Take Me as I Am: Black Female Collegiate Athletes Identity Negotiation

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According to Bruening (2005), African American women are silenced and stereotyped in the context of sport. The results of silencing and stereotypes for African American women are marginalized experiences reflective through the literature, research, and participation in sport (Bruening, 2005). The marginalization experienced by African American women is based on their “double bind” (Smith, 2000), multiple oppressions, or intersectionality based on their race, gender, and social class. African American women whom participate in sport at the collegiate level, the notion of intersectionality is significant.

While there is a dearth of research on African American women in sport and African American women in collegiate sport, researchers have examined the college sport experiences of this subjugated group and found African American female collegiate athletes: a) are alienated and isolated (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005); b) are silenced by the media, coaches, and administrators (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Foster, 2005); c) adopt an avoidance coping style and coping strategies rooted in African American culture (Carter & Hawkins, 2011); and d) adopt familial mentors to aid in psychosocial and sociocultural development (Carter & Hart, 2010). Therefore, with these range of experiences and strategies to counteract their marginalization, determining how African American female collegiate athletes negotiate their identity is of interest.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine African American female athletes’ athletic identity role in a predominantly white institutional context. For example, examine athletic identity by sport (i.e., traditional sport (e.g., track and field and basketball) v non-traditional sports (e.g., volleyball, gymnastics, softball, tennis); athletic identity by year in school, examine athletic identity based on scholarship status (e.g., full, partial, walk-on), examine athletic identity based on social class (which may have same findings based on traditional and non-traditional sports). While looking at the roles of African American female athletics, the critical race theory model (CRT) will be used to help understand the relationship between athletic identity role and race. The CRT model will help to answer to why the African American female athletes feel as if their role differs as an athletes.

According to practitioners, between the ages of 18-21 (college years) is deemed a critical period for identity development (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, Howard-Hamilton, 2003). In the collegiate context, understanding identity development has been known to facilitate practitioners (i.e., faculty, academic advisors, tutors) ability to aid in the academic successes for students of color, to include African Americans. However, obtaining “information about a person’s racial identity does not reveal anything about her or his cultural socialization, except perhaps how much the person values her or his socioracial group’s traditional culture (Helms & Cook, 1999, p. 98). Interestingly, when researching racial identity and student involvement on African American males, Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995) found that when involved in extracurricular activities, African American males had higher levels of racial identity and self-esteem. This information begs the question, how does athletic participation impact African American female identity? More specifically, does athletic salience, or a strong athletic identity, offset African American females overlapping oppressions?

Griffith & Johnson (2002) describe athletic identity as “the degree with which an individual identifies with the athletic role...a social dimension of self-concept influencing experiences, relationships with others, and pursuit of sport activity” (p. 226). Brewer and Cornelius (2001), creators of the athletic identity measurement scale (AIMS), designed the AIMS to encompass social, cognitive, and effective areas of athletic identity, as well as to determine the daily experiences of the collegiate athlete. Therefore utilizing a seven-item questionnaire (with a 7-point likert scale) Brewer and Cornelius (2001) present such statements as “I consider myself an athlete” and “sport is the most important part of my life”. The benefits of having a high athletic identity are increased athletic performance, high self confidence, and enhanced body image (Horton & Mack, 2000). Conversely, the consequences of having a high athletic identity are increased social isolation and alienation (Horton & Mack, 2000) and increased identity depression.
While determining the African American females’ racial identity formation is beyond the scope of this study, determining their athletic identity formation was of interest. However, few studies have examined athletic identity for racial and gendered minorities Melendez (2010); (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, In Press). Consequently, Harrison et al. (In Press) explored the relationship between race and athletic identity for African American and White male football players whom attended a predominantly white Division I institution. Harrison et al, (In Press) found the African American males to have a stronger athletic identity than the White males; suggesting athletics plays a more prominent role in the African American males’ daily lives.

The study was represented by 38 self-identified African American female collegiate athletes representing six sports completed a qualitative questionnaire which included: a) athletic information (e.g., athletic team, scholarship status), b) university perceptions (e.g., racial and gender discrimination) and personal information (e.g., hometown, parent/guardians socioeconomic status), and c) the athletic identity measurement scale. In the last section, the responses to the AIM scale were totaled to determine degree of athletic identity; and thus, determine the degree to which the athlete identifies with their role as an athlete. The AIM scale has been widely utilized in sport identity research and the instrument has undergone rigorous validation and reliability analysis during its development for university level populations. Therefore, the reliability of the AIM scale for this population was acceptable (Cronbach’s α = .77).

The findings provide insight to the role of athletics for African American female collegiate athletes; and, the impact of marginalization based on their race, gender, and class status within the context of a predominantly white institution of higher education. How African American females “double bind” is shaped by their psychosocial (i.e., silencing) and sociocultural (i.e., stereotypes) experiences impact identity formation. Finally, African American women felt that they were identified by their race not just by athletics.