Are There Barriers Keeping African Americans from Running Marathons? Investigating why some African Americans Choose to Run Marathons and the Barriers that would keep them from Running Along with Selection of Sport Based on Race

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According to the 2013 Annual Marathon Report, the marathon industry grew to an all time high with an estimated 518,000 runners completing a marathon in 2011, with a slight decrease in 2012 to 487,000. Historically, men have dominated the proportion of participants with 90% of the finishers in 1980. The proportion is trending to include a greater proportion of women: currently 58% men (Annual Report, 2013) with the number of female marathon runners increasing since the late 1960’s (Pate & O’Neill, 2007). One noticeable group still not joining in the distance running craze is African Americans. A recent article in Runner’s World magazine highlighted one African American runner who stated “I was tired of feeling like I was the only one out there.” This statement leads to the purpose of this exploratory investigation to develop an understanding of why more African Americans do not participate in distance running.

Two theoretical foundations may provide some insights into the differential rates of participation in marathons by race. The social aspect of competition theory notes “when there is a high concentration of one ethnicity and a limited amount of resources, competition is at a very high level” (Fournier, 2009, p. 1146). In communities, “humans must compete to be valued, chosen, and liked—in essence, to simulate feelings of positive affect in others—through display of their skill, talent, and competencies” (Fournier, 2009, p. 1146). In an area where resources are scarce, social hierarchies naturally form giving some individuals greater status within the community (Fournier, 2009). For example, the emphasis placed on the sport of basketball by African American communities could provide the pressure for children to take on this sport and become more talented in the sport at a young age (Carlston, 1983). Further, by participating in basketball, individuals in this community are seen in a positive light by peers, thus creating an environment in which African Americans compete for limited spots in basketball and other sports such as football (Medrano, 1994).

Group boundary theory provides a second theoretical framework, which may provide some insight into the lack of participation by African Americans in distance running. Group boundary is when “a group maintains its identity with others [which] entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership and exclusion” (Barth, 1970). A group with a defining boundary includes those who exhibit characteristics and qualities that fit into the group. There are two characteristics of group boundary; sharpness and permeability. Sharpness relates to how easily outsiders can distinguish members of the group from non-members, and permeability relates to how easily outsiders can join the group (Knowles, 1973). The membership requirements, strength, and allowance of others differentiate based on group characteristics. In terms of size, if a group’s beliefs are strong and there are a high number of members, it is hard for an outsider to join. The three main effects on group boundary are economic differences, racial differences, and geographic differences. Race and economic conditions tie into the sports that African Americans choose. Playing certain sports gives African Americans membership into a group that is regarded with high social status (Carlston, 1983). If an athlete were to go outside of the norms, there could be conflict both within and among other groups. Economic conditions affect African Americans because in low-income communities, resources are scarce for sports that require extra equipment or extra fees.

Using competition theory and group boundary theory as conceptual frameworks, this study will explore African American sport participation in the context of marathons. This exploratory study will use qualitative data collection and analysis to address the research purpose. The experiences of African American runners will be examined, and their motivations for running marathons and potential barriers to their participation will be documented. The researchers will use purposeful sampling to collect data from participants who can provide information-rich cases, detailing this phenomenon and providing more information to help understand it (Patton, 2002). In addition to purposeful sampling, the researchers may use snowball sampling to identify other participants who meet this criteria.
and can provide further information about competition theory and group boundary theory as it relates to their marathon running.

Data will be collected from participants through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol will contain open-ended questions addressing competition theory and group boundary theory and potential themes such as sport social hierarchies and economic, racial, and geographic differences. The researchers will conduct approximately 15 interviews, or until they have saturated the data. The study will use detailed coding techniques and constant comparative analysis, which allows the transcribed data to evolve from description to categorization to theme development. This compare and contrast method will help to develop an emerging framework that is grounded in the data. The study's findings as well as theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.