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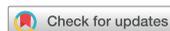
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Playing While Black

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, black youth face unique challenges that shape “where” they recreate, “who” they participate with, and “how” they engage in recreation. Recent events around the country have highlighted the potential of racial profiling in leisure settings. As a result, black youth and parents remain aware of the potential dangers of participating in recreation activities in public spaces. As black youth and their families are forced to navigate these realities, our field is presented with opportunities to explore unanswered questions about the relationship between Race and leisure, especially in the area of youth development. Using multiple contemporary examples to demonstrate the impact of Race on the recreation of black youth, three theoretical frameworks are presented that may help advance the discussion on race, recreation, and youth development. Warning: This article includes videos that contain graphic content and may be upsetting to some.

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Recreation and leisure scholars have made significant strides in increasing our understanding the role of recreation and youth development. Attention has been given to understanding the role of structured out-of-school activities, the importance of providing youths with voice in designing free-time activities, and the value of camp experiences (Lauer et al., 2006; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007). Despite these gains, very little is known about the relationship between Race¹, recreation, and youth development. While adolescence is marked as a difficult period within the lives of youths, this process becomes more complex for black² youths as their Race adds an additional developmental domain that must be negotiated during this period.

This commentary will argue that Race plays a pivotal role in adolescence and should not be overlooked as an aspect/context for researching recreation and adolescence. This will be accomplished by juxtaposing what is known about the adolescent phase with the realities of being a black teenager in the United States. Theoretical frameworks will be

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Color versions of one or more of the figures in the article can be found online at www.tandfonline.com/ulsc.

¹Race is capitalized throughout the manuscript to ensure its use as a proper noun and distinguish itself from the noun “race.”

For the purposes of this manuscript black and African American are used interchangeably.

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offered to provide an explanation for why these realities exist for black youth, with three case studies serving as examples. These case studies will also highlight how these realities impact recreation black youths. Finally, considerations will be offered to suggest future directions for expanding the understanding of the relationship among Race, recreation, and youth development through research, with the intent of helping to prepare the next generation of recreation professionals to effectively work with black youths.

A brief look at the literature

Race, recreation, and youth development

Adolescence is often marked as a period of time in which individuals experience increased autonomy and seek to establish their own identities (Erikson, 1968). As a result, adolescence is a time of exploration, as youths test new activities, relationships, and boundaries (Marcia, 1993). In a supportive environment, this exploration can lead to youth developing social, emotional, and behavioral competence, establishing self-efficacy and self-determination, and learning prosocial norms (Catalano et al., 2004). Recreation can be a context for youth development and person-environment interactions, which facilitate growth (Caldwell & Witt, 2011). Young people might acquire social skills or gain a clearer understanding of their identity through interaction with adult mentors through organized recreation.

Two research gaps have been identified that, if researched, could increase the understanding of the relationship between recreation programs and black youth development. The first research gap is that few scholars have deployed culture or cultural context in studies of recreation and youth development (Larson & Ngo, 2016). The absence of the role of culture has obscured both cultural assets black youths bring to recreation programs and characteristics of recreation programs, which support their unique needs. The second research gap includes the general absence of racism from theoretical frameworks within existing studies in the leisure literature (Mowatt, 2017). The absence of racism from analyses places developmental deficits and risks for black youths and leaves an unjust social structure unexamined, which reinforces negative outcomes.

Youth development research on black youths outside of recreation settings, has generally emphasized deficits such as poverty or academic failure (Cabrera, 2013). These studies have yielded important targets for remediation; however, without accompanying examinations of strength and resilience, deficit-based research may unintentionally reinforce images of African Americans as at-risk or delinquent rather than a social, cultural, or nonaberrant approach. Deficit-based constructions often limit perceptions of who African American youths are in the present and who they could be in the future (Baldrige, 2014).

Collectively, these research gaps point to a pattern of ignoring culture-bound, strength-based explorations of African American youth development. In the present discussion, we present a potential framework to overcome these gaps and provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationships among Race, recreation, and youth development. However, any assessment of black youth development must begin the political realities that shape their everyday lives.

Systemic racism

The phrase “driving while black” was coined in the 1990s when black male drivers were stopped by law enforcement under the suspicion of drug possession, at disproportionately high rates (Kocieniewski & Hanley, 2000). While the practice of racially profiling black men has long been acknowledged in black communities, the U.S. populace began to take note when training memos instructing officers to make racial judgments became public (Heumann, 2007). Similar to the racial profiling that continues to take place for black male adults, we now see black youths encountering the challenge of “playing while black” (PWB). PWB is where typical youth behavior result in black youths being racially profiled in public spaces, especially where interactions with others (e.g., members of the justice system and nonblack adults and peers) are concerned. These realities influence not only how black youths approach recreation but also the manner in which parents of black youths prepare their children for interactions with nonblack “others.”

Critical race theory (CRT) provides an approach to discussing and addressing racism that emerged out of the intersections of critical legal studies and radical feminism. CRT has two major goals: to understand our social situation, including how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, and to transform our social system for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Tenets of CRT are as follows: a) racism is ordinary, common, and embedded into our everyday experiences; b) racism advances the interests of both elite whites and working-class people, leaving little incentive to eradicate it; c) race is socially constructed and races are categories invented, manipulated, or removed by society whenever convenient; and d) the voices of people of color (e.g., African Americans, Latino/as, Asians, Native Americans) hold unique stories that should be privileged in discussions about Race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Adopted by numerous fields, including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), political science (Graham, 2007), and cultural/ethnic studies (Perry, 2005), CRT is useful in its ability to critique policies. For example, CRT was used to examine educational policies such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Common Core Standards* (Howard, 2010; Howard & Navarro, 2016) in ways that shed light on its failure to serve students of color. Leisure studies scholars have also used CRT, specifically in their discussions surrounding sport (Hylton, 2008), social justice and whiteness (Arai & Kivel, 2009), and intersectionality, a concept emerging from CRT (Watson & Scraton, 2013). One of the key features of CRT is the use of storytelling and counter-storytelling as tools to illuminate the intricacies and complexities of racism. In addition, CRT has also been used as an ontology that privileges the voices and lived experiences of those who are marginalized (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

The white racial frame can be used to explain the existence of systemic racism. The white racial frame is defined as “an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (Feagin, 2009, p. 3). As a worldview, the white racial frame is used to determine who gains access to specific resources and why. Prevention and assets-based models and implementation practices for youth programs and other institutions are identified as key resources for promoting positive youth development (Witt & Caldwell, 2005). However, these prevention and assets-based models fail to consider the

ways in which the white racial frame operates within society. Youth recreation often ignores the physical, social, emotional, and psychological implications that systemic racism had on black youths.

The white racial frame presents a strong foundation and context for how black youths are viewed within the United States. Both historically and contemporarily, media images and narratives of U.S. black culture have perpetuated negative ideas and stereotypes of black children and youths (Ward, 2004). These images and narratives, reinforced through the white racial frame, are communicated to children (through direct or indirect means) and fuel the ideology that blacks, black youths, and those identified as black are a subordinate group. This overarching white worldview then extends to other institutions that black youths come into contact with, including the education system, public recreation system, and justice system.

The leisure field could expand its understanding of Race, especially where youths are concerned, by applying the systemic racism lens to future studies. While this article does not allow for the detailed discussion of these frameworks, three recent incidents involving the recreation of black youths and interactions with the justice system are provided. They are intended to serve not only as examples of how systemic racism can impact the recreation experiences of black youths but also shed light on the impact these experiences have on black youths.

Three case studies

Loss of innocence: McKinney pool party

On June 5, 2015, McKinney police were called to the Craig Ranch North Community Pool to respond to a report of a large number of youths fighting, being unruly, and refusing to leave the site. Despite being told that many of the youths were invited to a private pool party at the site, upon arrival, 12 police officers tried to disperse the crowd of approximately 70 youths from the neighborhood and beyond. Later, an altercation occurred between Officer David Eric Casebolt and a black girl, 15-year-old Dajerria Becton, after he pushed her in the back in frustration when she failed to leave the area quickly upon his command. Video shot by Brandon Brooks, a white 15-year-old boy, showed the officer slamming her into the ground in her bikini (Cole-Frowe & Fausset, 2015). When friends tried to intervene, Officer Casebolt pulled his gun and began to wave it and shout obscenities at the black youths who surrounded him. The officer further immobilized Dajerria by pushing her face into the ground and placing a knee in her back as she cried and called out for her mother. Though many adults that lived in the community were standing by, none spoke out for the youths.

The next day, Brandon uploaded the approximately seven-minute video to YouTube (click [here](#)) and it garnered nationwide coverage with more than five million views and 16,000 comments in 48 hours. Accusations of racism, police brutality, bias, and community-based discrimination were observed and prompted an investigation of the reporting police and the police tactics used in the treatment of the youths present. The treatment from a trained police officer and the resultant actions against a young girl sparked another debate on Race and police tactics. But this time issues surrounding place were at the forefront. This was not a crime ridden inner city minority community; the

McKinney neighborhood is a fast growing, middle class suburban neighborhood with predominately white residents.

Casebolt, a decorated officer, was placed on administrative leave and subsequently resigned. Upon his resignation, Police Chief Greg Conley insisted that Officer Casebolt did not represent the department's "high standard of action" and his actions were "indefensible." After an investigation and refusal for indictment by a grand jury in 2016, Dajerra Becton and her legal guardian Shashona Becton sued the city for \$5 million in damages alleging the former officer and the police department violated the girl's constitutional rights by using excessive force and holding her without probable cause. This case is still pending.

For the youths who attended the pool party, we argue that a level of innocence (sense of virtue or purity) was lost. Although the party was attended by youths of multiple racial groups, eyewitness accounts stated, and the video confirmed, that youth of color were particularly targeted by the police. Recall the statement made by Brandon Brooks, a white youth:

"Everyone who was getting put on the ground was black, Mexican, Arabic," ... [The police] "didn't even look at me. *It was kind of like I was invisible.*"

His comments highlight the differential treatment that was displayed to white and non-white youths. Less than an hour earlier, these youths saw themselves and their peers as equals sharing a recreation experience. The arrival of the police taught these teens they were in fact not equal and there was a level of guilt associated with Race. This is a harsh reality that many, if not all, black youths must face early in their development. As a result, black youths are taught they cannot simply enjoy their recreation but must remain aware of their surroundings as well as who they interact with in those settings.

Loss of freedom: Grand Rapids, Michigan

A March 24, 2017, body camera video released by the Grand Rapids Police Department shows eight officers responding to detain five unarmed black youths after a report of a fight and a possible gun at the nearby basketball courts. The five boys, ranging in age from 12 to 14, were walking home from the Salvation Army Kroc Center on Division Avenue after playing basketball when they were stopped by police (see [Figure 1](#)).

Officer Caleb Johnson's body camera recorded the confrontation ([click here](#)) as he pulled up to the group that was casually walking and playing with a basketball between them, yelled out instructions, and drew his gun. As the youths were ordered to lay on the ground and other officers arrive on the scene, one of the boys is heard saying, "What did we do?" and "Can you please put the gun down?" Another youth says, "I do not want to die, bro." A third boy states, "Don't shoot me." Throughout the video, one of the boys cries loudly and uncontrollably with fear. A friend tries to comfort him by stating, "We are not about to die we didn't do nothing" as Officer Johnson keeps his weapon on the boys for more than 10 minutes.

Ironically, the large brawl was never confirmed and none of the boys upon a thorough search were found to have a gun, nor upon further investigation did they match the original description. However, they were still detained, placed in a squad car and parents were called for official release. Parents arrived angry and upset as one



Figure 1. Image from Officer Caleb Johnson's body camera of him pointing a gun at five black youth.

father stated, "Just like y'all understand (inaudible) my side too. My kids go to the Kroc to play basketball. That's it. Plain and simple." One of the officers stated that the youths were in the "Wrong place at the wrong time, obviously, for these kids. OK?" However, the father responded back, "Right place at the wrong time."

The Grand Rapids Police Department defended their officers, arguing they followed proper protocol and displayed professionalism during the incidence. Local NAACP president Cle Jackson stated, "If this is protocol, in terms of how you detain and treat teens and youth, then there probably needs to be a change in that protocol."

One year later, four of the five youths involved in the incident were interviewed. It was not only reported that the youths decided they do not like the police, but they also indicated they rarely visited the Kroc Center since the previous year's incident (Agar, 2018). Additionally, they noted they do not attend other festivals and activities they used to and avoid large gatherings. Since the incident, they prefer to stay close to home and often use their driveway to play full-court basketball instead of the local basketball courts.

While for many youths, especially white youths, adolescence is a time for exploration, this example clearly shows how that process can be cut short for black youths. The autonomy afforded other teenagers to walk to the local basketball court, without adult supervision, is lost for youths like the ones in this scenario. As the latter portion of the video shows, parents of black youths may prohibit their children from leaving home without an adult present. As the follow-up interview highlights, black youths themselves may limit their physical and social boundaries as a result of these negative interactions.

Loss of life: Tamir Rice

On November 22, 2014, Tamir Elijah Rice, a 12-year-old black boy from Cleveland, Ohio, was playing at a park outside his local recreation center. Tamir, playing with his toy gun, took a swing on the swing set then walked on the sidewalk kicking the snow

and making snowballs. A man, within a couple of feet of Tamir, sat under a gazebo drinking alcohol and watching him play. This man called 911, stating:

“There is a guy with a pistol ... *It’s probably fake*, but he’s pointing it at everybody... *Probably a juvenile*, you know ... I’m getting ready to leave, but you know he’s right here by the youth center or whatever. He’s pulling it in and out of his pants, I don’t know if it’s real or not.” (*Los Angeles Times* staff, 2014)

After the man who called 911 left the gazebo, Tamir sat at one of the picnic tables, continuing to play. The 911 dispatcher called two officers to the park, forgetting to mention critical parts of the 911 call, such as the gun was probably fake and Tamir was “probably a juvenile” (*Los Angeles Times*, 2014). Their police car (click [here](#)) drives up, and within three seconds of arriving Officer Timothy Loehmann jumped out of the passenger side of the squad car and shot Tamir. Next, Officer Frank Garmback, who was driving the car, jumped out and pointed his gun at Tamir’s body as he lay on the ground, slowly dying from a gunshot wound to the abdomen.

“Black male, *maybe 20*, black revolver, black handgun by him. Send E.M.S. this way, and a roadblock” an officer called on his radio. (Dewan & Opperl, 2015)

Tamir’s sister, Tajai, was next door in the Cudell Recreation Center when she heard these gunshots. Someone told Tajai that a boy had been shot. Soon after, she discovered this boy was her baby brother. Tajai ran outside to help, but as she approached her brother, who was bleeding out on the ground, she was stopped by police officers (click [here](#)). As Tajai tried to get to her dying brother, Officers Loehmann and Garmback forced her to the ground, handcuffed her, and placed her in their squad car less than 10 feet away from Tamir’s body (Shaffer, 2015). Thirteen minutes later an ambulance arrives to take Tamir to the hospital, where he died the next day.

“I want to go with my brother or go home ... *The police held me against my will. I want those officers responsible to be investigated*” wrote Tajai in a complaint to the Cleveland police oversight board. (Shaffer, 2015)

After Tamir’s death made national news, many people were outraged and protests against police brutality took place in cities across the United States. Over a year later, on December 8, 2015, both officers, Loehmann (who killed Tamir) and Garmback, were acquitted by a grand jury, despite all evidence. County Prosecutor Timothy McGinty stated the shooting had been “a perfect storm of human error, mistakes and miscommunications,” claiming that Loehmann had a reason to fear for his life (Williams & Smith, 2015).

“The world must be made to acknowledge that *Tamir Rice’s life mattered*” wrote Charles Blow in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*. (Blow, 2015).

On April 25, 2015, the city of Cleveland agreed to pay a \$6 million settlement to Tamir’s family. “While we have settled the legal side of this and the court proceedings side of this for \$6 million dollars there is no price that you can put on the life, the loss of a 12-year-old child,” stated Cleveland Mayor Frank G. Jackson (Berman & Lowery, 2015). Despite the grand jury court case and \$6 million settlement, Loehmann and Garmback continued to work at the Cleveland Police Department. However, in May 2017 Loehmann was fired, not for killing 12-year-old Tamir but for lying on his

department application. The department discovered inaccuracies in his application related to past employers recommending his termination for instances of insubordination, lying, and an inability to emotionally function (Fortin & Bromwich, 2017). Despite his termination, Loehmann has yet to be decertified and still holds a license to be an officer in Cleveland (Ali, 2017).

The case of Tamir Rice is one example of how playing while black can result in murder. While some may point to racial threat and bias as reasons, Tamir was murdered, the use of this explanation “diminishes the impact of the larger epidemic of racism within the greater population” (Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016, p. 175). Racial ideologies played a major role in Tamir’s death and the response to it. Race played an equally harrowing role in how police responded in the other two cases and its emotional and psychological impact on the black youths who now follow the pursuit of happiness through leisure in their own backyard. Mowatt (2017) argues that it is the color-blind racial ideology that causes the silence in leisure research surrounding the death of Tamir. Nearly three years after Tamir’s death, *Leisure Sciences* published a manifesto response. In this manifesto, Mowatt (2017) urged leisure researchers to think critically about the role that police play in “regulating and determining who has access to spaces for recreation and who is empowered to enjoy those spaces” (p. 8).

Addressing the needs of today’s black youths

The three examples provided above only reflect the interactions between black youths and the justice system covered by the national media. A number of similar incidents still occur and play out in the local news. This presents challenges for parents of black youths as they discuss not only the impact of Race on life but also specifically provide guidance for appropriate or safe recreation activities and behaviors during their youth. At the same time, it presents an opportunity for members of the field of leisure studies, as current approaches to examining the relationship between Race, recreation, and youth development may not provide a meaningful way to understand this negotiation process.

Recognizing the tension brought about by systemic racism, the first question that must be asked is, how do we transform our research in a way that truly recognizes the harsh realities of Race? We must push past the more palatable research agendas that focus on recreation behaviors grouped by Race or policies and procedures that increase access for marginalized groups. A closer look must be taken at the ways in which communities are built, funded, and managed and how these structures truly inhibit recreation engagement and the positive youth development process.

There’s also an opportunity to re-evaluate our academic curricula. Are we really preparing our students to work with the diverse communities that many of them will be expected to serve? While most accredited Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions (COAPRT) academic programs include a diversity course, we must begin asking ourselves is one class enough? Is that course offered in a way that truly informs our students of the complexity of Race as well as that of gender and sexual identity? Are we weaving these discussions into other courses such as programming, risk management, and interpretation? Together, these questions can begin shifting our field in a practical and meaningful way as we prepare professionals to immediately address these issues.

In the Grand Rapids, Michigan, incident, the role of parents and other supportive adults is evident. Moving forward, the role of family and the socialization process (Stevenson, 1995) needs to be explored. Researchers can begin with understanding what messages black youths receive and how these messages limit or promote their recreation. With a strong correlation between racial socialization and racial identity (Tang, McLoyd, & Hallman, 2016), it is important to consider how varied socialization processes influence the development of one's identity as well as how these identities influence recreation choices. Doing so provides a richer understanding of the varied ways in which black youths approach recreation.

Adopting theories like CRT bring new ideologies that aid in the methodology to understanding the intersections of Race, youth development, and recreation. As CRT is adopted for future studies, researchers should consider practicing the tenets of CRT by developing research questions that privilege the stories of black youths. Researchers should understand that racism is a part of their everyday lived experience, including their participation in structured and unstructured recreational activities. In addition, researchers should acknowledge that their adoption of CRT requires addressing systemic racism by building connections between this social issue and their research approaches and agendas.

Finally, we must ask, what is the impact of these nationally known stories on black youths? With the availability of social media, incidents like the three presented here are receiving more national attention. Black youths are being exposed to tense, and sometimes violent, footage. Thirty years ago, black youths were taught the realities of interacting with law enforcement; today's youths are able to witness these tragedies firsthand and sometimes live due to the prevalence of body cameras, live streaming social media, and, in the case of Tamir Rice, security videos. Using a recreation lens, we need to understand how this access influences their perceptions of *where* they can engage in recreation and *with whom*. Simultaneously, youth development researchers need to begin to explore the impact of exposure to these videos on black youth's emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Closing thoughts

While progress has been made in expanding our understanding of youth development and recreation, there is still a gap in recognizing the relationship between youth development and recreation for black youths. As such, new questions need to be asked. These questions will affect how recreation educators prepare students to become professionals in the field and how future studies are approached. These questions will possibly make us uncomfortable, push the boundaries of our understanding, and force us to face harsh realities about the way in which our communities and recreation agencies are structured. However, with thoughtful consideration, we can create a world where playing while black is no longer a death sentence.

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