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## Black Drowning Deaths: An Introductory Analysis

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### Abstract

Black children between the ages of 5 and 14 are 2.6 times more likely to drown than white children. A systematic exclusion from public pools and other forms of water activities over time has led to a lack of cultural capital involving aquatics among black families. Pierre Bourdieu has provided a theoretical foundation in which to understand this issue. The social fields created by generational socialization have made blacks feel like they have no place in the water. It will take a restructuring of the social institutions to set in motion the socialization (or a re-socialization) of new and more positive attitudes concerning swimming in the black community. Reversing the way African Americans interact with water will create new opportunities to adjust the way blacks view swimming, and in turn, will lead to the creation of new social structures encouraging blacks to return to the water. This research suggests a larger focus on swimming education in predominantly black schools. The continued development of swimming opportunities for blacks of all ages is warranted in the effort to reduce drowning risks.

*Keywords:* African Americans, blacks, drowning, swimming lessons, racial disparity, cultural discouragement, Pierre Bourdieu

### Introduction

Every year large numbers of African Americans drown in swimming pools, lakes, and rivers. The death rate due to drowning disproportionately impacts young black people. A recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control found that black children between the ages of 5 and 14 were 2.6 times more likely to drown than white children (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). As a matter of perspective, on average ten people drown per day in the United States and six of those ten are black (Ali, 2010). The racial disparities increase when we consider drowning deaths in swimming pools. Black children are 5.5 times more likely to drown in swimming pools while black children ages 11-12 are 10 times more at risk than whites (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). A 2010 study conducted at the University of Memphis and funded by USA Swimming Foundation found that 70% of black respondents said that they could not swim at all compared to only 31% of the whites in the study saying that they could not swim. Since then, we have seen a 5-10% improvement, but the racial disparities are still a concern when nearly 64% of blacks surveyed said they had little to no swimming ability (USA Swimming Foundation, 2017).

So, how did we get here and what can be done to alleviate these statistics? There are several competing ideas concerning why so many blacks drown compared to whites. These positions can be grouped into two broad areas. First, there are historical aspects that place blacks at a higher risk of drowning. Second, discussions that focus on cultural capital can help understand the statistics.

## History

Recreational swimming has often been viewed as a white activity. Much of this thinking is the result of a tradition of cultural discouragement in the black community concerning swimming. It has not always been this way. A large number of slaves brought to America came from West African countries with a deep aquatic culture. In fact, before the Civil War, it is thought that more blacks could swim than whites (Pitts, 2007). Whitten (2017) pointed out those water skills possessed by this group were so high that slave owners often assigned a black slave to teach their own children how to swim. Early in this history of slavery, some slave owners were known to allow their slaves to go to the river for recreational time.

It was not long until slave owners started to restrict their black slaves from enjoying water activities. It became common for slave owners to fear the ever-present possibility that a slave would escape. The ability to swim was seen as a skill that would aid them in their attempts to flee. It was at this time that slave owners began to promote in the black community a number of swimming-related myths and scare tactics. Stories of dangerous creatures lurking in the water were common. Some slave owners even resorted to forcefully dunking slaves until they feared drowning as a way to discourage water activities (Pitts, 2007).

Slave owners commonly used hunting dogs to track escaping slaves and while many techniques were used to throw the dogs off their scent, slaves often tried crossing water in order to cause problems for the tracking dogs. By encouraging a fear of water, they created just one more obstacle for slaves to face in escape attempts. It has been suggested that the Underground Railroad received the name after a slave, Tice Davids, succeeded in escaping by swimming across the Ohio River. The slave owner felt Davids had drowned and must have taken an underground railroad (Pitts, 2007). The newspapers picked up the comment and the idea of an underground railroad stuck

When the scare tactics and brutality weren't enough, laws were enacted to keep blacks out of the water. The Negro Seaman Act of 1822 called for the imprisonment of free foreign black seamen while their ships were docked in South Carolina. Racially restrictive covenants were well known when we think of housing discrimination. Similarly, covenants restricting black access to swimming pools became increasingly popular. An example came to national attention in 2009 when 65 black elementary school children were turned away from the Valley Swim Club of Huntingdon Valley in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Tillman, 2009).

Due to the exclusionary laws and Jim Crow style municipal regulations, when blacks did want to enjoy the water they had to resort to unregulated bodies of water. Examples of such high-risk areas were unsafe beaches and rivers. The result

of these segregation-inspired alternative swimming environments was a higher rate of drowning. One such example in 1961 was the drowning of dozens of black children in what was known as the 'negro swimming hole,' in Monroe, North Carolina (Pitts, 2007). In Louisiana six young black teens drowned when they tried to save some of their friends who were in trouble while swimming in the Red River in Shreveport, Louisiana (James, 2010).

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended the overt discrimination excluding blacks from swimming pools. To be sure, the Jim Crow laws were dismantled, but the damage to black cultural attitudes concerning swimming was already done. Blacks had begun internalizing a negative relationship with water and were actively socializing it into successive generations. Ali (2010) related the story of what his Aunt told him about swimming when she warned him to stay away from the pool because black folk don't swim. As pointed out by Whitten (2017) "only now, 150 years after the Civil War is that historic falsehood finally unraveling" (para. 28). But even though the laws were changing, general attitudes were not as quick to follow. When blacks attempted to swim in public pools they were discriminated against. In 1931, Pittsburgh opened a pool in Highland Park. Black swimmers who attended the opening were asked to provide health certificates that would prove they were free of disease. The next day, 50 black men were allowed to enter the pool, but were subsequently attacked by several white vigilantes. Unfortunately, these incidents still occur. In 2018, a white woman in South Carolina assaulted a 15-year-old black male at a neighborhood pool (Mervosh, 2018). These are not isolated instances and there are many examples of racial discrimination blacks face when they attempt to use a public pool.

More recently, swim clubs have served as a vehicle for social class preservation revolving around race and its concomitant social class and social/racial exclusion. Swim clubs create a type of invisible boundary shaped by a history of race and class-based exclusivity (DeLuca, 2013). Wiltse (2007) goes as far as to argue that swim clubs were a direct result of the public pool exclusions of the past, "a discreet and immediate cause" (p.180). As documented by Hackman (2015) investments in public pools started in the 1920s and 1930s "across the country, creating a culture of swimming for millions of Americans. But the pools were segregated, and only a fraction of them were designated for black Americans" (p.12). Furthermore, those investments declined as it became clear that black Americans were benefiting from publicly-funded pools. The loss of funds lead to the growth of community pools in higher income subdivisions and private swim clubs (Hackman, 2015). Such social structures continue the white privilege in ways often unforeseen by those who benefit from the status quo. Frankenberg (1993) addressed this misplaced racial neutrality when he detailed the manner in which race shaped one's life and privilege. All the relationships that potentially can erase

class/race-based privilege are hidden behind the veil provided by social organizations. As in other socially-organized institutions, ultimately, these entrenched privileges have led to the stratification of sport and leisure.

Even at the highest level of swimming, the Olympic Games, one can find evidence of a history of racial exclusion. At the 2012 Olympic Games the United States swim team contained only three black team members. There have only been four Olympic swimmers from the United States in all the games, including the 2012 games. During the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro history was made when Simone Manuel became the first black woman to win a Gold medal in an individual swimming event. She noted in an interview that she almost quit swimming because there were no other swimmers who looked like her (Washington, 2016). The importance of role models for young black swimmers cannot be ignored.

Social scientists have long studied entrenched, structurally-created, disadvantages. History has consequences. As Harrington said, many individual outcomes are the result of their only mistake is “. . . being born to the wrong parents, in the wrong section of the country, in the wrong industry, or in the wrong racial or ethnic group” (1963, p. 21). Swimming-related exclusionary laws and covenants have existed for decades creating a level of resource control that kept succeeding generations from obtaining the lifesaving skills not to mention recreational possibilities associated with water activities. Viewing this issue as an example of institutional discrimination, we can start to understand why blacks are often blamed for their own inability to swim.

### **Theory**

Swimming, when discouraged, first semi-legally through Jim Crow era laws and municipal codes, then through socialization to the succeeding generations, effectively set this issue as one that is ‘raced.’ Pierre Bourdieu said it best when he asserted that, “The social world is accumulated history...” (1986, p. 241). Racial identities resulting from ideologies (i.e., the passed-along-attitudes) and institutions have resulted in an accumulation of skills reflecting the obtainment, or in this case lack, of cultural capital. To be sure, the socialization and historical aspects already discussed have had a substantial impact on the accumulation of cultural capital, but there is more to this process.

Pierre Bourdieu would not want us to overlook the economic aspect of social capital. Cultural capital comes in a variety of forms: material possessions, tastes, mannerisms, professional and educational credentials, and for our purpose in this work, swimming skills. Blacks have endured a long history of not only institutional barriers to obtaining swimming skills, but also economic realities that prevented their ability to afford access to private swimming pools or swimming

lessons. Thus, the more economic capital one has the more cultural capital that is possible. Social reproduction results from what one has at their disposal to work with in their efforts to accumulate cultural capital. As expressed by Bourdieu (1977) "It is significant that culture is sometimes described as a map...;" he added a final point, ". . . a model of all possible routes" (p. 2).

Social scientists consistently point out that, as social beings, socialization is the process through which we learn how to be a member of our society. These socialized messages are received unconsciously and are taken for granted. Some aspects of this learned experience are perpetuated through a history of exclusion. Over time social structures, the road maps presented to people, serve as officializing strategies that solidify the status quo (Bourdieu, 1977). These strategies aim at producing regular practices that manipulate a collective definition of a situation. Some collective definitions matter more than others. The negative collective definitions concerning swimming in the black community have led to a fear of water. In an interview by Dailey (2010) for Newsweek Magazine, Kimberly Seals Allers, a mother of two who had a fear of water and an in-ground pool in her backyard, said, "African-Americans don't have pools in our communities and homes, and anything that's foreign to you, you usually feel afraid of" (p. 5). So, it seems that in the case of the social transmission of water skills, it is a matter of life and death. Blacks are three times more afraid of drowning than whites (USA Swimming Foundation, 2017). The same USA Swimming Foundation (2017) study found that if an individual cannot swim then there is only a 13% chance that their child will learn to swim thus demonstrating how easy it is for generation after generation to fail to acquire swimming and water safety skills.

Bourdieu was also thinking about economic resources when he discussed the conversion of cultural capital into social capital. There are some aspects of cultural capital that directly convert, while others operate secondarily. In the example of swimming skills, it seems that the conversion is secondary. The accumulation of any skill set occurs over time. In this case, the attainment of swimming skills (social capital) requires a substantial personal and economic investment. Fees for swimming lessons, resources required for pool maintenance or swim club membership, and time to practice all are out of reach of those not in the middle-class or higher. We even find that designers of swim caps based their products on the needs of Caucasians rather than blacks. With hair often being a status symbol and a point of pride for blacks, some black women are reluctant to swim and get their hair wet (Evans, 2018).

An understanding of this issue from the perspective of the accumulation of social capital also helps us gain insights into the complex dynamics at work in the drowning statistics for blacks. Financial resources as well as an absence of the

cultural capital required to encourage the attainment of swimming as a set of skills have created the situation we see reflected in the rate of black drowning. Conversely, the cultural encouragement of swimming as a skill set may not be possible without the financial support discussed earlier in this paper. The best possible way to view this phenomenon is as a combination of interacting social realities. The history of economic exclusion preceded the requisite conditions for the development of cultural capital and the conversion into social capital required to have an impact in people's lived experiences. This socio-historical perspective provides a better way of understanding the high rate of black drowning statistics.

To break the negative cycle of higher rates of drowning among blacks, it will take a restructuring of the social institutions to set in motion the socialization (or a re-socialization) of new and more positive attitudes concerning swimming in the black community. Reversing the way African Americans interact with swimming will create new opportunities to adjust the way blacks think about swimming, and in turn, will lead to the creation of new social structures encouraging blacks to return to the water.

These social structures, or social fields, as expressed by Bourdieu have a complex history. The interplay between economic and cultural fields create how social members of specific groups develop views of things as varied as cuisine, ideas of fashions, and recreation. In *Distinction* (1984) we find Bourdieu's understanding concerning how subfields become a part of individual lives. Swimming is one example of such subfield. It is not that blacks don't swim because of some random thoughts; those thoughts are guided by a history and the history is hierarchical. The concept that blacks don't swim sets up what Hardy (2014) saw as an objective opposition. Hardy (2014) cited choices of food, marriage partners, and museum visiting as examples of "... distinct practices.... derived from the same dialectic tension between capital value and capital configuration" (p. 234).

### **Conclusion**

Just as social spaces develop from the interaction of culture, capital, and history, they can evolve as social structures change or are modified. The relational aspect of this perspective drives the possibility of change. An understanding of the interrelationship between capital, habitus, and field is valuable if changes are desirable. The histories that inhabit individuals create a sense that swimming is not for "me" as one is immersed in the doxa that results from the history of blacks and swimming.

For Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1986), the cycle prevented blacks from even considering swimming as a part of their lives. It is as Maton (2014) pointed out, "because its dispositions are embodied, the habitus develops a momentum that can

generate practices for some time after the original conditions which shaped it have vanished” (p. 58). Therefore, to affect change requires a disruption of the cycle. In this work, we have discussed successes gained by black swimmers in recent Olympic Games. These role models will no doubt help change how blacks see swimming, but a more concentrated and structured effort is needed.

Drowning continues to be a public health problem affecting racial/ethnic groups disparately among different age groups and in different aquatic settings. The risk of drowning in a swimming pool, or in any body of water, rises for anyone who cannot swim. Death by drowning is often an unnecessary tragedy. According to the United States Swimming Foundation (2015), the risk of childhood drowning can be reduced as much as 88% by providing youth with formal swimming lessons. The Safety Commission for the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) emphasized that there is no doubt that the inability to swim in swimming pools or in other bodies of water (oceans, lakes or in streams) contributes to minority children drowning. In a CBS News interview, CPSC Chair Inez Tenebaum stated, "It's a cultural issue, because many of the African-American and Hispanic children have parents and grandparents who never learned to swim" (2012, para. 6). Xu (2010) reminded us that even though pools are considered safer than other bodies of water in the United States a major threat to the health of toddlers and preschool children is drowning in a swimming pool, with swimming pool drowning rates for black children, adolescents, and young adults elevated compared to those of other racial/ethnic groups.

Swimming skills are life-saving skills. In an effort to curtail the racial disparities in drowning rates, government safety activists have insisted that African American children and adolescents must be taught how to swim. Pool Safely (2013) is an established national public education campaign which advocates for the requirements of the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act. The campaign urges adults in the roles of parents or caregivers to obtain vital water safety information related to drowning prevention from their website. This agency works with partners across the United States to reduce fatal and non-fatal drowning and entrapment tragedies which occur in swimming pools. In 2013, the agency's campaign focus was on increasing swimming education in minority communities. The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) continues to work with the YMCA, the American Red Cross (through their Centennial Campaign), public schools and other community organizations in order to promote free swimming lessons.

With the general observations that blacks as a group have limited swimming skills (Brenner et al., 2009; Rahman, et al., 2012) it is imperative that appropriate basic swimming be taught as widely as possible. In addition to basic swimming

skills, this also includes controlled breathing, being able to traverse an appropriate distance, utilizing appropriate drowning prevention barriers (like pool fencing, childproof locks, alarms) and wearing life jackets in, on, and around that water, actively supervising persons in the water or having a lifeguard, and knowing how to perform bystander Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) (Irwin et al., 2011; Gilchrist et al., 2000). The continued development of swimming opportunities for blacks of all ages is warranted in the effort to reduce drowning risks. In addition, further research is necessary to bridge the gaps and priorities related to risk factor identification, strategies for intervention, the evaluation of programs, and the necessary dissemination strategies which will help reduce water related injuries.

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