

The Dark Side of Title IX: Participation Disparity of African-American Female Athletes

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Abstract

The enactment of Title IX initiated a period of tremendous growth in women's intercollegiate athletics within the last thirty years [2].

Despite the increase in women's intercollegiate athletic programs, African-American females continue to primarily participate in only two sports – basketball and track and field, where they make up one-quarter and one-fifth of female college athletes respectively [7].

Conversely, African-American participation in "non-traditional sports," or all sports outside of basketball and track and field remain marginal [7].

In an effort to comply with Title IX many athletic departments have added women's teams, the most popular being soccer and crew [2]. The fact that many of these sports are non-traditional has caused some African-American scholars to question whether Title IX benefits African-Americans females in the same way as it does their Caucasian counterparts [3].

The aim of this paper is to examine why African American females do not participate in non-traditional sports. The paper focuses on sociological reasons behind the participation disparity. Therefore, the research question is as follows: What socio-cultural factors impede African American female participation in non-traditional sports? This paper uses a theoretical framework from the leisure constraint field.

Research in the field has established that specific variables affect and differentiate the leisure preferences between African-Americans and Caucasians [6]. This paper utilizes two major leisure constraint theories that explain racial differences in leisure.

The marginality/structural perspective contends that inequality in social structures, like income and education, result in African-Americans having different leisure choices [5].

Conversely, the ethnicity perspective maintains that regardless of social structures, African-American leisure choices result from cultural styles and preferences [5].

In conjunction with the two theories, this paper offers several structural and racial constraints that may explain the lack of participation in non-traditional sports. They include socio-economic status, access, role models, sport specialization and recruitment, African-American culture, self-schemas, and support.

This paper employs a qualitative methodology.

In an effort to confirm or deny the aforementioned constraints, interviews were conducted with African-American females who participated in non-traditional sports on a collegiate and elite level.

A total of eight athletes were interviewed. The participants were asked what factors allowed them to participate in non-traditional sports. Data analysis included finding common themes amongst the experiences of the participants.

Results revealed several major themes.

The majority of these athletes' entry into their respective sport came through chance opportunities. Support from their families was necessary in order to continue participation. Despite their middle class backgrounds, many of the participants would not have been able to continue without the financial support of their coaches and sport organizations. Many of the athletes experienced some form of resistance, racism, and feelings of isolation from their own community or the community at large. Despite the negative experiences and hardships, the athletes rated their experiences as positive. Moreover, many believed that participation in non-traditional sports allowed them unique opportunities. Overall, the data confirmed that the suggested constraints do impact non-traditional sport participation, especially social class, role models, a lack of access to resources, and culture.

The African-American sportswoman has remained largely invisible in sport history [7]. Most studies on gender have focused on white women, and research on race has focused on black men [1].

Consequently, little is known about African-American females' socialization into sport and why their participation is clustered into traditional sports. This is the first study to date, that has linked their lack of participation in non-traditional sports to constraint theory.

The results of this paper imply that athletic choice is not made solely on choice, but rather constraints to other options. Additionally, assessments of the benefits of Title IX need to occur in different paradigms. For women of color, who face the complexity of a "double jeopardy" status, Title IX has different connotations and consequences in comparison to Caucasian women.

It is the hope that this paper will begin a dialogue on an overlooked phenomenon and lead towards greater equality for all female athletes under Title IX.

The paper also offers several recommendations for sport managers on how to achieve greater participation equity.

The biggest need is resources.

With resources, more grass-root youth programs that expose minority and underprivileged children to non-traditional sports can develop. Interviews with African-American directors of such programs illustrate their importance and successes.

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