



# **'RACE' AND SPORT**

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

**KEVIN HYLTON**

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# 'Race' and Sport

## Critical race theory

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Critical race theory provides a framework for exploring racism in society, taking into account the role of institutions and drawing on the experiences of those affected.

Applied to the world of sport, this framework can reveal the underlying social mores and institutionalised prejudices that have helped perpetuate those racial stereotypes particular to sport, and those that permeate broader society.

In this groundbreaking sociological investigation, Kevin Hylton takes on the controversial subject of racial attitudes in sport and beyond. With sport as his primary focus, Hylton unpacks the central concepts of 'race', ethnicity, social constructionism and racialisation, and helps the reader navigate the complicated issues and debates that surround the study of 'race' in sport. Containing rigorous and insightful analysis throughout, the book explores key topics such as:

- The origins, applications and terminology of critical race theory
- The meaning of 'whiteness'
- The media, sport and racism
- Antiracism and sport
- Genetics and scientific racism

The contested concepts that define the subject of 'race' in sport present a constant challenge for academics, policy makers and practitioners in the development of their ideas, policies and interventions. This innovative and challenging book is essential reading for anybody looking to fully understand this important subject.

**Kevin Hylton** is a Senior Lecturer in Sport and Recreation Development in the Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education, Leeds Metropolitan University. He has been heavily involved in community sports development, working with marginalized groups in different settings. Hylton's research has focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, and in particular, racism in sport and leisure.



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# Foreword

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At a recent conference for black parents and educators, I shared the platform with a colleague who leads a youth advocacy programme. In the midst of a discussion about institutional racism and the education system's perpetual ability to define black young people as 'less able', 'less motivated' – as just plain 'failures' – a delegate argued that the youth shared some of the responsibility because of their 'low aspirations'. My colleague begged to differ: 'there are a lot more brain surgeons than pro basketball players in the world, but the boys I work with still want to be in the NBA [National Basketball Association]. It would actually be *easier* to be a brain surgeon but they're sold the dream . . .'

The point was well made. Racism operates in multifaceted and complex ways. Sport provides a highly visible area where the prowess of black athletes (built through training and dedication) can simultaneously offer an apparent site of 'success' while supporting the crudest of racialised stereotypes. The endless hours of commitment and struggle are magically reinscribed as a 'natural' talent or gift by teachers who view black bodies as fit for physical rather than academic excellence. The racial structuring and commodification of sport – not least as a multi-million-pound enterprise – provide a vitally important context where racism works (sometimes subtly, sometimes more crudely) to protect particular interests while maintaining the racial status quo.

In this landmark study Kevin Hylton makes a powerful, sophisticated and original contribution to critical scholarship on the racialised dynamics of sport. The book deserves a wide readership, not only within its specialist field but also more generally, because it represents one of the first full-length applications of critical race theory (CRT) in the UK.

CRT is a movement of activist scholars who seek to expose and resist the workings of racism in contemporary society. Its origins lie in US law schools and the ground-breaking work of writers such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Williams. Since the late 1980s, CRT has expanded and now finds a place in numerous disciplines including economics, anthropology, sociology and education. In each of these fields critical race scholars are asking radical questions that trouble the accepted assumptions and push for action to resist and reshape race inequities. Although CRT started in the US, it



is increasingly international in its reach. Indeed, as CRT matures it may be that scholars working outside North America will become particularly influential in helping identify strengths and weaknesses in the perspective as an overarching theory of race and inequity. This book certainly offers important insights that will benefit critical race theorists internationally.

After a careful and wide-ranging review of key conceptual debates, Hylton outlines his view of CRT and perceptively reflects on its exclusion from certain debates and contexts that seek to define the theoretical highground – especially in Europe. He shows the utility of CRT, and this book is likely to help establish the approach as an important dimension in contemporary theorising about sport and social inequity in the UK. As the study unfolds, the reader is taken on a fascinating journey that challenges preconceptions and highlights the fundamental role of racism in questions concerning the nature of research, whiteness, the role of the media and the praxis of antiracist struggle.

David Gillborn  
*Institute of Education*  
*University of London*

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Chapter 2 is based upon a paper published in the *Journal of Leisure Studies* (Hylton 2005). Chapter 4 is based on a paper published in *Leisure Studies* (Long and Hylton 2002).



# Introduction – defining key terms

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Temperament, sexuality, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernible from the palpable mark of race.

(Omi and Winant 1994: 60)

Our capabilities in sport are often described in physical or psychological terms, ‘natural’ differences. These ‘gifts’ are often identified as the difference between those who are likely to succeed in a given sport and those who are not. This discourse of superiority and inferiority in sport is not dissimilar to other debates in wider society which revolve around genetics and intelligence, and ultimately underpin imperialist ideologies (Goldberg 1993, Essed and Goldberg 2002, Omi and Winant 2002). There is a popular perception in sport that our genes and to a degree our cultural background dictate the prowess of an individual sportsman or woman. This discourse of advantage and of course disadvantage in sport is invariably reduced to ‘harmless’ racial differences, a reduction that suggests, however, a more sinister undercurrent: ‘race’ logic (Coakley 2001), racial discourse (Goldberg 1993), racial formations (Omi and Winant 1994), raciology (Gilroy 2000) and racialisation (Murji and Solomos 2005). The preconceptions we have of Others act as a kind of shorthand for who they are and where they are located in social hierarchies. As Others speak they are gendered, classed and raced in a reflexive moment and beyond that the reality of their circumstances takes much longer to emerge. Omi and Winant (1994) suggest that often people are expected to act out racial identities, and where this does not occur it can be a source of confusion. Athletes such as the African American 400 metre runner Michael Johnson and Garth Crooks, the African Caribbean ex-footballer, contradict crude stereotypes of themselves when offering articulate and cerebral questions and answers on media panels. Oliver Skeets, the African Caribbean show jumper, Darshan-Singh Buller, the Asian contemporary dance choreographer, Tiger Woods and of course all of those white men who can jump, and those Asian women who can Bend it like Beckham, hint at the reality and very real contradictions of the diversity in wider society. The racialised social structures of sport therefore contribute to the way we shape and experience our own and others’ identities.

## 2 Introduction

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This chapter examines why 'race' and racism are so powerful as concepts and processes that when they are the point of debate, especially in public policy, they remain unproblematised. That is, we need to appreciate more fully what 'race' means in sport (signification in a discursive practice) and then, on the basis of this meaning, how sport (social structure) is organised (racially, racial hierarchy). Sport could be described as a racial formation according to Omi and Winant (1994), who are concerned with how racial categories are created over time, lived, transformed and negated in such institutions. A racial formation is a process that can be described as a series of interrelated but historically situated *racial projects* where *racialised* people and social structures are organised and represented (Omi and Winant 1994). The complexities of racial projects can be encapsulated in the idea that they could be a representation of racial dynamics. In the same moment a racial project could be an interpretation or an explanation of the same racial process resulting in an allocation of resources based upon a racialised premise. There is no one interpretation of how these dynamic racialised processes work as the intricacies of these issues exercise the minds of many committed to furthering our understanding of racism in sport. This chapter considers the utility of the concept of 'race' because its use as an analytical concept implies a clear association with ethnicity which is often articulated in a reductionist black/white binary. The term 'race' is used by critical race theorists, as we shall see in Chapter 2, but it is emphasised here that the use of critical race theory (CRT) does not imply that the term 'race' is being applied without caution. In addition, there is no attempt to deny difference, individuality or identity in *'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory* by not consistently referring to ethnicity, as it is recognised here that we experience racialisation and racism(s) in different ways. It would also be fallacious to talk of a common experience, and of a monolithic phenomenon of 'race', racism or even blackness or whiteness (hooks and West 1991, Collins 2000, Long and Hylton 2002, Harris 2003, Frankenberg 2004). We will see in this and the following chapters that the irony of 'race' is that talking about it is still problematic even after the customary caveats have been expressed and parentheses denoting dissonance around it and related concepts such as the 'Other', 'black', 'minority ethnic' have been elucidated. When W.E.B. DuBois asserted that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the colour line I wonder whether he anticipated how stirring those words would continue to be in the twenty-first century for so many (Bulmer and Solomos 1999, Alexander and Knowles 2005). The relationship between 'race', racism, racialisation, ethnicity, identity and nation in sport will be explored further on in this chapter and effectively used as the starting point for the many debates over the next chapters. As many writers have stated over the years, any discussion of 'race' effects what Gilroy (2000) describes as a perpetuation of everyday raciology or, as others such as Lee and Lutz (2005b) would suggest, a racial ideology. Certain attributions and associations are made with racialised practices that result in a system of representation that structures racial ideologies. It is evident that those with power and influence in societies defend and fix these

ideologies in the form of racialised discourses (Goldberg 1993, Lee and Lutz 2005a, b). For Armstrong and Ng (2005: 35) 'race is the social construction, but the act and effect of this construction (racialisation) have produced actual divisions between people'. In hard populist terms what 'race' often boils down to is physical differences, and in particular physiognomy. Whereas many believe that they can tell the difference between people born in continents and countries across the world, the ability to distinguish social groups according to this notion of 'race' is beyond the most advanced minds and computers, the truth being we are as much collapsed into one 'race' as pieces in a jigsaw: we all may look different but we all fit together to make the one picture. Malik's (1996) argument that humanity is not a Dulux colour chart with everyone falling into discrete categories is reiterated here.

The problematic of 'race' thinking for many in sport is its endemic omnipresent discourse. The popularity of 'race' thinking is historically located in multifarious assumptions, and deeds that reinforce the legitimacy of 'race' and therefore physical differences in sport. Assumptions that have endured are those that argue humans could be divided into a few biologically and phenotypically detached 'races'; the similarities within these groups could be reduced to ability, behaviour and morality; these differences would be naturally passed from one generation to the next; and racial hierarchies exist with white people at the top and darker 'races' at the opposite end (Fenton 2003). The 'Jack Nicklaus syndrome' typifies the example of this unconscious, benign acceptance of differences in sport premised upon biology or psychology. In 1994, before Tiger Woods had established himself as the best golfer in a generation, Nicklaus was reported to have argued that African American golfers could not succeed at the highest level of golf because of their muscle structure (Hatfield 1996). The 'Nicklaus syndrome' has been evident at all levels of sport, and its related impacts replicated internationally. St Louis (2004) accepts that this racist orthodoxy exists while positing that the perception of racial Others as being particularly strong in motor rather than psychological terms, and that evidence of conspicuous success in high-profile sport is evidence of this, provides for many a *prima facie* case for the existence of racial physical propensities. These racial differences that emerge from a flawed social Darwinism begin and end in a biological reductionist morass. They give support to Younge's contention that these views (2000: 24) suggest that if (black) people are naturally talented at sport then they are naturally less equipped intellectually. The ability to generate stereotypes of this kind in itself points towards the insidious prejudices, 'race' thinking and social positioning of dominant hegemonic actors within sport and academe (Long *et al.* 1995, 1997, 2000). Turning to popular culture, in 1993 Jon Turteltaub's film *Cool Runnings*, the story of the Jamaican bobsleigh team competing in the Olympic Games, was written as a comedy that was underpinned by the conception and stereotype that black people cannot do winter sports, they do not like the cold and are quite superficial characters. Also, in Jon Shelton's *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) where the narrative is even more obvious, the film carries still a benign subtext that not

## 4 Introduction

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only has the white man who couldn't jump, jumping, but shows him managing it only when he needs to and only after a lot of hard work! Here racial stereotypes prevail again with many racialised ideologies, concepts and stereotypes remaining intact and unchallenged. What was not considered in any respect was the corollary of these arguments which Coakley (2001) alludes to in his examination of race logic in sport as he points to the unlikelihood of commentators explaining the achievements of Swiss skiing from a biological viewpoint. This racial thinking in sport is perpetuated by four weak theoretical propositions (St Louis 2004: 32):

- 1 Sports are based on theoretical principles of equality.
- 2 The results of sporting competition are unequal.
- 3 This inequality of results has a racial bias.
- 4 Therefore, given the equality of access and opportunity, the explanation of the unequal results lies in racial physicality.

This race logic can be propagated by anyone from any social background. According to Williams (1977), Hargreaves (1986) and Sugden and Tomlinson (2002), the pressures and limits of a given domination or subordination are experienced and internalised by individuals and groups. This has the effect of power minorities, that is, individuals or groups in society, reinforcing or challenging their own subordination in a system that can alienate and disenfranchise them. A lived hegemony is always an ongoing process: it is not a passive form of dominance as it has got to be continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified. Goldberg (1993: 94) would argue that biology is not the only predicate of racial constructions. By this he is suggesting that, although the history of racial oppression has been marked by attempts to subjugate the Other through 'commonsense' scientific and folk arguments, there are other devices that are more readily invoked owing to their relative acceptance. These include cultural racism, nationalism and whiteness processes explored further during the course of *'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory*.

### **The salience of 'race' in sport and society**

In the public sector, underlying the development of equal opportunities policies and the 'race relations industry' since the 1950s has been a worldview that draws its reasoning from a racialised, race-biased discourse (Nanton 1989). The recent reports in the UK by Cattle (2002) and Ouseley (2001) on the disturbances in Bradford, Oldham, Burnley, Leicester, Southall and Birmingham were all heavily tinged with racial overtones and the subsequent reports spoke in particular of communities differentiated by 'race'. In legal terms, where a citizen's rights have been flouted in relation to racism there are sanctions in law, steps to be taken, to indemnify each individual. What Lee and Lutz (2005b) recognise with this approach is that the naturalness of 'races' is not questioned or disturbed in any way. This discourse has as its basic principle an oversimplified reductionist

tenet that reinforces biological arguments, homogeneity and universalism (Harris 2003). In sport and leisure the lexicon of policy makers has promulgated a vocabulary that legitimates rather than challenges the notion of 'race', monolithic racial identities and the black 'Other' (Gilroy 1987, Cross and Keith 1993, Goldberg 1993, Back *et al.* 1999, Thomas and Piccolo 2000, Leeds Metropolitan University 2003). Approaches like these are 'unable to transcend their own complicity in the production and reproduction of racism' (Lee and Lutz 2005b: 9).

Omi and Winant (2002: 123) contend that "race" is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies'. 'Race' is constructed and transformed using everyday assumptions, and it is viewed as the most powerful and persistent group boundary by Cornell and Hartmann (1998), hence the general tendency for politicians and sports practitioners to take cognisance, and to varying degrees consider the policy implications of 'race' regulations. Gates's (1986) observation that 'race' is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so arbitrary in application supports these constructionist views of the concept, even though it is well documented that 'race' is socially constructed (UNESCO 1978). The fiction and fallacy of 'race' as a cultural construct have been the source of much controversy (Husband 1984, Gates 1986, Miles 1989, Terkel 1992, Montagu 1997). Miles's (1989) view that the idea of 'race' was derived from nineteenth-century scientific theories has much support. Goldberg (1993) describes how racialised discourses emerge as ideological and conceptual conditions conflate over time. The nineteenth-century ideas that emerged from the racial science of the day have found their way into our public and private spheres (Husband 1984, Ben-Tovim *et al.* 1986, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993, Verma and Darby 1994, Haney-Lopez 2000, Solomos 1995, Guillaumin 1995, Parker 1998, Macpherson 1999). Unfortunately, clearly articulated positions have emphasised the spurious position of natural differences in sport and society and emphasised the 'othering' discourse of 'race', and we are still unable to halt the flow of folk concepts and definitions that maintain these fundamentally racist ideologies. In the wake of these essentialist conceptual and theoretical claims racism is propagated, is perpetuated and remains a cancerous aspect of social life. Racism by definition reinforces human differences and privileges some over others. It is on the basis of this controversial, but well documented, debate that in democratic, cosmopolitan societies discourses of 'race' are perpetuated, and 'race' equality no longer raises any eyebrows.

Society maintains the habit of reifying 'race' in sport and other institutions, and a critical analysis of racism and therefore antiracism needs to challenge any 'race' schema, commonsense views and other hegemonic impositions (Outlaw 1990). Most people in society accept the importance of 'race' whilst at the same time being revolted by its outcomes. The state, as a major sponsor of the notion of 'race', regularly endorses its value as a social and political boundary between groups. The state often utilises 'race' through the law in its implementation of statutes such as in the UK the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), and the contested issues of affirmative action in the US. The discourse of 'race' is also used