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"White Men Can’t Jump": Evidence for the Perceptual Confirmation of Racial Stereotypes Following a Basketball Game

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An experiment was conducted to demonstrate the perceptual confirmation of racial stereotypes about Black and White athletes. In a 2 × 2 design, target race (Black vs. White) and target athleticism (perceived athletic vs. unathletic) were manipulated by providing participants with a photograph of a male basketball player. Participants then listened to a college basketball game and were asked to evaluate the target’s athletic abilities, individual performance, and contribution to his team’s performance. Multivariate analyses showed only a main effect for target race on the measures of ability and team performance. Whereas the Black targets were rated as exhibiting significantly more athletic ability and having played a better game, White targets were rated as exhibiting significantly more basketball intelligence and hustle. The results suggest that participants relied on a stereotype of Black and White athletes to guide their evaluations of the target’s abilities and performance.

The title of the popular Ron Shelton film illustrates a common stereotype about racial differences in athletics: White males do not possess the physical capabilities that Black males possess, and therefore, are not as skilled in sports (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Craighead, Privette, Vallianos & Byrkit, 1986; Edwards, 1973; Felson, 1981; Nation & LeUnea, 1983). Like many stereotypes, the beliefs underlying the athletic superiority of Blacks in basketball may well have a factual basis: More than 75% of the players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and 64% of collegiate basketball players are Black (Hoose, 1989). However, the history of professional basketball makes clear the danger in predicting athletic success based solely on race: Many White men have not just played, but excelled in the
NBA (e.g., Bob Cousy, Jerry West, Gail Goodrich, Larry Bird, John Stockton, Toni Kukoc, just to name a few). Thus, race accounts for only part of the variance in basketball performance and explains still less variance in athletic performance when all professional sports are taken into account (e.g., Samson & Yerles, 1988). As we describe in the next section, racial stereotypes about athletes appear to be complex and include negative beliefs about Blacks and Whites alike. The purpose of this study is to document the existence and use of racial stereotypes when assessing athletic performance, in this case, as the stereotypes were applied to the game of basketball.

Stereotypes are incomplete and overgeneralized beliefs a person holds toward a particular social group (Allport, 1954). When a person who subscribes to a stereotype observes or interacts with members of a target group, stereotypic beliefs act as expectancies during the interaction (e.g., Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990; see Hamilton & Sherman, 1994). That is, the stereotype leads the perceiver to expect specific behaviors from the target, such as “If this player is White, he probably can’t rebound.” Once activated, expectancies can guide the interpretation of the target’s behavior (Duncan, 1976; Sagar & Schofield, 1980), especially when the behavioral information is ambiguous (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985). Stereotypes often confirm their own veracity and may do so implicitly such that perceivers are unaware of the stereotype’s activation or use (e.g., Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993; Devine, 1989; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991).

Racial stereotypes that might apply specifically to Black and White athletes in a sports context have not received much empirical attention. For example, Devine and Baker (1991) found that the attributes assigned to the social category of “Black athlete” included “unintelligent” and “ostentatious,” but their study was not designed to examine attributes about White athletes. Biernat and Manis (1994) reported that Black men were perceived to be more athletic than White men, however, the ratings were made outside of a specific sports context. Other studies have failed to find evidence of stereotyped perceptions of minority athletes (e.g., Harris & Ramsey, 1974) or reported stereotyped perceptions that did not include ethnicity as a variable (e.g., Cxizma, Wittig, & Schurr, 1988; Sadalla, Linder, & Jenkins, 1988). Last, in one study that examined the relation between race and basketball performance, Sapolsky (1980) compared the evaluations made by Black and White perceivers of the baskets made by Black and White basketball players. Although differences were found between Black and White perceivers, the primary measures did not include ratings of the attributes of the Black and White players themselves. In sum, few studies have examined the specific racial stereotypes that might underlie the belief “White men can’t jump.”

Racial stereotypes about athletes, however, have received attention in the sports media. According to the observations made by sports writers and commentators, racial stereotypes about Black and White athletes involve two general beliefs: that Blacks are physically better athletes than Whites and that Black athletes are intellectually inferior to White athletes. These assertions were brought to national
attention in the late 1980s by two prominent figures in the world of sports. First, former CBS commentator Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder was videotaped suggesting that Black players were bred in slavery to be better athletes than Whites (Craig, 1989). Shortly after Snyder's comments, then-Los Angeles Dodger General Manager Al Campanis announced to a national television audience that although Blacks are "fleet of foot," they may lack some of the necessities to succeed in management positions in professional baseball (Cornwell, 1993). The truth behind these beliefs about race and athleticism has since been explored and criticized in contemporary sports publications, such as USA Today (Meyers, 1991), in a number of stories written for The Sporting News (e.g., Craig, 1989; Kindred, 1995), in two editions of Sports Illustrated ("The Black Athlete,"1968; and "The Black Athlete Revisited," 1991), and in recent books on basketball (e.g., The Selling of the Green, Araton & Bondy, 1992). The sports media provides illuminating commentary on the "possibility" that Black athletes are physically superior to Whites, but that White athletes are intellectually superior to Blacks.

It also appears that the discussion of racial stereotypes in the sports media centers around the game of basketball. For example, noted sports columnist David Halberstam made the following observation about racial stereotypes in a Sports Illustrated (Halberstram, 1987) article published after the 1987 NBA championship series, during which the Celtics, led by Larry Bird, lost to the Lakers, led by Magic Johnson:

Yet, if there is one thing that enrages the better Black athletes . . . it is the contemporary White perception, both in the media and among fans, that Black athletes are natural athletes, doing night after night what comes quite readily to them. This is an ironic update to an earlier myth, which was that Blacks were faster than Whites but could not play in difficult positions . . . because they lacked both guts and talent. Whites, by contrast, are seen as less gifted but headier athletes who practice and perfect their skills better because they have . . . better work habits. (p. 38)

Halberstam's observation aptly illustrates how racial stereotypes about basketball players maintain themselves: When a White man such as Larry Bird does perform skillfully, perceivers account for the unexpected performance through existing beliefs such as Whites are smarter or more hard working than stupid and lazy Blacks (see also Mead, 1985, for an example of how these stereotypes were applied to the heavyweight fight between Joe Louis and Max Schmelling). These examples from the sports media serve as evidence for a widely held belief about success in basketball: Black male athletes have more natural physical ability than do White athletes, but White male athletes are intellectually superior and have a better work ethic than do Black male athletes.

We believe it is important to document racial stereotypes about athletes because they have the potential to cause discrimination. The problem is not that there are racial differences in athletic performance; indeed, the fact that Blacks are overrepresented in professional sports such as basketball indicates that there is a relationship
between race and athletic performance. The problem arises when people go beyond the relationship and infer that some characteristic about race causes the differences in athletic performance. According to our earlier discussion, one popular explanation for racial differences in athletic performance is that Black athletes are more physically skilled than Whites, but that Whites are more intelligent and diligent than Black athletes. To the degree these beliefs form stereotypes, they can influence perceptions of athletic performance. That is, racial stereotypes ascribed to athletes may serve as heuristics in information processing and lead to inaccurate evaluations of Black and White athletes who attempt to play outside of the limitations supposedly imposed by their ethnic heritage.

**PERCEPTUAL CONFIRMATION PARADIGM**

If people hold racial stereotypes about basketball performance, and the stereotype has an influence on how Black and White basketball players are perceived, then it should be possible to demonstrate this through the well-documented procedures used to study perceptual confirmation effects (see Hamilton & Sherman, 1994, for a review). In these studies, an action is committed by a stereotyped or nonstereotyped individual, and it is shown that perceivers evaluate its meaning differently, depending on to whom the behavior was attributed. In one classic demonstration, Duncan (1976) showed that an ambiguous shove was rated as more violent by White participants if a Black target ostensibly did the pushing compared to if a White target did the pushing (see also Bodenhausen, 1988; Darley & Gross, 1983; Sager & Schofield, 1980). Perceptual confirmation procedures provide a useful strategy for examining whether stereotyped expectations about a target significantly alter a perceiver’s interpretations of the target person’s behavior.

Research on perceptual confirmation of a stereotype, however, has shown that use of a stereotype can sometimes be attenuated when individuating information about the target is available (e.g., Locksley, Borgida, Brekke, & Hepbrun, 1980). When highly diagnostic information concerning personal behaviors or attributes of a target are known, stereotyped beliefs may not influence perceptions of a target person. In contrast, if the individuating information is not useful for generating judgments about the target, stereotypes are more likely to dominate subsequent processing of a target’s behavior (e.g., Krueger & Rothbart, 1988).

This suggests that racial stereotypes about race and basketball may not operate if perceivers have individuating information about a Black or White player, such as diagnostic information about the target’s athletic abilities (e.g., Locksley et al., 1980). In fact, the availability of individuating information such as athletic ability may override the utility of race in evaluating the ambiguous performance of a basketball player. Perceivers may see an athletic White man as having more basketball ability than an unathletic Black male, contradicting the stereotype that “White men can’t jump.” Of course, if individuating information concerning the
athleticism of a Black and White player was available but race still accounted for most of the variance in performance evaluation, then fairly clear evidence of stereotypic processing would emerge (e.g., Nelson, Biernat, & Manis, 1990). It may be that even when individuating information is available, perceivers believe that race is a more reliable predictor of basketball performance.

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this experiment was to investigate perceptual confirmation of racial stereotypes concerning basketball players when information about the player's race and athleticism was available. Participants were asked to rate the attributes and performance of a basketball player after listening to a radio broadcast of a collegiate basketball game. For half the participants, the player was depicted as White; for the other half, the same player was depicted as Black. This was crossed with information about the perceived athleticism of the target: Half the participants viewed a picture of a relatively unathletic target; the other half viewed a picture of a relatively athletic target. Participants were then asked to provide estimates of the target's athletic abilities, individual performance, and contribution to his team's performance.

Based on the racial stereotypes described elsewhere (Brinson & Robinson, 1991; Edwards, 1973;) and on the documented effects of individuating information (i.e., Locksley et al., 1980), we predicted that one of three patterns would emerge from the data: First, if the target's perceived athleticism influenced the perceiver's evaluations, we expected main effects for perceived athleticism on the dependent measures. Specifically, independent of the target's race, the athletic targets would be rated as possessing more athletic ability and as having played a better game overall, relative to the unathletic targets.

In contrast, if athletic stereotypes were activated by the target pictures, we predicted that participant's expectations created by the ethnicity of the targets would effect how they perceived the target's athletic attributes and performance. Specifically, we expected that stereotyped processing would lead to one of two possible patterns across the measures. First, Black targets would be rated as possessing more general physical ability than the White targets. In contrast, the White targets could be seen as more intelligent, more team-oriented, and could be seen as players that can think on their feet and hustle to make up for their lack of physical talent. Such a stereotyped response might indicate a "compensatory" set of beliefs that allows for White men to make a contribution in basketball, but only because they make up for their lack of physical ability through intelligence and diligence. Alternatively, another stereotype dictates that Black athletes are simply more talented at all aspects of sport, including those requiring intelligence and effort, relative to White athletes. As a result, the Black targets would be perceived not only as possessing more physical skill, but also as possessing more team-oriented ability,
such as "court-smarts" and "stamina." This pattern would suggest a general athletic stereotype whereby White men are perceived as generally inferior to Black men in a sports context.

METHODS

Evaluating the Target Stimuli

The race and perceived athleticism of each target was manipulated by presenting participants with a color photograph extracted from a high school yearbook. Photos of two Black and two White men were carefully selected such that one photo in each race pair depicted an "athletic" target (i.e., broad shoulders and a relatively thick neck) and two photos within each race pair depicted a relatively "unathletic" target (i.e., thinner in the shoulders and neck than the athletic targets). The initial choice of the photos was conducted by the authors.

To test the perceptual information afforded by our selection of the target pictures, a sample of college student participants (N = 21) were recruited at a campus restaurant. Participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire study for which they would be paid $4. Interested participants were then presented the target pictures and asked to rate each for 10 relevant attributes. They were told that the pictures were experimental stimuli and that their ratings would assist the researchers in determining how the stimuli were perceived.

The target pictures were rated along attributes drawn from a modified version of the Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ: Pelham & Swann, 1989), a questionnaire designed to measure self-descriptions among college students. The SAQ was adapted for the current purposes by asking participants to rate the targets in the pictures along each dimension "relative to other people the target's own age." The ratings were made along a 10-point scale for the attributes of intellectual ability, social competence, work ethic, athletic ability, physical attractiveness, leadership, common sense, likability, luck, and discipline. To avoid suspicion, participants were randomly assigned to rate either the two Black or the two White target pictures. The order in which participants rated the pictures in each pair was manipulated, but subsequent analyses showed that the order had no effect on the ratings.

The ratings were analyzed using a race (Black vs. White) x perceived athleticism (high vs. low) x attribute mixed analysis of variance. The results revealed a significant interaction between perceived athleticism and the attribute ratings, $F(9, 162) = 15.50, p < .0001$. The mean ratings for each target by attribute are presented in Table 1. Protected univariate tests showed that within the pictures of the Black and White players, the athletic targets were perceived to be more athletic but also more socially competent, more physically attractive, and to have more leadership ability compared with the unathletic targets, all $ps < .05$. The ratings of perceived common sense, likability, and luck, and discipline did not co-vary with the perceived athleticism of the targets.
TABLE 1
Pretest Attribute Ratings for Each Target Picture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unathletic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Unathletic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic ability</td>
<td>5.00&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8.25&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4.82&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.91&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual ability</td>
<td>6.63&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.50&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.46&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.10&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>5.88&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.75&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.46&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.82&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic</td>
<td>7.00&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.63&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.73&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.55&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attractiveness</td>
<td>4.63&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.88&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.73&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.73&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership ability</td>
<td>5.50&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.13&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.91&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.00&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common sense</td>
<td>6.38&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.63&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.27&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.91&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likeability</td>
<td>6.88&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7.00&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.82&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.55&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky</td>
<td>6.00&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.75&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.09&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.81&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplined</td>
<td>6.62&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.75&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.45&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.82&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a,b</sup>Higher numbers indicate the target was rated as possessing more of the attribute. Comparisons with different superscripts are significantly different at the .05 level using Fisher’s LSD protected t-tests.

In sum, the ratings appeared to confirm our perceptions of the athletic and unathletic targets. Across race of target, the differences between the athletic and unathletic targets were comparable with two exceptions: The athletic–unathletic differences for the White targets was significant for intellectual ability and work ethic, but these differences were not significant for the Black targets. It should be noted that perceived athleticism also correlated with other attributes such as physical attractiveness and social competence, an issue we address in the next section.

Perceptual Confirmation Experiment

Participants. Participants were 51 (32 men and 19 women) undergraduates at Princeton University who were recruited through sign-up sheets posted on the university campus. The sample was predominately White; only three Black, two Asian-Americans, and two Hispanics participated in the study. Of the 51 participants, 31 reported that they had played basketball at the high school level, and most reported that they follow either NBA or National College Athletic Association basketball. Only seven participants claimed to have “very little” knowledge of basketball. All participants were paid $4 for their participation.

Materials. The experiment was conducted in a large rectangular room. In each corner of the room was a seat and a tape recorder with headphones. All of the
recorders contained a 20-min tape recording of a Division I college basketball game. The tape was made from a radio broadcast of a University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) versus University of Nevada, Las Vegas basketball game, played in mid-December of 1994. The cassette featured sections of the game in which a student named “Mark Flick” played power forward for UCSB. To create an ambiguous performance for the target from the taped broadcast, all evaluative comments by the announcers and all exemplary plays by Flick were edited from the tape.

Nearby each recorder was an orange folder that contained a profile of the player named Flick. All the folders contained the same player profile information including demographic information about the player’s life (see Figure 1). The file also

FIGURE 1 An example of the profile information presented to participants while they listened to the taped radio broadcast of the basketball game.
included the text of the audiotape so that participants could read along with the audio presentation.

To manipulate target race and perceived athleticism, the folder included one of the pretested pictures just described. The target pictures crossed race (Black vs. White) with perceived athleticism (athletic vs. unathletic), thus creating four different profiles (none of the pictures were the real Mark Hick). The folders were randomly distributed to each station before each trial.

Procedure. The sign-up sheets described the study as an experiment on the differences between information processed from a radio broadcast compared with a television broadcast. The task was described as “Listening or watching a 20 minute excerpt of a basketball game and answering a 5 minute questionnaire.” Participants were run in groups of between two and five, but each was seated at separate stations to prevent interaction during the procedures.

On arrival, the experimenter explained that participants would listen to an 18- to 20-min tape of one of four basketball games. Participants were told to use the folder by their recorder to help them follow the recording because they were only hearing certain sections of the game. Participants were also told that the file contained a player profile and that their task was to listen for that player because they would be asked to evaluate him later. Participants were then randomly assigned to an isolated listening station.

After they had listened to the game tape, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to measure the participants’ backgrounds in basketball and their evaluations of the target’s basketball abilities and performance. Specifically, the primary measures were assessments of the target’s natural ability (i.e., individual ratings of physical ability and “basketball” ability), objective estimates of his personal performance (i.e., the number of points, rebounds, and assists attributed to the target), and evaluations of his contribution to the team’s performance (i.e., individual evaluations of the target’s “team-play,” “hustle,” “court-smarts,” and “position-play”). The evaluations of ability and team contribution were collected on 9-point rating scales with descriptions of the scale endpoints included at the end of the question (e.g., 5 = average for a collegiate ballplayer, 9 = great, 1 = poor). After the completed questionnaires were collected by the experimenter, participants were paid $4 for their participation and fully debriefed about the true purposes of the research.

RESULTS

Preliminary inspection of the data revealed that participant sex, self-reports of experience playing basketball, and knowledge of college and professional basketball did not correlate significantly with the target ratings. As a result, the participant variables were dropped from any further analyses. The experimental data were
analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in which the measures of basketball ability, performance, and team contribution were analyzed separately.

A Race (Black vs. White) × Perceived Athleticism (athletic vs. unathletic) MANOVA across the ability measures revealed only a significant multivariate main effect for the target's race, Wilks's $\Lambda$, $F(2, 46) = 3.89, p < .03$. As predicted, when they thought he was Black, participants rated Mark Flick as having more physical ability ($M = 6.19$, see Table 2) and more basketball ability ($M = 5.50$) compared with when they thought Flick was White ($M = 5.48$ and $M = 4.88$, respectively). This finding supports what we take to be one core of the stereotypes, that Blacks have more of the physical skills required for playing basketball.

A similar analysis of the performance measures did not reveal any effect for the target's race or perceived athleticism, all Wilks's $\Lambda$, $< 1$. As seen in Table 2, the Black players were rated as having performed slightly better in points and assists, but were not perceived to have rebounded more shots compared with the White players. Generally, participants were fairly accurate in their perceptions of the target's offensive performance: In the edited radio broadcast, Mark Flick scored four points, made two rebounds and one assist. Their relative accuracy is not an unexpected finding given the objective nature of Flick's game statistics and the emphasis placed on evaluating the target's game performance.

For the measures of team contribution, the Race × Athleticism MANOVA revealed only a significant multivariate effect for the target's race, Wilks's $\Lambda$, $F(4,$

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Picture</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural ability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball ability</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical ability</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points scored</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebounds</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assists</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Contribution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team play</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position play</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>6.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court smarts</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hustle</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>6.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When Mark Flick was thought to be Black, he was perceived to be a better team player \( (M = 6.52) \) and his position play was rated better \( (M = 6.16) \) compared with when Flick was thought to be White \( (M = 5.88 \text{ and } M = 5.38) \), respectively. In contrast, when depicted as White, Flick was perceived to have more basketball intelligence (i.e., “court-smarts,” \( M = 6.00 \)) and more “hustle” \( (M = 6.83) \) compared with when he was depicted as Black \( (M = 5.60 \text{ and } M = 6.36) \), respectively). This set of findings supports our prediction concerning the particular nature of the racial stereotype about basketball players. Specifically, Black targets were rated as making more of a contribution to the game through better team and position play, suggesting that Blacks athletes are perceived to be generally better at playing the game of basketball. Alternatively, White targets were perceived to make more of a contribution to the team through basketball intelligence and effort. This provides evidence of the belief that Whites compensate for their lower athletic abilities in basketball through court smarts and hustle.

Univariate tests suggested that perceived athleticism may have contributed to some of the ratings concerning team contribution. For example, univariate analyses of the team-play measure revealed a significant main effect for athleticism, \( F(1, 45) = 4.02, p < .05 \), and a marginally significant interaction between athleticism and race, \( F(1, 45) = 3.61, p < .06 \). The means in Table 2 show that whereas unathletic targets were perceived to contribute more to the team’s overall play compared with athletic targets, the athletic Black target was rated as contributing significantly more to the team than the athletic White target, Fisher’s LSD = 2.01, \( p < .05 \). Furthermore, univariate analysis of the measure of basketball intelligence (i.e., “court-smarts”) revealed a marginally significant interaction between race and athleticism, \( F(1, 45) = 3.15, p < .08 \). In this case, the unathletic White target was rated as possessing more court smarts \( (M = 6.64) \) compared with the other targets as a group \( (M = 5.59 \text{ combined, Fisher’s LSD = 1.04, } p < .05) \). Thus, there was some indication that individuating information had an influence on the attributions made about the team contribution of the players. The data suggests that athletic White basketball players are perceived to be less team oriented, whereas unathletic White players are perceived to be among the more intelligent players on the court.

DISCUSSION

The results of the multivariate analysis provided support for the hypothesized use of racial stereotypes when assessing the basketball performance of a Black or White athlete. As predicted, there indeed was a stereotype concerning the superior abilities of the Black athlete in basketball. The core component of the stereotype, we suggested, centered around the superior physical abilities of the Black athlete, and we found reasonably strong evidence that a basketball player identified as Black was perceived as having superior physical and basketball abilities. In contrast, the White targets were rated as possessing significantly less physical and basketball talent, which offers some insight into the beliefs underlying the assertion that
"White men can't jump." We thus documented a claim that is frequently made about race and athletics in the sports media.

The ratings of team contribution also provided evidence of racial stereotypes about athletes. On the questions that tapped the dimensions of team play and position play, the Black targets were more highly rated than were the White targets. These attributions may reflect the general belief that Black athletes are better at all aspects of the game of basketball. However, a general stereotype about Black athletes would not explain why the White targets received higher ratings of their basketball intelligence and effort. This finding supports what we referred to as the compensatory stereotype ascribed to White men on the basketball court—if they play well in spite of their inferior physical talent (although Flick’s game statistics were not exceptional), they are perceived as possessing more “court smarts” and more “hustle.” Overall, the pattern of attributions observed across the ability and team contribution measures was remarkably consistent with the stereotypes discussed in the sports media: Perceivers reported that Black men have more athletic ability and are better at playing the game of basketball, but White men can contribute because they are more intelligent and make up for their lack of physical ability through effort.

Although we in no way think these results are conclusive, the data appear to challenge some current thinking about the types of attributions made to ingroups and outgroups for successful outcomes. For example, the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979), which predicts that successful outgroup events will be attributed to relatively unstable causes, would not seem to predict the positive stable attributions of physical ability to the Black ballplayers. It also does not seem to predict the attribution of effort, a compensatory unstable explanation, to the ingroup in the study (i.e., the White athletes). That this pattern of attributions was made by the majority group (i.e., the perceivers were predominately White) is also surprising given other models of intergroup attributions (e.g., see Islam & Hewstone, 1993). Although we do not view this experiment as a test of any particular attribution model, the data imply that stereotyped attributions made about athletes might operate differently than do stereotyped attribution about other subtype categories (Devine & Baker, 1991). Uncovering the attribution processes that contributed to our findings is an important direction for future research.

At the univariate level, there was some evidence that the use of the compensatory White stereotype may be a function of the perceived athleticism of a White player. For example, the unathletic White player was thought to possess more knowledge of the game and to exhibit somewhat more hustle relative to the athletic White target. We note that applying a compensatory stereotype in this case is to some extent an accurate appraisal: If one is not perceived to be athletic, he or she would have to be smart or hustle or both to contribute to the team’s success. But the overall accuracy of the compensatory stereotype is questioned when one considers that the unathletic Black target was not rated similarly—he was perceived as less intelligent and exerting less effort than the unathletic White target. In fact, perceived athleti-
cism had no effect on any of the ratings of the Black targets, suggesting that the present manipulation of perceived athleticism might have been processed inconsistently across the race of the targets.

There are a number of factors that may have contributed to the weak and inconsistent effects obtained for the manipulation of individuating information. One is that participants were exposed to other individuating information such as the target’s school, college major, and information about his position on the basketball team. It is possible that this profile information was perceived to be more diagnostic of basketball performance relative to what his apparent athleticism conveyed. This suggests that if less information were held constant across the targets, perceived athleticism may have exerted a greater influence on the evaluations of the target’s performance and basketball attributes.

Another possibility is that the manipulation of perceived athleticism with photographs may not have been highly diagnostic of basketball performance (e.g., Krueger & Rothbart, 1988). A more concrete indicator of individual basketball performance, such as previous game statistics, may have had more of an effect on perceptions. Making previous performance information available would also reduce the potential for confounds that arise when photographs are used to provide individuating information—in this study, perceived athleticism was confounded with perceived attractiveness and leadership ability. Although other studies have documented the use of stereotypes when target information was presented in photographs (and participants were instructed not to rely on a stereotype to make their judgments; see Nelson et al., 1990), the presence of other information in the photographs may interfere with processing of the relevant individuating information. Nevertheless, we do note that a photograph, if it is taken as a proxy for what one learns from observing an athlete, closely approximates the type of information available in real life and thus has high ecological validity when used in perceptual confirmation research.

Another limitation to the research presented in this article was that the attribute ratings of the Black and White target pictures were not collected from the same participants who made the ratings of the basketball performance. Although the pretest and experimental participants were drawn from the same college sample, it is conceivable that the experimental participants did not perceive the photographs during the experiment in the same way as the pretest group. It should also be noted that the perceived athleticism ratings of the targets could have been affected by the fact that the ratings were made within race. Participants did not make explicit comparisons for the trait attributes across racial categories because pilot research revealed that participants resisted making cross-racial comparisons. Despite the potential difficulties in conducting such comparisons, this research does not directly address the perceptions that might emerge when Black and White athletes compete in the same basketball game.

Sometimes stereotypes are discussed as if they completely obscure any accurate perceptions of the actions of the stereotyped individuals. This is not the case in
general and it was not the case in this study. On the questions that most directly related to the objective specifics of basketball performance, those questions involving points scored, assists made, and rebounds made, the perceivers were quite accurate and did not see significant differences between the Black and White players. One explanation for this result may be instructional—participants were explicitly asked to evaluate the player’s performance, which may have motivated them to process the individual performance information accurately (e.g., Kunda, 1990). Another possibility is that assessing abstract concepts such as athletic ability or intelligence are more subject to the influence of stereotypes, whereas more concrete assessments, such as game statistics, are less prone to biased evaluations (e.g., Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; but see Biernat & Manis, 1994, for a potential exception to this rule). Although it is not clear why the individual performance statistics were processed accurately, the finding suggests that there may be limitations to the type of evaluations that are influenced by racial stereotypes of athletes.

In conclusion, the data demonstrate that the general process of perceptual confirmation of stereotypes extends to the domain of athletic performances. To what extent these effects would perseverate following performance observations of a less ambiguous or longer duration are important questions for future study. It is also important to consider to what extent racial stereotypes can influence the perceptions of coaches or anyone who makes decisions about an athlete’s future. For example, when decisions are made under time pressure or cognitive load (e.g., Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994), it seems possible for perceptual confirmation effects, encoded as first impressions of an athlete’s potential, to influence subsequent processing of performance information (see Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, Heilman, 1991, for a similar analysis of how gender stereotypes can influence evaluations of performance in the workplace). It also seems possible that these stereotypes would persist because of their subtlety—racial stereotypes about athletes do not deny that either Whites or Blacks can perform successfully on the basketball court, they simply assert that the underlying causes for success in either case are different. It is important to examine whether attributions about the relation between race and athletic performance cause discrimination against Blacks who are more intelligent or Whites who are more physically talented than athletic stereotypes predict.

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