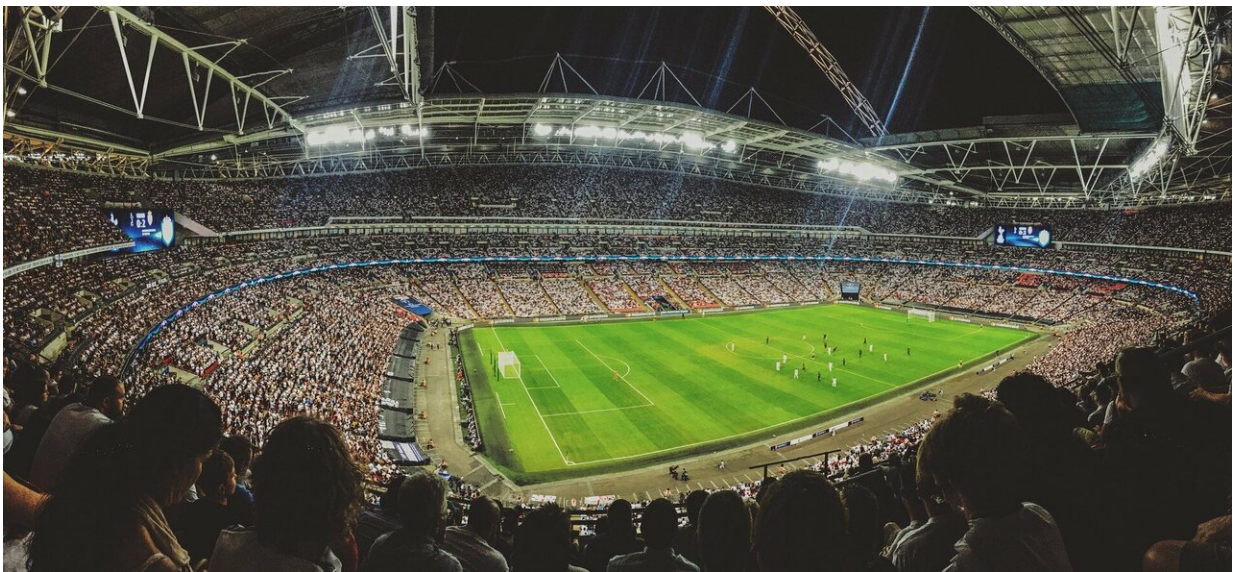


Racism in football: New research shows media treats black men differently to white men

May 14 2021, by Paul Ian Campbell



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On BBC Sport, Match of the Day pundits Ian Wright and Alan Shearer recently had a conversation about racism in football. Shearer, the white ex-England international striker asked his black ex-teammate Wright: "Do you believe a black guy gets treated differently to a white guy?" [Wright's response](#) was unequivocal: "Without a doubt, Al!"

Black players face discrimination on every level: public (anti-black

racism from fans in stadiums), private (abusive DMs on [social media](#)) and institutional (lack of management and coaching opportunities). Wright, however, also pointed to the disparate treatment players receive in the press, referencing [recent reports](#) on similar property investments by strikers Marcus Rashford and Phil Foden.

Rashford, who plays for Manchester United and is black, was framed an extravagant, cash-rich, [cash-loose footballer](#). Foden, meanwhile, who plays for City and is white, was described as the local Stockport boy [looking after his family](#).

[A recent study](#) on racial stereotyping in football match commentary, which I co-authored with Louis Bebb, backs up this observation. The findings show how differently black and white footballers are talked about within the very TV studios where Wright and Shearer work.

Considerable differences

The study focused on commentary during the FIFA World Cup in 2018. It analyzed 1,009 comments of praise given to footballers during 30 hours of BBC and ITV coverage, across 20 matches (between 19 of the 32 competing teams). We found that black players were overwhelmingly praised for their perceived physical prowess and natural athleticism, and white players for their intelligence and character.

We sorted the comments by attribute. The percentage breakdown of 281 praise comments given to visibly black players centered on physical (69.8%), natural (10.7%), learned (10.3%), character (5%) and cognitive (4%) attributes. Of the 448 praise comments given to white players, 47.9% were for their learned attributes, followed by physical (18.3%), character (13.8%), cognition (11.4%) and natural (8.6%) attributes.

The data indicated that this was not simply a case of commentators

reporting objectively on what they had seen in the match. Instead, certain attributes, such as power and pace, were more likely to be noticed or overlooked depending on the player's race.

Racialised stereotypes

Many of the racial stereotypes in sport are traceable back to the pseudo race sciences that emerged in the 1800s, and particularly to [social Darwinism](#). This held that white people were the most evolved race in terms of intellect, morality and character, and as such, did not require physical prowess. Black people were considered to be the least evolved, inherently violent, lazy, intellectually limited and lacking in character—they conversely needed greater physical strength than [white people](#).

This facilitated the view that [black people](#) were inherently suited to physical activities rather than cognitive tasks. It was seen as making them natural athletes.

As [Dean Cromwell](#), coach to the University of Southern California track and US Olympic sprint teams, wrote in 1941: "It was not long ago that [the African Americans athlete's] ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle."

Damaging impact

The near blanket praise by football commentators for black physiology in our study reinforces the idea of the "natural" black athlete.

This has a detrimental effect on how we see and value black talent, in that it is celebrated while simultaneously reduced to being about physical attributes. By this logic, black players are only professional footballers

because they are supremely strong, or can run fast, or jump high.

This is how Manchester City's Raheem Sterling was characterized during the 2018 tournament on UK radio station, talkSPORT. Here, the commentator, white ex-Wales international midfielder Vinnie Jones (ironically a player of very limited technical ability) asserted that if Sterling didn't have pace he would not even be playing for England or any team in the English Premier League.

He would instead, [said Jones](#), "be playing for Exeter", that is, in the lowest professional division in English football.

Beyond sport

Ideas of black people as natural athletes contribute to wider social myths of black people as hyperphysical, uncontrollably strong and cognitively challenged. These ideas have very real consequences for black communities in Britain.

This perception often legitimizes brutality by the state. In 2020 black-heritage young people were [three times more likely](#) to be tasered by police for the same crimes as white criminals. And black people with mental health conditions were more likely to be detained [when compared](#) to all other ethnic-groups.

Black children, meanwhile, were more likely to be predicted grades [below their intellectual talent](#), and [five times more likely](#) to be excluded for similar misbehavior as white peers.

Necessary changes

We need to expand our definition of what constitutes racist behavior and

attitudes. Instead of [focusing only](#) on those forms of discrimination and abuse that require intent, we need to understand that unintentional practices also contribute to racism.

Our study shows that racism includes the match commentary of sports broadcasters who—arguably unwittingly—treat black and white players differently. As shown here, these practices may not be intentional, but they contribute to racism in society more broadly, and so need to be unlearned.

We recommend that those within the sport media industry undertake more robust and meaningful education programs. Doing reflexive tallying exercises like that employed in our study would help them identify racial stereotyping and discrimination within their own journalistic practice.

We also argue that media and journalism degrees—where we train producers and journalists of the future—also have an integral role to play. Unless this happens, we will continue to see black people being treated differently on the pitch, in commentary boxes and in wider society.

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