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Athletic Identity and Mental Health: The Experiences of Black Male Former Student- Athletes

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Athletic Identity and Mental Health:
The Experiences of Black Male Former Student-Athletes

A Clinical Dissertation Presented to
The University of San Francisco
School of Nursing and Health Professions
Department of Integrated Healthcare
PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Psychology

By
Miguel Frank, M.A., M.S.

November 2018

PsyD Program Signature Page

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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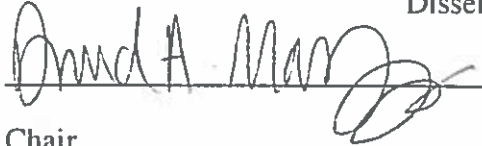


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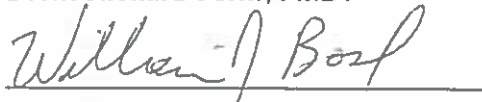
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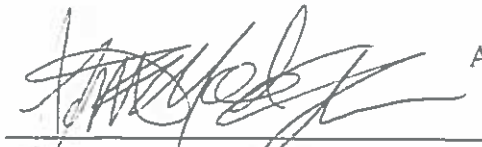
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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Signature Page	ii
Dedication	v
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Specific Aims.....	7
Chapter One	
Introduction.....	8
Definitions.....	9
Chapter Two	
Literature Review.....	10
Social Identity	10
Athletic Identity	11
Student-Athlete Experience	14
Black Male Student-Athlete Experience.....	17
Sports Retirement.....	23
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory	25
Chapter Three	
Methodology	28
Qualitative Research	28
Sample.....	29
Instruments.....	30
Interviews.....	31
Qualitative Analysis.....	31
Positionality and Reflexivity Statement.....	36
Participant Profiles.....	37
Chapter Four	
Results.....	40
Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS)	41
Qualitative Interviews	41
Athletic Identity	43
Age and Athletic Ability.....	43
Professional Aspirations	44
Preferential Treatment	45
Recruiting.....	47
Black Student-Athlete Experience.....	47
Perception of Others and Athletic Prejudice.....	48
Athlete-Student Stereotype	50
Black Athletic Identity.....	51
Black Athlete Stereotype	52

Racism.....	53
Overt Racism	53
Racial Profiling	54
Athletes and Protective Status	55
Career Termination	55
Circumstances Leading to Career Termination	56
Relationships.....	56
Mental Health.....	57
Loss of Identity	58
Depression.....	58
Protective Factors.....	59
Chapter Five	
Discussion.....	61
Interpretation and Connection to Literature.....	62
Implications.....	69
Limitations	71
Recommendations for Future Research	72
Appendix A: Athletic Identity Measurement Scale	73
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	74
Appendix C: Table One	75
References.....	76

Dedication

I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by strong women in my life. This project is dedicated to them.

To my grandmother, thank you for everything. By allowing my mother and me to stay with you, she was able to go back to school and provide me with the best life possible. You have always been so proud of me. My only wish is that you were here to share in this with me.

To my mother, thank you. I have only ever wanted to make you proud of me. I still remember the conversation after you had completed graduate school. I was 10 years old at the time and you were thinking of pursuing a doctorate of your own. You decided against it because you felt that you needed to spend more time with me. I made a promise during that conversation that I would get a doctorate for both of us. Well, here we are. We made it.

To my wife, Marisol, thank you for always being my biggest cheerleader. Thank you for sharing your light with me and leading me out of the darkness. I would not have made it without you. I am so thankful for everything you have done and the way you have supported me throughout this process. I love you so much, Boo.

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Thank you to my participants for their willingness to share their stories with me. I would also like to thank the counseling staff at California State University, Northridge and San Jose State University for your unconditional support during this process. To my friends, thank you for always showing up. Thank you for always checking in on me and not allowing me to forget about all of you. You have kept me grounded throughout this journey and have reminded me to take care of myself. I couldn't ask for a better group of friends.

Specific Aims

Revenue has changed the landscape of intercollegiate athletics. With television deals worth billions of dollars and athletic departments with multi-million dollar budgets, student-athletes are at the center of it all during their college careers. Student-athletes develop salient athletic identities, sometimes to the detriment of their other social identities (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Within the intercollegiate sports population, Black male student-athletes are an overrepresented group, representing nearly 21% of student-athletes (Simiyu, 2012). Black male student-athletes represented 46% of football players and 60% of basketball players for a total of 70% of all Black male student-athletes playing either football or basketball (Simiyu, 2012).

Due to the notoriety that comes from participating in either of these sports, Black male student-athletes are at risk for overidentifying as athletes, which could have a negative impact on their lives once their athletic careers are terminated (Beamon, 2012). The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of Black male former student-athletes after their athletic careers have been terminated. The research will consist of interviews with Black male former student-athletes to examine their life experiences while they were student-athletes, how they adjusted to no longer being student-athletes, and how they have coped post-transition. This study will include the use of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), a scale used to determine how strongly individuals identify with their athletic identities (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993).

Chapter One - Introduction

On college campuses across the nation, student-athletes represent a unique group among the student population. While the goal of many student-athletes is to make a career out of playing their sport professionally, the reality is that only a small percentage are able to do so, with less than 2% of student-athletes continuing on to play professional sports (Teicher, 2005; Young, 2007). Black male student-athletes are an overrepresented group in intercollegiate athletics. Between 2007 and 2010, Black males made up 2.8% of the degree-seeking undergraduate population at Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference schools, with Black student-athletes representing 57% of football players and 64% of basketball players at these same schools (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013).

Dating back to when they were children, student-athletes have often been recognized for their athletic ability (Wenner, 1995). Their athletic ability has come to define their identity to such an extent that student-athletes often do not fully develop other identities (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). It has come to influence how they interpret information, behave, and cope with the various situations that they will experience in their lives (Cornelius, 1995). In addition to their identity as athletes, Bimper, Harrison, and Clark (2012) found that Black student-athletes are very aware of their racial identity, with it often being as salient as their athletic identity. They also found that the continual reinforcement of one's athletic identity can cause one to become disconnected from their racial identity over time (Bimper et al., 2012). Bimper and colleagues (2012) found that Black male student-athletes believed their racial and athletic identities needed to be nurtured, but chose to nurture their athletic identity because they were perceived as athletes.

Definitions

For the purpose of carrying out the present research, this study used the following definitions:

- NCAA - National College Athletic Association. The NCAA is an association that organizes and oversees the athletic programs of colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada.
- Exhaustion of eligibility - Student-athletes typically have five years to participate in four years of intercollegiate athletics. This term describes instances when student-athletes are no longer eligible to participate in intercollegiate athletics due to exceeding their five years on campus.
- Athletic identity - The degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role.
- Racial identity - An individual's sense of having their identity defined by belonging to a particular race or ethnic group.
- Former student-athletes - Individuals that previously participated in intercollegiate athletics.
- Revenue sports - College football and college basketball are considered “revenue sports” due to the amount of money generated for their respective schools.
- PWI - Predominantly white institutions.
- AIMS - Athletic Identity Measurement Scale.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

This review of literature defines the concepts of social identity and identity salience, while also exploring how student-athletes come to establish their athletic identities and how this identity is reinforced by their social environments. This review of literature will also explore the multiple roles that Black male student-athletes must navigate during their intercollegiate athletic careers. For student-athletes in general, they must learn to navigate the demands and challenges that come with being a student and an athlete. Black student-athletes, however, must contend with any racial prejudice that they may encounter. The literature will also examine the concept of retirement and how athletes cope with that specific life transition and its potential consequences. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model will also be examined as a framework for understanding identity development in Black male student-athletes.

Social Identity

Tajfel and Turner (1979) posit that an individual's self-image is derived from social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging. Individuals strive to maintain or enhance their self-esteem through group membership, which in turn influences self-esteem. Social groups have positive and negative associations and the individual's identity is influenced by how they come to value the group. Social identity theory postulates that a person's psychology often depends on the state of the groups that define the self and that these groups provide the individual with stability, meaning, purpose, direction, and will have positive implications for the individual's mental health (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). However, if one's sense of social identity is compromised in some way, then this tends to have negative psychological consequences (Haslam et al., 2009). Haslam and colleagues (2009) posit

that group membership serves as a way to enrich the lives of group members and is a source of personal security and emotional bonding. Furthermore, groups shape our psychology through their capacity to be internalized and contribute to our sense of self which provides us with a sense of social identity.

Similarly, Erikson (1968) posits that an individual's identity connects their personality to the social world. An individual's identity is constructed based on the various ways that they have come to identify themselves and be identified by other people. Identities are organized in a salience hierarchy, which determines the probability that each of these identities will be present in a given situation (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Furthermore, identity is formed within the multiple contexts of social interactions, institutions, processes, and relationships (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007) and the development of aspects of one's identity is often dependent on the recognition and acknowledgement given to a specific identity from the surrounding systems (Hoberman, 2000). Elite athletes receive elevated levels of social reinforcement for their physical abilities and have much of their individual conception of identity based on athletic performance and is defined by others' view of them as athletes (Beamon, 2012).

Athletic Identity

The concept of athletic identity is the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). For student-athletes, the athletic role is often the most salient of their identities. Developmental theory suggests that late childhood through early adulthood represents a critical period for the development of an individual's identity (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010) and previous research into the development of athletic identity indicates that the

saliency of the athlete role increases throughout high school and decreases over the course of one's college career (Miller & Kerr, 2003). Brewer and colleagues (1993) posit that there exists a negative relationship between strong athletic identity and the increase in age of the student-athlete. In other words, as a student-athlete gets older, the extent to which they identify as an athlete decreases. Given this relationship, the expectation is that student-athletes are better equipped to handle the termination of their athletic careers, the loss of their athletic identity, and are not at risk for experiencing psychological distress.

However, Adler and Adler (1991) found that athletes with higher skill level and those who are heavily recruited throughout high school enter college fully immersed in their athletic identity and that the athletic identity becomes stronger and more exclusive with age. Previous research (Houle et al., 2010) indicates that by becoming involved in sports at an early age causes the identity of the individual to become heavily intertwined with the sport instead of dispersed among other areas. Additionally, as previously mentioned, group membership and the acknowledgment given to a specific identity significantly impact its development. In this regard, an individual's athletic identity is no different. An athlete who is committed to and achieves some degree of athletic success receives positive reinforcement from coaches, teammates, parents, friends, and fans, thus enhancing their self-esteem (Marx, Huffman, & Doyle, 2008). Group cohesion is actively promoted and rewarded (Brown, 2000) and student-athletes who commit themselves to their peers and their group find it difficult to develop balanced identities, as the athletic identity and its interests are prioritized (Marx et al., 2008).

Another point to consider when examining an individual's athletic identity and its development is the recruitment process that many of these individuals go through. As intercollegiate sports have grown as a sustainable business model, athletic departments have

been able to invest more resources into the recruitment of student-athletes in order to maintain success (Lavigne, 2010). The proliferation of various sports camps provides individuals with the opportunity to showcase their talent in front of numerous college coaches and these camps are available to individuals as young as middle school. In addition to sports camps, travel teams have been created to allow highly-skilled individuals to participate in various tournaments where college coaches will be in attendance and their talents can be evaluated. Furthermore, there have been websites such as Max Preps, Rivals, and 247 Sports that have been developed in order to rank high school student-athletes based on their athletic ability. In some instances, individuals as young as 8th grade have been offered athletic scholarships by major universities (Tyson, 2016; Daniels, 2016; Donohue, 2016; Feldman, 2016) and will go on to be told how great and special they are by college coaches and media throughout their high school years during the recruitment process (Feldman, 2007). The exposure provided by these camps and the acknowledgment of an individual's athletic ability, when paired with the recruitment process, reinforces an individual's athletic identity before they even step foot on a college campus.

At the intercollegiate level, an individual's athletic identity continues to be reinforced due to the high level of competition and the demands placed on the individual to succeed (Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999) and the interaction with their social groups. There exists a sports culture related to intercollegiate athletics that reinforces an individual's athletic identity. Student-athletes that participate in sports at the Division I level spend many hours per week participating in practices and games related to their sport. However, student-athletes must also participate in team meetings, strength and conditioning sessions, community outreach, and other public appearances (Poux & Fry, 2015). Due to the demands that student-athletes must confront, they often develop closer interpersonal relationships with individuals that possess a similar

identity and relatable experiences. Prior to 1996, the NCAA allowed college campuses to have dormitories specifically for student-athletes (Rowland, 2014). Since implementing rules to prohibit this practice, colleges and universities have managed to find a loophole that allows schools to house student-athletes in one dormitory as long as the majority of students living there are not athletes (Rowland, 2014).

Ideally, college represents the opportunity for young adults to explore various identities and careers before determining which suits them best. However, student-athletes are not afforded this luxury due to overidentifying with their athletic identity, resulting in a lack of career maturity. Super (1957) posits that individuals are career mature or ready to make appropriate choices when they have engaged in planned exploration and have appropriate occupational knowledge, self-knowledge, and decision-making knowledge. However, individuals that strongly identify with their athletic identity are often less likely to plan for a career after athletics (Grove, Lavelle, & Gordon, 1997) and are more likely to experience identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure occurs when an individual settles into a single identity, closing off any further exploration of other identities in their hierarchy (Erikson, 1956). As such, student-athletes are more likely to experience career immaturity and identity foreclosure (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996) as a result of developing an overly strong athletic identity due to exposure to competition and formalized training from an early age (Mitchell, Nesti, Richardson, Midgley, Eubank, & Littlewood, 2014).

Student-Athlete Experience

The college experience is very different for student-athletes than it is for their non-athlete peers. Parham (1993) identified six demands and challenges that student-athletes must confront during their college careers: a) student-athletes must balance athletic and academic

responsibilities; b) they must balance a healthy social life with athletic responsibilities; c) they must balance athletic success with the lack of athletic success; d) they must balance their physical health and injuries; e) they must balance their interpersonal relationships, and f) they must face the challenge of coping with the termination of their athletic careers.

In their survey of student-athletes at 18 Division I schools, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found that in their sample of 930 student-athletes, 82% reported that they spent more than 20 hours a week participating in practice and competition. Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found that 53% of student-athletes reported that they did not spend as much time on their academics as they would like due to athletic participation and 11% indicated that athletics prevented them from majoring in what they wanted to pursue. In regards to potential career exploration, Potuto and O'Hanlon (2007) found that 70% of student-athletes believed that there were educational opportunities that they could not participate in because of athletic responsibilities. Additionally, 60% of student-athletes reported that there were on-campus events that they were unable to attend because of their athletic time demands. However, it is worth noting that student-athletes viewed these as being acceptable trade-offs of being a student-athlete (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007) and it is also worth noting that the survey included student-athletes across all sports, not just revenue sports.

Stereotype and identity threat occur when an individual feels at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). There exists a belief that student-athletes are the recipients of special treatment and are not held to the same standard as their non-athlete peers (Baucom & Lantz, 2001). Student-athletes are often viewed as not taking their academics seriously and as only using school as a means to pursue a professional career in athletics. School faculty tends to view student-athletes negatively as it pertains to their

competency in comparison to non-athletes (Baucom & Lantz, 2001; Hobneck, Mudge, & Turchi, 2003). Further, Baucom and Lantz (2001) found that school faculty was more likely to believe that student-athletes had poor study habits, would not be able to balance their various responsibilities, would not perform as well academically as non-athletes, and generally did not believe them to be capable of being successful college students. Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, and Jensen (2007) conducted a survey of student-athletes at a Division I university to determine how they believed members of the campus community perceived them, finding that 33% reported negative perceptions from faculty and 60% reporting similar perceptions from other students. Furthermore, more negative perceptions were associated with revenue sports than with non-revenue sports (football or basketball; Simons et al., 2007).

The perception of special treatment for student-athletes stems from how much time student-athletes must commit to their sport, the revenue that their sport generates for the university, the number of athletic scholarships compared to the number of academic scholarships, and a variety of other accommodations that student-athletes may be provided (Tucker, Morgan, Oliver, Kirk, Moore, Irving, Sizemore, Turner, & Emanuel, 2016). In regards to the additional support that student-athletes receive, the belief exists that this additional support is unfair to non-athletes (Potuto & O'Hanlon, 2007). Further, Simons and colleagues (2007) posit that the perception of student-athletes is that they are unqualified and illegitimate students whose only interest is in athletics who expect special treatment from those around them, with non-athletes being more suspicious and less trusting of student-athletes who earn an A in class (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991; Tucker et al., 2016).

The responsibilities that student-athletes must adhere to may contribute to the perception of special treatment held by non-athletes. Specifically, student-athletes regularly receive

accommodations in order to participate in athletic competitions (Tucker et al., 2016). These accommodations include coming to class late or leaving early, missing classes or exams, being allowed to take make-up exams, taking exams away from campus, and turning in assignments late. Related to this, Williams, Colles, and Allen (2010) conducted a study of Division III athletes that found that 62% of student-athletes surveyed were refused accommodations by faculty and were viewed negatively by non-athlete peers.

For student-athletes, their experiences are affected by the interactions that they have on campus. However, in addition to the experiences they have in the classroom, student-athletes may also be affected by their performances on the field and their actions off the field. Student-athletes may face criticism from non-athlete peers and other individuals in the community because of poor athletic performance (Tucker et al., 2016). Blackshaw and Crabbe (2004) posit that the experiences of athletes have been combined with the celebrity that comes as a result of their visibility and these experiences have become commodities to be glamorized by the media. However, the experiences of all student-athletes are not the same. Differences exist among the student-athlete experience when taking into account the sport that the student-athlete plays and race.

Black Male Student-Athlete Experience

As it relates to Black student-athletes, they must also contend with the coupling of racial and athlete stereotypes. The stereotypes often held by administrators, faculty, and non-athlete peers can cause Black student-athletes to internalize negative stereotypes and create a heightened sense of athletic identity (Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011). Black student-athletes hold memberships in multiple at-risk groups (Killeya, 2001) as a result of belonging to a minority

group, being a student-athlete, and participating in revenue sports (Steinfeldt, Reed, & Steinfeldt, 2010). For student-athletes that identify as Black, there has been an ongoing discussion regarding an explanation for their athletic success (Harrison, Lawrence, & Bukstein, 2011). One explanation that has been offered is that athletic success is dependent on social and cultural factors such as family support, peer encouragement, media support, and socioeconomic status (Coakley, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2004). Another explanation that has been offered linked athletic success to genetically determined racial differences (Entine, 2000); these discussions are often linked to the concept of race. However, the success of White athletes is often attributed solely to cultural factors – exposure to specific sports, family and peer encouragement, and role models (Harrison et al., 2011).

Among the Black population, the portrayal of Black success is limited and tends to focus heavily on athletics. The Black community has been marginalized through policies that deny them equal access to resources, less qualified teachers, poor schools, and racial microaggressions, which combine to contribute to poor academic performance in children of color (Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007). Public perception is that professional sports are one of few pathways for success within the Black community (Edwards, 2000; Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Steinfeldt and colleagues (2010) found that young Black males may be internalizing the stereotype of professional athletics as the predominant pathway to success for Black athletes. As a result, a high proportion of Black students go to school with a single-minded purpose to excel in athletics (Simiyu, 2012). There also exists the fact that there are very few visible role models outside of athletics to inspire young Black people (Coakley, 2010; Edwards, 2000). In a 2012 study, across Division I schools, Simiyu found that while Black students made up 10% of the student population, they constituted 21% of student-athletes. Specifically, Black males

represented 46% of football players and 60% of basketball players for a total of 70% of Black male student-athletes participating in revenue sports (Simiyu, 2012). Harrison, Harrison, and Moore (2002) posit that Black males view involvement in athletics as important to social acceptability, group membership, and as a way to gain the respect and approval of peers. Further, Harrison and colleagues (2002) posit that Black males gain inspiration from existing role models who are athletes with high status. As a result, the focus of Black male athletes is towards basketball, football, and track and field (Harrison et al., 2002).

Once they arrive on campus, Black male student-athletes must contend with institutional racism when considering their experiences at predominantly White institutions (Simiyu, 2012). As a Black student-athlete at a PWI, it is not uncommon to experience feelings of isolation, being misunderstood, a sense of powerlessness, feelings of being judged, pressure to assimilate to different values, and being stigmatized as a Black athlete (Melendez, 2008). Institutional racism and its historical relationship with intercollegiate athletics can provide context for understanding the experiences of Black male student-athletes and Black student-athletes in general. Since the 1950s, Black athletes began to be allowed to participate in intercollegiate athletics (Simiyu, 2012). The growing popularity of intercollegiate sports forced institutions and coaches to put their prejudice aside and recruit the best players regardless of race or academic preparedness (Simiyu, 2012). Despite the inclusion of Black student-athletes, their on-campus experiences included dealing with racism and prejudice. In addition to the isolation that many student-athletes often experience, Black male student-athletes must also contend with negative racial, gender, and athletic stereotypes (Beamon, 2014). Educational stereotypes of Black student-athletes continues to persist, with some White faculty members and students having lower expectations of the academic potential of Black student-athletes (Sailes, 1998) and in some

instances, Black student-athletes felt antagonism from their professors (Adler & Adler, 1991). The negative academic stereotypes of Black student-athletes may be affecting them more than their White counterparts, with White football players graduating at a 20% higher rate and with White basketball players graduating at a 32% higher rate (Lapchick, 2010). Additionally, Black male student-athletes at Division I institutions have the lowest graduation rate of all race, ethnic, and gender classifications (Smith, 2004).

In a 2014 qualitative study across Division I schools, 18 of 20 Black male former student-athletes expected to experience some level of discrimination while on campus (Beamon, 2014). Though previous research has found that student-athletes are perceived to receive special treatment, most of the respondents in the study identified the classroom as a racially hostile environment and attributed it to negative stereotypes about Black males and student-athletes held by faculty (Beamon, 2014). Furthermore, Black male student-athletes were also found to feel isolated from the non-athlete Black student population on campus despite a strong Black racial identity (Beamon, 2014). Bimper and colleagues (2012) found that Black male student-athletes believed their racial and athletic identities needed to be nurtured, but often chose to nurture their athletic identity because they were perceived as athletes. Beamon (2014) found that Black male student-athletes believed that they were required to choose between their athletic and racial identities. In one instance, when a major racial conflict occurred on campus, one respondent indicated a desire to participate in protests, but choosing not to do so because of their role as an athlete and the fact that their coach did not want members of the team participating in protests (Beamon, 2014). In their study, Bimper and colleagues (2012) found that Black male student-athletes believed that the reinforcement of their athletic identity could cause them to become

“disconnected” from their racial identity. Being forbidden from speaking out against racism may also detach them from their Black non-athlete peers (Lapchick, 1996).

Sports are often discussed within the context of a post-racial narrative, citing the increased participation of persons of color across various sporting venues (Bimper, 2015). However, when discussing their experiences as members of a team, the majority of Black male student-athletes reported self-segregation in the locker room and on campus and did not believe that sports promoted racial harmony (Beamon, 2014). Participants reported that they were often the victim of racial abuse from their own fans, opposing fans, and local residents in town. Furthermore, they reported that they had not experienced overt racism prior to coming to campus (Beamon, 2014). Black student-athletes are very aware of their racial identity and how they are perceived by non-athletes. Steinfeldt and colleagues (2010) found that Black college football players farther along in their careers reported that they were more aware that society does not highly value those that identify as Black, particularly Black athletes. To an extent, the experiences of Black male student-athletes mirror those of their Black non-athlete peers when it comes to experiencing feelings of isolation and alienation as a result of being one of few Black students on campus (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

The media’s portrayal of Black male student-athletes in comparison to their White counterparts may also contribute to the negative perception of Black male student-athletes. Entman (2006) found that three dominant media images of Black males exist: criminals, athletes, and entertainers. Entman (2006) contends that Black male athletes receive more publicity for getting into trouble than for their positive contributions and that media coverage feeds into the existing stereotypes of irresponsible, violent, angry Black males. In her study, Frisby (2015) examined media coverage of athletes and gave particular attention to the type of story and the

race of the athlete. In a review of 155 articles, Frisby (2015) found that despite more stories being written about White male athletes (43.9%) than Black male athletes (38.7%), media coverage focused more on Black male athletes (66.7%) than White male athletes (22.2%) when connected to a crime. And in terms of stories on domestic and sexual violence, media coverage focused more on Black male athletes (70.6%) than White male athletes (17.6%).

In addition to the role that media coverage plays in shaping the perceptions of Black male athletes, sports broadcasters have a similar role as it relates to Black male student-athletes. Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) reviewed 20 hours of football coverage and 53 hours of basketball coverage to determine the frequency in which sports broadcasters prime racial stereotypes of Black males. Eighteen different announcers were included, all male, with two being Black (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). A total of 486 comments were coded, with Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) finding that of the 49 comments that were coded as negative, Black male student-athletes were the recipients of 92%. However, it is worth noting that some comments that were coded as positive were related to positive comments made about a student-athlete's athletic ability. In this regard, Black male student-athletes received 92% of the positive comments related to physical ability and White male student-athletes received more positive comments related to their character (58%) and personal interests (56%; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005).

The overrepresentation of Black males participating in intercollegiate sports, and sports in general, suggests that Black males have been conditioned to participate in activities that serve to reinforce their athletic identity. Black male student-athletes are being socialized to think of themselves solely as athletes at the expense of their other identities outside of the athlete role, including their Black identity, even when experiencing racism and prejudice in the form of non-athlete peers, faculty, opposing fans, community members, media, and sports broadcasters.

Taking this into consideration, what occurs when a Black male student-athlete's identity develops at the expense of their Black identity and is then lost due to injury, exhaustion of eligibility, or a failure to have a professional career?

Sports Retirement

For student-athletes, and athletes in general, the termination of one's athletic career and the resulting loss of their athletic identity can be perceived as a significant life transition given the extent to which an individual's athletic identity has been developed. Sports retirement is something that every athlete must face and it typically occurs in the following forms for student-athletes: injury, exhaustion of eligibility, or deselection. A developed athletic identity has been associated with difficulties adapting to sports retirement (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004) and anxiety in career-making decisions (Grove et al., 1997; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Moreland-Bishop (2009) examined the impact of career transition on student-athletes and found that student-athletes struggled with identity loss and loss of their social network due to no longer interacting daily with coaches and teammates.

In athletic competition, there is an increased risk of experiencing some form of injury. Brewer (1993) found that athletic identity in student-athletes was positively associated with depressed mood when individuals were asked to imagine experiencing a career-ending injury. Pearson and Petitpas (1990) posit that retirement forced by injury would be particularly disruptive to an individual's athletic identity. Horowitz, Wilner, and Alvarez (1979) developed the Impact of Event Scale to measure perceptions of events accompanying traumatic life events. Though it was not developed with student-athletes in mind, Shuer and Dietrich (1997) conducted a study that sampled 280 Division I athletes and found that the perceived impact of chronic

injury was equivalent to the impact of natural disasters; the student-athletes sampled perceived chronic injury as a life or death matter.

Mitchell and colleagues (2014) found that student-athletes may experience psychological or behavioral disturbance when they can no longer participate in their respective sport, while Brown and Potrac (2009) posit that players who fail to have a professional career may be at risk of psychological distress. Individuals who experienced deselection experienced high levels of negative emotions and viewed the loss of their athletic identity as a social death, betrayal, abandonment and social exclusion (Blinde & Stratta, 1992; McKenna & Thomas, 2007; Moreland-Bishop, 2009). Furthermore, many athletes do not feel that they have accomplished everything that they set out to achieve in their sport if they are cut from the team and forced to end their careers (McKnight, Bernes, Gunn, Chorney, Orr, & Bardick, 2009). Conversely, for athletes who succeeded in their sport, they showed stable levels of self-esteem, self-identity, and fewer difficulties post-retirement (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

As student-athletes retire and attempt to transition into alternative careers, the interactions that they have with others may prevent them from doing so. Moreland-Bishop (2009) found that student-athletes would continue to be identified as athletes by the community and reported that student-athletes consider it to be a barrier in terms of completing their transition. Further, Beamon (2012) found that in her sample of 20 Black male former student-athletes, many resented the emphasis that others placed on their athletic identity after exiting athletic competition and believed that the fixation of others on their athletic identities contributed to them still identifying as such. Further, all respondents described difficulties as they retired from competitive sports (Beamon, 2012). Respondents had expectations to play professional sports and were not prepared for alternative careers. Most described feeling depressed and a sense of

loss similar to dying, the loss of a body part, or the death of a family member (Beamon, 2012). Additionally, many respondents indicated that they delayed developing other identities after retirement because they believed an opportunity to continue their career would present itself. Many respondents identified their race and size as traits non-athletes would use to identify them as athletes and believed that it contributed to how others interacted with them, while also stating that achieving athletic success was something that they had been taught since childhood (Beamon, 2012).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can be used to explain how Black male student-athletes have come to strongly identify as athletes from early childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Ecological systems theory posits that human development is the reflection of several systems with which people interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In Bronfenbrenner's theory, the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems are the primary systems associated with this model. Each system influences the individual and the other systems differently, thus creating different results at various stages of the individual's development. Previous research indicates that Bronfenbrenner's ecological model could be used to explain the development of sports talent (Krebs, 2009), while other research examined the sports socialization of Black males (Beamon, 2010).

The microsystem describes the systems that an individual interacts with most frequently. For athletes, this group often includes their parents, family, peers, school and their coaches. Once their athletic ability is identified at an early age, they are often pushed to excel in their sport by others. Krebs (2009) defined three components of the microsystem: activities, interpersonal

relationships, and roles. Beamon (2010) found that most respondents began receiving messages from their social groups regarding a focus on sports as early as 10 years old and noted that their immediate and extended families placed an emphasis on athletics. In their study of how parents socialized student-athletes at a Division I institution, Beamon and Bell (2006) found that parents placed more of an emphasis on athletics during childhood for Black football players.

The mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. Bronfenbrenner (1979) used the relationship between school and home to describe how the mesosystem affects children and their development. Wenner (1995) posits that school and parents reinforce the athlete role by allowing students to miss class for sports practice and games, while also labeling children as “special” due to their athletic abilities.

The exosystem describes how larger systems come to impact smaller systems that directly influence the development of an individual’s athletic identity. Teachers, counselors, and coaches are often required to follow a set of guidelines developed by administrators or governing bodies (e.g. NCAA). The degree to which student-athletes identify with the athlete role can be influenced by receiving favorable grades from teachers, being pushed towards easier classes by counselors in order to maintain eligibility, having coursework completed by tutors, and receiving individualized attention from coaches and other support staff.

The macrosystem encompasses the three other levels and examines the relationship that exists between the individual and their ethnic and socioeconomic culture. Macrosystems can include national policies for sports and television networks (Krebs, 2009). In describing the Black community as signifying a larger context of culture, Beamon (2010) was essentially

describing a macrosystem that can potentially influence microsystems (neighborhood and family), mesosystems (the relationship between the two), and exosystems.

The chronosystem describes the passage of time and the impact of significant life transitions in an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the context of student-athletes, the chronosystem can be defined as representing the end of their athletic careers and their transitions into non-athlete roles. Black male student-athletes are products of their environment; the current culture of athlete celebrity and fame has shaped their ideals and their perception of success. Given the importance attributed to athletic success, many respondents cited professional athletes as childhood role models. Most respondents viewed media as a major contributor to their sports socialization and athletic identity development and Edwards (1988) argued that the lack of visible non-athlete role models contributes to young Black men pursuing sports.

Chapter Three - Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black male former student-athletes in revenue sports in order to gain a deeper understanding of how their athletic identity was developed over time and to determine any potential mental health implications as they transitioned out of their athletic careers.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research plays a role in the ability to inform research of a large scale issue or problem (Stake, 2000) and helps to understand conditions and occurrences from the participant's point of view. Blinde and Stratta (1992) suggest that previous studies that have utilized quantitative methods in examining former student-athletes may not have grasped the fundamental nature of the phenomenon that is their transition out of athletic careers. Qualitative methods may prove useful in capturing information regarding the actual process of athletic identity development and transitioning out of athletic careers. For Black student-athletes, our understanding could be enhanced by qualitative methodology and the belief that their voices need to be heard in order to truly understand the many issues that surround them (Adler & Adler, 1991; Beamon, 2010).

A phenomenological approach is a form of qualitative inquiry which focuses on the human experiences of those who have lived with or experienced a particular phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013). This approach's primary goal is to understand human experience in context-specific settings (Patton, 2001). The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black male former student-athletes, their athletic identity development, and their transition out of athletic careers. Phenomenological interviews were used to gain insight into the experiences of

Black male student-athletes and obtain a first-person account of a specific domain of experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Sample

Patton's (2001) strategy of purposeful sampling was employed. The purpose of this strategy was to select information-rich cases for in-depth study with the sample size being contingent upon the study's scope and purpose. According to Patton (2001), sample depends on the following factors: a) what the research wants to know; b) the purpose of the study; c) what is at stake; d) what will be useful; e) what will have credibility, and f) what can be done with available time and resources. In this study, the following criteria were utilized to purposefully select participants: a) student-athletes who attended Division I universities; b) Black male former student-athletes who participated in revenue sports; c) student-athletes who were highly recruited out of high school, and d) on full or partial athletic scholarships. The criteria selected were used due to Black males being overrepresented in the revenue sports of football and basketball, the high visibility of their sport, and the perceived impact it could have on their development.

As a result of the personal connections that the researcher had to individuals who participated in intercollegiate athletics and the connections to various athletic departments within the area, snowball sampling was used to identify participants who fit the sampling criteria, with initial contact being made either by the researcher or mutual connections.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest that the focus of phenomenological research is quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomena, phenomenological research usually benefits from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases. Further, as a successful analysis requires time, reflection, and dialogue, larger datasets tend to inhibit all of

these things. Thus, Smith and colleagues (2009) suggest a sample size of six participants as being sufficient for a doctoral level study. Similarly, according to Turpin et al. (1997), clinical psychology doctoral programs in Britain recommend that having six to eight participants is appropriate for a phenomenological study. A sample of this size gives an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals and the amount of qualitative data gathered is not overwhelming (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Participants will include six Black-identified male former student-athletes based on the selection criteria previously outlined.

Instruments

The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS, Brewer et al., 1993) requires participants, both athletes and non-athletes, to rate themselves on a 10-item instrument with responses ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a 7-point scale. The 10-item AIMS instrument is supported as both a unidimensional instrument (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001; Brewer, Cornelius, Stephan, & Van Raalte, 2010) and a multidimensional instrument (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). The evaluation of the unidimensional scale can be performed on the total scores to produce a single self-evaluation score that represents their athletic identity, with higher scores indicating a stronger identification with the athletic role. The multidimensional scale contains three subscales: social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity (Brewer et al., 1993). *Social identity* is the degree to which an individual views themselves as occupying the athlete role. *Exclusivity* is the degree to which an individual’s self-worth is established through participating in the athletic role. *Negative affectivity* is the degree to which individuals experience negative emotions from unwanted sporting outcomes (e.g. injury and retirement).

The AIMS has been used retrospectively in previous studies in which retired athletes were asked to reflect on their athletic identity at the time of retirement (Grove et al., 1997; Schacar, Brewer, Cornelius, & Petitpas, 2004). Previous research suggests that individuals can recall large amounts of information about their late adolescent and early adulthood years due to the development of one's identity, self-image, and life schema during this time (Fitzgerald, 1988; Rathbone, Moulin, & Conway, 2008). For the present study, the unidimensional version of the 10-item AIMS was used as a descriptor of athletic identity and was included in the participant profile. The scores are added together, with higher scores (out of a total 70 points) indicating a stronger identification with the athlete role.

Interviews

Each participant participated in an individual interview that was recorded. The interviews were semi-structured with the questioning focused on participant experiences related to their first introduction to sport and the perceived impact it had on their identity and interpersonal relationships as they aged. Additionally, participants were questioned on their sport career aspirations and their transition into a non-athletic career. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and covered topics that the participants believed to be relevant, with the interviews being transcribed verbatim by a third party.

Qualitative Analysis

Manen (1990) contends that there are four steps of a phenomenological study: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing, and describing. Step 1: *Bracketing* is defined as identifying and suspending any preconceived beliefs and notions that one may have about the phenomenon being researched. The researcher conducted a critical self-examination and identified assumptions held about the

phenomenon being explored. This self-examination occurred prior to analyzing the data and included engaging in conversations about the research with colleagues to bring awareness to any preconceived notions or biases held by the researcher. It was during this examination that the researcher identified assumptions, including: a) that participants had professional sports aspirations; b) participants experienced racism or prejudice while on campus; and c) that participants may have experienced mental health concerns related to the end of their athletic careers. This process enabled the researcher to review each transcript from the lens of having no prior assumptions regarding Black male student-athletes, their experiences at predominantly white institutions, and any potential mental health concerns upon career termination. By doing so, the researcher was able to fully experience the responses provided by the participants and gain different perspectives on the various topics covered throughout the interviews.

Step 2: *Intuiting* is defined as the researcher remaining open to the meaning attributed to the phenomenon by those who have experienced it. In this phase, it was important for the researcher to allow the participants to define their experiences through their own narratives. Due to *bracketing*, the researcher engaged in the interviews open to the lived experiences of the participants. Though the interviews were structured, the researcher did not bombard participants with question after question. Instead, the interviews became more conversational, with participants given space to share whatever they deemed relevant to their experiences as Black male former student-athletes. This ultimately contributed to a richer narrative being shared by the participants.

Step 3 & 4: *Analyzing* is the process of coding, categorizing, and making sense of the meaning of the phenomenon. *Describing* occurs when the researcher comes to understand and define the phenomenon (Manen, 1990). Though this research followed an interpretative

phenomenological approach, thematic analysis was used for the *analyzing* and *describing* processes. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and was used by this researcher for the *analyzing* and *describing* phases of this phenomenological study. Braun and Clarke (2006) have outlined and detailed six phases of thematic analysis. In this study, thematic analysis was completed using NVivo, a qualitative data management software program. Phase one: *Familiarizing Yourself with the Data* consisted first of having the interviews transcribed by a third party. Then, the researcher read through the data set twice prior to coding, which Braun and Clarke (2006) posit enables the shaping of the researcher's ideas and identification of possible patterns. It was also during this phase that the researcher made mental notes related to the ideas for potential codes.

Phase two: *Generating Initial Codes* consisted of creating initial codes from the data and identifying a feature that appeared interesting to this researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher initially conducted open coding. During initial line-by-line readings of the transcribed interviews, key points by which the data could be grouped were identified and codes related to specific identifying features were created by the researcher. For example, the researcher grouped together responses that indicated the age at which participants began playing their sport and the age at which their athletic ability was recognized by others. At the conclusion of this phase, 50 individual codes had been created within the data set.

Phase three: *Searching for Themes* occurred once all the data had been coded. This phase refocused the analysis at the broader level of themes and involved sorting the different codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher made use of handwritten notes to assist in the creation and organization of themes. When developing themes, attention was given to the frequency in which codes appeared, the context in which those codes existed, and how codes

correlated with the existing literature. For example, experiences of prejudice and racism were categorized under the theme of campus experiences. Four overarching themes were initially created based on the coded data set: identity, campus experiences, mental health concerns, and protective factors.

Phase four: *Reviewing Themes* occurred once the initial themes were created and involved the refinement of those themes. During this phase, it became evident that some themes either did not have enough data to support them or were better suited to collapse into another theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase also involved two levels of reviewing and refining themes; the first level required the researcher to read through the codes of each theme and consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern and the second level of review was to determine whether the themes were relevant to the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the first level of review, it was determined that the theme of *identity* was better suited being renamed to *athletic identity* in order to more accurately reflect the codes that existed within the theme. The theme of *campus experiences* was renamed *Black student-athlete experiences* to better capture all of the experiences shared by the participants. In reviewing the theme of *mental health concerns*, it was determined the theme would be renamed to *mental health* to more accurately reflect the codes existing within the theme. It was also determined that the theme of *protective factors* would be better suited merging with the theme of *mental health*. Furthermore, the researcher determined that the following codes would be better suited being moved to different themes due to their similarity to already existing codes. The *professional aspirations* code was categorized under the theme of *athletic identity* and the *coping with experiences* code was moved under the theme of *Black student-athlete experiences*. In continuing to review the *mental health* theme, it was determined that some of the data within that theme

would be more accurately categorized with the creation of another theme; *career termination*. Upon the creation of the *career termination* theme, codes related to *circumstances of career termination* were moved to this theme. During the second level of review, it was determined that the themes of *athletic identity*, *Black student-athlete experience*, *career termination*, and *mental health* were related to the data set as a whole based on a review of the literature and the responses of the participants.

Phase five: *Defining and Naming Themes* is described as determining what aspect of the data each theme captures and considering how each theme fits into the broader narrative of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theme of *athletic identity* came to represent the following existing codes: age and athletic ability, professional aspirations, preferential treatment, and recruiting. The theme of *Black student-athlete experiences* came to represent the following existing codes: black athletic identity, perception of others, and racism. The theme of *career termination* came to represent the following existing code: circumstances leading to career termination. The theme of *mental health* came to represent the following existing codes: depression and protective factors.

Braun and Clarke (2006) contend that it is important to determine if any theme contains sub-themes which can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme. During this phase of the analysis, it was determined that sub-themes existed within all four themes. Within the theme of *athletic identity*, responses related to *age and athletic ability* was previously identified as coded data. Similarly, within the theme of *Black student-athlete experiences*, responses related to *perception of others (prejudice)* and *racism* were previously identified as coded data. However, due to the wide range of coded responses, they were redefined as sub-themes and the data within were given their own codes. Under the sub-theme of

perception of others (prejudice), the following code was created based on participant responses: athlete-student stereotype. Under the sub-theme of *racism*, the following codes were created based on participant responses: overt racism, racial profiling, athletes and protective status. Additionally, for the sub-theme of *circumstances leading to career termination*, the following code was created: relationships. Lastly, within the theme of *mental health* the following codes were created for the sub-theme of *protective factors*: family and friends, fatherhood, importance of academics, support from other student-athletes, and athletic identity. The final phase of thematic analysis included presenting the information in a clear and concise way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data is presented in the following chapter in the form of direct quotes and narratives articulated by the respondents.

Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

Positionality is the practice of the researcher describing his or her own position in relation to the study, with the implication that this position may influence aspects of the study, such as the data collected or the way in which it is interpreted (Qin, 2016). Additionally, reflecting on the research relationship involves examining one's relationship to the respondent and how the relationship dynamics affect responses to questions (Hsiung, 2010). I am a college educated, African-American male from a middle class environment. For the past few years, I have worked in various mental health and academic settings throughout California. My experiences have allowed me to interact with the Black student-athlete population in various contexts related to academics and their mental health.

This project is significant due to previous research indicating that Black men are being socialized to internalize the stereotype that the pathway to success for Black individuals is

through a career in athletics. To that end, I was also once a student-athlete who had professional aspirations. Though I realized that I lacked the ability to continue pursuing athletics past high school, I watched as many of my peers tried and failed to make their dreams a reality. Despite no longer actively participating in sports, I remained a huge sports fan, particularly of college athletics. This interest allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the recruitment of high school athletes, the professional aspirations of college athletes, and how a variety of factors can influence the development of an individual's identity. Given my background and interest in college athletics, I shared many commonalities with my participants. Due to identifying similarly to my participants, I believe that this allowed them to respond to questions in a way in which they felt comfortable.

Participant Profiles

The six participants are introduced here. Each participant racially identified themselves as Black and/or African-American and had completed their athletic careers at time of interviews. The participants ranged from 33 years of age to 52 years of age. The participants were all recruited to be scholarship athletes at the Division I level and participated in either football or basketball. The participants were selected due to Black males being overrepresented in the revenue sports of football and basketball, the high visibility of their sport, and the perceived impact it could have on their development. Participants were recruited through personal connections the researcher has with individuals who participated in intercollegiate athletics and with various athletic departments within the area.

AC – AC was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and was highly recruited during high school before choosing to attend a university in the Northwest where he played football. He

currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area where he works as a social worker. He registered a score of 65 on the AIMS.

BA – BA was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and was recruited by smaller colleges and universities during high school before choosing to attend school in the San Francisco Bay Area. After spending a couple of years there, he transferred to a university in Southern California to finish his basketball career. He registered a score of 44 on the AIMS.

JM – JM was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and was heavily recruited during high school prior to getting injured. He tore his ACL four games into his senior year of high school and chose to attend community college. After recovering from his injury, he accepted a scholarship offer a university in the Northwest to play football. He registered a score of 63 on the AIMS.

BD – BD was raised in the Southeast and was heavily recruited during high school after being recognized as the top player in the state. He accepted a scholarship offer to play basketball in the Midwest. He transferred twice prior to finishing his career. He registered a score of 23 on the AIMS.

JD – JD was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and was lightly recruited during high school. He chose to attend a local community college over smaller colleges and universities. Due to his performances at the community college level, he initially committed to a university in the Southwest before accepting a scholarship offer to play football in the Southeast. He registered a score of 45 on the AIMS.

TA – TA was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and was lightly recruited during high school. Due to lack of scholarship offers, he chose to attend a local community college and

played basketball. He later accepted a scholarship offer to play basketball at a university on the West coast. He attempted to play professionally overseas prior to returning home and participating Professional-Amateur (Pro-Am) leagues. He registered a score of 56 on the AIMS.

Chapter Four - Results

This study retroactively measured the athletic identity of Black male student-athletes and explored their experiences as Black male student-athletes from the time they were introduced to their sport through the termination of their athletic careers. This study also explored the potential for mental health concerns among Black male student-athletes as a result of their on-campus experiences and as they transitioned out of their athletic careers. A void in previous research and literature examining the phenomenon of Black male student-athletes and mental health facilitated interest in this study. Exploring the experiences of Black male former student-athletes provided important information regarding the development of their athletic identities and the impact of this identity on their mental health. A qualitative framework was used to design this study, with thematic analysis used to guide data collection and analysis. The results highlight the lived experiences of the participants.

This chapter presents findings based on data collected through administering the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) and through interviewing a sample of six Black male former student-athletes. In place of their real names, participants will be identified by their initials. Throughout this chapter, the experiences of the participants will be revealed primarily through the verbatim responses of the participants. By conceptualizing their experiences through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings present a rich and meaningful view of their early childhood, adolescent, and adult experiences. Additionally, the findings provide answers to how their athletic identities developed over time, how their experiences as Black male student-athletes reinforced their athletic identities, and how the loss of their athletic identity affected their mental health as they transitioned out of their athletic careers.

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale

Immediately prior to their interviews, participants completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). At the time of administration, participants were asked to reflect on their athletic identity at the time of their retirement. Results of the AIMS are summarized in Appendix C. Scores ranged from a high of 65 to a low of 23, with 49.3 being the mean score of the participants. In addition to the AIMS, qualitative interviews were used to obtain a deeper understanding and meaning of the participants' experiences of their athletic identity, their experiences as Black student-athletes, career termination, and the overall impact on their mental health.

Qualitative Interviews

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory will provide a framework through which to understand how Black male student-athletes have come to strongly identify as athletes from early childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. In Bronfenbrenner's theory, the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems are the primary systems associated with this model. The microsystem describes the systems with which the individual has direct contact. The mesosystem is the relationship between two systems that impact the individual. The micro and mesosystem are present within the theme of *athletic identity*. The exosystem describes how larger systems come to impact smaller systems that directly influence the development of an individual's identity. The macrosystem is composed of cultural values, customs, and laws and connects the relationship between the individual and society at large. The exo and macrosystem are present within the theme of *Black student-athlete experiences*. The chronosystem relates to the impact of

environmental events or life transitions that occurs throughout an individual's life and is present within the theme of *mental health*.

The first theme of the qualitative interviews, *athletic identity*, relates to how strongly the participants identified as athletes while in college. Among student-athletes, their athletic identity is often the most salient aspect of their identity and drives their interactions with society while also influencing society's perception of them as individuals (Houle et al., 2010). This theme relates to how the participants began developing their athletic identity and how their different experiences such as: a) when their athletic ability was first recognized, b) their professional sports career aspirations, c) preferential treatment they received by virtue of being athletes, and d) the college recruiting process, served to reinforce this aspect of their identity.

The second theme, *Black student-athlete experiences*, encompasses the experiences that the participants had while in college as a result of their identity as Black student-athletes. Participants discussed how their Black identity influenced how they were perceived by others on campus, the prejudice they experienced due to being identified as athletes, and their experiences of racism as a result of being a Black athlete. This theme captures how identifying as athletes framed their experiences and reinforced their athletic identity throughout their college careers.

The third theme, *career termination*, refers to the significant life transition that occurs once a student-athlete is no longer able to pursue a career in their sport and identify with the athlete role. This theme explores the various circumstances which ultimately led to the participants no longer being able to pursue their sport past the collegiate level. Additionally, this theme sheds light on how participants felt about their athletic careers coming to an end and the potential loss of identity that they experienced as a result.

The fourth theme, *mental health*, refers to the impact on participants' mental health as they saw it relating to the inability of pursuing a career in professional sports. Additionally, this theme provides insight into how a strong athletic identity impacted the mental health of participants at the time of career termination. Protective factors that assisted participants as they transitioned out of their athletic careers are also present within this theme.

The following results are presented to clarify and support the findings of this study. Direct quotes are offered to represent the experiences of the participants and shed light on how they experience and understand the phenomenon.

Athletic Identity

Among student-athletes, the athletic role is often the most salient of their identities and drives their interactions with society. An individual's identity is shaped early in childhood and continues to develop through adolescence and into early adulthood. When discussing student-athletes, it is important to note that their athletic identity is continuously nurtured and reinforced as they age.

The microsystem defines the systems with which participants had the most direct contact and is represented by the age at which their athletic ability was recognized by others and their aspirations of playing sports professionally. Participants discussed how their athletic ability was recognized by others once they started playing competitive sports. Additionally, participants shared how they recognized their own athletic ability by comparing themselves to their teammates and opposing players.

Age and athletic ability. All participants reported beginning their athletic careers in middle school and shared similar experiences of when their athletic ability was recognized.

Though the majority of participants recalled having their ability recognized shortly after they started playing sports, other participants acknowledged that it wasn't until high school that their athletic ability was recognized by others. In response to when his athletic ability was recognized, AC stated the following:

Well, as a sixth grader was my first year of organized football, I was an offensive lineman, so I didn't touch the ball. And then in the seventh grade, I started to grow a little bit into my body. So that's when my athletic abilities started to come to the surface. And then, by the eighth grade, I was, head and shoulders, the best person on my team. And that's not an easy feat because we had a lot of great athletes on that team in the eighth grade. Matter of fact, on my eighth grade team, I guess, we had 22 kids. And seven of those 22 went on to get football scholarships. We had a lot of talent on those teams. But with all that talent, I was just, head and shoulders, the best. Eighth grade, I realized that, yeah, I might have a chance [to play professionally]. And people around me thought I had a chance.

Similarly, BD discussed how his athletic ability was recognized due to the competition he was playing against:

I guess growing up I never really played with my age until I had to. I was five years old and playing against fourth and fifth graders. When I was in school, when I was like nine, I was playing against middle schoolers. When I got to middle school, I was playing against high schoolers. So, I was practicing against varsity as a sixth, seventh grader.

Professional aspirations. It is worth mentioning that all participants indicated their desire to play professionally; with this desire developing around the same time they began to

play sports. Their professional aspirations were fueled by the recognition that their athletic ability received from family, friends, and their community. Each of the participants' desire to play his sport professionally was a mindset that influenced his interactions and further reinforced the development of his athletic identity. JM shared how his professional aspirations were affected by his father and older brother:

My dad believed it when I was really young, probably second or third grade. My dad had got me into ballet and tap dance when I was in preschool. I think I was five years old-- four or five, because he wanted me to be active or something and work on my footwork. So it was tap dance and ballet, whatever they put me in I was going to do. But my dad always thought that my sport would be football, because he thought I was tough and everything. And my brother would make me do push-ups and sit-ups whenever there was a commercial on television.

The mesosystem describes the relationship between microsystems that have a direct impact on the individual. For example, this can refer to the relationship that can exist between an individual's school and their family, the family and the community, and the school and the community in which it resides.

Preferential treatment. The acknowledgement given to a specific identity significantly impacts its development and an athlete that achieves some degree of athletic success often receives positive reinforcement of their athletic identity from coaches, teammates, parents, friends, and others. In this instance, the mesosystem is present, with microsystems of school and community interacting in a way that leads to treating participants differently because of their athletic ability. The majority of participants acknowledged receiving preferential treatment

during their careers and indicated that it influenced how they viewed themselves. AC discussed his experiences that highlight the relationship between his school and his community, while shedding light on how it impacted him directly:

I was entitled. I expected it. I thought that's just how things went for at least me. Hey, I was in the paper every week. This is in high school. I was actually-- the reason why they were talking about my school. So no, I had no idea that-- I mean, I just thought that's how things went. You know that people talk about male privilege? White privilege? There's also a thing called athletic privilege, and I was a recipient of that.

Additionally, BD shared an experience where an altercation with another student was ignored because of his athletic ability that also reflects the relationship between school and community:

The administration turned a blind eye. They tore the referral up. I didn't end up missing any games. I didn't have to go to any in-school suspension. They kept it hush hush. If I wasn't an athlete, I would have gotten suspended, possibly expelled. Being physical with a girl, especially a white girl in a smaller town in Kentucky like that, no.

JM suffered a torn ACL during his senior year of high school. However, despite his inability to play, he expressed a similar experience of preferential treatment due to his status as athlete:

When I tore my ACL, everybody wanted to push me around in my wheelchair. Because my knee was so bad, I couldn't even be on crutches. Everybody wanted to be my friend, everybody was supportive. And it was great, but it was people I didn't even really know. All of a sudden people are picking me up from my house and taking me to school. I think I'm a good guy, but I don't know these people. So, you've got to wonder why that is. And then the teachers were really cool. I'd be passing out in my chair every day in class, going

to sleep. I was a good student before, but after I tore my ACL, I just stopped trying. But they had sympathy for me and they didn't care if I was asleep the whole time in class. Still gave me As and Bs.

Recruiting. When considering the development of one's athletic identity, it is important to consider the impact that the recruiting process can have. Though participants had different experiences of the recruiting process, their experiences highlight the value that is placed on one's athletic ability and their identity as athletes. When considering the mesosystem, the recruiting process reflects the relationship that exists between school and family, as well as coaches and family. BA spoke about the flattering interactions with various schools and the impact it had on his identity and professional aspirations:

The coaches are going to talk to you. They're going to want to talk to your parents.

They're going to want to set up an in-home visit where they come and see you, see where you live. Obviously, it's flattering. You're working hard at something that you love and the sport that you love. So someone's coming at you and wants to, in essence, help you towards your dream of becoming a professional athlete.

Black Student-Athlete Experience

After exploring the development of their athletic identities and how their experiences reinforced this aspect of their identity, participants shared their experiences as Black student-athletes at predominantly White institutions (PWI). When discussing their experiences on and off campus, many participants acknowledged the intersection of their racial and athletic identity. Participants highlighted the emergence of their Black athletic identities and how they were impacted by experiences of prejudice and racism.

The exosystem and macrosystem exist within the Black student-athlete experience theme. In general, the exosystem describes how larger systems come to impact smaller systems that directly influence the development of an individual's identity. Macrosystems, on the other hand, are composed of cultural values, customs, and laws which impacts the relationship between the individual and society at large. In the case of the participants, the perception of intercollegiate athletics and student-athletes is influenced by cultural or societal values (macrosystem) and impacts members of the campus and Black communities (exosystem), which in turn have impacted the student-athletes themselves through interactions with members of these communities.

Perception of others and athletic prejudice. Five out of six participants referenced their interactions with faculty members and their non-athlete peers when discussing the prejudice they experienced on campus. Participant experiences reflect the macrosystem, in which assumptions and beliefs held about athletes have come to influence the participants directly. BD discussed the experiences of student-athletes, the impact of those experiences on mental health, and the role that the university plays:

I mean, when you're an athlete, nobody really cares about your mental health. You're there to do a job. You're there to get buckets, rebounds, or whatever. Score touchdowns or whatever. They don't really care about the shit that's going on in your life, your personal shit, problems. And you're going through a normal maturation process during this. I mean, you're 18, 19, 20 years old. You're still growing into a man you're becoming. So, just because you can put a ball through a hoop doesn't change that. And you don't have anyone there to put things into perspective for you, to give you guidance, to show you the ropes. It can get overwhelming at times. And I know a lot of guys who they

would just leave school because it was overwhelming at times. The demands of being an athlete, and the discipline it takes, and things of that nature. People criticize student-athletes but they don't understand the athlete part of it is hard as hell.

Additionally, JD reflected on the lack of compensation given to student-athletes despite the risks associated with intercollegiate sports:

I think it's kind of ridiculous, in my opinion, that we can go out there and put our bodies on the line and make the school, institution, NCAA a lot of money, and not be compensated for-- even back when I was playing, there was no compensation. You had guys who were struggling to make rent and to eat sometimes. But at the same time, the university is making millions of dollars, so. I think they're getting a little better now, but I still don't think it is where it should be. I still don't think it's equitable. The NCAA is still getting the lion share. And the coaches and all of them are still getting the lion share of any profit made off of the backs of the athletes, so.

Furthermore, previous research would support the belief that pursuing a career in sports are one of few pathways for success within the Black community and young Black males are internalizing this stereotype (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Edwards, 2000; Steinfeldt et al., 2010; Simiyu, 2012). The responses of the participants supported previous research, with BA sharing his perspective:

Most African-American players think they can make it, you know what I'm saying? Because how it's set up -- you know, obviously, how our country is set up; African-Americans have limited resources and limited types of opportunities. So most African-

Americans think I'm going to make this work whether I go to a small school or a big school.

Participants further discussed the negative perception of student-athletes held by others on campus, including how their intellectual ability and commitment to academics were questioned due to their status as athletes.

Athlete-Student Stereotype. Three participants also referenced feeling resented by faculty and non-athlete peers due to their status as athletes and the belief that they prioritized athletes over academics. Participant experiences in the classroom also reflect the presence of the macrosystem, with external cultural values and beliefs about the importance of academics driving these interactions. AC stated, "I had professors who hated and resented the fact that I was here on campus with a free education and feeling that I didn't take it seriously." BA expanded on this by making a comparison between how professors perceive White students versus how they perceive Black students:

I think the regular student who is not an African-American and is just a student there-- I think the professor already thinks, "Well, you're here for academics alone. So this is exactly why you're here." If you're there and you're Black and a student-athlete-- or they're more or less looking at you like you're only here to play the sport. And they think you're probably not going to take the class seriously.

TA also shared how the perception of student-athletes is not accurate:

I just felt that people will look at us and alienate us because we're athletes. And they just feel like we're not there to get an education. I think that's the wrong mindset. That's not

true for all athletes. Some people are really true student-athletes. But yeah, you see it on their face, how they look at you when you walk by them, and stuff like that.

Additionally, two participants shared that professors and non-athlete peers questioned their intelligence due their status as athletes. BA discussed how his identity as an athlete and the perception of him as a student-athlete were reflected in his classroom experiences:

I think there were times where if you're in an academic setting, you're viewed as a jock or being good at sports, you're not viewed as being intellectual or having well-thought-out opinions or well-thought-out facts to back up your opinions as well. If you're an athlete, they know that you're an athlete. And when you're in classes with people who don't know you, that is when you would get called on in class. You thought you had to really give the right answer, or give a well-thought-out answer, and really prove that you belong to be there in that academic setting.

Black athletic identity. All participants recalled entering college already fully immersed in their athletic identities. However, the participants also acknowledged their heightened awareness of the intersection that existed between their athletic identities and Black identities now that they were attending PWIs. It should be noted that five of six participants attended schools made up primarily of students of color prior to enrolling in college and as a result, did not identify as “Black athletes” until they arrived on campus. The macrosystem encompasses campus culture, sub-cultures, and environments influencing the development of the participants’ athletic identity. Participants described experiences at PWIs including: a) the responsibility that comes with being a Black athlete, b) the dearth of Black men on college campuses, and c) how

Black men are assumed to be athletes by their presence in the classroom. When discussing the emergence of his own Black athletic identity, AC stated:

I really didn't differentiate myself as a Black athlete until I got to college. I mean, we were really just football players before then. Most of the athletes are black. You have white teammates, but most of them are black.

Black athlete stereotype. Four participants discussed how their interactions with other people on campus were influenced by their physical presentation. They discussed how people on campus viewed them automatically as athletes because they are Black. When discussing his experiences attending school in the Midwest, BD shared, "It was unique. [Name of school omitted for confidentiality] is a school where there are not a lot of Black students. Pretty much, if you're Black and you're there, you're an athlete." BA shared his experiences about how he was perceived in the classroom:

So, if you are the only African-American in your class, I'm pretty sure your professor's like, "Oh, well, you're only here because you can shoot a basketball." So they have a preconceived notion. And whether they're able to-- whether they let that be known completely or not is a different story. Or sometimes they did. Or they would allude to it, so to speak.

Additionally, JM shared what it was like for him when interacting with other Black students on campus and having assumptions made about why he was there:

It was weird, because it wasn't that many Black people. And all the Black people pretty much hung out together. But the Black people I hung around with who weren't athletes were like, "What position do you play? When did you get here?" All that, every time, no

matter what. Everybody assumed that you were an athlete, no matter what, whether they knew you or not.

Racism. In addition to experiencing prejudice based on their identities as athletes, all but one participant described experiences of racism to varying degrees once they arrived on campus. As with their Black athletic identity, the macrosystem encompasses campus culture, sub-cultures, and environments influencing the development of their identity. Participants recalled overt acts of racism and being racially profiled while on and off campus. Additionally, two participants believed that their experiences of racism were not as severe due to their status as athletes.

Overt racism. Four participants described overt racism they experienced on campus and attributed their experiences to their status as athletes. AC recalled an experience he had his first semester on campus:

They had these skinheads on campus. They didn't go to school here, but they lived close by. And I remember one night, me and my partner – a black dude – were on campus, they called us names and started chasing us. I was faster than the wind and stronger than a mule. I don't know why I ran. I wasn't raised like that. I have never run from a fight.

AC continued by comparing his experiences of race and racism while on campus to what he experienced growing up:

Being from Richmond, being segregated mostly from white folk, I was fairly close to racism and didn't know it. It was more systematic and institutionalized. I didn't understand the systematic and the social structure of racism. I mean, we were just poor. We were just black. And everybody I knew was like this. Not some white boy calling me a nigger. I didn't experience overt racism until I got to [college].

In sharing his own experiences of racism at campus parties, JM made a connection between his Black athletic identity and racism:

It would come out when the white dudes would be drunk. The frat dudes? You'd be at their party and all of a sudden they don't want you there. All of a sudden the word "nigger" starts getting flown around, and "football playing niggers," and-- when it's only a couple of us. When it's a lot of us there, that would never happen, but when they get drunk, you hear it. You hear it, for sure. The white girls, too, when they get drunk. It just starts flying around, no hesitation.

Racial profiling. Three participants shared their experiences of being racial profiled by non-athlete peers and/or police. BD recalled many instances in which he experienced racial profiling, stating, "You go into certain stores and they follow you around, because you're Black in a city that's not black." Additionally, BA described an experience he had after moving into his dorm:

Me and my dad were moving our stuff in, so we took the elevator at the time. And obviously - you know what I'm saying? - I have stuff, so I'm coming to school there. And this girl who was moving in- she was I guess moving in on the second floor- she gets in with her mom and it's just a straight out of a movie, clutch your purse, suitcase, all of that, man. My dad is like, "Pay attention boy, you're going to have to-- you're going to have to be on your Ps and Qs and make sure everything is all right."

JM recalled a similar experience of being racially profiled his first day on campus:

I had on my regular attire. I had on some jeans, some shoes, I don't know what kind, and a sweatshirt. Probably a hoodie. Got my backpack on, and I got a map of the school. And

the first dude I walked by, I'm like, "Excuse me. Do you know where building C30 is?" The guy looks at me crazy. He's like, "You go to school here?" I'm like, "Yeah, man. It's my first day. See my backpack and my map of the school [laughter]?" And the dude's looking at me crazy and just walked away. I still remember his face. Dude looked at me like I was going to rob him.

Athletes and protective status. Two participants shared that while they did experience some racism in college, their identity as athletes protected them from having more racist experiences due to their athletic success. BD reflected on his experiences of racism and how his status as an athlete protected him:

I was from a smaller town, a small town like that. It wasn't as small, but I was used to [racism]. So, I had-- but I always, with my celebrity "status," I always-- that gave me a level of immunity to the worst of the worst of it. People would realize, "Oh, that's BD. He's not like a normal Black. He has talent. He's doing something, so we'll treat him human instead of sub-human."

Career Termination

In Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, the chronosystem is defined as the environmental events and transitions that occur throughout an individual's life. These changes can be ones that impact any of the systems within the model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The termination of one's athletic career can potentially have an impact. For example, changes having to do with family (microsystem) can have lasting effects on an individual. Similarly, a failure to have a professional career can shape the perception of an individual in the eyes of their community (macrosystem).

Career termination emerged as a theme as participants continued to share their experiences as Black student-athletes. The end of their athletic careers represented a significant life transition for all of the participants and was impacted by various factors. Participants reflected on the different circumstances that contributed to the end of their athletic careers and the feelings of knowing that their athletic careers were over.

Circumstances leading to career termination. In reflecting on their athletic careers, participants shared what ultimately prevented them from being able to continue playing their sport at the professional level. This is significant due to research suggesting that involuntary athletic career termination contributes to significantly stronger psychological distress (Wippert & Wippert, 2010). In examining their responses, participants highlighted different factors that contributed to the end of their careers, including: a) poor relationships with coaches and b) family circumstances that prevented participants from pursuing a professional sports career.

Relationships. Three participants shared that despite their aspirations to play their sport professionally, their relationships with coaches ultimately prevented them from doing so. Participants described feeling like they no longer loved the game like they once did due to interactions with their coaches (microsystem). In addition to their relationships with coaches, participants discussed the impact of family (microsystem) on the end of their athletic careers. JM discussed how the relationship with coaches impacted his desire to play his sport professionally:

He was such a dictator, it'd be his way or the highway, literally. And he was a person I respected for a lot of things, but I couldn't relate to him because he was like a robot.

Dealing with him, it was such a love-hate relationship; it kind of pushed me away from

my love of the actual sport of football, which was crazy to me because I love football more than anything.

TA reflected on how starting a family ultimately contributed to the end of his career:

I went overseas to start playing ball. I tried for a little bit, then came back home, met my wife and started having babies. That was it. When I started having kids, I shut it down. I needed to provide. I needed to get a job.

Additionally, BD reflected on his relationship with his father and their connection through sports:

I worked for six months and I started to miss basketball again. So, I started working that again. My dad was like, "You know what? Just give it one more try. If you don't like it, you can always come back to work, because you've got your degree." He was like, "You give it one more try. I really think you can go overseas and do something." I was working out. I was working out every day. Getting back in shape playing ball regularly. My father actually ended up passing away. He died from a stroke. And he had a stroke right after my 24th birthday. I was just like-- basketball was too heavy for me. I couldn't do it, because I never had done it without my father. So, I just put the ball down.

Mental Health

Similar to the theme of career termination, mental health emerged in response to the significant life transition of the participants' athletic careers coming to an end and not being able to play their sport at the professional level (chronosystem). As participants reflected on their professional aspirations and the circumstances leading to the end of their careers, the focus

shifted to the range of emotions that were experienced upon the realization that a career playing professional sports was unlikely.

Loss of identity. The termination of their athletic careers represented a sudden and major life transition for all but one participant, resulting in a loss of their athletic identity and how this inability to play their sport professionally resulted in experiencing symptoms of depression. AC recalled his feelings as his career came to an end:

I remember a rush of emotions came across me because I thought about, "Wow, I've been doing this since I was 11 years old, and this has been my whole life. I just remember going to the locker room and saying, "Damn." Everything was like, "Damn, this is the last time I'm going to make this walk. It's the last time I'm going to cut off my ankle tape here. It's the last time I'm going to--" Everything was the last. You've been working every day for the past four or five years, and now it's over. It seemed like it went by so fast.

JM reflected on the confusion that came with no longer being an athlete and not knowing what his next steps were:

There was like confusion, like, "What the hell do I do now?" Literally. I feel like I'm skilled in a lot of things but never worked a day in my life. People want experience, like yeah I got a degree. But people want people with knowledge in fields and trades. What do I know how to do besides play football? I know I can pick up things fast and do a lot. But what am I trained to do, you know what I mean? So I didn't know what to do.

Depression. All participants referenced the fact that their sport had been at the center of everything they had been doing since middle school and discussed the difficulties they experienced when trying to cope with figuring out what to do next. Five of six participants

reported experiencing symptoms related to depression (social isolation, feelings of sadness, feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest in activities) for six months to a year after their careers ended. Participants related their depression to the loss of their athletic identity and no longer being able to participate in something that had represented such a major aspect of their lives. AC described how he was affected by his sport:

I was depressed. Depressed. I'm talking about, depressed. I didn't watch football, literally, for about three years because when I turned on the games, there would always be a player who I played against in college who I destroyed. Man, there was some dark times after that, man. For 13 years I've always had something-- my whole life had been wrapped around football, and now, there was no football.

JD recalled his experiences at the end of his athletic career:

If there was a point in my life where I felt like I didn't know what my next purpose or my next move was going to be, it was definitely that time of life. I don't think people understood how severely that affected me, not being able to play the sport that I played all my life. So they didn't know really how to respond or react. I went through a period about six months to a year where I was just wasn't myself because I didn't have the outlet that I always had. I don't think they even understood what I was going through.

Protective factors. As participants discussed their mental health experiences, they were able to identify protective factors that assisted them in their transition out of athletic careers and with the development of new identities. Two protective factors that emerged were support from family and the athletic identity of the participants. BD recalled the support he received once he stopped playing basketball:

My family and friends never changed. They've always been supportive. They were there cheering when the games were on. And then, when they weren't cheering there, it was just like, "Yep. It's over. He's just him now." But, I mean, they were always there, supportive. They loved. They never changed. Family and friends, people who really care about you, are always going to be there.

JD reflected on the support he received once his career ended and how it allowed him to take his life in a different direction:

I mean, I'm very fortunate because I have people that guide me. I had some people that talked to me about going to graduate school, and applying, and doing different things like that. So I did them and one thing led to another and next thing you know, I'm in law school.

As he reflected on his experiences, AC commented on the duality of his athletic identity and how it ultimately proved to be one of his biggest protective factors:

There is nothing more gratifying than taking a man's-- in competition, taking his heart, making him not want to compete anymore because you are imposing physical pain on him. And there is nothing to replace-- there's nothing to ever replace that. But the people I'm around now, they will never feel that, never know what that means because they weren't good enough athletically to do that. They haven't done what I have done or been where I have been. So now, what used to depress me almost 25 years ago is a sense of pride.

Chapter Five - Discussion

This study explored the experiences of Black male former student-athletes. It examined the development of their athletic identities, how their experiences as Black male student-athletes influenced their sense of identity, and explored any difficulties they encountered once they were no longer able to play their sport. Due to the focus on athletic identity development, there was particular interest in exploring any mental health concerns experienced by the participants during their athletic careers and as their athletic careers came to a close. Specifically, did an overdeveloped athletic identity put participants at risk for mental health issues once they were no longer able to identify as athletes? Though previous research has separately explored athletic identity development and the experiences of Black male student-athletes, there exists a gap in the literature when examining how the experiences of Black male student-athletes reinforce their athletic identity. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature by not only exploring the experiences of Black male student-athletes and their athletic identity, but by also highlighting the impact on their mental health once their careers ended. The lived experiences of six Black male former student-athletes were captured through face-to-face interviews and the administration of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS).

Though the initial focus of this study was to explore athletic identity development among Black male former student-athletes and potential mental health concerns upon career termination, additional questions about their overall experiences as Black male student-athletes began to be answered. The responses provided by participants provided insight into how their athletic identity developed and was nurtured throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Participants provided a deeper understanding of their experiences of prejudice and racism in response to their athletic and racial identities. Furthermore, participants shared their experiences

of realizing their athletic careers were over and the extent to which their mental health was impacted as a result.

Interpretation and Connection to Literature

When examining the results of the AIMS, it became apparent that participants experienced their athletic identities differently. The inventory measures the strength and the exclusivity of athletic identity on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and a higher score on the scale represents a stronger athletic identification. The overall mean sum score for the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) was 49.33, with a possible range of scores of 10-70. Participants had an above average degree of athletic identification and considering the amount of time that had passed since being active in their athletic careers, indicates that they still maintain a strong athletic identity after the termination of their athletic careers.

Throughout the course of the interviews, themes related to the experiences of the participants began to emerge. The first theme identified in the study, athletic identity, relates to the most salient aspect of a student-athlete's identity. Previous research (Houle et al., 2010) posits that becoming involved in sports at an early age causes the identity of the individual to become heavily intertwined with their sport. All participants responded that they began playing their sport while in middle school and received positive reinforcement from family, peers, and other members of the community. The relationship between age and athletic ability is important to consider when discussing the development of one's identity. Identity development is influenced by the messages individuals receive from those in their community. When considering the participants in this study, the messages they received shifted once their athletic

ability was recognized. Furthermore, due to their athletic ability being recognized at such an early age, the athlete aspect of their identity continued to be nurtured and reinforced as they aged. In addition to the positive responses they received from their communities, participants recalled the preferential treatment (attention from others, academic support, meals) they received. The majority of participants indicated that they received preferential treatment at some point during their athletic careers which they would not have received if not for their status as athletes. This finding supports previous research in which Wenner (1995) posits that the athlete role is reinforced due to the special treatment individuals receive as a result of their athletic ability. One interesting finding of this study was the concept of “athletic privilege”. Initially, one participant referenced the concept of “athletic privilege” when discussing the preferential treatment he received as a result of his athletic identity. Two other participants made reference to their own “athletic privilege” and how it served as a protective barrier against experiences of racism. The introduction of this concept demonstrates that participants possess an awareness of how their experiences were shaped by their athletic identities and acknowledges that their “athletic privilege” protected them from experiences of racism and served to reinforce their athletic identities.

An unexpected finding from the research relates to the impact of the recruiting process on the development of athletic identity. The recruitment process can reinforce one’s athletic identity by placing significant value on an individual’s athletic identity. By celebrating their athletic ability and nurturing their desire to play professional sports, the recruitment process serves to strongly reinforce an individual’s athletic identity. However, the participant experience of the recruiting process appears to diverge from previous research that discusses the impact of recruiting on athletic identity (Adler & Adler, 1991). Only one participant was highly recruited

during high school, while the remaining participants were recruited by “smaller” Division I institutions or attended community college prior to transferring. Given how the recruitment of high school athletes is portrayed in the media, it was somewhat surprising to hear how subdued their experiences of being recruited were. One potential explanation could be related to the athletic ability of the participants. Though the participants possessed the athletic ability to participate in their sport at the intercollegiate level, one could assume that they did not possess the additional skills needed to be recruited by larger Division I institutions. Despite not being recruited by “bigger” schools, the participants still identified strongly with their athletic identity. While being highly recruited can serve to reinforce an individual’s athletic identity, not being highly recruited did not appear to impact the athletic identity of the participants.

One of the more notable findings of this study is the participants’ experiences of prejudice and racism during college and the intersection of their athletic and racial identity. Prior to enrolling in college, the majority of participants attended schools comprised predominantly of students of color. This is important considering that all participants attended predominantly white institutions in college. Participants became more aware of their Black athletic identity upon enrolling in college and their experiences were shaped by the interactions they had with faculty, non-athlete peers, coaches, and the surrounding community. Participants acknowledged that the prejudice they experienced was in response to the intersection of their athletic and racial identity. Due to their Black identity, participants were assumed to be athletes. Additionally, due to their athletic identity, it was assumed that participants were in school solely to further their professional aspirations and lacked intelligence. The assumptions held about the participants influenced the interactions they had with faculty and non-athlete peers and reinforced the athletic identity of the participants.

The presence of Black men on college campuses introduced stereotypes related to how Black men on college campuses are viewed. Participants recalled the lack of Black men on college campuses and how that led faculty and non-athlete peers to assume that they were athletes given that the majority of the sports teams were made up of individuals that identified as Black. Previous research posits that Black males may be internalizing the stereotype of Black males as athletes (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Based on the interactions participants had with White faculty and non-athlete peers, it would appear as though Black males are not the only group who believe this stereotype to be true. History has demonstrated how the beliefs held by others can influence how one views themselves. During the 1940s, Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted experiments in which Black children were asked questions about a white doll and a black doll; which doll did they want to play with, which one is nicer, which one looks bad, which one has a better color, etc.. The responses of the children indicated a clear preference for the white doll and exposed internalized racism among Black children as a result of segregation and messages received about their Black identity (Clark & Clark, 1939). To an extent, Black male student-athletes experience something similar in regard to their athletic identity. The assumptions made about their status as athletes, the prejudice that the participants were exposed to as a result of their athlete role, the racism they experienced as Black athletes, the assumptions made about their character, and questions about their intelligence are all messages that are internalized and reinforce an individual's athletic identity by stripping away an individual's value beyond their athletic ability.

The experiences of racism endured by the participants are relevant due to the current state of intercollegiate athletics. Though progress has been made in this country concerning cultural acceptance of differences, questions regarding the value of Black lives and the experiences of the

oppressed in the United States remain. As the revenue generated by college football and basketball continues to increase, Black communities will continue be exploited as young Black males are lured by the promise of athletic success. There exists a cycle of Black males pursuing careers in professional sports only to be cast aside once their eligibility is exhausted, their bodies fail them, or as a result of their failure to abide by certain rules and regulations. Participants described being the target of overt acts of racism by non-athlete peers and instances in which they were racially profiled by the surrounding community. The experiences of the participants beg the question; are the experiences of racism and prejudice endured in the pursuit of professional aspirations? As participants reflected on their experiences, the manner in which they shared their stories was significant. Absent were the pain, hurt, and disappointment one would expect to feel as a result of prejudice and racism, instead replaced by experiences shared in a way that makes one wonder if these experiences were expected to some degree. This expectation of discrimination was present in another study of Black male student-athletes (Beamon, 2014).

In continuing to explore the participants' experiences of racism, another interesting finding in the research reintroduces the concept of "athletic privilege". Some of the participants made reference to the ways their athletic identity served as a protective factor against experiences of racism. Specifically, they referenced the "celebrity" that comes with being a student-athlete. These findings differ from previous research which found one's status as a high-profile athlete did not protect them from experiencing racism at Division I institutions (Beamon, 2012). However, these findings do correlate with research related to sports fandom and team identification (Wann & Pierce, 2005; Earnhardt, Haridakis, & Hugenberg, 2012). Essentially, fans with higher levels of sports identification are more likely to experience positive emotions when their favorite team is performing well. Conversely, they will engage in more anger-based

coping behaviors if their favorite team is not performing well. Due to the individual and team success experienced by the participants, it makes sense that they believed their status as an athlete protected them from experiencing anger-based coping in the form of racism from non-athlete peers.

As participants came to the end of their athletic careers, they were forced to contend with the harsh realization that they would not be continuing to play their sport at the professional level. Despite the fact that less than 2% of student-athletes will go on to play their sport professionally (NCAA, 2018), all participants indicated their previous desire to play their sport at the professional level and believed it to be a likely outcome once their athletic ability was recognized. Previous research posits that student-athletes who fail to have a professional career in athletics may be at risk of psychological distress (Brown & Potrac, 2009). The majority of participants reported experiencing symptoms of depression lasting for six months to a year once their athletic careers ended. Participants highlighted a loss of identity related their failure to pursue their sport professionally as the source of their distress. The findings of this study provide evidence to support the claims of Brown and Potrac (2009). The extent to which participants experienced symptoms of depression is meaningful as it provides insight into a topic that is not present in the literature. Within the Black community, topics related to mental health are not commonly discussed. Similarly, conversations about mental health are not often had within the athletic community. It is significant that the participants, who identify as Black male former student-athletes, were willing to share their own struggles related to depression. Participants recalled not feeling as though their experiences were understood by friends and family. However, it is not known to what extent participants attempted to express how they were feeling to those around them.

In sharing how they coped with their loss of identity and symptoms of depression, participants stressed the importance of maintaining relationships with former teammates. This finding supports previous research regarding the importance of group membership on an individual's self-esteem, with groups providing individuals with stability, meaning, purpose, direction, and having positive implications on an individual's mental health (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Haslam et al., 2009). A lack of stability, meaning, purpose, and direction were all present in participant responses regarding the end of their athletic careers. However, they were able to achieve stability, meaning, purpose, and direction through their relationships with other former student-athletes. The support received from other former student-athletes served to validate and normalize their experiences, while the unconditional support from friends and family assisted participants in recognizing they held value beyond their athletic ability. The unconditional support from friends and family, along with positive messages regarding academics, allowed the participants to develop other aspects of their identity. This is reflected in all participants graduating from college, with two participants pursuing and completing graduate degrees.

Previous research (Moreland-Bishop, 2009) found that student-athletes would continue to be identified as athletes by the community and reported that it was considered a barrier in terms of transitioning out of their athletic careers. Beamon (2012) found that many of the Black male student-athletes in her sample resented the emphasis others placed on their athletic identity at the end of their athletic careers. However, the responses of the participants in this study deviated from previous research in that regard. Though participants indicated on the AIMS and in their interviews that others continued to identify them as athletes, none of the participants viewed it as a barrier to their transition out of athletic careers or resented the emphasis others placed on their athletic identity. This difference highlights the importance of the social support one receives as

their athletic careers come to an end. The responses participants received from their community were overwhelmingly positive and demonstrated to the participants that they held value beyond their athletic ability.

Implications

The findings from this study provide implications for individuals who are committed to working with the Black male student-athlete population and supporting them as they transition out of their athletic careers. By voicing their lived experiences, the participants were able to provide insight into how their athletic identity developed and continued to be reinforced through experiences of prejudice and racism. Participants also highlighted the mental health concerns that exist for Black male student-athletes if they are unable to pursue a career in professional sports. Previous research has explored the topics of athletic identity, experiences of racism, and academic success in the Black male student-athlete population (Beamon, 2014; Bimper et al., 2013). However, there exists very little research regarding the mental health implications of this population similar to what has been presented here. By engaging participants in a conversation about how their experiences impacted their mental health, this study has highlighted an area of growth for clinical practice.

Among clinicians, there exists a lack of understanding regarding the culture of intercollegiate athletics and the demands placed on student-athletes, which differ significantly from the general student population (Parham, 1993; Houle et al., 2010). As has been described above, student-athletes must adhere to team dynamics, athletic department and university policies, NCAA rules and regulations, while also living up to their academic responsibilities and attempting to maintain some semblance of a social life and familial responsibility. For Black male student-athletes, they must contend with the former, while also navigating through racist

and prejudicial experiences during their college careers. As their athletic careers come to an end, they are at risk for experiencing psychological distress due to the loss of their identity. Striving for cultural competence in this area is similar to striving for cultural competence as it relates to race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. As cultural competence increases, more effective ways of understanding the intersectionality of the varying identities that student-athletes possess and assisting student-athletes transition into post-athletic careers will be developed.

Developing strategies that build relationships between university counseling centers and athletic departments could prove to be beneficial to the Black male student-athlete population. Williams (2005) provided a similar recommendation by suggesting that counselors within student affairs contact coaches and athletic administrators regarding the mental health counseling services available on campus. However, this researcher recommends that counselors and psychologists located within university counseling centers work jointly with athletic departments to inform each other about the needs of the student-athlete population. Counselors and psychologists have received training related to identity development, sports psychology, and career counseling that could be useful when providing services to Black male student-athletes prior to the end of their athletic careers.

The findings in this study demonstrate that there is a need to develop programs that will provide support to student-athletes. As participants shared their experiences of their attempts to cope with the end of their athletic careers, there was no mention of their school's involvement in assisting them transition into the next phase of their lives. Participants were left to figure out their next steps on their own. Programs that are geared towards providing mentorship, leadership skills, career development, and psychological growth could prove to be beneficial for student-athletes throughout their careers. These programs could potentially teach student-athletes that the

skills that have made them successful athletes (work ethic, teamwork, leadership, etc.) are skills that are transferrable to other areas of their life. The University of Southern California (USC), Southern Methodist University (SMU), the University of Iowa, and Maryland have developed similar programs to assist their student-athletes as they transition out of their athletic careers. The continued development of programs that include a focus on social justice and mental health could help address the concerns discussed in this study.

Limitations

When considering a study, it is important to explore the limitations that the study presents. A limitation of this study involves the recruitment of the sample. Due to the reliance on interpersonal relationships, it proved difficult to find participants that met the desired sample criteria. Despite participating at the Division I level, the schools attended by participants differed in size and resources. Half of the participants attended universities that hold membership in “power conferences” which are athletic conferences at the highest level of Division I athletics. These conferences and their membership schools generate millions of dollars in sports revenue. The remaining participants attended universities outside of these conferences. The difference between these institutions is often in the amount of revenue they are able to generate through sports and the resources they are able to commit to intercollegiate athletics. Not all participants were heavily recruited in high school, with half of the participants choosing to attend community college as a result. Due to all participants being over the age of 30, significant time had passed since they were fully immersed in their athletic careers. Either interviewing a younger group of participants or interviewing participants at the time of career termination could yield different results. The racial identity of the researcher could also be viewed as a limitation of the study as

the research called for the researcher to develop one's own interpretations of another person's perspectives, views, and thoughts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are present in the current study. Future research with participants who were more heavily recruited in high school could potentially provide more insight into how the recruitment process has impacted the development of their athletic identity. The inclusion of participants that played their sport at more high-profile Division I institutions could also yield different experiences of preferential treatment and professional aspirations. Additional areas of future research include exploring the impact of masculinity on help-seeking behaviors among Black male student-athletes. Further exploring Black male identity and experiences of oppression as a potential protective factor for Black male student-athletes attending predominantly white institutions could also be beneficial. As it relates to Black male student-athletes and mental health, further assessing the attitudes that Black male student-athletes and their families have about mental health could provide useful information regarding the likelihood to engage in help-seeking behaviors.

Appendix A

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS)

Instructions: This questionnaire is designed to measure people's perceptions about their athletic role. There is no right or wrong answer. Use the scale below to respond to each statement. On your answer sheet, fill in the number that best describes how you feel.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree

1. I consider myself an athlete.
2. I have many goals related to sports.
3. Most of my friends are athletes.
4. Sport is the most important part of my life.
5. I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.
6. I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.
7. Other people see me mainly as an athlete.
8. I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport.
9. Sport is the only important thing in my life.
10. I would be very depressed if I were injured and could not compete in sport.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- How old were you when you began playing your sport?
- When did you or your family realize that you might have the potential to play sports at a high level?
- Do you think that people treated you differently because you excelled at sports?
 - If so, what did they do?
- How heavily recruited were you?
 - What was the recruiting process like?
- Where did you go to school?
- What was it like being a college athlete?
- Did you experience any racism or prejudice while on campus?
 - If so, how did you cope with that?
- When you think about yourself, what do you most identify with?
- When other people think about you, how do you think they identify you?
- How did you feel at your last college game?
- What have you been doing since your last college athletic experience ended?
- Did you plan to continue to pursue your sport past the collegiate level?
 - If so, to what degree?
- Was not playing sports professionally something that you ever thought about?
- When did you know that your career was over?
 - What was that experience like?
- What was the response from your community when you came home after college?
- What, if anything, do you miss being a part of the sport?
- Do you still see your teammates?
 - If so, so you still hang out with them?
- Had you thought about what you might do following college?
- Did you attend career development programming?
 - If so, how many programs did you attend?

Appendix C

Table 1

*Athletic Identity**Measurement Scale (AIMS)*

Participant	Score
AC	65
JM	63
TA	56
JD	45
BA	44
BD	23

Note. The maximum score is 70.

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