It Takes a Village: Black Female Collegiate Athletes’ Social Network Experiences

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Social networks are “the social connections” made within the institutional environment, and are characterized by their function and structure (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Heaney and Israel (1997) found that within the social networks relationships are forged which can illicit numerous functions such as social influence, social control, social comparison, and social support; but they may or may not always fulfill these functions. In the context of universities and colleges, social networks for students can include peer associations, academic associations, and leadership and career organizations. The goal of these social networks is to assist students with coping with transitions (i.e., into college, out of college) (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), and with regard to social support, provide (a) appraisal support (constructive feedback), (b) emotional support (care and love), (c) informational support (advice and suggestions), and (d) instrumental support (resources and services) (House, 1981; Tardy, 1985). However, the utility of social networks is not based on the mere existence of such social networks, but more so on a person’s perception of their needs for support being fulfilled.

A person’s social identity (e.g., race and gender) will influence their perception of whether social support is available or has been provided (Bailey, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1996). Hence, racial minorities might perceive the availability of social support differently than those in the majority. As concerns Black female athletes, their societal marginalization and the challenges that arise from this status (e.g., silencing through a lack of media attention; discriminatory and sexist treatment (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005) justify the need for beneficial social support. This support, however, if often not provided for Black female athletes (Suggs, 2001).

Acknowledging the notion of social networks and its relationship with social support, this paper will examine Black female collegiate athletes’ social network experiences within the context of predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU). Examining Black female collegiate athletes’ social network experiences could speak to the dearth of representation of Black women within a number of sporting careers and environments to include athletic administration and coaching (Abney, 2007; Corbett & Stills, 2007), sport media and broadcasting (Corbett & Stills, 2007, Lapchick, 2008), and overall sport participation (Harrison, 2001; Lapchick, 2009). In addition, the historical marginalization of Black women as a collective could provide insight into the amount and types of social networks with which they are involved.

Employing critical race theory (CRT), this paper seeks to explain how Black female collegiate athletes social network experiences provide social support. Hence, CRT’s transformative and emancipatory tenets (Bell, 1988; Delgado, 1989; Singer, 2005; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998) will illuminate how Black female collegiate athletes’ social network experiences play out within the context of a PWIHE and HBCU. The research questions include:

**Research Question 1**: In what way does your athletic affiliation provide social support?

**Research Question 2**: What additional social networks do you have and in what ways do they provide social support?

**Research Question 3**: How have these social support networks prepared you for life after college?

Accordingly, utilizing a qualitative questionnaire, narratives were captured and analyzed to understand the voices and experiences of Black female collegiate athletes in PWHEs and HBCUs in the mid and southwest regions of the United States. Results will be discussed which explicate how these social support network experiences are enhanced or hindered based on the institutional environments and resources, and how their overarching societal marginalization as Black women speaks to their psychosocial and sociocultural development and their opportunity and access within and throughout sporting environments and beyond.