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Swimming Through the Waves: Black Collegiate Swimmers and Their Experiences

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Abstract

For the current generation of collegiate Black swimmers attending either a historically Black colleges and university (HBCU) or a predominantly white institution (PWI), they have witnessed Black swimmers excel at the collegiate and elite levels of swimming. Using an interview case study method, a semi-structured protocol was employed to interview three participants concerning family history, their swimming history, the meaning of inclusion by exploring stereotypes and expenses (cultural, financial, and emotional), the ramifications of being a collegiate swimmer, and being a Black swimmer. The participants of this study discussed the significance and intersectionality of race/ethnicity and the complexities of competitive swimming. Noting that minimal research has been conducted on the experiences of Black collegiate swimmers from historically Black colleges and universities and predominantly white institutions, the results provided insight into the lived experiences of Black collegiate swimmers and addressed the adversity and accomplishments of the participants and their role models. This research was conducted as a semester long course requirement for future inquiry on the subject matter of the experiences of Black collegiate swimmers.

Keywords: Black athletes, Black collegiate swimmers, minority swimming gap, swimming constraints, swimming disparity

“I want to take my career to the next level and encourage and motivate minorities to get involved with swimming. Learning basic water safety skills can save lives”

– Maritza Correia McClendon (2018)

First Black American on the United State Olympic Swim Team and
University of Georgia Alum

The experiences of Black swimmers can be labeled in the categories of unintentional drowning rates (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014), the effectiveness of aquatic programs in urban areas (Irwin, C. C., Irwin, R. L., Ryan, T. D., & Drayer, J., 2009), the water competency barriers that reside within the Black community (Ito, 2014), the segregation and discrimination of aquatic venues inclusive of pools and beaches (Wiltse, 2014; Kahl, 2016), and the aquatic lifestyle prior to and during the enslavement of Africans throughout the diasporic slave trade (Dawson, 2010). An area that largely has been overlooked in the aquatics literature has been the experiences of Black collegiate swimmers. Norwood, Waller, and Spearman’s study (2014) examined the experiences of a Division I Black female collegiate swimmer attending a predominantly white institution. Since the publication of the Norwood and colleagues (2014) study, the participation of Black collegiate swimmers across Divisions I, II, and III (inclusive of historically Black colleges and universities) between the 2013-2014 to 2016-2017 academic year has increased

from 192 to 217 Black men and 158 to 162 Black women (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2017). Despite the increase of Black collegiate swimmers participating in the sport, minimal comparisons have been made regarding the experiences of Black collegiate swimmers across NCAA Divisions and institutions. This study sought to examine the past and present experiences of three Black collegiate swimmers from varying institutions and divisions. Additionally, gather their thoughts on the future of Black swimmers in the sport.

Goldsmith (2003) stated that race determined the exposure of Black and White students participating in high school sports due to “racial hierarchy” (p. 147). This “racial hierarchy” is connected to structural differences, which are “[defined as] social class, but in general, structural differences include any difference in a larger social pattern in which groups are embedded” (Goldsmith, 2013, p. 151). For those Blacks who participated in swimming, Goldsmith (2003) quotes Harris (1994) who stated that “Black high school basketball players report more social support to play from teachers, coaches, peers and parents than White players do; and African-American swimmers report being harassed at public swimming pools and being stereotyped by Whites as poor swimmers” (p. 154). Such stereotypes often were embedded in the writing of previous scholars. For example, Allen and Nickel (1969) in a publication stated that Blacks were unable to swim due to their inability to float. Despite overcoming such stereotypes, physical barriers continued due to the segregation of pools. The stark image of James Brock, a manager at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida in 1964, pouring muriatic acid into the swimming pool illustrates such example of discrimination (Cruz, Berson, & Fall, 2012). Though such incidents can be considered part of aquatic history, the continuous hair maintenance for Black women swimmers and the racism Black collegiate swimmers encounter remains (Norwood, 2010; Norwood et al, 2014). The history for Black collegiate swimmers would begin to change significantly in 2014.

On March 20, 2014 at the Division I Swimming and Diving Championships, history was made when Black swimmers Simone Manuel (Stanford University), Lia Neal (Stanford University), and Natalie Hinds (University of Florida), placed first, second, and third, respectively, in the Women’s 100-meter freestyle event (Three College Swimmers Make History at NCAA Championship, 2014). The significance of the wins since 2014 has gained worldwide recognition and has helped challenge the dialogue of stereotypes about why Black people do not or cannot swim. Though this was not the first time that Black collegiate swimmers had made significant advances in collegiate swimming, it was the first time that three Black collegiate swimmers would share the podium together. It is imperative to recall the historic athletic accomplishments of previous Black collegiate swimmers which date back to 1962 when Nate Clark scored in an NCAA

Championship final. In 1975 Fred Evans from Chicago State won a national collegiate championship; or in 2002 when Maritza Correia from the University of Georgia “broke two American and NCAA records” (International Swimming Hall of Fame, 2009). Despite these and other historic successes, the voices of former and current Black collegiate swimmers from HBCUs and PWIs have continued to be silenced and frequently not recognized. The participants in this study acknowledged the past, examined their present status as swimmers, and projected the future for other swimmers like them.

Purpose

The purpose of this interview case study was to understand what it is like to be a Black collegiate swimmer. By understanding how Black collegiate swimmers have evolved from their swimming introduction into a collegiate swimmer, their credible voices provided insight into the anomaly of Black people swimming successfully despite barriers and statistics. In addition to understanding the evolution of the Black collegiate swimmer, it is important to connect swimming as a part of cultural construct to serious leisure. Stebbins (2001) defined the term “serious leisure” as “the steady pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with its complexity and challenges” (p. 54). Serious leisure does not indicate the barriers participants may encounter when participating in such activity. Black collegiate swimmers are therefore caught in the crosshairs of leisure constraints. Using the leisure constraints theory, Crawford and Godbey (1987) identified that barriers to participating in leisure activities included “three categories: intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, and structural constraints” (White, 2008, p. 345). Noting that the participants in this study are categorized as serious leisure individuals, some of the experiences that resonated with leisure constraints were embedded in interpersonal and structural constraints. In addition to these theoretical foundations, this study provided participants an opportunity to express the personal success and adversity they may (or may not) have experienced as a novice into collegiate swimmer. Lastly, the study provided a space for participants to express their perspective on the future of aspiring and current Black swimmers.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that were used for this project were serious leisure and racial formation theory. Though leisure constraints theory was previously mentioned, it is imperative to acknowledge the intersections of serious leisure, leisure constraints, and racial formation theory as multiple layers experienced by the participants. Stebbins (1982) defined an individual who is invested in serious leisure as someone who is involved in an activity that is a combination of long-term and strong socialization. For the participants in this study, their participation in the

sport began between the ages of 7-12 years of age and continued into their college years as collegiate swimmers. Each participant competed in either Divisions I, II, or III collegiate swimming and have achieved significant levels of athletic success as either personal best times or elite level swimming. Each of the participants addressed interpersonal and structural constraints that they experienced and individually had overcome to remain in their serious leisure activity.

The second conceptual framework employed in this study was racial formation theory. Omi and Winant (2014) defined racial formation theory as “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed and destroyed” (p. 109). As stated in the introduction, the relationship between individuals of African descent is contradictory to the present-day relationship of Black (specifically of Black Americans). Due to the negative historical relationship Blacks had with water and/or swimming which have constructed significant mental, emotional, and physical barriers, racial formation theory is also applicable to be utilized as a foundation for this study. Both theoretical frameworks identify competitive swimming as a serious leisure activity due to the required commitment necessary to be engaged in competitive swimming while at the same time comparing the past to the present relationships of Blacks or those of African descent to competitive swimming.

Research Question

What is it like to be a Black collegiate swimmer attending a HBCU or PWI?

Method

Participants

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) stated that “[q]ualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 6). Furthermore, qualitative research “achieves an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives...and describe[s] how people makes interpret what they experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Through the process of qualitative interviews, the researcher and the participant “engage in a conversation on questions related to [the] research study” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 55). It is the conversations, that provide the voices of the participants enable the researcher to be “present in others’ lives... [and provide an opportunity to learn] about others” (Glesne, 2016 p. 1). To better understand the experiences of a marginalized group such as Black swimmers, the qualitative method and conducting interviews could capture such experiences.

Noy (2008), stated that, “[t]he employment of snowball sampling in organic social networks brings to the front two relevant concepts: Social [K]nowledge [and] Power [R]elations” (p. 329). The required criterion for participation in this

study were collegiate self-identified Black collegiate swimmers from Divisions I, II, or III, attending either a HBCU or PWI, and either public or private institutions. Using snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study, contact was made with five Black collegiate swimmers who were currently swimming. Of the initial contacts, three individuals (1 woman, and 2 men) were willing to commit to participate in the study. Since this study was conducted during the high point of the swim season, time was limited to gain additional participation. Each participant was provided a pseudonym for anonymity to maintain their confidentiality. Because of the nature of this study, the participants understood that their identities could be revealed. Table 1 provides detailed demographic and personal information of the three participants in this study.

Table 1 Demographic and contextual information of study participants

Names (pseudonyms)	Lupita	Michael	Chadwick
Age	20	20	21
Gender (self-identified)	Female	Male	Male
Ethnicity/Race (self-identified)	Black/ Haitian-American	African-American	African-American/ Black
Year in School	Junior	Sophomore	Sophomore/Junior
Current Residency	Midwest United States	South United States	Southwest United States
NCAA Division	III	I	II
Type of Scholarship	Academic scholarship	Partial athletic scholarship; Family members help pay for tuition	Scholarship because he is adopted; Academic scholarship
HBCU/PWI	PWI (Private)	HBCU (Private)	PWI (Public)

Procedures

The selected three participants were emailed the informed consent form and verbally agreed to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. These interviews ranged between one to one and a half hours and were recorded on a digital recorder. The file of the interview was then downloaded and stored on an external storage drive that was password protected. The interview protocol used for this project discussed: (a) demographic information, (b) the family history, (c) participant swimming history, (d) sport inclusion (stereotypes and expenses), (e) being a collegiate swimmer, (f) being a Black swimmer (overall), and (g) conclusion. See Table 2 for summary of interview topics and questions.

Table 2 Interview topics and sample interview questions

Demographic Information

Name:	Year in School:
Age:	Name of School:
Gender:	School Location (City, State):
Ethnicity/Race:	NCAA Division:
Place born:	Types of Scholarship (if applicable):
Place of residency:	Categorization of Institution (HBCU/ PWI):
	Public or Private Institution:

I. Family Story

- a. Describe your family upbringing (socio-economics, employment of family members, description of neighborhood(s)).
- b. Were there family members who were introduced to swimming? If so, how? If not, why not?

II. Participant Swimming Story

- a. How were you introduced to swimming?
- b. Describe your first swim team experience.
- c. Who were your role models as a young swimmer?

III. Sport Inclusion (stereotypes and expenses)

- a. What did you hear or what have you heard as some of the stereotypes concerning Black people swimming or not swimming?
 1. Why do you believe these do or do not exist?
 2. What are your feelings/reactions when you do hear these stereotypes?
- b. Swimming is an expensive sport (meet fees, team fees, suits, gear, etc.), how was your family able to bridge the cultural, racial, financial, and athletic divide in the sport?
- d. Because of your experience, would you recommend this sport to other youth? Would you change any part of your swimming experiences? If so, how?

IV. Being a Collegiate Swimmer

- a. What has been your successes and challenges of being a collegiate swimmer?
- b. Have you utilized any type of institutional support? (academic, trainers, health services, etc.)
- c. What would you describe as the trials and triumphs of being a Black collegiate swimmer?

V. Being a Black Swimmer

- a. What are some of the challenges of being a Black swimmer? (overall)
- b. Have you witnessed differences/similarities between the experiences of male and female Black swimmers?
- c. How has swimming contributed and/or not contributed to your life?
- d. What are your hopes for the future of swimming, Black swimmers, and Black aspiring swimmers?
- e. Knowing that there is a high drowning rate that impacts people of color, do you have any ideas on how to decrease this issue?

VI. Conclusion

- a. Overall, is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience as a swimmer, collegiate swimmer, Black swimmer, Black collegiate swimmer?

Discussion

Analysis

To analyze the interviews objectively and reliably, it was recommended to repeatedly listen to interviews a minimum of four to five times. While listening to each interview, notes were and recorded in a notebook on one side of the paper while on the other side memos, referencing important aspects of the interview which would later be translated into themes. Although the interviews were not transcribed, the validity and transparency of the interviews with the participants were not lost.

Themes

Based on the open-ended interview questions that were delivered in the sections of the 1) family story, 2) participant story and swimming (the beginning), 3) sport inclusion (i.e., barriers and expenses), 4) being a collegiate swimmer, and 5) being a Black swimmer. Following the above stated process six themes were extrapolated. Those themes and definitions consisted of the following in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes and Definitions

Themes	Definitions	Themes	Definitions
Family story	Explanation of family upbringing, socio-economic status, family employment	Bridging the divide	Sacrifices family members made toward swimming career Contributions to society as a swimmer
Speaking the truth	Reasons for signing up for swimming lessons	Hope for the future	Community engagement

Challenging stereotypes	Experiences as a swimmer and/or as a student	Visibility	What is being said by white and/or Black peers non-swimmers
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Each interview concluded by asking the participants if they would like to share additional information regarding their experiences as a swimmer, a collegiate swimmer, a Black, a swimmer, and a Black collegiate swimmer. The following quotes are associated with the themes from the interview of the 3 participants:

Table 4. Themes from Interviews

	Lupita	Michael	Chadwick
Family Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents Self-Employed Immigrated to the U.S. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mom substitute teacher (was a teacher full-time 16 years) Father: Quality Assurance and 8 apartment complexes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopted at age 4 Mother and Father are White Was born with a birth defect
Speaking the Truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple family drownings At a swim party and did not know how to swim Age 10 competitive swimming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5th grade was signed up for swimming because of diabetes diagnosis Age 12 competitive swimming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Almost drowned twice Family did not know he did not know how to swim and was immediately placed into swim lessons Age 7/8 competitive swimming
Bridging the Divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did not let the fact that they were the only Black family Swimming as a means to college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mom was taking out retirement for him to swim Providing the stereotypes wrong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost of the swimming was [covered by my performance]
Hope for the Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessibility Get in and succeed in the sport 	Hosting free swim clinics in communities	Wants African-American kids/all kids to be the best they can be

Challenging Stereotypes	Harder to maintain socially acceptable beauty because swimming	Standard to look top-notch. [Especially dealing with the chlorine]	Stereotypes are reinforced by us and others for not learning how to swim
Visibility	There was a shock from [Whites] that [I] knew how to swim	At conference meet it was great knowing that we are the only HBCU swim team	My parents wanted to make sure that everything was fair

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to ask Black collegiate swimmers about their experiences. Based upon their interviews with this researcher, there is an acknowledgement of the intersections of race, class, and gender in swimming for collegiate Black swimmers. The fiscal demand required to be a part of a swim team and at times families are required to make sacrifices, much of this depends on the current financial status of the family. Due to such high costs, these swimmers changed to teams. Though the swimmers are roughly the same ages, there is an acknowledgment of historical barriers and overcoming adversity. Most importantly, each participant expressed an eagerness to tell their story because they had never been asked and have hope to eradicate the drowning disparity within the Black community by being leaders.

Future Research

Areas that remain to be discussed within serious leisure, competitive swimming, and the Black community (and other communities of color) using Racial Formation Theory include a case study analysis and comparison between the success rate of current USA Club programs within communities of color. Alternative methods to be used to examine similarities and differences include qualitative and quantitative data through a questionnaire process, focus groups, observations, and interviews. Such analyses should employ a qualitative interview process, focus groups, and/or questionnaires.

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