Factors Influencing the Sport Participation Patterns of African American Females

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Abstract

While Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters are breaking the stereotype of what constitutes “White sports” and “Black sports,” most African Americans are still found in the traditional “Black sports.” In examining why the majority of Black women participate in basketball and track and field, the researchers studied twelve African American female collegiate athletes through the use of four focus groups and four subsequent individual interviews with selected focus group participants. The researchers present data from the focus groups and the individual interviews in the form of quotations from the participants on their views of the influence of societal systems (geographic region, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, school), influential others (e.g., family members, coaches, teachers, peers), and expectations in terms of choice of sports. The participants also share their opinions on the current state of Black female sport participation leading to the discussion and implications of the study.

N.B. While many scholars do not view African American and Black as one in the same, the women in the study referred to themselves as both African American and Black. As a result, the terms are used interchangeably throughout the article.

From the mid 1980’s to the mid 1990’s an exchange of ideas and criticisms concerning socialization theory and method took place among sport sociologists (Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Fishwick & Greendorfer, 1987; McPherson, 1986; Theberge, 1984). This exchange called into question the theoretical validity of past studies on sport socialization and the application of theory to methodology. Scholars connected the conceptual shortcomings in linking theory and inquiry to explain why after “a plethora of studies dealing with sport socialization over the past 20 years” the field was suffering from “malaise” (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991, p.129). This debate among sport sociologists and their claims of malaise caught our attention. We noticed that although the published exchange of opinions and criticisms has slowed, little published evidence of research on sport socialization has materialized.

In addition to a lack of empirical investigations of sport socialization, we also have observed a phenomenon calling out for just such analysis. Although the “Black presence” can be observed at the elite level with the examples of Woods and the Williams, “the masses . . . have not been so fortunate” (King, 2001, p. 9). When one examines the collegiate ranks, gender and racial representation in sport is skewed. The National Collegiate Athletic Association reported that African American women compose 14.9% of all NCAA Division I female student-athletes in 2003-2004. While overall this percentage reflects a number similar to the latest census data, (according to the 2000 census 13.5% of the population is composed of Black women (http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/gender/ppl-121/tab01.txt), representation issues become apparent when the percentage is broken down by sport. The 14.8% reflects 41.6% of basketball participants, 27.9% of indoor track and field participants and 28.1% of outdoor track and field participants with just 4.1% in other sports (http://www.ncaa.org/library/research/ethnicity_report/2003-04/2003-04_ethnicity_report.pdf)

Previous research has shown that these numbers are not simply the result of preference toward certain sports, but rather an intricately woven set of social circumstances (Greendorfer, 1993). The socialization process, and how young African American females experience it, affects the likelihood of them becoming involved in sport as well as which sports they choose.

The NCAA numbers suggest a problem exists: Why are African American females overrepresented in basketball and track and field and field and underrepresented in all other sports? The complexity of the socialization process, in Greendorfer’s words, suggests that a solution is not easily found. The significance of the current study then lies not in attempting to find a solution, but in bringing the problem to light. We attempted to do this by first paying attention to a previously overlooked population, African American females. Secondly, the methods we employed provided first-hand data from the women themselves. In answering the questions of who influenced them to become involved in sport in general or in their chosen sport in college in particular, these women provided insight into their experience. By sharing their interpretation of what socioeconomic factors influenced their sport involvement and specific sport choice, they delved even deeper into the influence of their social environment. The researchers looked to the participants in analyzing the current state of sport participation for African American females and the factors affecting it.

In the following study, we have revisited the theory used to examine the socialization process in sport adopting a paradigm drawing on family, peers, teachers, and coaches as influences. Social systems theory, as evident in environmental and economic influences, has also been included in our analysis. However, we attempted to take the next theoretical step in acknowledging the need to address power and hegemony and how they affect the socialization process in sport, as Greendorfer and Bruce (1991) suggested. We included an emphasis on social and political forces such as racism in an effort to more completely explore the position of the “outsider within” (Collins 1988, 1990, 1998, 2000). By being both female and Black, the participants in this study shared partial membership in their gender group (minority representation compared to White women) and partial membership in their racial/ethnic group (minority membership to Black men). Their “outsider within” status was one that informed our interpretation of previous research that had primarily focused on all women without any consideration of race/ethnicity or all African Americans without
any consideration of gender. The “intersectionality” (Smith, 1998) of race/ethnicity and gender has been missing in sport research. We also had a heightened awareness when analyzing and interpreting the data that there truly was an intersection. The women could not share their experiences just as women or just as African Americans. Their experiences were all based on their shared membership in each group.

By weaving a Black Feminist perspective with sport socialization, we “focus[ed] our energies on developing a critical understanding of the power structure that frames and shapes” the lives of African American women specifically in the sport socialization process (Messner, 1992, p. 143). It was not enough to simply examine the socialization agents and the social systems that influence the sport experiences of African American females. We had to move to a level of analysis that acknowledged and dissected the social power exerted by those agents and systems as they shape and direct African American girls and women in sport (Bruening, 2005).

Lastly, socialization theory must allow for the exertion of influence by both the individual and the system (Fishwick & Greendorfer, 1987). In examining the socialization of African American female student-athletes, we borrow from symbolic interactionist theory as we viewed the athletes as active participants in their own socialization while understanding the “asymmetrical power relationship” (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991, p. 132) that exists between American society and these individuals. The women in this study were “value-transmitting, value-receiving . . . value-creating” (Fishwick & Greendorfer, 1987, p. 2), and most importantly, they possessed intimate knowledge of their own experiences. They represented multiple voices which conveyed that although there might have been overlapping experiences, there was not always commonality of interpretation. That is, there is no “African American female” sport experience. The experiences are “always in negotiation . . . never complete, always in process” (Smith, 1998, pp. xvi-xvii). Socialization is a mutual and emergent process because it leaves the way open for self-autonomy, interpretation of social meanings, and some degree of negotiation” (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991, p. 136). Only by exploring individual sport socialization experiences with African American women can a better understanding be reached of the multiple and shifting possibilities (Smith, 1998) of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class converging with sport, the individual, and the power represented in the social structure. Many African American women have “strong self-definitions and self-valuations [offering] serious challenges to [the] oppressive situations” presented to them throughout the socialization process, but Black women also often feel they must socialize for survival (Collins, 2000, pp. 183-84), or strive to fit into the dominant politics of White male society. These competing forces, strong sense of self and the struggle for survival within the White male power structure, explain the complexity of the socialization process.

The current study’s purpose was to shed light on African American women’s socialization experiences, and in particular their socialization experiences as they relate to sport, and was structured around the following research questions:

1. What is the socialization process for African American women? Is there one experience or multiple experiences?
2 a. Who influences the socialization of African American women in regard to sport? How is this different based on family structure, and/or school system?
2 b. What influences the socialization of African American women in regard to sport? How can this differ by geographic region, neighborhood, and/or socioeconomic status?
3. How does the socialization process affect sport participation patterns in African American women?

**Review of the Literature**

**Socialization into Sport for African American Women**

Yevonne Smith stated that the “socialization of African American and other women of color historically has been different from Anglo American women” (Smith, 1992, p. 234). African American women have a different experience from both other women and from African American men. The sport socialization process for males is “extremely consistent or institutionalized” (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981, p. 303). The irregularity in the process is considerable for women and is compounded when race, social class, and geographical location are added as factors (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981). An African American woman has “to be very determined to be a full-time participant in sport, because for the most part heritage and birth culture speak loudly and forcefully against involvement with most forms of sport” (Acosta, 1993, p. 208). Gender, race, and social class add to the complex sport socialization process and yield a variety of experiences for these women (Bruening, 2005b).

**Sport Choice**

The issue of whether or not women will participate in sport is the focus of Greendorfer’s work in sport socialization. However, when focusing on African American women specifically, the issue expands to what sports participants choose. Through socialization women in American society are taught “how to behave in accordance with the expectations of others in the social order” (Greendorfer, 1993, p. 4). For African American women who participate in sports, that social order includes the labeling of the sports that are deemed desirable for them to play. From a young age, many African American women are told what their role in sport will be. They are not typically asked their opinions about what they enjoy or what experiences they want to have (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005). They are exposed to stereotypes about their intellectual and physical capacities (Bruening, 2005a). And these contribute to a socialization process that leads most African American women to participate in basketball and track and field. They are taught the importance of their group identity and togetherness making it a difficult decision to be a “token” participant in other sports, and one that often leads to diminishing self-esteem (Jackson, McCullough, & Gurin, 1997). For “who wants to be an alien . . . ?” (King, 2001, p. 11).

**Societal/ Structural Factors**

In further distinguishing the sport experiences of White and Black girls, Greendorfer and Ewing (1981) found that specific agents of socialization such as parents or teachers had more influence on White children’s involvement in sport. African American children’s participation was guided more by the actual structure of society and certain contextual factors. African
American children’s sport decisions were more affected than White children’s by access to facilities, equipment, programming, and instruction, or their opportunity set (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981), than by the guidance of any influential people in their lives. Smith agreed that most African American families cannot afford “elite sporting experiences” and that socioeconomic status affects girls and women of color “disproportionately such that their children must participate in stereotypical, ‘popular’ sports such as basketball and track and field or not participate in at all in organized sports” (Smith, 1992, p. 236). But she did not discount the influence of individuals on the sport participation of African American girls and women (Bruening, 2004b).

Also contrary to Greendorfer and Ewing (1981), it has been argued that African American women have not participated or excelled in certain due to a combination of factors including both structural constraints such as: a lack of money for lessons and equipment; lack of affirmative action on the part of colleges and universities; and lack of available opportunities in geographical areas of minority population concentration and socialization agents such as role models (Corbett & Johnson, 2000). Role models for African American girls and women can include both individuals inside and outside sport. It is true that African American women lack opportunities for careers in sport, leading to a scarcity of sporting role models for young African American females.

Socialization Agents

In the mid 1970’s role models for African American women athletes were considered “almost non-existent” (Houzer, 1974, p. 208). Bruening (2004a) found that African American women in sport were still “more likely to be on [their] own . . .because of the scarcity of minority females . . .” (Smith, 1995, p.32). Today, women who choose coaching as a career following completion of intercollegiate competition account for 10.2% of assistant coaches (24.8% in basketball, 10% in outdoor track, and 10.7% in indoor track) 5.4 % of head coaches (11.8% in basketball, 10.1% in outdoor track, and 10.9% in indoor track). As African American women continue on in athletic administration, they represent 4.2% of athletic administrators, and only 3.4% when administrative assistants are removed from the calculations. All percentages have decreased since the 2001-2002 numbers were reported. (Available at http://www.ncaa.org/library/research/race_demographics/2003-04/2003-04_race_demographics_athletics_personnel.pdf).

But beyond the athletic arena, African American girls find role models in their families and their social circles (e.g., school, church, peers). (Collins 1988, 1990, 1998, 2000). In examining the socialization experiences of African American females, then, it is crucial to look at both the people who influence their sport experience as a point of comparison to their White counterparts, and at the structural or societal influences, as they might differ significantly for African Americans.

Methods

Participants

Document analysis of the NCAA Certification Study for the university was first conducted as “an unobtrusive method [by which to] develop an understanding of the setting [and] group studied” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 85). Analyzing the certification study provided empirical data on the number of minority women student-athletes and coaches in each sport the university offered. In 1998-1999, X University reported that of a total of 336 female student-athletes 21 (6.3%) were African American. These 21 women were distributed as follows: 11 (3.3%) in track and field and field and field, 6 (1.8%) in basketball, and the combination of 2 in crew, and 1 each in volleyball and fencing accounting for 1.2% in all other sports. Twelve of the 21 African American women athletes agreed to participate in this study (Bruening, 2004). Of those twelve, three identified themselves as bi-racial (Caucasian and African American) although the institution counted them as African American. Additionally three other women were born outside the United States (two in Canada and one in South America), but were raised in the United States. Again, the institution counted them as African American.

Data Collection

Data collection was also informed by Black Feminism as we acknowledged that the participants’ lived experiences reflected the totality of [their] . . . of [the] “multiple jeopardies” including race, class, and gender” (Bruening, et al., 2005, p. 85). As Bruening, et al. (2005) claim, African American women have been noticeably absent in mainstream, traditional research in sport. We were also aware of the tendency to then reduce the experiences of all Black women to a “common denominator” (Smith, 1998, p. xvi) thus constricting those experiences. With this in mind, our data collection methods were triangulated through the use of the voices of the participants (Reinharz, 1992) through background questionnaires, focus groups, individual interviews, transcription and computer-assisted data analysis, grounded surveys, and member checks. Each step of data collection and analysis is outlined in more detail and according to the chronology of its use in the sections that follow.

Background Questionnaires.

All participants were first given a background questionnaire to gather demographic information (e.g., age, year in school, sport played) and facts pertinent to the socialization theme (e.g., parental occupations, past and/or current sport involvement of parents, number, gender, and ages of siblings, past and/or current sport involvement of siblings). This valuable personal assisted in the preparation and personalization the interview guides and provided demographic information needed to assist in data analysis. The information on each participant is presented in Appendices A, B and C.

Focus Groups.

Focus group sessions were conducted over three dates with groups of three, four, and five. By design, the semi-structured nature and group format contributed to the establishment of rapport between the interviewer and the participants. The connection that usually forms between an interviewer and a participant was enhanced by the interface of the participants (Berg, 1998; Kvale, 1996). Granting the athletes respect as well-informed observers allowed them to experience a sense of empowerment in the research process (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The focus groups each began by moving from one participant to the next as each
of the women answered the initial question. As the focus groups continued, both questions and answers flowed from one participant to the next asystematically. The focus group interview guide was composed of the following groups of questions:

1. When did you first begin your involvement in sports? Can you recall your first sport experience? How did that experience shape the role of sport in your life?
2. Who or what would you credit with getting you started in sports? How influential has this event or person remained in your life? Do you think you would have gotten involved if it weren’t for this event or person?
3. What do you believe is the current state of African American females in sport? What/who is affecting that situation?

The first group of questions focused on the initial sport involvement of the participants in an attempt to establish the commonality or the varying of experiences of the individual women. This question was also intended to assist with establishing rapport as the women felt comfortable telling stories about themselves as children. Every woman also had a story to tell, so no individual monopolized the conversation. The next series of questions was aimed at identifying social systems that affected the women. The final sequence of questions were intended to identify if the participants believed that any societal or structural factors played a role in their decisions about sport participation as well as to establish any perceived resistance to these influences on their parts. Did they believe that African American females were well represented in sport and what did they see as the issues at the root of participation patterns (i.e. Who or what held the power of responsibility for African American women being participants in sport?) (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005).

Grounded Survey.

After completing the data analysis from the focus groups sessions, a grounded survey was developed incorporating the themes that emerged from the data as well as the participation statistics gathered through the document analysis. Grounded theory incorporates data from various sources in an attempt to identify a fundamental process and thus develop theory (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994; Strauss & Corbin. 1990). The surveys were administered to selected participants (4), representing all of the focus groups in order to test for accuracy in data interpretation. Selection was also based on family make-up, geographic origin, their sport, and their year in school in order to have the most diverse group of women possible. These decisions were made based the multiple feminist perspectives (Collins, 1988, 1990, 1998, 2000; Hernandez & Rehman, 2002; Smith, 1998) which acknowledge that while these women might share commonalities of gender and race, they also might have unique experiences due to their family background (single parent, two parent, extended family involvement), growing up in an urban or suburban environment, and their particular sport’s culture. Preference was also given to the student-athletes who had more experience both in sport and at the university; juniors, seniors, or fifth year seniors. Two participated in track and field and field (one a middle distance runner and one a heptathlete), one in crew, and one in volleyball. These were the same women who participated in the individual interviews. The participants responded on a five point Likert scale to questions developed in each of several theme-based categories (See Appendix D for items).

Individual Interviews.

Individual interviews were conducted with four of the athletes (See Appendix E for interview guide example) selected by the same criteria as those who compiled the grounded surveys. The individual interview guides were personalized to each participant based on their responses in the focus group and the collective responses to the grounded survey. The questions were designed to probe the sport experiences of these women. All were asked the same questions regarding their experience in their sport, how the athletic department treated them, and their opinion of current participation rates, sport distribution, and representation in leadership positions African American females in sport. Other individualized questions served as follow-ups to comments made in the focus groups.

Data Analysis

All focus group and individual interview sessions were recorded on audio tape and the interviewer also took notes during the sessions. Data was transcribed by the interviewer then coded, organized, and analyzed primarily by the interviewer with the use of NUD*IST (Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building). The comments and corrections of the other two researchers were then incorporated. The data were coded and organized into themes and then expanded into multiple sub-themes. Socialization was the major theme grouped into the following sub-themes: socialization-agents- parents, siblings, peers, and teachers/coaches; environment- neighborhood and economic; racism- childhood experiences and college experiences.

Member Checks.

Member checks were conducted by providing all participants with the transcripts of their focus group session. They were also provided with the emerging themes and coding. Focus group and individual interview participants were mailed their particular group or their individual transcripts and the researchers’ index of emerging themes, as well as how the participants’ comments were coded in that index. Those women who had corrections and comments submitted them to the researchers by returning the transcripts with their comments to the researchers in the envelope provided. The member checks assisted in clarifying statements made in the focus groups and individual interviews and gaining insight from the participants on the coding schemes, thus functioning as an additional method of triangulating the data (Janesick, 1994) and is consistent with feminist research methods emphasizing the crucial nature of “giving voice” to participants (Reinharz, 1992)

Description of Research Setting.

Selecting a major Division I university with more than thirty varsity sports increased the chances of finding potential participants (i.e., African American female student-athletes). This choice of institution also increased the likelihood that the women who participated would be from diverse backgrounds, have a broad range of hometown locations, and have a variety of lived experiences. The academic support network for student-athletes
was the site of entry for this study. The Athlete Academic Services office provided the necessary and relevant statistics about the racial makeup of the athletic program, information needed to contact potential participants, assistance in gaining consent to participate from the students, and facility access for conducting the focus groups and individual interviews.

The following data was gathered through the administration of the background questionnaire and from the context of the focus group and individual interviews. Each participant selected a pseudonym when completing the background questionnaire and was referred to using that name.

Results and Discussion

In addressing the research questions for this study, the data has been organized into two primary sections. The first focuses on socialization agents (parents, siblings, peers, teachers/coaches), or the “who,” and then presents the social systems or structures that influence the socialization process. These include opportunity set/environment, neighborhood, economics, and examples of racist attitudes (as demonstrated through both childhood and collegiate experiences) or the “what.” The second section provides an in-depth look at two of the women who participated in the study and how they did or did not exercise personal agency in the socialization process. Lastly, the effects of the socialization process are covered in the discussion. Not all twelve women who participated are quoted in the results that follow. Quotes that best represented the themes discussed were selected and come from both the focus groups and individual interviews.

Socialization Agents

Parents.

Several of the participants in the study identified both their mothers and fathers as powerful socialization influences in their athletic careers. But context is important to consider here. Neither of Lolita’s and Essence’s parents participated in sports. Vanessa’s and Dianne’s mothers had no sport background. While, as Gabby will speak to below, having played sports is not a prerequisite to being an influential socialization agent, those parents who had a sport background tended to provide more sport-related mentoring.

Dianne, Princess, and Vanessa, who grew up in two-parent, dual-income homes, strongly believed that their fathers served as their primary socialization influence. Their fathers performed a variety of tasks that led them to play sports, including teaching them how to play, signing them up for teams, and even serving as their coach. The women demonstrated their love for their fathers and their appreciation for the time, support, and admiration their fathers gave them:

. . . My dad . . . was always the one who played sports. I always followed him. I just loved being around him and he encouraged me to play. He supported me. All through high school he came to every practice. He was so supportive. He still supports my team to this day. . . (Dianne)

Vanessa’s father had a big impact on her sport participation: “my very first sports memory would have to be my dad putting a basketball in my hands because that was his sport experience. He bought me a little hoop and everything when I was like five.”

He had an extensive sport participation background, including professional basketball.

The women who identified their mothers as the central influence in their sport involvement did so with the same type of appreciation and love the other women showed for their fathers. Gabby’s mom, who never played sports, wanted her to be that “pink and purple” type of little girl with a dress on and bows in her hair. But Gabby’s mom realized after arriving one too many times to pick her up at school and finding that her “stockings were torn, [her] pretty sweater was all ripped, and [her] hair . . . everywhere” (Gabby) that Gabby was going to be an athlete:

My mom is not a big sports fan, but . . . she signed me up to play on team sports. So I have to credit her because she's the one who got over the expectations that she had. . . If she wouldn't have been in my life, I don't doubt that I would have gotten involved . . . (Gabby)

Kay’s mother was just the opposite of Gabby’s as far as her gender role expectations and her previous sport experience, having played volleyball and participated in track and field. When asked who the most influential person was for her becoming involved in sports, Kay answered:

I didn't like to do the so-called girl things. My mom always told me that was all right, that I didn't have to do that. That kept me going. I did it because she told me I could. (Kay)

Kay’s relationship with her mother and her mother’s beliefs about women being involved in sport were strong influences on Kay’s early and continued participation. Kay’s mother attended all of her high school sporting events and college basketball games. However, it is important to note that Kay’s father was not an option as a role model, since her mother raised Kay on her own.

Siblings.

The guidance given to the women in the study by their siblings was not as prevalent as the parental guidance the women experienced. All of the participants had at least one sibling, however both Gabby and Dianne only had younger siblings so the likelihood of them being influential was slight. The other women had older siblings, and in some cases (Essence, November, Prieces, Vanessa, and Chyna) multiple older siblings, who played sports and could have potentially been influential socialization agents.

November remembered being only six years old and a little intimidated by the situation of filling in on her sister’s relay team.

“I always used to practice with my sister outside. We would use twigs. She always needed someone to practice with so I did it. So I knew how to do it.” However, November viewed actually running in a meet as a completely different challenge. November’s desire to emulate her sister led her to be in attendance at that track and field meet, which led her to participate that day and remain involved in track and field.

Peers.

Few of the women addressed how their friends and peers had influenced their decision to become involved in sport, and helped them continue to be involved. Gabby did share an experience about how she came to college as a student only. Luckily for Gabby, her university had a rowing club. Gabby had been exposed to crew in the short time she spent in Canada while her father played for a Canadian Football League team and had always been interested in
the sport. She joined the club and experienced success immediately. Her sophomore year when crew became a varsity sport, Gabby was able to realize her dream of being a college athlete. Gabby was excited to be a part of the team, but experienced some difficulties fitting in with the other women on the team:

I found a friend because I really didn't know anybody. She was another Black girl and we just got along very well. We would get a kick out of it because we would always be paired up together. She just made it a lot of fun and that's what kept me coming. (Gabby)

Teachers/Coaches.

Teachers and coaches proved to be influential. Many of the women remembered a physical education teacher or a coach from elementary or middle school playing an important role in their initial sport experiences. The teachers and coaches were also instrumental in the encouragement that kept the women involved. Some of the women remained in contact with those teachers and coaches and continued to appreciate their influence many years later.

Lolita and Taz recalled their teachers and coaches from middle school spotting their talent. Both women welcomed the praise and attention received from the teachers as a result of this athletic ability. Lolita enjoyed this attention that she was not receiving from any other source as neither her sibling nor parents had any sport background or interest.

I remember my sixth-grade teacher. We used to have fitness tests. There was a 60-meter dash and he thought I was the best. If I had to pick somebody, it would probably be my teacher. (Lolita)

Taz remembers:

In middle school . . . I was playing flag football for gym class and the first time I got the ball I ran for a touchdown. The teacher said you gotta come out and run track and field . . . So I went and I've been running even since then. If he wouldn't have challenged me I would have done nothing. (Taz)

Taz still remained in contact with this coach and gave him a great deal of credit for her continuing to compete and succeed at a level that gained a full scholarship to college for her.

Environment

Neighborhood.

The student-athletes in the study hailed from neighborhoods as different as the Bronx to suburban areas of Colorado. Despite the differences found in those neighborhoods, all of the women agreed that the surroundings in which a person grows up have a tremendous effect on the sport choices young athletes make. The women described what type of sports they saw being played outside their homes and what types of courts, fields, and other athletic spaces were available to them near where they lived.

What do you see in the inner cities? Basketball and track and field. You don’t see any volleyball or swimming pools. You don’t see golf courses. (Princess)

There aren’t a lot of tracks where I’m from just basketball courts, everywhere . . . It doesn't take much to run. You can run anywhere . . . What led me to basketball? I think it was just more opportunities. (Kay)

You won't see a lot of girls play tennis or ice-skating. Did you guys ever see anyone ice-skating? We are supposed to drive all the way in the suburbs to go skate somewhere? (November)

Kay made her decision to play basketball based on what she was exposed to as a young girl in a major metropolitan area. Lacrosse and field hockey were not even options, not to mention crew. She believed her environment had everything to do with her sport choice:

It's how you grew up . . . We didn't even have a lacrosse team in high school. I didn't even know what lacrosse was until I got to college. Field hockey? We didn't do that and I'm sure those girls had to play in high school to get to the point to do it in college . . . I think it's your environment. (Kay)

Economic.

Environment was also a financial agent of socialization. Again the women varied as far as their socioeconomic status was concerned from Taz whose mother was a college professor and father owned an auto detailing shop to Babeahgirl whose mother and step-father owned and operated their own hair salon to Kay who lived only with her mother, a legal assistant. The women in the study expressed how the physical environment of the surrounding neighborhood influenced how people become acquainted with sport and society, and they elaborated on how the economic environment a person grows up in plays a role as well. It is impossible to separate the two components:

You have to pay money and these inner city kids don’t have any money. (Kay)

. . . people say well we don’t have the money. (November)

Kay had no trouble playing basketball in her neighborhood and it cost nothing to go down the street and shoot. And November ran in the street in front of her house with her sister using a twig as a relay baton.

Taz and Vanessa had experiences that differed quite a bit from many of their peers. Taz grew up in a smaller town in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area and Vanessa grew up in an affluent section of a mid-size city. Neither of their families had any trouble providing their daughters with the necessary training and equipment to play sports. Taz participated in field hockey, soccer, as well as her college sport of track and field. Vanessa played basketball and soccer before she decided to focus her efforts on volleyball and join an elite club program. While Taz and Vanessa were thankful for the opportunities they were afforded growing up, they realized that not all children were as fortunate. Taz remembered when she played field hockey and soccer:

When I asked my girlfriends why they didn’t play it was because they couldn’t buy a hockey stick or cleats. I don’t think people are really that bad off but the parents are afraid to lay out $60 or $100 max to have their daughter step out of her comfort zone to play that sport and then not like it. (Taz)
Vanessa elaborated on the specifics of her club volleyball experience:

My parents paid $2500 in dues each year just for me to play on that team. Then we went to Vegas, California, junior Olympics, and another qualifier. If you don’t have $5000 per year just for volleyball then you are going to play for a lesser club. That club is not as well known and makes it harder for you to get seen by colleges. (Vanessa)

Vanessa appreciated the chance she had to play club and the scholarship to play volleyball in college she earned as a result, but she understood the problems the club system created and perpetuated:

I never really saw any of the other clubs because they wouldn’t go to the same tournaments that we would because the entry fees for the tournaments we went to were high. Now I go back and look at them though and I see athletes who could be really good volleyball players and just don’t have the money to do it. They go and play basketball or something that’s more accessible. It’s kind of sad that good athletes are being passed up because they don’t have enough money to play. (Vanessa)

Racist Attitudes.

Racism affected the women from an early age, and it continued to affect them as college students. Both the past and present incidents spoke to racial climate and how that has affected the socialization process and continues to play a role in their lives. Taz recalled the first time she remembered being singled out because she was African American. The situation involved racial slurs on the part of other children and their parents. Her father explained to her why the slur was so degrading and took action with the soccer league because of the incident.

I was playing soccer and I was the only Black girl who ever played in that league and I was really called some names. (Taz)

Following Taz’s recollection of her youth soccer experiences, the women then discussed how finding themselves in similar situations. Attending a predominantly White university had been difficult for them. They described the type of “culture shock” experienced by African American students. They felt this sense of isolation in their dorms, as they walked to class or practice, and in the Student Union. There was no denying that they were in the minority on campus. Princess, Kay, Essence, and November expressed their initial reactions to the complexion their university’s student body:

Princess-I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I came to college.
Kay-Me neither.
Princess-It was a culture shock.
Essence-When I came here it was not only culture shock, but I had never seen so many White people in all my life. It was like 90% White.
November-There were White people at my high school and on my teams. But the White people here they seem like they come from rural areas. Like they've never been around Blacks at all! . . . there's only four Blacks on our whole [residence hall]floor,
maybe in our whole building.

In addition to the climate in the dorms and on campus, the women also noticed a racial segregation that took place at one of the central meeting places on campus, the student union:

Dianne -When you walk into the union, when I first walked in here . . .
Gabby-It's like the United Nations.
Dianne-One part has a section full of Black people. Little Africa.
Lolita-All the Black sororities and fraternities are there.
Gabby-There's always little Africa, little Asia, little India, and little Britain. And little Britain is scattered.

Gabby went into more detail about the seating patterns in the union:

There’s not a sign, it’s just like that. It’s funny though because I’ve gone in with some of my teammates and of course they’re White. They tend not to see it. They just get their food and go to this area. They’ll go wherever they want to sit. I’ll be thinking well, my people are over there. I don’t think all people do it consciously but a lot of people do.

Implications

Patricia Hill Collins opened the 1988 edition of Black Feminist Thought with a childhood memory of performing in a school play. She, like the participants in this study, found herself on stage. And, like the participants in this study, she was the first, the only, or at least one of the few African American women in the circles within which she traveled. Through others pointing out to her that she did not belong, Collins felt herself becoming quieter and “virtually silenced” (Collins, 2000, p. vi). African American women have been silenced by not being given the opportunity to speak, by not being listened to when they do speak, or by having to speak the language of and adopt the ideas of the dominant group in order to be heard (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005). This study is significant in the development of a body of knowledge concerning African American women’s experiences in sport. The focus group and individual interview processes brought together women who were “undergoing similar journeys” (Collins, 2000, p. x) and provided the women a chance to speak freely, to be listened to both by the researchers and their peers, and to speak their own language and voice their own ideas among fellow African American female student-athletes (Reinharz, 1992). In addition, they shared examples of how they interacted with their environment and responded to the expectations other individuals and structural forces exerted on them. The dialogue that took place was significant in that a dialogue about African American female student-athletes took place, African American female student-athletes were involved in that dialogue, and the dialogue has been shared with a larger audience—other African American women who currently serve as athletic role models or those who potentially could in the future, administrators who make decisions that affect African American female student-athletes, and educators who are in daily contact with these women. Beyond that significance, specific aspects of the socialization process for African American women were also illuminated.
Parents, as Jackson, et al. (1997) reported, marked the initial source of ideas about what it means to be Black and female in society and how to respond to those expectations. The empowerment some of the women felt to fight hegemonic dictates that they “act womanish” (Hill, 1999, p. 103) or to refuse to let peers use racial slurs to define them came from their parents as “society makes the socialization of children the primary responsibility of families [teaching] statuses, social roles, and prescribed behavior [as well as] preparing them to recognize their position in larger society” in regard to racism and discrimination (Taylor, Jackson, & Chatters, 1997, p. 3). Beyond this aspect of parental involvement, the women in this study were not influenced by socialization agents (parent, siblings) in considerably different ways than their White female counterparts (Brustad, 1996; Miller & Levy, 1996).

Teachers and coaches, as additional agents, served the dual role of recruiting some of the women to initially become involved and encouraging them to remain as participants. In the cases of the women who identified coaches as influential in their sport involvement (Lolita and Taz), those coaches steered the women toward the stereotypical Black sport of track and field. Particularly in Taz’s case given her exposure to multiple sports as a youth and her apparent athletic ability, her coach could have encouraged her toward field hockey or soccer just as easily as track and field.

The opportunity set (Greendorfer & Ewing, 1981) of the women in this study proved equally if not more influential than socialization agents. Race, gender, and social class create a “matrix of domination that women of color experience on three levels: the level of personal biography, the group level of the cultural contexts created by race, class, and gender, and the systemic level of social institutions” (Zinn & Dill, 1994, p. 6). When asked who or what influenced their involvement in sport, their personal biography, all of the women responded with who--a person who was crucial in their becoming involved. But when the conversation turned toward the societal forces at work in the environments (the what) of these women, every one of them agreed that the neighborhood in which they grew up and the socioeconomic status of their family played a determining role in their athletic career. To Kay, Princess, and November opportunities were limited as they had access to only certain sports. They then pursued basketball and track and field. Socialization led them to participate in the stereotypical “Black” sports, although Princess also participated in cross country in preparation for the track and field season. To others, like Vanessa, Babeahgirl, and Taz, their neighborhood or family income enhanced their opportunities and exposure to a variety of sports beyond their peers. Not so coincidently, these are the three women who were bi-racial. Their socialization led them to participate in stereotypical “White” sports. Perhaps because each of them had one Caucasian parent they did not feel the isolation other African American women would have felt on a team of Caucasians. For instance, in reference to the sections of the Student Union at their university, the bi-racial women who participated in this study by virtue of their appearance sat in “Little Africa.” But by virtue of their socialization “Little Britain” was within their comfort zone. They could operate within with either group, but again like Collins’s “outsider within,” never achieving full membership in either. At one point, Vanessa expressed her difficulty in not knowing who she was or who she should be spending her time with because of her bi-racial background.

The inability to generalize experiences by gender or race or even gender and race became apparent through the duration of the current study. Being African American, female, and an athlete are the “intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 69) that shape these women’s experiences. Social class was also a factor for both the women who came from lower socioeconomic situations and those who did not. Socialization into sport for these women represented a “diversity of experiences” (Hill, 1999, p. 12). The findings in this study serve to support the challenge that there is no such thing as “the African American family” or “the African American experience” brought by Black Feminist thinkers, a “challenge to the myth of the monolithic [African American] family experience” (Hill, 1999, p. 12). The data demonstrated that each woman followed a slightly unique path to becoming a college student-athlete. They could not be conceptualized as inherently “disadvantaged” as opposed to the “White middle-class norm” (King, 2001, p. 10). But instead they needed to be treated as individuals coming from backgrounds that vary in some regards and were similar in others.

The participants in this study demonstrated that not all African American females are destined to play basketball or run track and field. But that “issues of power and agency” (King, 2001, p. 8) affect the socialization process for African American females creating a perception of limited options in sport. Socialization agents and social structures influence their sport participation decisions. However, they can be interactive, like Gabby, in making decisions and shaping their own experience. More often than not, though, African American women like Kay follow the crowd. They socialize for survival (Collins, 2000). Taz, Vanessa, and Princess also indicated their plans to mentor young women as they pursued careers in coaching and youth sport. They have learned from their experiences and from each other that African American females student-athletes can possess a strong sense of self whether they participate in basketball and track and field or not. By bringing these women together to discuss issues that were central to their identities as African American female student-athletes, they were able to share their experiences with each other and comment on how they will take an active role in encouraging the next generation of African American girls to become involved in sport. They also learned that through role modeling they can affect change. The NCAA participation, coaching, and administrative statistics can improve to reflect more diversity. Lastly, this study illuminated how the participant’s sport socialization experiences were and pointed to the areas of socialization agents, environment (neighborhood and economic), and the social power structure as avenues for continued research.

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References
Factors

Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

**Appendix A: Background Information-Participant**

* participated in an individual interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Age/Yr</th>
<th>College Sport</th>
<th>Other sports played prior to college</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22/SR</td>
<td>crew</td>
<td>tennis,basketball, track swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18/FR</td>
<td>track</td>
<td>volleyball,basketball,track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lolita</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22/SR</td>
<td>track</td>
<td>volleyball,basketball,track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23/FR</td>
<td>track</td>
<td>Track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19/FR</td>
<td>track</td>
<td>volleyball,basketball,track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22/SR</td>
<td>basketball</td>
<td>basketball,softball,track bowling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22/SR</td>
<td>XC/track</td>
<td>track, X country, basketball</td>
</tr>
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Factors

Appendix B: Background Information-Parents of Participants
F-Father; M-Mother

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Parents’ occupations</th>
<th>Parents’ Sport Backgrounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>F-Supervisor</td>
<td>F-football basketball track and field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M-Accountant</td>
<td>M-none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>F-bank customer service</td>
<td>F-baseball football basketball M-bowling softball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lolita</td>
<td>F-nurse</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence</td>
<td>F-retired</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>F-school administrator</td>
<td>F-football basketball M-school administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>F-school administrator</td>
<td>M-bowling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>F-bus driver</td>
<td>Both track and field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babeahgirl</td>
<td>StepF-hairdresser</td>
<td>StepF-football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>F-shipping manager</td>
<td>M-bowling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M-administrative assistant</td>
<td>M-none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>F-radiologist</td>
<td>track and field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chyna</td>
<td>F-teacher/coach</td>
<td>F-baseball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taz</td>
<td>F-auto detailer</td>
<td>M-cheerleading gymnastics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M-professor</td>
<td>M-tennis swimming</td>
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</table>

Appendix C: Background Information-Siblings of Participants
B-Brother; S-Sister

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Siblings’-Ages</th>
<th>Siblings’ Sport Backgrounds</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>Brother-15</td>
<td>swimming, soccer, track and field baseball, football, soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>Brother-13</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lolita</td>
<td>Brother-24</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sister-21</td>
<td>Both basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Brothers-26 &amp; 24</td>
<td>B-football, basketball, track and field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>Sister-22</td>
<td>S-basketball, track and field track and field, cheerleading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>Brothers-26 &amp; 25</td>
<td>B (26)-boxing; S-track and field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babeahgirl</td>
<td>Brothers 21 &amp;-20</td>
<td>Both basketball and tennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Brothers 22 &amp; 15</td>
<td>Both B- basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters 26 &amp; 23</td>
<td>S(26)-soccer, cheerleading; S(23)-soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>Brother-26</td>
<td>Both football, basketball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chyna</td>
<td>Sisters-28, 26</td>
<td>Both-track and field, soccer, gymnastics, cheerleading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D: Grounded Survey Items

I. Early Socialization Influences
1. My mother was the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
2. My father was the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
3. My brother(s) was/were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
4. My sister(s) was/were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
5. My peers were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
6. My teacher(s) was/were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
7. My coach(es) was/were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.
8. My relatives were the most significant influence on my becoming involved in sports.

II. Choice of Sport
1. I chose to play the sport I play in college because I was good at it.
2. I chose to play the sport I play in college because I enjoyed it.
3. I chose to play the sport I play in college due to the most significant influence I listed in the previous section.
4. I chose the sport I play in college due to the availability of a scholarship.
5. I chose the sport I play in college for the opportunities it will afford me after graduation.
6. I feel a stereotype exists that African-American women are supposed to play a certain sport or sports.
7. I believe this sport is basketball.
8. I believe this sport is track and field.

Appendix E: Example of an Individual Interview Guide

Gabby
1. Why did you choose crew? What influenced you to become and to stay involved?
2. What has your experience been as a participant in crew?
3. What stereotypes have you been exposed to as an African American woman? As an African American female athlete? Talk about the racial seating arrangement at the Student Union.
4. How do you feel about the treatment of women by the athletic department?
6. What is the current state of participation for African American women in sport?