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Going Deep: Experiences of a Division I University's First Black Female Competitive Swimmer

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The adjustment period for first-year minority students at a predominantly White institution (PWI) can prove a little more difficult than most; and even more arduous for a Black student-athlete competing on an otherwise all-White team in what is considered a nontraditional sport for Black participants. Using case study method, a semistructured interview was used to explore the first year experience(s) of a predominantly White, Division I university's first and only Black female swim team member during the 2008–2009 academic school year. The principle investigator and two additional investigators found the participant, at times, felt lonely and disconnected from the team, encountered cultural/racial stereotypes, and had to negotiate cultural constraints to be a swimmer. Moreover, the participant found herself in a position of having to inform, and sometimes correct, her White (and Black) peers and coaches on the misconceptions they held about Black swimmers and Black culture over all. The never-ending quest to maintain individuality, culture, and be a leader proved overwhelming for the participant at times. Implications for cultural competency for coaches and players are discussed.

Keywords: Black athletes, Black female swimmer, Black hair, minority swimming gap, swimming constraints

As many students prepare to make the transition from high school to their first year in college, they are flooded with a plethora of emotions ranging from excite-

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ment and anticipation to nervousness and even anxiety. This is to be expected. They are embarking on what will potentially be the most memorable time of their lives. Besides, college is not just about attending classes and walking away with a degree; it is also a time for self-exploration, meeting people with diverse backgrounds, building lifelong friendships, and creating memories to recall at future reunions for years to come. In essence, college is an adjustment period that all students have to make. That being said, the adjustment can prove a little more difficult for a Black student at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Moreover, the adjustment can prove more salient for a Black student-athlete competing on an all-White team in a sport with documented low ethnic minority participation, such as swimming. There appears to be a paucity of literature specifically addressing the issues surrounding the experiences of Black female student-athletes at the collegiate level, and an breadth of research exploring the Black male student-athlete experience at PWIs (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2013; Harper, 2009; Singer, 2005). What the literature does reveal is Black female student-athletes are generally under-represented in collegiate athletics, tend to have higher graduation rates than their male counterparts, and have reported dealing with instances of perceived racism (Lapchick, 2010; Coakley, 2008).

Melendez (2008) purports that even though Black student-athletes, particularly males, “. . . are often treated as valued and respected representatives of a university community, they can also be the victims of prejudice from White students, faculty, and nonathletic minority students” (p. 424). This is definitely applicable to Black swimmers on campuses at PWIs, particularly Black female swimmers, as they tend to have the lowest rate of participation in swimming over any other racial group in the United States (American Red Cross, 2009). Minority swimming participation continues to be a struggle in the U.S. due to various researched constraints such as social economic status, access to facilities, fear, and even hair maintenance for Black females (Centers for Disease Control, 2014; Irwin, Irwin, Ryan & Drayer, 2009; Norwood, 2010).

Principle Investigator Intrigue

Even with experience as a researcher in the area of ethnic minority swimming participation and constraints, as the principle investigator (PI), I was rather surprised to meet the participant, a Black, female, competitive swimmer. To clarify, the surprise was more so that I did not realize Wave University had a Black swimmer on its women’s team. The surprise soon gave way to intrigue: How long had she been a swimmer? Where was her home town? Did she face the constraints to swimming that other Black females have reported (Norwood, 2010)? Even more so, were there any other Black females on the swim team? All my questions were answered in the current study.

Wave University Women’s Swim Team

Athletics is among the top, if not *the* top draw at Wave University, as is the case with most NCAA Division I institutions. With a long-standing history stretching back to the early 1900s, the athletic program has grown by leaps and bounds, particularly

with women's athletics. Wave's swimming and diving team started intercollegiate play during the 1976–1977 season. It was not until the 2008–2010 school year that Wave University saw its first ever Black athlete on the Lady Tiger swimming and diving team. While there could be several questions as to why it took so long, the current research, instead, focuses only on the experiences and perspectives of Wave University's first Black female competitive swimmer.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to explore the first year experience(s) of a Black female competitive swimmer on an otherwise all-White team at a predominantly White National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institution. The primary objectives of this study were to gain a firsthand account of the participant's experience(s) of adjustment, if any, being on an all-White team and also being the first Black female swimmer the University has ever had. As previously stated, Black female swimming participation tends to be little to null in the U.S., thus, the purpose of this study was also to understand how the participant negotiated constraints to be a competitive swimmer.

Method

Qualitative Research

The use of a qualitative research design was most appropriate for gaining the in-depth information from the participant that was desired. Gratton and Jones (2004) contended the human experience “. . . is too complex to be reduced to numbers. Rather, they are ‘measured’ using words, statements, and other non-numerical tools, collecting data from the viewpoint of the participant” (p. 19). Qualitative data allows for exploration into the human experience that extends beyond data garnered from quantitative methods thus, was most suitable for the current study. This approach allowed the use of probing, follow-up questions to gain clarity and further insight into the participant's responses. Moreover, the qualitative approach is a perfect alignment with phenomenological research which was used as the basis of this study.

Phenomenology

The fundamental foundation of this research is phenomenology, which, in essence, uses inductive methods of identifying and exploring a phenomenon from the perspective of the participant. An early adopter and promoter of phenomenology, Husserl (1962) positioned the approach as a way of classifying and describing subjective, human experience(s). Moreover, phenomenology is concerned with getting first-hand accounts of lived experiences and interpretations of those experiences *from* the participant's point of view. This is not to suggest the absence of research bias, which Husserl (1970) attempted to assert should be the beginning point of good, phenomenological research. To the contrary, Lester (1999) suggested more modern humanist and feminist researchers reject Husserl's suggestions of starting research free of preconceived ideas or hypotheses. Instead, they “emphasize the

importance of making clear how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings, as well as making the researcher visible in the ‘frame’ of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer” (p. 1). From the onset of this research study, as the primary researcher, I had a subjective interest in the topic being explored but wanted an “insider view” of the phenomenon being researched. Being aware of this researcher bias, the data collection and analysis were a continuous labor of openness to whatever would be revealed. As stated by Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2007), “Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility” (p. 97). The main goal of this study, as with any phenomenological study, was to focus in on the participant and the things the participant experienced and, in turn, make meaning of those experiences.

Given the unique nature of the obvious phenomena present in this study—1) A Black female competitive swimmer and 2) A Black female competitive swimmer on an all-White Division I collegiate team—phenomenology seemed to be the best method for unearthing the participant’s experiences. As Smith (2011) purports, phenomenology offers a view of a conscious experience as it is experienced from a first person perspective (*Phenomenology*). Through the use of a semistructured interview, the participant gave first-and accounts of her experience(s).

Theoretical/conceptual framework. Two theoretical frameworks help us create a foundation for framing this study, the assimilation and leisure constraints theories. Sport has been perceived as an important mechanism in this process by which racial and ethnic group members could be assimilated into mainstream society. Moreover, in team sports, assimilation and constraints to participation are common (Shifman, Moss, D’Andrade, Eichel, & Forrester, 2012).

Assimilation theory. Assimilation, also referred to as cultural assimilation, is the process by which a person or a group’s language or culture comes to resemble those of another group. The term is used both to refer to both individuals and groups that come to be culturally dominated by another group. Assimilation may involve either a quick or gradual change depending on circumstances of the group. Gamanche (2009) posited that participation in sport [athletics] and recreation have numerous meanings for the various constituencies, all of whom use sport [athletics] and recreation to construct identities, express emotions, and struggle over the politics of assimilation.

Assimilation theory springs from Park’s (1950) classic model that posits a cycle of ethnic relations: contact, conflict, accommodation, assimilation. Cultural conflict is therefore mitigated through accommodations and assimilation, or cultural annihilation (Birell, 1989). Park’s ‘race relations cycle’, with its distinct, linear stages of 1) contact, 2) competition, 3) accommodation, and 4) assimilation, was consolidated as a hegemonic frame to understand the incorporation of racial and ethnic groups into the developing 20th century. Park’s race relation cycle is best understood in the following manner:

First, there is contact/competition among social groups. Next, there is racial conflict between the social groups. Then, after the stage of racial conflict, the ‘losing’ group (generally understood as the minority group) is forced to

accommodate to the rules of the 'victorious' group (generally understood as the majority group). Finally (the fourth stage), over time there is assimilation to the ruling group's social world, culture, and way of thinking (Smith & Hattery, 2011, p. 109).

Leisure/sport constraints theory. Constraints research has transdisciplinary applications. It more commonly used in leisure and recreation studies research but is now more frequently used in sport studies, sport management and cultural studies. The hierarchical leisure constraints models first presented about two decades ago by Crawford and Godbey (1987) and Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991), and subsequently expanded by Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey (1993), have been widely adopted as an important lens through which to view leisure and sport behavior. These models, taken together, actually comprise what should be more properly denoted as a theory of hierarchical leisure/sport constraints, given that each model essentially.

Crawford et al. (1991) posited three explicit propositions: a) leisure constraints are arrayed in a sequential hierarchical fashion (i.e., individuals encounter and negotiate through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints in a sequential manner), b) this array reflects a hierarchy of importance (the three levels are arranged from the most proximal, powerful, to the most distal), and c) this rank-ordering also denotes a hierarchy of social privilege (resulted from the correlation between perceived constraints and social classes defined by income, education, gender, race, etc.).

Constraints emerged as a central theme in leisure research over the past 25 years as demonstrated by the proliferation of journal articles and the recent publication of a comprehensive text on the subject (Jackson, 2005). Early leisure constraints researchers framed the issue in terms of *barriers* to recreation activity participation with the implicit assumption that encountering barriers necessarily resulted in nonparticipation. Constraints were defined as factors that may inhibit activity participation or limit satisfaction (Jackson, 1988). Crawford and Godbey (1987) argued that constraints affect not only participation but also acquisition of leisure preferences. They organized constraints into three categories: *intrapersonal* constraints defined as individual psychological qualities that affect the development of leisure preferences (e.g., shyness), *interpersonal* constraints defined as social factors that affect development of leisure preferences (e.g., lack of companions), and *structural constraints* comprised of factors that intervene between development of leisure preferences and participation (e.g., financial resources, rules, and regulations). Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991) extended this line of thinking and presented their hierarchical model of leisure constraints, which posited that intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints affect leisure preferences whereas structural constraints intervene between preferences and participation. Though not a part of the original model, in recent years, Chick & Dong (2003) and Norwood (2010) have studied leisure constraints from a cross-cultural and intercultural perspective, respectively, with Norwood (2010) calling for a revision of the current leisure model to include culture as an attempt to prompt researchers toward in-depth inquiry of the cultural trappings many minority groups face when considering leisure participation.

In the last decade far greater emphasis has been placed on negotiating constraints through the understanding of transitions (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson, 2005), the process of moving beyond constraints (Elkins & Beggs, 2007;

Elkins, Beggs, Choutka, 2007), development of coping strategies (Tseng, 2009), exchange of constraints, achieving balance among competing needs and aspirations (Woods, 2011), and the merit of “re-engagement” (Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010).

Site Description and Participant

Data were collected from the participant at a predominantly White, Division I university in the Southeastern United States. Wave University has an estimated undergraduate enrollment of 21,000 students and is a strong competitor in women’s swimming and diving. The team successfully recruited its first Black player for the 2008–2009 academic school year.

To maintain anonymity, the participant is referred to as Brandy throughout this manuscript. Brandy reported being from a somewhat affluent suburb in the Midwest. She started swimming before the age of 10, competing on club teams, and subsequently on her high school team.

Data Collection

At the time of data collection, the participant was a 21-year-old and self-reported as being African American. Upon reading and signing an informed consent form, the interview took place in a quiet, secluded location on campus where the participant felt comfortable. It was a face-to-face, semistructured, audio-taped interview lasting approximately 50 min. The interview focused on the sociocultural experiences of Brandy, primarily her experience as a Black female swimmer, and her first year experience as Wave University’s first and only Black female swimmer on an all-White team.

Data analysis. From the onset of the data collection process, concurrent data analysis took place in the form of recording memos and impressions during the interview. Once completed, the interview was transcribed and sent to the participant for member checking. With no requests of changes from the participant, analysis proceeded. The PI spent time interrogating the data by listening to the audio recording over and over again, reading and rereading the transcript along with the initial memos and impressions. Finlay (2008) describes this process as “dwelling” with the data.

After repeatedly listening to the audio recording, the transcript was reviewed using inductive analysis. Hatch (2002) describes this type of analysis as “. . . a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (p. 161). Some initial “loose” frames of analysis were established as a first step. Given the stated purpose of the study, which was to get a first-person narrative of the participant’s experience as a Black, competitive swimmer at a PWI, some frames such as ‘adjustment’ and ‘identity’ were readily established; however, the PI wanted to remain open to other critical information held within the data. Ultimately, the purpose of identifying the frames of analysis was simply to put some form of parameters on how the PI would interrogate the data as opposed to actually analyzing it (Hatch, 2002).

Once the frames of analysis were created, the PI read and reread the data and created domains within the frames. A continuous search for passages reflecting

semantic relationships within the data were done. The most salient domains were kept for further analysis, which consisted of identifying passages in the data that most supported or highlighted the domains, as well as information that ran counter to the domains. Following this step, memos and impressions were recorded for each domain and a search for themes across domains was completed. The data were pared down to the following four themes: 1) cultural pride and awareness 2) stereotypes from white and black peers 3) leadership and individuality, and 4) constraints to being a competitive black swimmer.

Coding. From this process, several initial themes were identified and created by the PI. The coding process was also completed by the co-investigators. The PI and co-investigators compared their analyses finding commonality in what would eventually be the four major themes discussed in the results. The transcript was then reread for supporting text for each theme to create the final findings.

Results

The results of this study gave an in-depth view of the participant's thoughts, feelings, and reflections of her first-year experience as the first, and only, Black female on the swim team at Wave University. Brandy gave an overall sense of being aware of and comfortable with her identity and grounded in her beliefs. The potential pressure of being "the first" did not intimidate her. On the contrary, she took her first year at Wave University in stride.

Cultural Pride and Awareness

Cultural and racial pride and awareness was the first theme to be recognized during the coding process. In fact, it was one of the first memo impressions made by the PI during the actual interview. Brandy spoke of her initial thoughts and feelings when arriving to campus to begin the school year. She was not just a Black swimmer, but the *only* Black swimmer on the team at a predominantly White university. In addition, she made note of the racial make-up of the city, which is over 80% White. This realization of her surroundings and of being "different" guided her decisions throughout the year.

I came here and I could just tell; just the difference from the way I was being brought up [by my parents] and the way the other girls [on the team] were brought up. So, my freshman year I stayed with another swimmer, uhm, and you could just tell our ideas, like, the way we think about things were different . . . I know one point in time they [swimmers] all got in trouble [for going to a party] and I decided I did not want to go to that party and all the freshmen girls got in trouble but me because I was the one that stayed back . . . that was, I guess, a really big defining point as to when I realized that I'm here; I'm in a different place [long pause]. Things are just different . . . I realized that I need to stay true to what I was taught and what I was accustomed to and what my parents, and what, I guess, my culture instilled in me which was to be proud and to stay, I guess, concrete with your decisions, and don't be swayed.

When asked to clarify or elaborate on what she meant by the phrase “not like them,” Brandy hesitated and shifted in her seat. After a short silence, the PI reminded Brandy that she could be honest and say how she felt; that whatever she said in the interview would remain confidential. Appearing to be more at ease after hearing this, Brandy continued:

It’s like an expectation; like a custom. What I’ve known is that, I guess, Black folks tend to get in more trouble than a White person would. And a White person could talk themselves out of it. Like if a Black person gets in trouble, it’s really bad. It’s like ‘you’re the one to blame! Suzie couldn’t have done this because *you’re!* here!’ I mean, that’s just the common knowledge . . . I feel like everybody knows that. You have to be careful who you’re going out with and what you’re doing; especially when you’re with people like them and it’s like all fingers can get pointed to you so don’t put yourself in those situations.

In being “careful,” Brandy admitted to being “. . . very, very quiet” her first year and noticed other people on the team were “. . . not scared to talk to me but were trying to figure me out.” The three people she did socialize with on the team that year were all foreign students.

In further expounding on the push-pull between cultural preservation and connecting with the team, Brandy painted a picture of a rather uncomfortable, though not unheard of, situation many Black athletes on predominantly White teams at PWIs have expressed feeling (Melendez, 2008):

I tried really hard not to let my culture go . . . when you’re in a sport like this . . . some people don’t think about it but you have to keep hold of your culture. You can’t miss the fact that you’re African-American and you do have a connection with other people out there, it’s not *just* swimming here.

Wanting to get a deeper understanding of Brandy’s use of the phrases “in a sport like this” and “hold on to your culture,” the PI asked her to give more insight. It was at this point, the enormity of the subject for the respondent became quite evident. She started and stopped sentences, searching for the “right” words to express what appeared to be this weighted feeling:

It’s a challenge because you can’t [long pause] . . . how could I put it, not connect, but see eye to eye with the other girls of different races. You don’t have anybody, well, like at home, that you can just AAAARRRGHHH!! – like just let loose in a sense . . . You don’t have anyone to share a common ground with. It’s not all about race, but granted, you come from different cultures and you still yearn for that common ground. . . how do I put it? It’s so big! It’s such a big topic [laughs a little and then exhales deeply] . . . It is very overwhelming . . . it’s like, when you’re with the team, everybody is there and you still don’t have anybody you can connect with really.

Brandy ultimately admitted feeling lonely at times, though she’s part of a team. “I feel like that’s another thing you have to step over. You have to not make it completely tear up your world.”

Stereotypes From Whites . . . and Blacks

Having grown up in a mixed-race neighborhood as a kid and attending racially mixed elementary and high schools, Brandy was no stranger to the myriad of stereotypes that surround Black people. The student body, including her teammates, did not fail to follow suit with their own stereotypes about minorities.

Blacks and swimming. Stereotypes surrounding Blacks and swimming run the gamut of the antiquated, though once accepted, idea that the Black body was not buoyant enough to float (Allen and Nickel, 1969) to an “innate” psychological trauma Black people share dating back to the tragedy of the Middle Passage where many Africans died in transport and were thrown overboard while some opted for suicide by drowning and jumped overboard. When Brandy first arrived on campus at Wave University, the revelation that she was a swimmer for the university was met with surprise from both White people and Black people. She recalled some of the statements she heard from White students after saying she was a swimmer: “Oh! I would’ve thought track!”; or “Really! You can swim?”; and “What! You’re a swimmer?” Their reactions did not really surprise Brandy, as she realizes there are not many Blacks in the sport, particularly from her experience coming up through the ranks as a kid. Nonetheless, it made her a bit “. . . angry when I told Black people that I was a swimmer. It was ‘Oh man! I can’t swim! Black folks can’t swim!’ What in the world?”

General stereotypes. Stereotypes surrounding swimming are not the only ones Brandy encountered. Statements and questions from White students (including teammates) concerning Blacks seemed to be an ongoing issue early on in her arrival to campus. “When I first got [here] they were expecting me to be like the [stereo] typical Black person – loud . . . just very flamboyant. They were surprised by the way I spoke, first of all.” When asked was there something specific that led her to believe there was an expected behavior of her from her White teammates, Brandy said:

No, it was more like, I guess, common things they expected me to say or like how they expected me to know all of the new R&B and rap songs out. It would be like “Brandy, you *have* to know this song!” It was almost like competition. Some of the girls would be like ‘Yeah, I know this song! I know this person! Brandy, you don’t know about this?’

To this, Brandy would offer a sarcastic response of “No! I will get back to you on that.”

At the time of this interview, Brandy mentioned a Black male diver had joined the men’s swim team. This addition seemed to add to the minds of Brandy’s teammates regarding the upcoming winter holiday plans of her and the new Black swimmer. “Don’t you guys celebrate Kwanzaa?” one teammate asked as the others laughed. According to Brandy, this question had been posed to her the first semester she was on campus.

I was like, ‘Uhm, I’m not exactly sure how to take that question.’ I just looked at her [and said to myself], ‘Wow, she’s really being serious with me here!’ I just didn’t think that was a laughing matter. I celebrate Christmas . . . I don’t

celebrate Kwanzaa but the fact that you'd expect me to celebrate Kwanzaa and then bring it up again when the other [Black] swimmer came to our school! . . . I don't [really] think I should get offended by that but I think they should know, you shouldn't think that everybody celebrates the same thing . . . that comment really threw me off.

Contrary to her visible emotions of anguish and being a bit ill-at-ease when discussing issues of cultural preservation and awareness, Brandy seemed to have categorized the stereotypical statements and questions as to, somewhat, be expected, thus, not reaching a point of anger, rather, one of annoyance.

Leadership and Individuality

From the onset of the interview, Brandy appeared to pride herself on being an individual. Maintaining her own identity, independent of the swim team, was paramount to her. She recalled an incident early in her first semester when the swim team got reprimanded by their coach for going to a party. Brandy made a conscious decision not to attend the party, despite the urging of her teammates. Her gut told her that “. . . if I'm out doing what they're doing, I could get in a lot more trouble than they could.” Again, this is her feeling of possible consequences of being the only Black person out with a group of White teammates. When all freshmen teammates were reprimanded by the coach, Brandy took that opportunity to assert herself and said:

‘I was not there, and I don't deserve to be in the same trouble as they are.’ They could see, I guess, leadership in that sense. So I realized that I didn't have to try to fit in with them because [on] other teams, girls try to fit in . . . that was the thing—to fit in. I don't need to fit in because I'm not like [them] and I can just do my own thing and I've done my own thing until now.

She was the only freshman player to not be punished for the incident. Since it was a team Brandy was a part of, the PI wondered how this stance of individuality, and possibly perceived separation, went over with her teammates.

They accepted it. I guess I set the tone when I got there. I was like ‘if you're doing something I don't want to do, I'm not going to do it. I'll see you when you get back.’ They weren't like ‘Oh come on! The whole team's going.’ I'd just say ‘I'll see you guys [tomorrow].’

As the year progressed, Brandy was able to create a balance of socializing with her teammates without abandoning her culture and sense of self. She described it as a sort of dance where “. . . you know, step over the line and step back . . . just don't let go completely of what you know and the culture you're from.”

Constraints to Being a Competitive Black Swimmer

While Brandy shared the plethora of comments she would receive about being a Black swimmer, the PI asked what, if any, were some of the reasons she heard (from Blacks) as to why Black people generally tend not to be swimmers. “From the guys it's like ‘I can't float!’ or ‘I didn't take those lessons.’ The most common thing I get from the girls is ‘What do you do with your hair?’ Brandy immediately

broke out into laughter after stating that. She went on to say she always gets asked “Do you have a perm?” Her response: “Noooo, it’s natural hair, and it sucks!” The PI went on to ask Brandy how, if at all, hair plays a role in her swimming participation. “Oh, yeah!” she replied. At that point, the PI told her to share whatever she wanted to about that experience. (It should be noted here that what followed from Brandy was a thick, rich narrative about her hair, which accounts for the lengthy discussion that follows in this section.) She took a deep breath, laughed a little, and said “Ooooooh, gosh! Got stories galore!” Her story began to unfold when she first came to Wave University, located in a predominantly White town.

Well, freshman year when I first got here, I had to have my hair in braids. I can’t do a perm, because a perm will make my hair fall out. So finding somebody to braid my hair was a hassle—the biggest hassle I’ve ever gone through. Back at home . . . we found someone who could braid my hair for a decent price. But here, prices are spiked up like \$200 something dollars and I can’t afford that.

Negotiating this constraint proved to be a daunting task. Whereas Brandy was getting her hair rebraided approximately every month when she was in her hometown in the Midwest, she began not being able to get her hair rebraided for two months. Concerned about the maintenance and overall health of her daughter’s hair, Brandy’s mom intervened to assist.

I had to wait until I got home to get it done and keep it up for a long time and go back and forth. My mom would actually come down here and help me do my hair. So, after Saturday morning practice, she’d fly down here, take out my braids, wash my hair, blow dry it and once we found somebody, we’d go there and get it braided.

To the average person, this seems quite extreme. But Brandy explained due to the (shoulder) length and coarseness of her hair, coupled with her busy practice schedule, trying to manage her hair on her own proved next to impossible. “I don’t have time to wash it. Between practice and stuff, it’s just better for me to find somebody to wash it and somebody to braid it.”

Articulating hair constraints to the coach. Brandy and her mom managed and negotiated the hair constraint as best they could and for as long as they could without her teammates or coaches really having any insight into this task. It finally became an issue Brandy had to discuss with her White, female coach.

I had to tell my coach that I needed time to take down my hair because [I] was [doing it] on my own and it takes five hours to put these braids in and like five hours to take them out; a good six hours to wash, blow dry, and then find somebody to take five hours to braid [my] hair back up again. So, I went to my coach’s office and said ‘I have to get my hair done.’ I had a point where a girl told me I needed to get my hair done. So, I went to our female coach and said ‘I need to get my hair redone, but, it takes me about 12–16 hours to do my hair.’ She looked at me [and said] ‘You’re kidding me, right?’ I said, ‘Uhm, no, I’m really not kidding, Coach. It takes me this long to do this, this, and this. I have to take my hair down Friday in order to get it braided Sunday, and I’ve got practices in between that. I’m just letting you know that I’m going to

come to practice probably, you know . . . my hair is going to be a little different because it takes me a while, so just bear with me.'

When asked what her motivation was for telling her coach her hair was going to "be a little different," Brandy explained her initial goal was to skip practice altogether. But judging from the initial reaction of her coach, she soon went to another plan which was to go to practice but simply prepare the coach that she, and the team, would see her hair in a sort of state of disarray or what her White counterparts may perceive as disarray.

I have to keep expecting that they haven't seen natural hair. That's something I learned back in high school, you know, when I was in the locker room combing through my hair, the big afro, it was like 'Ooooh, what in the world, Brandy! Where's your other hair?' So, being in college, I had to expect that they didn't know what that was or what that [natural hair] looked like.

Brandy's coach relayed this information to the other coaches so the next day at practice, things were fine, and the coach was also fine with her missing the New Recruits outing later that evening. However, after practice, her male coach (White) was intrigued about her "hair issue" and pulled her aside to converse.

Even my coach started asking me questions. 'So, Brandy, do you think if I had hair like you, what would I do with it?' He's like, 'You know, would I cut it off?' I said, 'Coach, it takes me 16 hours to do my hair, I guarantee you, you'd cut it off!' [erupted in laughter] They thought I was kidding! I can't just go to a salon to get it done.

Once Brandy found someone to braid her hair on a regular basis, she was spending between 180–200 dollars every month and a half to get her hair done. Ultimately, she considered the cost worth it because it preserved the health of her natural hair and saved her time with her busy school and practice schedule.

Brandy's candor around her hair maintenance routine appeared to have also been a "teachable moment" for her female coach. In terms of future Black recruits, Brandy believes this may have provided the coach with informed insight into at least one cultural constraint the recruit may face.

I think she even admitted that she, well, that she didn't realize that it [hair] was that much of a constraint and she thanked me for letting her know and giving her the insight on how it worked and everything because she had no idea . . . You can't expect them [Black recruits] to be exactly like the girls you have here. I feel like she is becoming more well-rounded because I am here.

Constraints can be negotiated. While Brandy resoundingly stated "hair . . . is a huge issue," she does not believe it should keep any Black female from participating in the activity.

When asked what she would say to a Black female who is interested in swimming but is on the fence about it because of her hair, Brandy had this to offer:

It's just . . . I can see why hair is a really big issue but I feel like it shouldn't be the only issue to turn people away from swimming. . . . Hair is just a thing

... Yeah, you have natural hair and if you don't do braids you're going to have to wear your own hair. But you can find beauty in pretty much anything. Even if I wear an afro, it's like, that's really pretty. You know, it's natural, it's what my hair is and I can't hide from that. You learn to deal. You cope with things. You gotta understand and feel good about it. I'd still encourage them. It's the only deterring factor. Hair is just a thing.

Brandy seems comfortable in her hair maintenance routine and does not let that interfere with her performance and goals as a competitive swimmer.

Discussion

There has been quite a bit of research (Cooper, 2012; Thompson, 2010; Melendez, 2008; Singer, 2005) over the last decade devoted to unearthing and interpreting the experiences of Black athletes on predominantly White campuses across the U.S. In large part, the research has focused on Black male athletes who compete in sports that typically have a disproportionately high level of participation by Blacks (e.g., football and basketball). The narrative of this study presented a very unique, threefold experience for Brandy: 1) her adjustment as a Black student at a predominantly White institution coupled with 2) her adjustment as the first, and only, Black athlete on her team, and 3) negotiating constraints to sport participation germane to many Black female athletes. Brandy was able to, according to her, successfully handle those experiences she found herself thrust into as a freshman. While this is to be commended, the investigators all concur that her ability to handle the emotional and psychological stressors of being a Black, female student-athlete at Wave University is probably atypical. Some research (Moody, 2011; Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Bruening, 2004) suggests many Black female athletes experience difficulty in handling the pressures of being a competitive athlete, maintaining academic eligibility, and navigating through the behavioral expectations of their peers, and possibly coaches, which are linked to their culture and race. The results of the current study, along with previous research, indicates there is an opportunity for shared learning between coaches and athletes that could prove valuable to the overall experience for ethnic minority, female athletes at predominantly White institutions.

Practical Implications

Making the transition from high school to college can be a difficult change for many students. The transition for minority students at PWIs can prove that much more difficult; this evidenced by the special interest organizations on predominantly White campuses such as Minority Student Affairs, which are designed to foster the retention and matriculation of minority students. Though seen as student leaders, it can be easy to forget that student-athletes also need support as they, too, experience growing pains just like the rest of the student body.

The teacher becomes the student. The “teachable moment” Brandy had with her coaches about her hair care routine offered a window, not only into her personal life, but possibly the lives of other Black female swimmers who may come after her. By the coaches opening themselves up to understanding Brandy's situation,

in turn, they opened themselves up to move toward a place of cultural sensitivity and competency. The fact that Brandy's female coach listened to her with purpose should not be overlooked or minimized. Offering Brandy an active ear and a true desire to understand helped to put Brandy at ease once all was said and done. Aside from being empathetic to the rigors of Brandy's hair maintenance routine, the coach, and others in similar situations, should find out who braids Brandy's hair and maybe begin to identify and create a list of hair braiders in the community. This would be helpful for future African American female swimmers who may join the team because the reality is, in small, predominantly White towns where many PWIs are located, there are not many options for hair care by way of hair salons or braiding shops for African Americans to go; subsequently, many African American female students (or those in the community) often get their hair braided by a person who does hair out of their home, in which case knowledge of their services are often spread through word of mouth.

Taking a cue from Brandy's coach, other White coaches of Black players, particularly in sports not frequently played by Blacks, should take an active role in understanding the culture of their players and how it intersects/affects their sport participation and overall collegiate experience at a PWI. As Kumagai and Lypson (2009) suggested, faculty and staff in higher education need to move beyond just the notion of cultural competency and toward ". . . fostering a critical awareness—a critical consciousness of the self, others, and the world and making a commitment to addressing issues of social relevance . . ." (p. 782). As the leading governing body of college athletics, the NCAA should offer and make it mandatory for coaches of its member institutions to participate in cultural competency workshops led by qualified facilitators. The idea here is to equip coaches, particularly White coaches, with a fundamental understanding of the proven issues of adjustment many African American and other racial minority students face at PWIs (Harper, 2009; Melendez, 2008; Feagin & Imani, 1996). As the ultimate leaders and figureheads of their respective teams, coaches can, in turn, set the tone of cultural sensitivity for their teams.

Contextualized mentoring. The experiences of Brandy that are chronicled in this study point to the need for relevant mentoring that is grounded in the shared experiences of both the mentor and mentee. The formal or informal pairing of Black student-athletes with faculty, staff and academic support personnel of the same racial and gender group can be invaluable in helping the student-athlete translate cultural insensitivity on the part of others (Carter & Hart, 2010). Singer (2005) suggested that this type of contextualized mentoring relationship can offer the Black student-athlete an opportunity to become empowered by understanding how racism and one of its manifestations, cultural insensitivity, works. Moreover, the mentoring relationship can potentially equip and empower the student-athlete with effective strategies to deal with both racism and cultural insensitivity.

Recent research by Comeaux and Harrison (2006, 2007) also revealed that when the race and gender of the mentor and student-athlete are the same, the potential for a positive relationship between the mentor and mentee is heightened. Carter and Hart (2010), in studying Black female athletes at PWIs also found that the relational aspects of mentoring are important to aiding Black women student-athletes in negotiating systems at PWIs. It is important that Black women that are student-athletes be adroit at seeking the wisdom of other women of color

that share similar experiences in their sport context. The findings of Carter and Hart (2010) relating to the value of relational mentoring parallels the findings of previous studies by Liang, Tracy, Taylor, and Williams (2002); Miller and Stiver (1997); and Surrey (1985) in which each advocated for a "Relational Mentoring Model." Carter and Hart (2010) suggest that if a mentoring model is designed in this manner it has the potential to promote an atmosphere of mutual engagement, authenticity and empowerment (p. 392).

Swim buddy mentoring. Building on the recommended mentoring at the university level, it would be valuable to have coaches and swimmers, particularly African Americans, from university swim teams to offer some type of buddy program to minority students from local high schools. In addition to teaching them how to swim, university swimmers can also serve as mentors, sharing their experiences as a Black swimmer and offering tips and support on how to negotiate some of the constraints to swimming they may share with their mentee. More importantly, the mere presence of a Black competitive swimmer may help to break down some of the cultural trappings many African Americans fall victim to as it relates to swimming, (e.g., "Black people just do not swim" or "Black girls can't swim because it'll mess up our hair"). Black youth need to see more images of people who look like them participating in swimming to plant the seed of their own swimming participation being a possibility and eventually a reality.

Limitations

By virtue of this study being qualitative, the intrinsic limitation lies in its lack of generalizability. But concurrently, it should not be assumed that the method and its limited generalizability devalues the findings of the study. Moreover, it is worth mentioning and reminding, however, that the relative goal of qualitative research is not consistent with gaining generalizability, rather, with shedding light on and raising awareness of the intricacies and nuances of human interaction. Furthermore, by this research being a single-case study, its traditional focus ". . . is obviously inconsistent with the requirements for statistical sampling procedures, which are usually seen as fundamental to generalizing from the data gathered in a study to some larger population" (Schofield, 2002).

In addition to the limitation of generalizability, researcher bias may have played a role in the analysis and interpretation of data being that the researchers are all minorities who attended PWIs. During the analysis and interpretation of data, the PI was able to recall similar experiences expressed by the participant, such as being the only minority person in a classroom of White peers. At these moments during the interview, the PI was very conscious of this bias and tried to compensate for it by asking probing, follow-up questions to allow the participant to further put into her own words her feelings and experiences.

Another limitation may lie in the fact that Brandy was sometimes hesitant and cautious with her answers in the beginning of the interview. With the sensitive nature of race relations, the PI did not want to press too hard with too many probing questions. If Brandy appeared too uncomfortable talking about certain topics, the PI backed off a little as to not make Brandy feel any more uncomfortable than she already appeared to be. This, in turn, may have limited some useful information that may have given a more holistic view of certain topics.

In addition, while this was not the goal of the research study, the PI did not interview any other members of the swim team to compare their experiences against Brandy's. For example, having them recall some of the same incidents Brandy spoke of to see how the viewpoints may have compared or contrasted. In addition, the PI had no way of knowing if the respondent was being honest in her answers.

Finally, while being a member of the swim team, swimming itself is an individual sport. The sheer nature of the sport could have aided in Brandy's feelings of isolation or loneliness. Individual performances matter and are closely monitored, thus, giving swimming a sort of innate propensity for the athlete to focus more inward, and subsequently self-isolate.

Future Research

The unique adjustment experience for Black students/student-athletes at PWIs has been well-documented over the years (Moody, 2011; Hawkins, 2010; Melendez, 2008). In matters of adjustment, future research should examine how Black female swimmers deal with the constraints of time management and hair maintenance while at PWIs. Brandy, for example, reported that hair braiding takes more than 10 hr. Other research should examine levels of critical awareness on the part of coaches at PWIs, many of whom are White. Scholars should gauge how well coaches understand the salience of race in everyday interactions with their athletes.

The authors also recommend employing a cohort longitudinal study with other elite, Black female swimmers to track their experiences, both past and present. The idea would be to document the experiences of these cohorts at two different points in time: the end of their freshmen and senior years. This research would be looking for any different or shared experiences related to adjustment, stereotypes, peer/coach interaction and/or more. It would also be important to speak with participants who may drop out of the study to juxtapose their experiences with those of the remaining participants.

Finally, replicating the current study using a Black male would yield information to then do a comparative analysis of his experiences versus that of Brandy's or another African American female swimmer's experience. It would be interesting to see if they share some of the same challenges of adjustment and assimilation based on race and the associated stereotypes, particularly those attached to Blacks and swimming; or is there a point of departure in their experiences when it comes to their difference in sex. In general, males and females experience certain aspects of life differently based on their sex. This comparative study could possibly give greater insight into understanding the Black male and female student-athlete experience independent of each other.

Endnotes

¹The use of italics and/or exclamations in quoted passages throughout the Results section are used to reflect emphasis put on the word(s) by the respondent.

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