

9-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Samantha M. (2015) "Race and Gender Consciousness of College Students in Relation to Physical Ability," *Perspectives*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol7/iss1/2>

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Race and Gender Consciousness of College Students in Relation to Physical Ability

Samantha M. Howard

ABSTRACT

This study examines college students' beliefs about how race and gender affect physical ability. There were a total of 184 respondents from the University of New Hampshire. Students answered questions through the online survey program Qualtrics. The results of this study show that roughly the same percentage of males and females agree that women can reach the same level of physical ability. It also revealed that about a third of respondents agreed that African Americans have a natural physical ability.

Introduction

How does a student's gender and race affect his or her beliefs about the physical ability of other types of students? Do students believe that there is a race that is more physically dominant? Do students believe that males and females can reach the same level of physical strength and ability? In my research study, I will use "gender" as my first independent variable, and "race" as my second independent variable. My first dependent variable is: "belief that there is a difference between gender and physical ability," while my second dependent variable is "belief that African-Americans have a greater natural physical ability." The objective of my study is to gain an understanding of whether or not college students at the University of New Hampshire believe that gender and race affect the physical ability of a person. If this belief exists, I would also like to see which gender and/or race holds these beliefs.

Literature Review

This research builds on prior research in this field: "Racetalk and Sport: The Color Consciousness of Contemporary Discourse on Basketball," by Buffington et al. (2011), "Gender Differences in Beliefs About the Influence of Ability and Effort in Sport and Physical Activity," by Li et al. (2006), and "College Students' Implicit Theories of Ability in Sports: Race and Gender Differences," by Li et al. (2004). Buffington et al. (2011) surveyed a sample of college students using language that "appears to be colorblind, and progressive on the surface, but is undergirded by a distinct form of color consciousness." This study found that the majority of respondents agreed that there is a correlation between race and physical ability. Li et al. (2006) explored gender differences in the relationship between natural ability and performance outcome. It was discovered that men were more likely to agree that they could be successful in any sport if they had a natural physical ability, while women felt they could only succeed in traditionally masculine sports with hard work. The study by Li et al. (2004) found that "European-Americans were more likely than African-Americans to accept the notion of ability as a fixed construct," while gender did not prove to have any distinct opinions on the question of ability.

Although each of the articles contributed information related to my research question, there are limitations to each study. Buffington et al. (2011) had a unique research method and showed individuals pictures of different basketball players and asked which one they thought to have greater physical ability. However, the methods used to interpret the reactions and responses of these picture surveys was new and not tested thoroughly. Li et al. (2006) discretely surveyed male and female college students about physical ability and gender to uncover sexist perspectives and interpreted the responses in a similar fashion. Again, these methods have limitations, and certain people could have misunderstood the questions, leading them to agree or disagree based on the methods of interpretation. While complex surveys might be good at being discrete about asking questions of racism or sexism, sometimes it might confuse the answers of respondents and portray different opinions. I had many limitations in my research because of being in a class that used one survey for many questions, and because I was only allowed a few questions. However, I feel that because my questions were straight forward, I have the benefit of there being little confusion in my survey.

Methods

In this study, a survey was administered via the online survey program Qualtrics. The survey was administered by the students of my SOC 601 class. Each student sent e-mail requests to people within their social networks, which included a link to the survey. By using a convenience sample, we did not need to access any university databases to acquire a random sample. A convenience sample is overall less time consuming and less expensive than other sampling methods, however, since our sample was not random, it may not be representative of the university population. The survey consisted of questions from each of the students in my class. The statements I presented for the survey were: "Females and Males of similar age groups and body types can reach the same level of physical ability," and "African-Americans have a greater natural ability in terms of physical talent." The response options were: "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Disagree", "Strongly Disagree", and "Not Sure". The end of the survey included questions about gender and the race of each student.

The first null hypothesis for this research study is that the gender of a student does not correlate with a belief that the gender of an individual affects physical ability. The second null hypothesis is: “the race of a student does not correlate with a belief that African-Americans have a greater natural physical ability.” My first directional alternative hypotheses is: “Regardless of race, most students will agree that African-Americans have a greater natural physical ability, and white students will be most willing to agree.” My second directional alternative hypothesis is: “most women will agree that women can reach the same level of physical ability as men, while fewer men will agree that women can reach the same level of physical ability.”

I chose my first hypothesis because I am looking to see if students think it is reasonable that both genders may achieve the same level of physical attainment. I chose the second hypothesis to be focused on one race specifically. In the research that I examined there is a clear pattern of beliefs that only African-Americans have greater natural ability.

The diversity of student respondents is shown in table 1, and reveals that our sample consisted mostly of white respondents (84.9%). The other 15.1% included individuals who identify as black, Hispanic, Asian, and other. The University of New Hampshire is comprised of mostly white students, so it was expected that most respondents would identify as white. According to table 2, there were slightly more female respondents than male respondents; 58.7% were female and 41.4% were male. The reason that more women responded than men likely had to do with the fact that we used a convenience sample to collect data.

	Total	Percentage
White	152	84.9%
Black	10	5.5%
Hispanic	9	5%
Asian	4	2.2%
Other	4	2.2%

	Total	Percentage
Female	108	58.7%
Male	76	41.3%

Results

Table 3 shows that the gender of a respondent does not affect the belief in equal physical ability between males and females. The Chi-square analysis of the cross tabulation frequencies indicate that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. This figure shows that roughly the same percentage of males and females agree that women can reach the same level of physical ability, while 35% of males and 32% of females disagree that women can reach the same level of physical ability. My alternative directional hypothesis was that the gender of the respondent would affect the belief on this topic; I predicted that males would be more likely to disagree that women can reach the same level of physical ability.

	Female	Male	Total
Females and males of the same age group and body type can reach the same level of physical ability	6 66.67% 5.56%	3 33.33% 3.95%	9 100% 4.89%
	31 58.49% 28.70	22 41.51% 28.95%	53 100% 28.80%
	28 66.67% 25.93%	14 33.33% 18.42%	42 100% 22.83%
	35 56.45% 32.41%	27 43.55% 35.53%	62 100% 33.70%
	8 44.44% 7.41%	10 55.56% 13.16%	18 100% 9.78%
	108 58.70% 100%	76 41.30% 100%	184 100% 100%
	Chi Square		2.97
	Degrees of Freedom		8
	p-value		.94

Table 4 shows that about 35% of respondents said they agree or strongly agree with the statement “African-Americans have a greater natural ability in terms of physical talent.” About 35% of participants responded with “neither agree nor disagree”, remaining neutral on the topic. It is difficult to say whether these respondents felt they did not have enough information on the topic, or if they actually agreed with the statement but chose a neutral answer so that they did not feel as though they were being racist. My intent with this question was to find out whether or not race affected a student’s belief.

Table 4.								
Females and males of the same age group and body type can reach the same level of physical ability		White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	Total	
	Strongly Agree	9 81.82% 5.92%	1 9.09% 10.00%	1 9.09% 11.11%	0 0.00% 0.00%	0 0.00% 0.00%	11 100% 6.15%	
	Agree	42 80.77% 27.63%	5 9.62% 50.00%	1 1.92% 11.11%	1 1.92% 25.00%	3 5.77% 75.00%	52 100% 29.05%	
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	53 84.13% 34.81%	3 4.76% 30.00%	6 9.52% 66.67%	1 1.59% 25.00%	0 0.00% 0.00%	63 100% 35.20%	
	Disagree	39 92.86% 25.66%	1 2.38% 10.00%	1 2.38% 11.11%	0 0.00% 0.00%	1 2.38% 25.00%	42 100% 23.46%	
	Strongly Disagree	9 81.82% 5.92%	0 0.00% 0.00%	0 0.00% 0.00%	2 18.18% 50.00%	0 0.00% 0.00%	11 100% 6.15%	
	Total	152 84.92% 100%	10 5.59% 100%	9 5.03% 100%	4 2.23% 100%	4 2.23% 100%	179 100% 100%	
	Chi Square		27.35					
	Degrees of Freedom		16					
	p-value		.04					

The results of the Chi-square analysis presented in the cross tabulation shows that the null hypothesis can be rejected, meaning that there are racial differences when it comes to

perceptions about physical ability, and that these differences are unlikely due to chance. However, since there is a lack of racial diversity at my university, these results should be interpreted with caution.

Conclusion

After conducting this research, I feel that I am more knowledgeable about the beliefs of my peers here at the University of New Hampshire. The first piece of information I learned is that the students here believe that the race of an athlete directly affects their physical ability. The second piece of information I learned is that females equally agree with males that females can reach the same level of physical ability. This information provides a small yet telling glance into the beliefs of students at the University of New Hampshire in regard to race and gender. Further research could dive into the origin of these beliefs and provide answers about the social influences pertaining to this topic.

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