Determining the Socioecological Factors Shaping Black Girls' Sport Experiences using Collins (1990)'s Black Feminist Thought

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The “Black” woman in U.S. society is misunderstood, misrepresented, and misappropriated (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Smith, 1992). Her experiences are often constrained to the lens of gender or race without consideration for how these two constructs synergistically create a social dynamic for Black women that is not fully realized by simply studying women or Blacks (Carter, 2010; Scranton, 2001). Sport management literature also highlights the silo effect of using race and gender as separate constructs in understanding Black female sport experiences, demonstrating that opportunities for their sport participation are limited by the lack of input Black women have in defining and implementing sport (Bruening, 2004; McDowell, 2009). In addition, the dearth of literature for Black female sport experiences is cause for great concern in the wake of increasing health and educational disparities for this population (Henderson, 2001). For example, despite an urgent need for conversations and solutions to the growing problem of obesity among Blacks, a disproportionate amount of Black women are overweight or obese and are unable to participate in physical activity at levels that would increase long term health (Carter- Francique, 2011; Ogden et al., 2010). In the face of increasing sport interventions for health in this population, data that provides a more parsimonious understanding of Black women’s sporting experiences is warranted for determining the factors that shape Black female sport participation and furthermore, creating more empowering and sustainable sport experiences.

Black women face an intersection of race, gender, and class that creates a different social experience from Black men and White woman (Bruening, 2005). Even among Black women, the effects of these social constructs are experienced differently as variables including age, religion, and physical ability, also affect their sport experience (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, these women must be studied from an emic point of view as previously held notions and concepts of their behaviors lack robustness in capturing their experiences and the interlocking nature of racial, gender, and class oppression affecting their human agency particularly as it pertains to their sport experiences, health behavior, and educational attainment (Collins, 2000; Hull et al., 1982; Olushola et al., 2012).

To this end, Collins (1990)' Black Feminist Thought (BFT) will be employed as the theoretical framework for this study. A key theme of BFT is recognizing the patterns in Black women’s lived experience that speak to the multiple levels, or matrix, of domination Black women face. The effect of the matrix of domination created by race, gender, and class ideologies can be observed on three levels: individual, cultural, and institutional. The individual level looks at how one’s concrete experiences, values, and motivation shape one's outlook and behavior. Observations at this level also encompass interpersonal relationships as sites of resistance or empowerment. The second level is the cultural level. At this level, individual experiences and ideas gain meaning from interactions with other members of one’s group or community. For Black women, the Black community has a strong influence on the way these women interpret their experiences and validate their behavior (Collins, 2009). The third level speaks to how hegemonic ideologies permeate the cultural and individual levels through social institutions. Social institutions, including education, housing, employment, and healthcare, are structured to reinforce dominant ideologies through the unequal distribution of resources. While these sites offer opportunities for empowerment through increased access to resources (i.e., social capital), these resources are often provided with the latent intent of indemnifying the people whom the resources were meant to serve. Frisby and Shaw (2006) and LaVoi and Dutove (2012) speak to how current frames of promoting gender equity actually work to reinforce gender stereotypes and promote tokenism when promoting women in administrative positions, and consequently their input in how Black women are able to participate in sport.

Qualitative methods will be employed to explore the socioecological factors that shape Black female sport participation. Given the strong correlation between sport participation as a youth to adult sport participation and the
data that Black female sport participation drastically decreasing around fourteen, Black girls will be the focus for this study. To ascertain the factors they perceive shape their current sport participation, individual interviews with Black high school girls from around the state of Arkansas will be conducted. Arkansas is 3rd in obesity rates nationally with Black children obesity rates being over 15% higher than the national average (Healthy People, 2020; Phillips et al., 2012). The state of Arkansas was chosen to control for structural variables that would affect sport participation, namely the effect of State Act 2020 on shaping healthy lifestyle environments and behaviors for school age youth. Informed by BFT, the questionnaire will ascertain the enablers and barriers to sport participation on the individual (i.e., religion, physical ability, value of sport), cultural (i.e., stereotypes of Black girls sport behaviors and body types) and structural (i.e., Act 2020 guidelines regarding access to healthy foods and physical activity) levels. A snowball sampling technique will be used to identify Black high school girls currently participating in sport from contacts provided from the Educational Renewal Zone (Jonesboro, AR) and the researcher’s personal networks. Participant ascent and parent consent will be requested in writing prior to each interview. The interview data will be digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using logic models to describe the factors the girls' felt shaped their sport experiences.

NVIVO 10 will be used to code interview data from the co-informants. Data will be examined for barriers and enablers to sport on the three levels (individual, structural, and cultural) outlined by Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990). The effects of these factors will be analyzed to create models of the processes that shape Black girls' current sport experiences. The models will then be reviewed juxtapose to the data to ensure the processes in the model accurately reflect the themes presented in the data. The coding process will seek to identify how these factors are internalized to affect sport participation and sport’s ability to promote healthy lifestyles in this population. Date triangulation will consist of reviewing the logic models with the girls and coming to a consensus about how the coded data represents their sport experience.

Having a better understanding of how this population currently engages in sport could yield data that increases the effectiveness of current sport programs in promoting healthy weight and lifestyles. Employing Black Feminist Thought can redress the taken for granted notions in sport that limit the representation of this population in the participation and administration of sport. BFT is ideal as it avoids the binaries of traditional concepts of gender to allow for exploration of multiple traits and identities, including race and class, in understanding how to redress hegemonic ideologies that preclude the equitable treatment of girls and women (Frisby & Shaw, 2006). This study seeks to build on previous research by explaining how race, class, and gender affect sport participation by exploring these factors as they are socially constructed and individually interpreted. The focus on Black girls is warranted as their sport experiences serve as “canaries in the mines” to the social, cultural, and structural influences that are continually driving individuals out of sport. Subjected to the triple threat of racism, sexism, and classism, identifying how these girls navigate and overcome these barriers to engage and remain physically active through sport will provide insight in designing sport programs that employ individual, cultural and structural enablers to participation in the recruitment and retention of this and other marginalized populations.