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The Diversity in Creating a New Dream: A Black Man's Journey from Sports to Human Resources

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Cover Page Footnote

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The Diversity in Creating a New Dream: A Black Man's Journey from Sports to Human Resources

Abstract: Issues of diversity explores a variety of social, political, and educational issues as it relates to the education of individuals in a culturally diverse world. Through the process of reading, reflection, and discussion, individuals are able to learn about trends and challenges individuals face related to their experiences and cultural backgrounds. This article explores the author's narrative interview with Cameron (a pseudonym) as he discusses his life experiences on his path as an athlete and as a professional. This article explores Cameron's experiences and obstacles he overcame to transition from athletics to the workforce. Additionally, this article investigates the issues of diversity as it relates to stereotypes he had to endure as a Black Man and athlete. This article will recap our firsthand experiences and reflections through our interview.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Diversity, Athletics, Workforce, Culture, Reflection

Introduction

Diversity is an essential topic within the research field that defines an individual or community's differences (Thomas, 1996). These differences include age, race, personality, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, ethnicity, religion, and educational level (Cunningham & Fink, 2006; Thomas, 1996; Timmerman, 2000). Self-reflection and classification of oneself could lead to stereotyping oneself and others (Timmerman, 2000). A *stereotype* is a term that defines the belief one has in a particular group (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981; Jussim et al., 2015). Typically, these beliefs are inaccurate community perceptions (Jussim

et al., 2015). As it relates to sports, stereotyping can impact players' production ability or quality of performance towards individual and team goals (Timmerman, 2000). Diversity and stereotypes are concepts individuals face not only within the athletic field but within academics and the workplace. Within academia, one study noted a gender gap in academic excellence (Marcén et al., 2020). Women tend to graduate at higher rates than men, while men participate in more sports than females (Goldin et al., 2006; Marcén et al., 2020). Within the workplace, Black men experience higher layoff rates and lower salaries than their White male counterparts (Couch & Fairlie, 2010; DeSilver, 2013; Pitcon et al., 2018).

The concepts of diversity and stereotypes research explore a variety of issues individuals face within the athletic, academic, and workplace environments. This article explores a qualitative, narrative study through an interview on the participant's experiences of diversity and stereotypes through their academic, athletic, and professional careers. The primary question this study seeks to understand further is: What issues of diversity and stereotyping did Cameron face as a student, athlete, and professional? The article begins by reviewing the literature on diversity and stereotypes. Next, the article discusses the methodology of the single case study. Then, the article explores the participant's experiences through the narrative interview process. Next, the discussion explores how the participant handled diversity and stereotypes through their journey and what implications may have resulted. Finally, the article concludes with the author's reflections. Pseudonyms were used for all participants' within this study.

Review of Related Literature

Issues in Diversity

Diversity is an important topic within communities and across disciplines (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; Thomas, 1996). Issues in diversity deal with an issue that impacts a group or

groups (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; Thomas, 1996). Typically, the categories or variables of diversity include gender, ethnicity, race, class, exceptionality, religion, cultural background, personality, and sexual orientation (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016; Cunningham & Fink, 2006; Thomas, 1996; Timmerman, 2000). The sociology field believes an individual is influenced by group norms, behaviors, patterns, and environments (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016).

Gender diversity has been prominent among the behaviors and actions expected of males over females (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016). This diversity This disparity exists within academia and the workplace (Gruber et al., 2020). Gender role expectations dictate perception and actions across various cultures and societies (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016). Male and females have experienced diversity in access and success due to racial and ethnic backgrounds (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). Overall, environments that focus on diversity inclusion experience higher participation, satisfaction, and retention from diverse individuals (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000).

Race, a socially created construct, provides diversity among individuals (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016). Diversity in a race can include the following categories: Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016). Depending on their upbringing and familial environment, individuals can identify as one or more races (Banks & McGee Banks, 2016). Diversity can sometimes be confused as discrimination and promote stereotypes towards specific individuals or groups (Smith & Joseph, 2010).

Stereotypes

Diverse environments can breed bias, generating stereotypes and discrimination against individuals (Fiske, 1998). Stereotypes impact the way individuals see themselves and others may treat them, which continues the perpetuation of the stereotype cycle (Ellemers,

2018). *Stereotypes* are a generalized understanding of an individual or group that results in associated stigmas (Smith & Joseph, 2010).

Among Black males, stereotypes can create threatening environments (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018). *Stereotype threat* is a term in which bias creates a threatening, hostile or fearful lens of an individual or group (McGee & Martin, 2011). These environments influence black males by inciting negative feelings due to stereotypes and increasing stress and pressures (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Harper, 2015). Strategies to overcome stereotypes include recognizing stereotyping and developing communication skills to limit threats encountered (Harper, 2015; McGee & Martin, 2011).

Methodology

This qualitative narrative study aims to understand the experiences of diversity and stereotypes of the participant as he progressed through his academic, athletic, and professional careers. The participant, Cameron, was selected to answer the study's research questions. The primary question this study seeks to understand further is: What issues of diversity and stereotyping did Cameron face as a student, athlete, and professional? The study aims to deepen the understanding of how an individual can use their experiences to preserve through various life obstacles as it relates to diversity and stereotypes. The researcher intends for the study's results to inform others with similar backgrounds and strategies to overcome the same situations.

Research Positionality

As the researcher, I identify as a young Black woman who has participated in collegiate and amateur sports. I have held various positions as an organizational member, active player, and volunteer in various sports. Through observation and discussion, I grappled with understanding how specific minority individuals were able to excel at various sporting levels, from high school

to professional. Additionally, my personal experiences influenced the approach and design of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I believe that environment can lead individuals to react a certain way when facing diversity and stereotypes. My belief is rooted in a constructivist worldview, where individuals find meaning and understanding through their world lens (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

The study was designed as a qualitative narrative study. Qualitative research allows for questions and research plans to change depending on the data collected by participants' (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher is an essential instrument in data collection from participants through interviews, observations, focus groups, and the examination of documents (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative studies examine an individual's life histories, oral histories, and interpretive biographies and experiences (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The researcher utilized the stories told by the participant and documents and online materials related to the participant's life to find important themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

Data Collection

Data collection strategies included three semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews focus on open-ended, non-leading questions that seek detailed insight into a participants' experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010). Each interview took between 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The researcher used semi-structured interview questions to gather data on the participant's experiences within their academic, athletic, and professional careers. The questions were divided into the following categories: demographic & family, pre-and professional basketball, and human resources profession. I collected, analyzed, and categorized

the data to identify themes and trends of the participant's experiences related to diversity and stereotypes. A pseudonym was used to protect the participant's identity and anonymity. All data were stored on a password-protected computer drive that only the researcher could access.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures utilized in this study shed light on the participant's experiences throughout their academic, athletic, and professional careers related to diversity and stereotypes. Data analysis within qualitative research focuses on describing the participants' detailed experiences by organizing, compiling, and preparing the data into themes and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative analysis was conducted as this type of analysis explores the stories within the data (Bergin, 2018). A narrative analysis allows the researcher to understand the participants' perspectives, surroundings, and worldviews relating to the study questions (Bergin, 2018).

Findings

Foundation: Meet the Family

Cameron was born in Virginia. He grew up in a single-parent household with his mother, Gabrielle, and younger sister, Keeyah. His mother's family was born and raised in Virginia. Gabrielle attended high school and a few years at the local community college. This brief time in higher education did not hinder instilling a sense of education in her children. Gabrielle wanted the best for her children, so she ensured they always had 100% for their studies and grades. Outside of traditional education, she provided for her family by any means necessary; she held multiple jobs simultaneously. It is Gabrielle to whom Cameron and Keeyah attributed their hard work and ethics.

Cameron is the oldest sibling of two. He was born in May 1975, while Keeyah was born in October 1976. While Cameron lives in Maryland, Keeyah still resides in Virginia. Keeyah did not take the traditional path toward education. She went straight into the workforce after graduating high school. It was her mother's work ethic, as a single parent, that she applied to her own life. Keeyah had a series of jobs, which included Post Office Secretary, Krispy Kreme, and Giant, after graduating. Currently, she works as a full-time bus driver for the local Virginia School District and part-time at Walmart. Like her mother, she provided for her family, which consisted of her two daughters.

Progression: The Basketball Life

After attending Homer L. Ferguson High School and graduating in 1994, Cameron continued his studies at Saint Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia. Saint Paul's College was a private, historically Black college that opened on September 24th, 1888 (Saint Paul University, n.d.). Due to financial difficulties and accreditation issues, it closed on June 30th, 2013 (Saint Paul University, n.d.). Cameron went to play on their basketball team. He explained he was "red-shirted my freshman year, meaning I was a non-active member on the team." From 1995 to 1999, he made his mark at Saint Paul's athletically. Cameron stated he was "a four-year starter for the Saint Paul's College Tigers. I finished my career at Saint Paul's with 2,056 points and 955 rebounds – averaging 19.6 points and 9.0 rebounds a game." He was named CIAA player of the year three times. Cameron would practice with Bryant Stith, an NBA player for the Denver Nuggets, during the off-season between 1994-1999.

Amid this success, Cameron knew he was attending Saint Paul's to receive his education and a degree. He was not a top student but made sure to carve time for his studies. Cameron did a decent job balancing his responsibilities between his academic and athletic careers. Cameron

explained, "I would coordinate my class times to meet my practice and game schedule, as well as make time to go home and see family in Virginia." He had the goal of graduating and ensured his actions assisted that goal. If he needed assistance in his courses, he contacted professors and other students and attended study hall. In 1999, Cameron graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice.

In 1999, he was the 51st pick in the second round of the NBA draft just after graduation. He shared, "the Vancouver Grizzlies drafted me, and I played with the Grizzlies during their summer league until the season started." As is common knowledge, teams make many cuts before deciding on the final team for the season, after the draft. Cameron did not take this as a loss but continued to pursue his basketball career.

Cameron played the 1999-2000 season for St. Louis Swarm. St. Louis Swarm was a professional basketball team, a member of the International Basketball League (IBL), based in St. Charles, Missouri, from 1999 to 2001 (St. Louis Swarm, n.d.). After his first season with the Swarm, the team traded him to the Richmond Rhythm. The Richmond Rhythm was another professional basketball team based in Richmond, Virginia, a member of the International Basketball League (IBL) (Richmond Rhythm, n.d.). After a year with the Richmond Rhythm, Cameron went overseas to play for Krka. *Krka* is a professional basketball team based in Novo Mesto, Slovenia. Krka competed in the Slovenian Basketball League and the ABA League. After his experience overseas, he returned home and played with the Fayetteville Patriots.

It was a game night during the 2002 season. Cameron was suited and ready to play for the Fayetteville Patriots. The Fayetteville Patriots were one of the eight charter franchises for the National Basketball Development League (NBDL) (Fayetteville Patriots, n.d.). The NBDL is now known as the D-League. Cameron shared that "the fans were at an all-time high, and he

knew it would be a good night. The game has heated, and the points were close." He continued that the Patriots set to run their back-pick play that had been successful against the team in previous games.

Cameron rolled towards the basket to prepare for the alley-op the Guard was about to set up for him. He explained, "as I jumped up for the ball to finish the alley-op, the opposing player backed into my knee, and I felt a shift. I immediately fell to the floor in agonizing pain, clutching my knee." As the trainers ran to his aid, Cameron honestly did not know what was in store, the final verdict being that he tore his ACL in his left knee. His torn ACL did not impede his passion and drive to pursue his dreams. Cameron completed surgery and worked hard within rehab to return to the game he loved. He returned to the game overseas to play international basketball. Cameron was cleared for his return; however, the swelling in his knee prevented teams in China from preserving his spot on the team. This obstacle proved too great, and he returned home by the end of 2003.

Destination: Star Athlete to Human Resources

Cameron was supported in his basketball dreams until he left the game in 2003. After that, he held a series of jobs within Virginia before landing a job in Maryland. He explained, "none of the positions I held in Virginia were truly impactful until I moved to Maryland." When he moved to Maryland, he was an administrator for a youth detention center. This position fits well within the degree he earned in criminal justice. Cameron shared that he was "responsible for supervising, monitoring, and mentoring the youth at the center." Additionally, he utilized this time to engage in pick-up basketball games with the kids on occasion.

After a few years, Cameron landed a new position with the local city government in the Human Resources field. He made this position and fielded his new career; he moved through the

ranks as a Human Resource Specialist. He shared, "I was extremely blessed and grateful to land this position. I knew that a government job would provide me with a career." Although human resources were not the field his degree was in, Cameron made sure to learn his job efficiently and effectively. He utilized the transferrable skills he gained through his athletic career and educational studies to develop success. Since then, he has been excelling in this role. Cameron has climbed his way up the ranks to be considered a senior professional in the department. He enjoys meeting new people, learning new processes, and overall providing a pathway for others to start new careers, as he did.

Discussion

Overcoming: Stereotypes of a Black Athlete

Throughout Cameron's story, the theme of Black males overcoming stereotypes was a common motif within his experiences. McCreary and Wright define a stereotype as

a relatively fixed, simplistic overgeneralization of something or something that is not necessarily true or based on facts. Stereotyping is negative when the unfavorable characteristics of the target groups or things are emphasized...historically, stereotypes held about African Americans have been negative, rigid, and inaccurate (McCreary & Wright, 1997, p. 26).

Studies and research have shown that African Americans, especially males, have a history of negative racial and gender stereotypes (Harper, 2015; McCreary & Wright, 1997). The negative racial and gender stereotypes that Black men experience exist within educational spaces (Bell et al., 2020; Harper, 2015). Research has also shown that these stereotypes against Black Males influence their ability to gain employment in the workforce (Pedulla, 2014; Smith & Joseph, 2010; Wingfield, 2007). Regarding Cameron, he was a Black male who was seen as an athlete in

his early years. No one honestly had other plans or goals for his life. When he had his injury, Cameron felt like all the support he gained through the years vanished outside his family. As a stereotype, Cameron should have become a washed-up athlete who could not land a corporate or professional job. Instead, Cameron used his skills and degree to land various professional roles, eventually landing a career in human resources.

Stereotypes are seen in the workforce for Black males and may have followed them from college as athletes. Cameron mentioned during his undergraduate career that he was not the best student. Given his athletic accolades, one could assume the pressure to complete his degree with honors was limited. Instead, everyone focused on his athletic abilities and making it to the National Basketball Association (NBA) league. The research examines the experiences of stereotypes and racial discrimination and their impact on African American college athletes (Fuller, 2017; Harper, 2015). Typically, these experiences are seen through stereotype threat, which explains that disidentification is produced when students are faced with confirming possible stereotypes about their academic achievement (Fuller, 2017; Harper, 2015).

Cameron could have succumbed to this belief that he would make it in the NBA and, therefore, not need his academic degree. He could have solely focused on basketball and not made room for his studies. However, stereotype management is challenging the idea of stereotype threat. Stereotype management explains possible positive outcomes or effects on African American students and athletes when faced with stereotypes and discrimination (Fuller, 2017; McGee & Martin, 2011). In Cameron's case, he overcame his stereotype and put in the work to complete his studies. Those skills helped him when he pursued his career endeavors. Cameron positively used these items to create the best life after completing his athletic career.

Transition: From Basketball Athlete to Human Resource Specialist

The transition from a full-time athlete to a full-time working professional can be strenuous for an individual. Being an athlete and excelling in a sport has been an avenue of social mobility for Black males (Hawkins & Baker, 2016; Mesner & Sabo, 1994). Additionally, being an athlete is seen as more successful than academic achievement (Hawkins & Baker, 2016; Mesner & Sabo, 1994) when an individual is exceptionally skilled with talent. However, success is not always viewed on both fronts for these individuals.

Typically, Black males experience challenges making it into professional sports, obtaining a degree, or finding meaningful employment (Hawkins & Baker, 2016; McGee & Martin, 2011; Smith & Joseph, 2010). With studies showing the low performance of male athletes in sports like basketball, it is clear why there would be difficulties in individuals transitioning from professional sports to the workforce (Cooper & Hall, 2016; Sadker & Zittleman, 2016). This lack of academic preparation or lack of obtaining a degree can adversely affect individuals obtaining a job if professional sports do not work out (Cooper & Hall, 2016). A few causes could aid this lack of preparation, including student focus on their studies, societal focus on student-athletes being focused on their academics before sports first, and resources for athletes to know there is more to them than their sport becoming a professional in it.

Cameron was not an A-plus student; therefore, it may have appeared that he was not reaching his full potential with his education. It could be assumed that if Cameron put down his basketball, he would have more time for his studies to become an honors student. As a student-athlete, Cameron took the necessary steps to receive assistance in his studies, a choice many student-athletes have experienced while in college. Academics and sports are essential to completing a degree, and the drive and persistence he carried with him to enter the workforce. Because of his athletic career, abilities, and grades, it could have seemed that Cameron would

not have become the Human Resources Professional he is today, overcoming self-doubt, stereotypes, and fear of transition to create his professional career.

Implications

Cameron's experiences throughout college, his professional basketball career, and his professional career provide a detailed description of racial and gender diversity themes. Due to our prior rapport, Cameron seemed comfortable in sharing his experiences. He enjoyed reviewing photographs from his time on various basketball teams. He did not allow the racial and gender diversity issues of stereotypes and stigmas of Black male athletes to stop him from being a good student and becoming a successful professional in the workplace.

As a Black male attending an HBCU and playing basketball, Stereotypically, Cameron was not set up to exude academic success. He explained that he was always seen as just a basketball player and only attended school to play. Although his initial decision to attend college was to continue his basketball career, that was not his only goal at college. Cameron wanted to earn his degree and worked hard to achieve it. Instead of being the kind of athlete who always asked others to complete their work, He sought out help from professors and study hall and never missed a session. If Cameron had questions about his work, he would always speak up. Cameron explained that he did not want to be another stereotype of another Black male-only attending college to playing sports; he wanted to get his investment back from the education. Of all the lessons his mother Gabrielle taught him, being another statistic was not one of them. This idea was one of the driving factors why he did not attend college, like Hampton University, near his hometown. His mother wanted to ensure he could experience other geographical areas besides where he grew up.

Becoming another statistic ideology followed Cameron from college through his professional basketball career and his professional career as well. It is effortless to say that Cameron could have given up once released from the Grizzlies. He could have quit basketball and pursued other interests but stuck with it. It is easy to say that Cameron could have given up once the ACL tore, but he stuck with it. Moreover, it is effortless to say that he could have given up on doing more once his basketball career ended, but he found something else. Cameron could have moved home and become one of those athletes that had to live on others to survive. However, he used his smarts and his degree to move away from home to obtain employment. He continued to persist, learn, and network to land the career he is in today. Ultimately, he followed the stereotype management idea versus the stereotype threat idea to overcome all stereotypes and stigmas against him as a Black male athlete and an athlete who transitioned into the workforce.

Cameron's story can motivate other male athletes who find themselves in the same position. Cameron can mentor other males in athletics to explain that sports should not be the ultimate goal in life. Besides sports, individuals should have other goals or backup plans if a professional career in sports does not go as planned. Although Cameron should have had more professional years playing ball or had been honored into the CIAA Hall of Fame for the records broken at Saint Paul's College, he had a backup plan. He made sure that he received his degree to use it as a steppingstone later in life. Cameron made that shift into the workforce because of his experiences traveling domestically and abroad and obtaining his degree. His story proves that no matter the gender or racial diversity, an individual can achieve and exceed expectations. One must grind towards their goal and create opportunities through dedication, hard work, perseverance, and motivation.

Personal Reflection

Initially, I had biased opinions of Cameron regarding being a college athlete, a professional athlete, and his academic success. Like traditional stereotypes, he would not have time to focus on his academics since he was achieving in athletics. He mentioned going to school during the initial meetings, but we did not go in-depth until the full interview. I felt he may have taken the easy route to complete his studies based on initial conversations. It seemed that basketball and playing professional ball were essential. To my surprise, Cameron was full of intellect, knowledge, and experience. His experiences pursuing professional basketball allowed him to travel across the country and abroad (Italy and China). Those experiences gave Cameron a rich education about different people, cultures, traditions, and locations. He was able to network and advocate for himself regarding his work ethic, strengths, and things he could bring to the table. Because of his journey, he can connect with many youths with the same goal and truly inspire them to be more than their sport. Cameron brings first-hand experiences to youth pursuing the same professional athletics goals.

This experience impacted my personal and professional life immensely. I was able to walk in another person's shoes and understand life through their lens and experiences. This type of research that opens vulnerability, compassion, and empathy through exploring and researching an individual's experience is rich in providing a diversity of thought, meaning, and understanding. By the end of the experience, I could bond with Cameron over his experiences. This interview allowed the researcher to ask questions about navigating various places and people. The conversation allows the reader to understand how his experiences have molded him into the man he is today. Although there are thoughts of more he could have accomplished, all his experiences have led him to where he needed to be in life, which is the best lesson/takeaway one can receive.

Cameron brought racial and gender diversity to his African American male experiences. He overcame typical stereotypes and stigmas that Black males experience in their daily lives. He was able not to become another negative statistic but a positive one that shows it is possible to pursue and excel in athletics and academics. His story and experiences are one of hard work, perseverance, and creating opportunities, qualities his mother Gabrielle instilled in him throughout his childhood and adult life.

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