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## A Leisure Model: Barriers and Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers

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## A Leisure Model: Barriers and Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers

### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the twenty-five participants of this study who continue to uplift our swimming world.

### **Abstract**

There remains a gap in the literature about the experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers (hereafter referred to as BWCS) and the application of the leisure constraints model. Whether research has been conducted with Black Womxn Swimmers enrolled in a swimming course while using an autoethnographic lens (Norwood, 2010) or the representation of one Black Womxn Swimmer from a Predominantly White Institution (Quash, 2018), minimal knowledge is known about this specific demographic representative of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and the barriers they experience. Using a qualitative methodological approach to understand the leisure constraints experiences by BWCS, this study methodically invited this demographic to share and discuss their lived experiences across generations. By challenging the leisure constraints model, this article revisits research completed by Chick and Dong (2003) and Waller and Norwood (2009). The researcher interviewed twenty-five self-identified Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers (current and former), between the ages of 19-61. Each interview focused on the experiences and the barriers participants encountered during their collegiate swimming careers. The analysis presents a new theoretical construct to replace the leisure constraint framework while working with a marginalized population. The results of this narrative inquiry suggest that the experiences of BWCS differ individually but have similar themes as a collective; thus, charging the field of leisure behavior to consider the experiences of marginalized groups who excel in a leisure activity outside of societal and cultural norms.

*Keywords:* Black womxn, collegiate swimmers, barriers, narrative inquiry

### **Introduction**

The lack of representation of Black people in swimming has been attributed to a host of reasons. Irwin et al. (2009) found that the stigma associated with Black people not participating in the sport of swimming often centered on: “financial limitations,” lack of “swimming [facilities],” lack of swimming “interests,” and wet hair and make-up related to “personal appearance” (p. 12). They collected responses from “approximately 2,000...non[w]hite children aged 4-17 years of varying swimming ability...” (Irwin et al., 2009, p. 13). This study attempted to provide insight into the mind of Black youth and their perceptions of barriers to aquatic participation. Reasons related to the lack of their swimming participation are reliant upon the experiences of racially/ethnically marginalized swimmers who have not invested their time and physical energy in the sport of swimming. However, Irwin et al.'s (2009) study addressed the lack of involvement of Black people in swimming as “myths” with minimal relationship to the racial history and oppression of Black people in aquatics. Waller and Norwood (2009) addressed the lack of this historical relationship between Black people and aquatic spaces in their

rejoinder article to Irwin et al. Furthermore, Waller and Norwood (2009) examine the relationship of a Black “Female” (specifically cisgender) swimmers in the sport of swimming. By providing a constructive critique of the use of the leisure constraint theory, Waller and Norwood (2009) acknowledge that the “myths: Irwin et al. (2009) state related to hair lack a connection between cultural identity, race, and gender within the sport of swimming.

The findings documented by Irwin et al. (2009) and Waller and Norwood (2009) suggest that there is a need to develop a leisure constraint theoretical framework through the lens of Black Womxn<sup>1</sup> Collegiate Swimmers (BWCS) that can be inclusive for past aquatic research. Previous research completed by Quash (2018), Norwood (2010), Norwood et al. (2014), and Waller and Norwood (2009) took the time to speak with Black Womxn who dedicated their lives to swimming. Minimal research, however, acknowledges the voices of Black Womxn using a Black Womxnst theoretical lens applied by a Black Womxn researcher.

By extending an invitation to understand the experiences of Black (inclusive of the African diaspora) Womxn Collegiate Swimmers representative of four age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36-48, 49-over) from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), this study validated and challenged the narratives of Black Womxn and their participation in swimming as competitive athletes (specifically collegiate swimmers). To best acknowledge these generational bodies (verbal, physical, and emotional) of Black Womxn swimmers, their stories center on the categories of one’s family swim-story (introduction to swimming and overall swimming career), the participant’s swim-story (introduction to swimming and their collegiate swimming career), demystifying swimming stereotypes, swim team culture, Black Womxn and body, and a reflection on the future of swimming.

**Purpose.** This study challenges the application and implications of the leisure constraints theory by positioning the experiences of BWCS and the sport of swimming as an activity that has a historical relationship with Black people. Similar aquatic qualitative research discussed the experience of Black Womxn swimmers; however, the history of African people before enslavement during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and one’s personal history must be the foundation for the development of new models because of the historical significance of African people swimming and Black culture related to swimming. If such aspects of a people’s history are removed from (or ignored in) the research lens, specifically regarding

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<sup>1</sup> The author uses the spelling of “Womxn” with an “x” instead of an “a” or “e” to focus the literature and conversations to be inclusive of Black Womxn and move away from the narrative of men and/or man.

marginalized populations, then researchers are making a conscious effort to colonize their history for the satisfaction of the colonizer by not challenging institutional racism within the research/er paradigm.

Historically, swimming in Africa was more than play for children. By identifying and acknowledging the positive historical encounters that people of African descent have had with the water and the systematic racism connected to this leisure activity, the focus of the personal barriers remains on poignant personal interactions with people. The purpose of this study was expressed as an invitation to understand and recognize the experiences of Black (inclusive of the African diaspora) Womxn Collegiate Swimmers (BWCS) from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The goals of this study were to:

1. Explore the experiences of Black Womxn alumnae and current student-athletes.
2. Analyze factors that signify time (across generations) and place (locations of collegiate swimming experience).
3. Understand the narratives of BWCS, their team culture, and institutional culture across time (generation) and place (location).

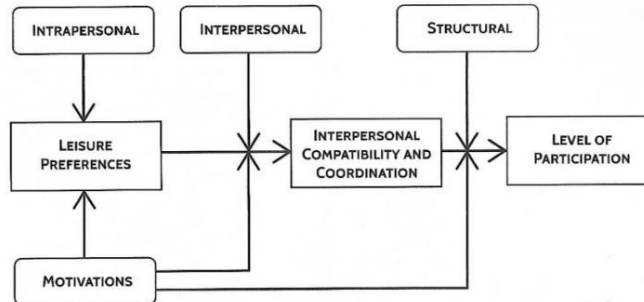
**Leisure Constraints Theory.** Current scholars rely upon the conception and development of “leisure constraint” versus that of “leisure barriers”. Leisure Constraints are, “factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived or experienced by individuals to limit the formation of leisure preferences and to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (Jackson, 1997, p. 461). Without minimizing the work of other scholars in the field, Schneider (2016) outlined that “the term barriers fell out of favor when researchers realized constraints could be dealt with and that they influenced more than participation” (p. 152). The proposed argument is that the basic understanding of “constraints” does not provide the opportunity to explore the possibility of overcoming adversity. This is not to erase the history of leisure studies, but to consider an addendum to terminology and definitions with marginalized populations as defined by those voices.

Goodale and Godbey (1988) ask: “What are the barriers which prevent people from experiencing leisure or, more precisely, from participating in specific leisure activities?” (p. 255). Two years prior, Crawford and Godbey (1987) challenged the leisure behavior field that “conceptual and empirical” evidence was lacking to provide an actual definition and model for the term “barrier” (p. 120). They continued by stating that there are “five factors which ...account for the lack of association between preference and participation” (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, p. 121). Those factors include individuals not having the ability to participate in

leisure activities; “engag[ing]” in activities that they choose not to be a part of; “lack of interest”; the presence of “internal and external barriers”; and the “stability” of an individual’s preference (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, pp. 121–122). Research surrounding leisure constraint and its models “aims to investigate and understand the factors that are assumed by researchers and perceived by individuals to inhibit or prohibit participation and enjoyment in leisure” (Jackson, 1991, p. 279).

The construction and the application of the leisure constraints theory and its framework have undergone a series of changes. The leisure constraints model has been simplified to include four classified barriers: interpersonal, intrapersonal, structural, and cultural (Chick & Dong, 2003). Shinew et al. (2004) recognized there was a need to challenge the application of the leisure constraints theoretical framework and conceptual models in relationship to race and gender. Explicitly referencing the experiences of Womxn and leisure, the authors address how experiential barriers can mirror that of racial and/or ethnic minorities by citing Jackson and Henderson (1995), Philipp (1995), and Shaw (1994, 2001). However, in many of the cited studies and Shinew et al. (2004), a comparison between a populations’ race/ethnicity was used as a comparative analysis.

The first model developed and incorporated the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural barriers into a model was Crawford et al. (1991). Defined individually, Crawford and Godbey (1987) explained that interpersonal barriers, “interact with both preference for, and subsequent participation in, companionate leisure activities” (p. 123). Intrapersonal barriers “involve individual psychological states and attributes which interact with leisure preferences rather than intervening between preferences and participation” (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, p. 122). Structural barriers, as defined by Crawford and Godbey (1987), were “intervening factors between leisure preference and participation” impacted by personal experience, “appropriateness”, and/or availability of participation (p. 124). Combining the elements of these barriers into this specific model, “arrange[s] [the barriers] in a hierarchical fashion indicating intrapersonal constraints must first be overcome, then interpersonal and finally structural” (Crawford et al., 1991; Schneider, 2016, p. 152; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.***Hierarchical Model of Constraints (Crawford et al., 1991)*

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The disadvantage to using the leisure constraints framework and model is the inability to differentiate a singular experience as interpersonal, intrapersonal, structural, and cultural, in relationship to the experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers (and possibly other marginalized voices) with their voices in the forefront of the literature. To date, the research conducted with marginalized communities places the research participant in the position of disempowerment rather than empowerment.

### Positionality

The experience of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers has yet to be fully investigated and critically *by* Black Womxn researchers who identify as collegiate swimmers. To challenge the current standards of research as dictated by white scholars and the space of cisgender white men who impose systemic oppression upon marginalized voices, specifically Black Womxn, this study was developed to challenge such standards/notions. This topic is an invitation to a space that is often overlooked by practitioners (i.e., aquatic programming administrators, aquatic instructors, and coaches) and researchers (Anderson, 2017). Too often, the leisure experiences of Black womxn have been undervalued and rarely discussed *by* other Black Womxn. To address this, Black Womxn researchers are cited here as a form of upliftment and solidarity instead of white scholars in the leisure field. Regrettably, this goal was unattainable due to the lack of other Black Womxn leisure scholars who address competitive swimming. It is my position that the experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers should be explained by someone from that community.

### Theoretical Framework

This study, in design and reporting, aims to remain in solidarity with Black

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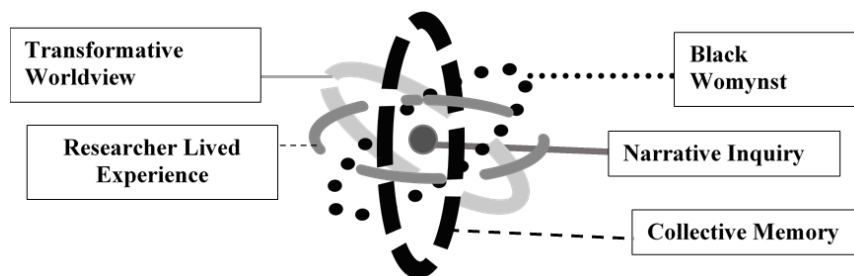
Womxnst Scholars while using de/colonizing language. To do this and not challenge the leisure model would be counterproductive of the goals set forth in this study. Previous research indicates that the experiences and the presence of Black Womxn in spaces where representation is minimal. Crenshaw (1991) addresses how “identity politics ...fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (p. 1242). Though Crenshaw's (1991) article “[explores] the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color,” it is in the author’s words that “the intersections of race and gender only highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). It is Crenshaw's (1989) previous text that provides insight as to how Black Womxn can experience discrimination and navigate society. She stated:

Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (p. 149).

Crenshaw’s (1989, 1991) writings provide an opportunity for Black Womxn researchers to engage with the academic community with our voices in solidarity by situating the theoretical frameworks of Black Womxnst Theory, Narrative Inquiry, Collective Memory, and Transformative Worldview as the lenses of cultural consciousness and cultural acceptance, while simultaneously honoring the role as a researcher and a BWCS. As a result of this realization, the following Qualitative Researcher Framework (Figure 3) acknowledges the intersecting theories, Black Womxnst Theory, Narrative Inquiry, Collective Memory, and Transformative Worldview.

**Figure 2**

*Qualitative Researcher Framework*





### **Black Womxnst Theory**

As cited, research conducted by and with Black Womxn and their relationship to swimming as leisure, learning-to-swim, or competitive activity from a place of empowerment has been minimal. Norwood (2010, 2018); Norwood et al. (2014); and Quash (2018) discuss the success and challenges of being a Black Womxn and a swimmer. Similar research that has been brought forth by Black Womxn researchers about Black Womxn and Girls in leisure include, Brown and Outley (2019). By using the lens of Black Womxnst Theory and the authors mentioned above as a foundation, the aim remains to acknowledge the holistic experiences of Black Womxn while providing a platform with those who embody “race, [gender], and class oppression as forming one struggle” in the form of intersectionality (Brown, 1989, p. 632).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

In addition to being a form of methodology, narrative inquiry is also a theoretical framework that is composed of “first-person accounts of experiences [in the form of]...autobiography, life history, interview, journal, letters, or other materials...” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 232). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that the function of narrative inquiry “is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). Concerning this study, narrative inquiry focuses on specific lived experiences of BWCS from their introduction to swimming, collegiate swimming experiences, and beyond.

### **Collective Memory**

Assmann (2008) defined collective memory as a form of individual memory, cultural memory, and generational memory. The forms of memory include media (images, monuments, etc.) and verbal (Assmann, 2008, p. 55). The relationship collective memory has to this study helps to understand, accept, and appreciate the reasons as to why BWCS were told why Black people do not and cannot swim even though they continued to invest their time and energy into the sport of swimming. By understanding and recognizing the collective memory of Black Collegiate Swimmers in this study, there is an ability of affirmation in the literature the context of Black Womxn, swimming, and their cultural relationship.

### **Transformative Worldview**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) acknowledge that “[t]his philosophical worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized ...” (p. 9). It is through the re-construction of the lived experiences of the participants and the researcher that social change can occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To grasp the power differential within a specific community (in the case of this study, within the community of swimming), there must also be a

“focus on the strengths that reside in communities that experience discrimination and oppression on the basis of their cultural values and experiences” (Mertens, 2007; Mertens, 2009; Mertens, 2010; Mertens, 2012, p. 804). Furthermore, the implications of this research “[link] political and social action to these inequities” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 10).

To date, reasons as to why Black girls and Black Womxn do not participate in swimming have been published by Irwin et al., (2009); Norwood (2010, 2018); Waller & Norwood (2009); and Waller & Norwood (2011). The challenge remains of moving this conversation from Black girls and Black Womxn, who do not participate in swimming to those who do participate in competitive swimming and examining their experiences to the applicability to the leisure constraints theoretical framework and conceptual models.

### **Method**

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand the lived experiences of people through their words, behaviors, and actions derived from a specific event or series of events. Echoing Bhattacharya (2018), a “[q]ualitative researcher... aims to work within the context of human experiences and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (p. 6). The richness of the data (the lived experiences) was developed by using narrative inquiry and interviewing simultaneously.

### **Narrative Inquiry and Interview Methodology**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) state that “[n]arrative inquiry strives to interpret the larger meaning of the story by focusing on the process, theories, and unique and general feature of the story or text” (p. 241). The stories (i.e., experiences) of Black Womxn and their relationship with collegiate swimming has yet to be discussed as a collective or across the generations amongst varying institutions. Due to the importance of relationship building and community associated with being a swimmer and a Black Womxn in competitive swimming, narrative inquiry provides a platform for participants to bring their authentic-selves to the forefront of the conversation (i.e., the interview). It is through the process of story-telling that the lived experienced is structured and analyzed. To arrive at the “larger meaning of the story,” as explained by Bloomberg and Volpe (2016, p. 241), Bhattacharya (2017) states, “researchers who use narrative inquiry are interested in understanding how people articulate their life experiences in the structure of a story” (p. 27). In addition to narrative inquiry, interviewing was a form of methodology that asked the participant the questions that enabled the participants to share their stories.

The goal of this study was to understand the narratives of BWCS. Through their lived experiences, a holistic leisure constraints model was defined and

developed for the application of marginalized voices. The application of narrative inquiry in this study is a theoretical and methodological approach because of the aim to understand and hear the stories, the lives, and the experiences of individuals. To achieve the goals of this study, twenty-five Black Womxn consented to participate in a digitally recorded semi-structured interview. Each interview ranged from 1-2 hours. To transition the lived experiences of the participants to a developing theory simultaneously, Kim (2016) states that “we have to recognize that there is a strong interlocking relationship between theory and practice, they interlock just like gears, with our personal experience serving as a lubricant” (p. 29). It is because of the personal experiences of the researchers as a Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmer and the experiences of the participants that a new theoretical framework was developed based on the experiences of Black Womxn.

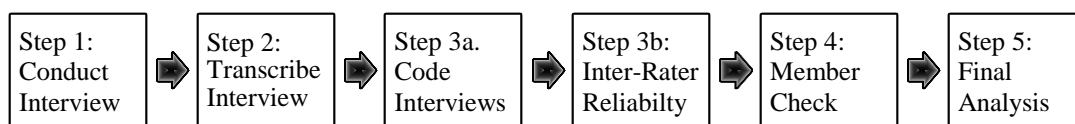
## Data Collection

### *Participants and Interviews*

Twenty-Five self-identified Black Womxn consented to participate in individual, digitally recorded interviews. The interviews were filed on an encrypted university system. Participants represented Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); and of four age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36-48, 49-over) from the previously mentioned institutions. Each participant had the option to choose their pseudonym or to use their name. The data collection and analysis process for this study was methodical. The step-by-step data collection and research process, illustrated in Figure 4, shows how the researcher, research team, and participants worked together in this study.

### Figure 3

#### *Data Collection and Research Process*



Interviews used a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) that was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview guide consisted of 11 provisional codes: Background Information, Family History, Family Swim Story, Your Swim History, What Do You Hear?, Class and Swimming, Team Experience, Black Womxn and Body, Seeing Me Now, Future Hopes in Swimming and Reflection. Each digitally recorded interview averaged between 1-2 hours with the consent of the participant.

The research question of the study addressed the following:

What are the experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers from HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions?

Sub-questions

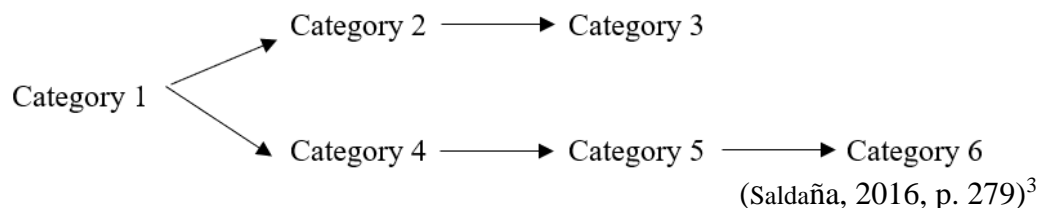
1. What led these swimmers to the sport?
2. What are the shared experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers from HBCUs and Predominantly White Institutions?

### Data Analysis

After transcribing each interview and using the preliminary codes, the information was presented to the participant for member checking. To form a more intimate relationship with the words of the participants, the researcher used the “tabletop” exercise (Saldaña, 2016). The “tabletop” exercise “involves the literal spatial arrangement on a table of coded and categorized data” (p. 230). With the establishment of the provisional codes, quotes from each transcript (the raw data) were cut and pasted onto note cards with phrases highlighted. The highlighted text helped to form key phrases into a preliminary code. This preliminary code was a description of a subcategory of the provisional code. At times, the preliminary codes developed into Domino Effects (Figure 4)

**Figure 4**

*Domino Effects*



When discussing this exercise in text, Saldaña (2016) explained that “[s]tudents remark that “touching the data” and physically moving categories on a tabletop in multiple arrangements helps them to better discover and understand such organizational concepts as hierarchy, process, interrelationship, theming, and structure” (p. 231). It was the themes that were shaped by the participants’ experiences with the participant. As Saldaña (2016) reminds readers, “a theme is an *outcome* of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded” (p. 198).

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Participants were given a summary of their transcripts and an explanation of the themes derived from their conversations with the researchers as a form of member checking. The purpose of member checking is to invite participants to “discuss relevant multiple dimensions of the research...” and will provide an atmosphere as an “exchange of ideas” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37). Noting that this study is action-based, the analysis process enabled BWCS to have “ownership and investment in data analysis” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 36).

As a form of inter-rater reliability, the researcher, a research assistant, and participant discussed the best interpretation of the results. This process enabled a transition of the raw data from the provisional codes to codes, and codes to themes with sub-categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that “[a] ... common strategy to ensure internal validity or credibility is member checks” (p. 246). They continue by stating that “the idea ...is [to] solicit feedback on [the] preliminary or emerging finding from some of the people that [have been] interviewed” (p. 246).

### **Results**

The results of this study provided a reflection into the lived experiences of twenty-five past and current Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers representative of Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominantly White Institutions. Codes were derived from the following sections of the interview guide: Swimmer Background, Family History, Family Swim Story, Your Swim Story, What Do You Hear? Team Experience, and Black Womxn and Body. As a celebration of the experiences of Black Womxnhood and the Black Womxn Swimmer experiences, the Black Womxnst Lens continued to be the embodiment of the diversity and complexity to understand the lives of BWCS.

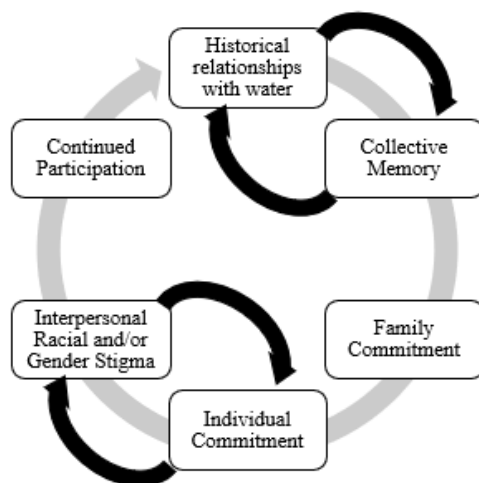
To date, research by and with other Black Womxn swimmers in leisure studies remained minimal. Black Womxn Swimmers, who are within the academy and are practitioners willing to discuss the barriers to being a participant in a sport dominated by white cisgender male are rare and their expertise is minimally documented in the literature. By framing the interpersonal model and acknowledging the stigma the participants encountered during their experiences, the academy provides a platform for a marginalized population to develop a framework that is in favor of a Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmer experience.

### **Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma Model**

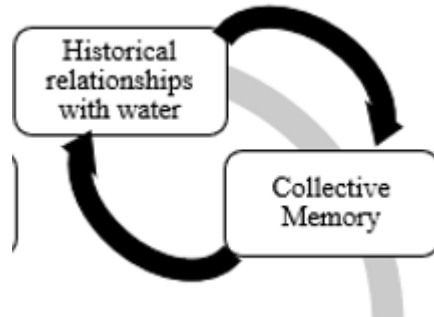
Race and leisure scholars as early as Philipp (1995); Floyd (1998); Shinew et al. (2004); Shinew et al. (2006); Floyd et al. (2008); Schneider, (2016); Floyd and Stodolska (2019); and Stodolska et al. (2020) were accurate to acknowledge that the leisure constraint theory and race should be approached with caution and an alternative framework proposed. Thus, the Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender

Model proves the relationship between African swim history before the enslavement of Black bodies during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, family and individual swim story, race, and gender. Referring to the information gathered by the participants during the interviews in sections: *Family History; Family Swim Story; Your Swim Story; and What did you hear?*, Black Womxn expressed how their parents acknowledged the importance to learning how to swim either based on their past trauma, encouragement from other Black Swim Families within their communities, and/or the positive relationship parents had with swimming. The proposed model for Intrapersonal Racial and Gender Stigma is illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**  
*Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma*



Beginning with “Historical Relationships with Water” (Figure 6), participants acknowledged past athletic accomplishments of other Black womxn competitive swimmers, the importance of Black life centered around water before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and their families’ relationship with water.

**Figure 6***Part I: Historical Relationships with Water and Collective Memory*

“Historical relationships with water” were discussed congruently with the “Collective Memory” related to drowning, the fear of swimming, and lack of swimming facility opportunity. Jeanine, 39 an alumna from an HBCU discussed the historical relationship of Black people swimming (or lack thereof) and the collective memory of the lack of opportunity:

[W]hen my mother was graduating from high school, there was a lot that was happening. So between 1964 and 1968 you had the assassination of, you know, Bobby Kennedy, President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, you know, so you had the assassination of a lot of individuals, and there was a lot of stuff happening prior to, you know, around segregation and discrimination. And so, um, growing up in Philadelphia, I don't know that my parents had access to pools to learn.

Based on the experiences of these participants, the historical relationship between Black people swimming and the collective memories centered on traumatic swimming experiences, are often cultivated within the family unit and expressed through stories within Black culture. The “Historical relationships with water” and the “Collective Memories” are cyclical and are part of the foundation of the lives of the BWCS.

The other half of this foundation is one’s “Family Commitment” to swimming as a leisure activity and a sport. The “Family Commitment” (Figure 7) focused on the participants’ family commitment to teaching their children to learn-to-swim, the positive relationship families had with aquatic activities, and the importance of the community Black families developed with other swim families.

**Figure 7**

*Part II: Family Commitment*



Savanna, age 19, a current swimmer at a PWI stated:

[B]oth my parents swam in high school in Chicago. [My dad] knew how to swim when he was younger, and then he never really did like clubs or anything. And then when he got to high school, his, uh, he said to his coach, had him try out and he was good at breaststroke.

The reinforcement of learning to swim extended across each of the participants' families, which encompassed varying socio-economic backgrounds, educational and professional backgrounds, and the locations of each swimmer. Growing up in Puerto Rico, Maritza's parents understood the importance of swim lessons because of her attraction to the ocean. Maritza, age 38 and an alumna from a PWI, stated the following:

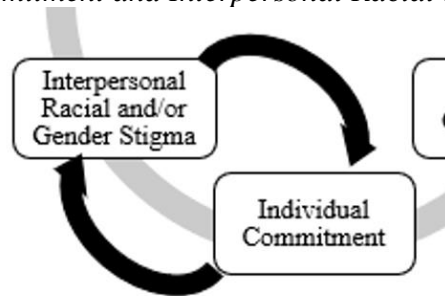
[W]e [were] surrounded by water down there, and we would always go to the beach. And my mom noticed that I really love playing in the water. Um, I probably made her super nervous a couple of times. So that's, that's kind of where the water kinda came in where it's like some lesson kind of came in.

Moving from participant's exposure of swimming lessons to competitive swimming, BWCS found a space to thrive while overcoming oppositional interactions with fellow swimmers athletically. The "Individual Commitment and Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma" (Figure 8) identifies those respondents experienced interactions that include passive remarks to outward statements focused on their race and/or gender. Such maltreatment occurred throughout various levels of their competitive swimming (high school, club swimming, or collegiate swimming) experiences.



**Figure 8**

*Part III: Individual Commitment and Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma*



Brittany, age 30, an alumna from a PWI, recalled a swim meet she attended in Texas as an age-group club team swimmer:

I was top-ranked in the state as a 9-, 10-year-old in breaststroke. And I remember (pause) being behind the blocks and a white girl asking me why did my thighs touch. And I didn't understand the question. And so, I asked, I'm pretty sure I said, 'I don't know. How come yours don't touch?' And it wasn't in this, like, (pause) you know (chuckles) tryin' to be fresh sort of way. I think, knowing me, it was a genuine question, like, "Well, I don't know. How come yours don't?"

The implied innocence of this question left a significant memory upon Brittany. Questions centered on the complexity of being a Black Womxn and a Swimmer also occurred out of sight of adults and in private conversations and locker rooms. Gia, age 33 and an alumna from an HBCU, recalled an incident that occurred when she swam for her youth club team.

It had to be when I had just joined. Maybe between the age of 10, 11. And it was, it was always something like whether it was my hair in braids if I had beads in my hair. It was just always questions about my hair, or you know when I would wash it with like shampoo and if I could like mold my hair. They thought it was just so cool to like the way that my hair responded to water. Because it was different from theirs, you know? So how did it make me feel? It just, I don't, I was torn. I was torn because it was like on one end, I wanted to make friends. I wanted to have conversations and connect. But then on the other end, it kind of made me feel like a pet.

Like the experiences of Brittany and Gia that focused on the visibility of one's physical body in areas characteristically in white-centered spaces, one's physical ability was questioned and challenged by the coaching staff. Victoria, age 25 and

an alumna from an HBCU, remembered being not invited to attend collegiate recruiting opportunities.

[M]y dad just didn't want to see it. And he was [this was the] coach ... and he was trying to tell him like they, they're not treating her right point, blank period. Just like they didn't want to give me the same chances that they were giving everybody else as far as like ... scholarship and going to see this school and, and, "Hey, let's go on a visit to this school, but I know Victoria you can't come right or you're not ready". That's what they would say. "You're not ready."

The reality for Victoria was that she was ready. Victoria became the captain of her collegiate team and received a full scholarship. The BWCS who participated in this study demonstrated a resounding amount of expertise as swimmers (refer to Appendix B), and many of the race and/or gender barriers they encountered were, in fact, stigmas.

Outside of the questions from teammates, some BWCS felt isolated as being a member of their collegiate team. Paula, age 61 and an alumna from a PWI, recalled the lack of opportunity to swim and being shunned from her collegiate swimmer teammates.

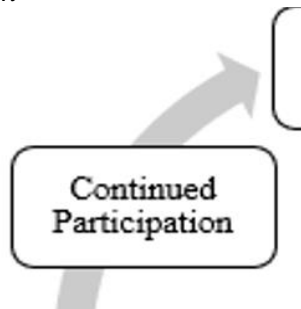
[W]e had a meet at Penn State one time and the whole way, which may have been maybe like an hour [or] 45 minutes away from where we were. The whole time I sat by myself on that bus the whole way there and the whole way back. No one would sit next to me. I didn't get a chance to swim in that meet. Yeah. I never swam in any of those meets either. Once again, just like high school.

As shown in Figure 8, incidents of racial and/or gender stigma can occur throughout a BWCS athletic career despite their commitment and success in the sport. The root of the stigmas remains embedded in society's understanding of body acceptability for swimmers (race and gender-based), the Black culture's meaning of swimming associated with drowning and limited success as a professional athlete, and the continuous systemic (and systematic) racism and oppression within the competitive swimming (and aquatics) profession.

In the last wave of the Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma model, BWCS continue to participate in swimming as either coaches, swim instructors, volunteers, or being active in their communities. The "Continued Participation" (Figure 9) is a culmination of self-preservation, dedication, and love for competitive swimming.

**Figure 9**

*Part IV: Continued Participation*



The participants in this study remain dedicated to themselves and the sport of swimming. Latroya, age 23, and an HBCU alumna recognized her commitment to challenging the narrative that Black people can swim. Latroya stated the following:

What I really want to focus on is getting it out there. I think getting it out there that we can swim, informing people, you know, like these are the opportunities that come with swimming, and that was, you know, you don't just have to swim just to swim.

Participants expressed a resounding commitment to support local teams that cultivate a community for Black swimmers like Karen, age 50, an alumna from a PWI stated:

I think continuing to support... the local teams that I grew up in. And...trying to be part of furthering the understanding of swimming, the appropriateness, the appreciation of swimming in our community.

For some participants who stepped away from the sport, they returned to swimming because they recognized the value of learning-to-swim for their children. Tracy, age 49 and a collegiate swimmer from a PWI stated the following when reflecting on her recommitment to swimming:

I returned to the sport for the same reason that my mom originally took us to this sport. My kids have to be safe around the water. Every kid has to stay from the water. You know, every kid should learn how to swim, black, white, whatever. Every kid should be safe around the water. So that was my thing, and I went into it the same way my mom did, [swim] lessons. Just so that they're around the pool, they're safe. Well, it took off from there, and I kind of found a new love for swimming again. I was like, wow, I miss it.

That was when I started to volunteer, and it kind of worked into coaching and 15 years later...

### **Discussion**

This study centered on producing a more reliable leisure constraints theoretical framework and model for Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers. When presented with the analysis from the study, the experiences of Black Womxn, particularly Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers, cannot be molded into the current leisure constraints framework. Furthermore, the current models for intrapersonal and structural barriers are not applicable due to the complexity of the lived experience of being a Black Womxn while participating in the white cismale dominated sport, swimming. By changing the current interpersonal barriers and focusing on the athletic success of BWCS with a Black Womxnst Lens, the experiences are not solely based on one's race or gender.

The Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma Model signifies that the experiences of a marginalized individual can occur a multitude of times during one's life. This model also pays homage to the root of swimming as a leisure activity and a lifestyle. Unlike previous models, this model heavily relied upon the experiences of Black Womxn and their varied experiences centered on the collegiate sport of swimming. Within the leisure studies, leisure constraints and a cross-cultural analysis (Chick & Dong, 2003), gender (Ayala et al., 2020; Fowlie et al., 2021), and race (Shinew et al., 2004) and their historical relationship to physical space (Fernandez & Witt, 2013) have been the basis for analysis. What is lacking within the literature is an examination of how a group of Black Womxn across generations continue to participate in a physical space that has historically robbed them from participating in the leisure activity of swimming.

### **Practical Implications**

Participants of this study discussed the importance of competitive swimming in their lives. Beyond the bond between teammates and team culture, there was a need for the swimming community to dedicate itself toward cultural conscious learning to swim and competitive swimming programming for Black children, Black girls, Black Womxn, and Black families. The stigmas that BWCS encountered on the deck and/or the locker-room, demand for the accountability of the coaching staff, team parents/guardians, and swimmers along with an increase in cultural education. There remained a drive to encourage and mobilize Black families to attend learn-to-swim programs with Black aquatic community leaders. There was an acknowledgment that there are Black Womxn coaching and aquatic professionals in leadership positions who have gone either unnoticed or subjected to micro-aggressions in the field. Lastly, the exposure and engagement of Black athletes outside of swimming clinics and to include individuals in learn-to-swim

opportunities outside of USA Swimming was an area of need. By providing such athletes with the skills to communicate with individuals outside of competitive swimming enables them to be more approachable to those outside of the competitive swimming community.

### **Conclusion**

For BWCS, the intentionality of walking onto the deck to swim resonated with each participant. As a collegiate Black Swimmer, one is not only left the identity of being a swimmer and a collegiate athlete, but also a Black Womxn. The root of the stigmas remains embedded in society's understanding of body acceptability for swimmers (race and gender-based), the Black culture's meaning of swimming associated with drowning and the limited success as a professional swimmer, and the continuous systemic racism and oppression within the competitive swimming (and aquatics) profession.

Research on the experiences of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers from various institutions includes work by Norwood et al. (2014) and Quash (2018). This is not to say that the literature on the engagement of Black Womxn as swimmers is not of value in a field that is hyper-focused on the experiences of Black girls/Womxn and their hair in aquatics, the impact of financial commitment and the disengagement of Black people in swimming. The antithesis of the narrative of swimming and Black People, specifically Black Womxn, is the counter-narrative presented here of Black Womxn, who devoted their lives to the sport of swimming as collegiate athletes. By using a qualitative approach, this researcher became candidly vulnerable when listening to the experiences of 25 Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers who represent HBCUs and PWIs. The results of this study and the development of the Interpersonal Race and/or Gender Stigma model is an attempt to challenge the status of the leisure constraints model and conceptual frameworks while placing the experiences of a marginalized community within the swimming community first, Black Womxn. The experiences of the participants enabled this researcher to critically analyze her own experience as a Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmer and remain unapologetically a Black Womxn.

As explained in Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) text, the experiences of the Black Womxn continuously challenge the perceptions of the embodiment of being a Womxn and being Black in society. The interpersonal barriers of Black Womxn Collegiate swimmers were never the focus of one being a swimmer, nor were the structural barriers, which in some cases were experiences of institutional racism on and off the deck. For Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers, leisure constraints were presented in the form of interrelationships with family, friends, teammates and their families, and coaches.

The findings in this study suggest that experience of interpersonal barriers expanded over an array of generations of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers. It is suggested to position the leisure constraints theory as a position from the lens of the participant through qualitative research and a Black Womxnst Lens when discussing the experiences of Black Womxn. By asking questions centered on the barriers in activities in which individuals continuously succeed (including elite levels of physical activity), this will help to understand the lived experience and the development of practitioners and researchers.

### **Limitations**

The limitations in this study include the reliability of the proposed theory and its application to other sports and marginalized individuals participating in those sports. Additionally, the proposal of this theory only applies to BWCS. For further analysis and conclusive hypothesis of the *Interpersonal Racial and/or Gender Stigma* model, further research outside of Black Womxn Collegiate Swimmers needs to prove the future application of the model.

### **Future Research**

This study is a first of a series, including future publications on the experiences of Black Womxn Competitive Swimmers. There is a need to listen to the experiences of marginalized individuals who are not solely participating at PWIs. The institutional history of BWCS remains overlooked and overshadowed by the experiences of Black athletes at a white institution, and Black men engaged in athletics from HBCUs and PWIs. Overall, there is a need to discuss the generational and collective experiences of Black Womxn, who participate in sports that society identifies as “white.”

It is recommended to situate the literature of Black Womxn swimmers in their voices, with their voices, by their voices. Stating such would require an adjustment to the examination and explanation of the lived experiences with the use of a Black Womxnst theoretical framework. Such a move would require a historical undertaking within the field of sport and leisure studies holistically.

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