

The Ultimate Triple Jump: The Psychosocial, Historical, and Current Dynamics Affecting African American Female Athletes' Identity and Success

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Much attention is paid to the retention of student-athletes, including those who are female, of color, and in revenue-producing sports. Little attention has been paid directly and specifically to African American female athletes. Psychosocial, historical, and multiconscious dynamics affecting African American female athletes' identity development and success in mainstream universities are discussed and a new perspective from which this cohort can be viewed and assisted is offered.

The African American female athlete has transcended multiple obstacles to matriculate to and through college campuses. While she has achieved numerous successes to gain athletic excellence and academic eligibility, she must often persist in university communities that do not fully appreciate her race, gender, or athletic participation. Aside from graduation rates, "an African American female's future career aspirations depend on her coping with her differences, developing a firm identity and formulating a realistic life plan for after her athletic/academic pursuits" (Hamilton, 1993, p. 153). Collegiate and postgraduate experiences may be determined by the African American female's college experiences and successes. This paper will review psychosocial dynamics, historical dynamics, and current dynamics in discussing how universities should support African American female athletes.

In similar discussions regarding women or people of color, terms such as "other" or "subculture" are often employed. These terms suggest that difference is subordinate and secondary, while mainstream culture is primary and superior. Consequently, I have derived the term "co-culture" which validates all differences. While this paper will survey the African American female athlete's quest to earn a degree from the potentially obscure culture of higher education, the term co-culture will be used to emphasize the view that one culture should not be perceived as being superior or inferior to another.

Psychosocial Dynamics

Due to race, gender, and athletics, African American women athletes represent an amalgam of experiences which are central to them, but at the same time may marginalize them on college campuses. In the academic and athletic arenas, African American female athletes belong to a specific co-culture. The marginalization

embodied by the intersection of race, gender, and athletic activity often creates an isolating experience that must be transcended in order to achieve academic and athletic success. Gordon Allport's terms "in-group" and "out-group" provide a provocative vantage point from which to consider prejudice. In-group versus out-group dynamics manifest along gender lines, along racial lines, or along any of the defining characteristics of a marginalized group. Psychologically speaking, out-group perception helps to shape in-group identity in contrast to the out-group. Hostility toward and rejection of out-groups strengthens the in-groups' sense of belonging. "To reject an out-group is a salient need" and results in five types of rejective behavior: antilocution, avoidance, discrimination, physical attack, and extermination (Allport, 1979, pp. 48–49). Those who cling to their in-group identity, do so at the risk of defining, stifling, rejecting, and possibly persecuting out-group members by fortifying their own sense of belonging while simultaneously ostracizing people from different backgrounds.

In-group and out-group members, socialized in various ways, come together to teach in, learn, administer, and maintain the collegiate institution. Any of these tasks can prove difficult to an individual who is unfamiliar with a university campus and its culture. Additionally, Brislin's (1993) commentary on in-groups and out-groups also provides a relevant perspective to understanding the cultural dynamics in the university community. In-group members have positive feelings for other in-group members. This familiarity fosters positive interactions between in-group members, yet simultaneously excludes out-group members who are considered "too different to receive in-group member attention" (Brislin, 1993, pp. 181).

Regardless of an individual's position in the university community, those who feel part of the in-group are likely to be more comfortable and more academically and professionally successful. As a member of the in-group he or she would be less likely to feel hostility in, or isolation from, the university environment. According to Brislin (1993), the out-group members are kept at a distance, feeling unwelcome, ostracized, and uncomfortable. In contrast, those welcomed into the mainstream often enjoy greater academic success and professional advancement than their out-group counterparts.

Environment is also a factor in determining a student's success in other ways. Bandura (1977) suggests that through self-efficacy—that is, the belief in one's ability to perform a given behavior—performance will be determined jointly by the strength of a person's conviction that he or she has the competency to execute the skills that are demanded by the situation and the responsiveness of the *environment*. Bandura identifies four major components of self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states.

Through vicarious experience, student-athletes who see others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts. African American female athletes who see other women and minorities persisting successfully through coaching and administration will likely feel more confident in persisting through their own difficult educational and athletic experiences. If institutions can create

more positive academic and athletic experiences for African American female athletes which are supported by vicarious experiences, such support will result in a greater likelihood of success. In turn, success creates mastery expectations and subsequently higher self-efficacy and performance. Further, collective efficacy, or shared perceptions of efficacy within groups of people (Bandura, 1986), can affect a cultural group which may absorb the covert and destructive messages disseminated in mainstream culture. In turn, "weak efficacy beliefs may limit the level of future performance one is willing to attempt and the degree to which one will persevere under stressful conditions" (Lent and Hackett, 1987, p. 373).

In relation to postathletic careers, African American female athletes need to feel comfortable in their environment to develop themselves and their lives outside college. Therefore, this marginalized co-culture (i.e., out-group) needs to be able to navigate the in-group mainstream culture to develop despite the exclusionary nature of many collegiate institutions.

Multiconsciousness of Female Athletes

In addition to out-group versus in-group dynamics, consider Du Boisian theory as it applies to the cultural dynamics discussed previously. This theory provides some insight as to how co-culture members can progress through the university community. DuBois' classic, *The Souls of Black Folks*, deems the "Negro" as a sort of second son, born with a veil. With this veiled perception, the Negro sees himself as the world views him, creating the "peculiar sensation of double consciousness"; that is, looking at himself through another's eyes (Du Bois, 1969, p. 45). Being "too different" or kept at a distance, the Negro Du Bois speaks of shares a similar status of marginality with other co-cultures. While Du Bois speaks specifically of African Americans, the co-culture status of African Americans parallels the co-culture status of other marginalized groups. In order to maneuver through a "world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," (Du Bois, 1969, p. 45) co-culture members are aware of themselves and how mainstream society views them.

In writing her chapter "In the Kingdom of Culture," Hine (1993) expands Du Boisian double consciousness theory. While Du Bois refers to a duality of vision, Hine considers the multiplicity in marginalization. That is, in addition to race, a co-culture member may face marginalization due to a complex amalgam of race, sex, class, or other nonmainstream attributes.

Had Du Bois specifically included the experiences and lives of black women in his lament he probably would have had to modify his prose. For Du Bois race was the master key to understanding American reality and the most potent factor shaping identity. Still, I suspect, had he considered the issue of gender, instead of writing "One feels his twoness," he would have mused about how one feels her "fiveness": Negro, American, woman, poor, black woman. An examination of the separate realities and complex identities of black women offers a greater illumination of the power relations that operate along the interlocking grid of race, sex, and class in America (p. 339).

These ideas demonstrate that co-culture members utilize multiplicitness; they must employ this multiplicit vision in relationship to their enculturized values in order to participate in the mainstream collegiate setting. African American female athletes simultaneously are aware of race, gender, and athletic participation. In short, African American female athletes must be aware of how they see themselves. By developing confidence in their own identities, they can then deal with how the world views them and persevere through the potential conflict between self-awareness and the world's definition of them.

Female athletes experience a double conscious veil in relation to male athletes. Female athletes see the disparity when men are flown to competitions while they take the bus; they see the disparity when they raise funds for uniforms while men's teams purchase multiple uniforms. As African American females, they endure injustices and stereotypes when professors sometime believe they are "dumb jocks" admitted to college primarily for athletics. As athletes, these women must often sacrifice participation in mainstream activities such as sororities, student organizations, and other social activities to participate in their sport. This combination of experiences creates a unique co-cultural experience for African American female athletes.

Historical Dynamics

Historically, black women athletes' feminine identity has been challenged. Female athletes were often viewed as masculine or animalistic. For black women, who were already stereotyped as lacking feminine grace, and refinement, athletic participation conjured notions of African American women athletes as virile and mannish. African American female athletes then developed a heavy emphasis on off-the-field-appearances, and re-established their womanhood through nonathletic means (Cahn, 1994). This phenomenon continues today when many African American female athletes rush to have the hair and nails done before major track meets. In addition to fighting mainstream culture to achieve academic and athletic success, African American female athletes also struggle to maintain their feminine identity in a culture that has historically denied their womanhood.

In 1929, Tuskegee Institute formed the first highly competitive collegiate women's track team. While Tuskegee yielded to other women's track programs in the next decade at Prairie View A & M, Alabama State, and Florida A & M, such advances in women's athletics were coupled with rampant discrimination.

In the late 1940's and early 1950's efforts to end racial segregation in major league sports like baseball and basketball had made little impact... the white press gave minimal coverage to black sports and seldom printed photographs of African American athletes. Black women found that sex discrimination in the form of small athletic budgets, half-hearted backing from Black school administrators, and the general absence of support from white-dominated sport organizations further impeded their development (Cahn, 1994, p. 119).

Despite efforts to level the playing field for women in recent years, most male coaches earn more than their female counterparts or even their college presidents.

They receive more financial aid for their programs and generally are given more attention by the media (Phillip, 1993). Today, only 17% of women's programs are headed by a woman and women fill less than a third of all administrative positions in women's college sport. More than 25% of women's athletic programs have *no* female administrators (Cahn, 1994). Racial tensions are coupled with gender inequities to create situations which exclude African American females in athletics. Title IX was instituted in 1972 to develop needed equity; nonetheless, gender inequity in hiring, fiscal commitments, and facilities still persists in collegiate athletics. "Women are experiencing a backlash for the 1972 Title IX... as a result... men can now apply to coach women's teams... now women have to compete with them to coach women's teams" (Phillip, 1993, p. 24).

Such equity dynamics make it difficult for African American female athletes to connect to the athletic mainstream culture. With a dearth of women and minorities in athletics, African American females have few role models with whom to identify. In the face of racial and gender induced tensions, African American female athletes must often struggle to gain support while their athletic counterparts benefit from their mainstream culture.

Despite efforts to connect people of color to athletics, racial inequity continues to be a problem in athletics, as few African Americans are hired into leadership roles as head coaches, athletic directors, or other administrators. Phillip (1993) found that minority women comprise fewer than 5% of all women coaches. Furthermore, "women have a better chance of becoming president of an NCAA institution than athletic director of that same institution" (p. 25). With the paucity of female and African American leadership roles, African American female athletes have few positive athletic role models in their own image.

A special report on the five-year trend in minority degree production cites Howard University at the top of the list with an average of nearly 1,500 degrees per year during the period 1988-1992. Many of the top ten institutions are historically black colleges and universities ("Five-Year Trends," 1996). It would seem from this report that historically black colleges and universities provide the environment and staff for role models which better support African American students, thus, more African American students can find their way to graduation and successful careers with the help of role models and mentors.

Hale (1996) reflects on the importance of role models early in her educational career: "During my public school years and in college, I was surrounded by strong Black role models. These individuals...challenged me in a manner that made me extend myself to greater heights and never doubt my abilities (p. 22)." In relation to her current employment at the University of South Carolina she states:

For... Black females to be successful, more must be hired to provide the role models needed to inspire them. For this reason I stay in higher education... I know I will be successful and be able to serve as a role model for other Black females in higher education (Hale, 1996, p. 22-23).

Educational success which is demonstrated through graduation rates, and postcollegiate careers is the fruit of encouraging environments staffed with posi-

tive role models.

Recommendations

In the June 28, 1995 issue of *The NCAA News*, the National Collegiate Athletic Association reported that Black female athletes demonstrated significant graduation rate gains over the past decade. The 58% graduation rate for black female student-athletes is almost a third higher than the 44% rate for black female student-athletes who entered school in 1985 ("Black Female Athletes," 1995). In addition, this particular co-culture outperforms black female students by graduating at a rate 17% higher than nonathletes. While these data demonstrate a positive graduation rate, African American female athletes still graduate at a rate 11% below that of white female student-athletes. As Dr. Bernice Resnick Sandler, Senior Scholar in Residence, National Association for Women in Education, states, "women of color have different experiences than white and other women" (Morgan, 1996, p. 21). These differences discussed previously yield the current trends which create this graduation rate disparity.

To rectify this disparity, institutions should provide or extend individualized attention for this co-culture. Individualized advising regarding academic decisions, time management, study habits, and adjustment to student life can help African American female athletes feel connected to and comfortable in the mainstream culture (Greenlee, 1995). When students feel comfortable and connected, they persevere through college to graduation (Pascarella, 1982). Individualized outreach to, and connection with, this co-culture can minimize the exclusionary effects perpetuated by the in-group mainstream.

Administratively, the support needed to help African American female student-athletes must come from, and continue to come from, executive- or senior-level administration. During the contemporary surge in diversity education, the highest authorities within the mainstream university culture must invest in programs which support a variety of co-cultures. The NCAA has started such support for the student-athlete co-culture by giving over \$15 million to Division I schools for academic enhancement ("Budget Boosts," 1995). Once this money is distributed, the upper administration at these institutions must make a commitment to supporting African American females in their athletic co-culture. If decision makers are passive, they condone the negative status quo. Subsequently, such passivity maintains power for the privileged group to the exclusion of various co-cultures.

Second, administrative support for the student-athlete co-culture should consider that the institution needs to assist the acculturation of the student-athlete. By providing support programs, hiring women and minorities, and providing academic assistance, institutions will be able to continue and augment services which help the African American female student-athlete to navigate the mainstream university culture.

Academic advisors should be provided who can relate to and connect with African American female athletes to assist them as they progress through college. "Students should be given clear academic expectations of the college environment in addition to assistance in formulating academic as well as personal goals"

(Roper & McKenzie, 1988, p. 93). Further, such advisors should be willing to utilize alternate methods to reach African American athletes and real life experiences should be incorporated into support for African American female athletes. The historical lack of role models at predominantly white institutions has persisted as a current dynamic. Career mentors are a tremendous benefit to young women at the onset of their careers, therefore, it is imperative that such role models be available to African American female athletes (Hamilton, 1993). Academic advisors or African American alumni should be encouraged to "facilitate workshops on coping strategies for the work world, developing and enhancing self-concept, and successfully matriculating through the university" (Hamilton, 1993, p. 157). African American female athletes should be given a guide who can assist them as they maneuver the mainstream university culture.

Third, in addition to the specific methodology for assisting African American female student-athletes, the NCAA should continue to contribute monetary support for the diverse population in athletics. The NCAA Council Subcommittee to Review Minority Opportunities in Intercollegiate Athletics is aimed at creating better opportunities for ethnic minorities in coaching, athletics administration, and officiating. Since 1987, 10 postgraduate scholarships have been awarded as part of the Ethnic Minority Enhancement Program. Ethnic minority students who have earned their bachelor's degrees and plan to enter sport administration or related fields are eligible for a \$6,000 scholarship ("Ethnic Minority," 1995). In borrowing from the NCAA's model for vocational support, colleges and universities could create internships of cooperative educational opportunities which introduce women and minorities to athletic administration. Even if such programs created unpaid position for students, positive experiences in these positions could further guide women and minorities to careers in athletics.

A review of the literature revealed a dearth of empirical research addressing the potential value of African American female role models. Research findings on special populations, such as the degree production report, and anecdotal information, such as Hale's comments, suggest that there is a value in having more African American female role models. Nonetheless, there is a need to empirically study institutions that have hired African American females in athletics to determine if such hirings have positively affected the graduation rates of this cohort.

Summary

Given the aforementioned examples, the rising graduation rate of African American female athletes, or any co-culture should be supported and funded by the mainstream administration. Such support is necessary to assist co-culture graduation rates. While co-cultures are able to employ a multiplicit consciousness to survive, universities need to continuously employ more inclusive practices; such practices would include supportive programs, diversity in hiring, and mentoring programs.

Supporting the African American female co-culture or any co-culture will only strengthen any athletic department. Support translates into academic and athletic success; yet, to reap the benefits of athletic and academic success, athletic depart-

ments must create an environment which fosters such success. Winning seasons and rising graduation rates are powerful recruiting tools. Athletic departments that have records of such success can in turn retain top administrators, coaches, and athletes. However, the foundation of such success is developing an environment in which all co-cultures can thrive.

In summary, the university culture needs to provide the resources and sincere commitment from upper administration throughout the entire university community. This would not only include more diverse hiring practices, but would also include diversity training for existing faculty and staff. Further, such a commitment would include the necessary monetary support. Mentoring programs that provide role models for co-culture members need to be established and maintained. Such role models would be able to guide fellow co-culture members through the university culture. Administrative support, which yields individual attention for co-culture members, would be coupled with the co-culture members' ability to employ a multiplicit consciousness. The combination of co-cultural support and multiplicit adaptive behavior will assist co-culture members in obtaining their goals within the university mainstream culture. While African American female athletes navigate the university culture, the university host culture must take on the responsibility of facilitating this navigation, which will directly affect the success of co-cultural students.

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