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The “Black Middle-Class Toolkit” as a Framework for Understanding the Cultural Implications of Recreational Running

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ABSTRACT

Despite Black women having disproportionately low rates of physical activity, the number of Black Americans who participate in non-professional, recreational running is on the rise. Scant research attention has been given to Black women who run and challenge the stereotypes about their health and bodies. Likewise, most previous research in this area has focused on the health aspects of physical activity, rather than the sociocultural components specific to middle-class Blacks. Using life story interviews, this study examines middle-class Black women's experiences participating in this predominantly white, middle-class activity. The life story excerpts presented in this article are based on the narratives of three women who are part of an ongoing study of middle-class Black women who run. An analysis of their life stories revealed that in addition to losing weight and relieving stress, by participating in this activity they were able to develop their “[B]lack middle-class toolkit” to include recreational running and its associated lifestyle components. Their running narratives exemplify three types of identities in the Black middle-class toolkit: 1) public identities; 2) status-based identities; and 3) race and class-based identities. The themes that emerged in this analysis contribute to a limited but growing literature on middle-class Blacks' experiences, using a cultural framework to better understand some of the latent functions of becoming a recreational runner.

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Introduction

Running—particularly non-competitive, recreational running—is important to study because of its mounting popularity as an activity for exercise and leisure. This can be credited in part to its growing inclusivity over the years. It was not until 1972 that the first woman competed in a marathon (Lendrum 2015), but by 2016 about 63 percent of those participating in races were women (Running USA 2016a). Recreational running has also flourished because of the burgeoning participants of amateur-level athleticism. Before the end of the 1960s, only those who had a chance of winning could sign-up to participate (Cooper 1992). During the mid-1970s, The New York City Marathon—one of the biggest races in the United States—took strides to make participating possible for people of all ability levels. This race was one of the first to give medals and t-shirts to all finishers and to record the times of all of the runners rather than just the fastest individuals (Cooper 1992). The New York City Marathon fostered a change in the culture of road races. Most races went from being exceedingly competitive to events that hypothetically any able-bodied individual could take part in for reasons unrelated to winning (Cooper 1992). Now, participating in road races is more popular than ever: between 1990 and 2013, road race finisher totals rose steeply from 5 million to more than 19 million (Running USA 2016b).

The changed culture of recreational participation in road races is reflected in the commonality of distances shorter than the traditional marathon (26.2 miles). According to Running USA (2016a), the

half marathon is now the most popular race distance followed by the 10k and 5k races. The popularity of these shorter distances is illustrative of the demand for more races of accessible distances. The focus for many of those participating in these events has shifted since the 1960s and early 1970s as more individuals are focused on merely crossing the finish line (Running USA 2014).

Although the majority of race participants in the United States are white (Running USA 2016a), the growing number of Black Americans who are taking part is notable—particularly because Black Americans have one of the lowest rates of weekly physical activity of any racial group (Schiller et al. 2012). By 2016, the percentage of Black recreational runners was up to 8 percent from 1.6 percent in 2011 (Running USA 2016a). Black women runners have recently been featured by various media outlets because of the creation and rapid growth of running groups such as Black Girls Run! in 2009 and the National Black Marathoners Association, founded in 2004 (Marcus 2013). Black Girls Run!, a national organization that promotes fitness and healthy lifestyles among Black women, started with 15 to 20 members in Atlanta. At present, there are at least 150,000 active members throughout the United States (Eversley 2014). Similarly, the National Black Marathoners Association experienced a 300 percent membership increase from 2010 to 2015 (Eversley 2014).

Despite these trends, scant scholarly attention has been given to Black women who run and challenge the stereotypes about their health and bodies. More generally, little research has been conducted about middle-class Black women's exercise routines. Most previous research in this area has honed in on the health aspects of physical activity, rather than the sociocultural components that are specific to middle-class Blacks. Studying running provides a unique lens for exploring the leisure and health routines of middle-class Black women, specifically those routines that are dominated by white Americans.

Previous social research on Black women and physical activity has focused on the obstacles that shape Blacks' disproportionately low rates of exercise such as unsafe neighborhoods (Bennett et al. 2007; Molnar et al. 2004; Williams and Collins 2001), as well as scarce leisure time and inadequate financial resources (Im et al. 2012). Recent dermatological research attributes Black women's abstention from exercise to not wanting to damage high-priced, chemical hair straightening regimens used by many Black women. When dampened, heat or chemically-straightened hairstyles return back to their "native" or "kinkier" states, which negates the financial investment and time to wash, dry, and restyle (Hall et al. 2013; Versey 2014). Since hair is oftentimes tied to Black women's feelings of self-worth, Black women may be deterred from engaging in activities that may de-style hair (Versey 2014).

Others have looked at how Black women's attitudes about workout routines are a barrier to an active lifestyle (Bopp et al. 2007; Im et al. 2012; Mabry et al. 2003). For example, Im et al. (2012) interviewed middle-aged Black women who said that exercise was "self-indulgent" (p. 331). Many said they felt guilty for participating in physical activity in light of their family obligations and financial burdens. While some view exercise a means of stress-relief or relaxation, the Black women in their study revealed that free time and relaxation are often sparse or cause remorse.

It is important to consider that on average, previous research has found that physical activity is not linked to Black women's ideal body types. Some have found that Black women view the ideal body as being of a higher BMI than white women (Allan, Mayo, and Michel 1993; Ray 2014). Whites are more present on television generally, and subsequently, images portraying thinness—particularly of thin women exercising—commonly feature white women (Ray 2014). Previous research shows that Black women are less likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies given that most of the media images portraying women are white, so they cannot as easily engage in body comparison (DeBraganza and Hausenblas 2010; Schooler et al. 2004). Some researchers, however, provide a counter-narrative differentiating Black women of different social classes. Upwardly mobile, middle-class Black women are more likely to share whites' valuation of slenderness (Allan, Mayo, and Michel 1993).

Unflattering assessments of Black women's bodies and health practices are coupled with historically rooted stereotypes about Black women such as the "mammy" role and the "jezebel." The mammy has been characterized as the "bandana clad, obese, dark complexioned woman with African features" whose "primary role was domestic service, characterized by long hours of work with little to no financial compensation" (West 1995: 459). Subordination and continuous self-sacrifice were expected as she fulfilled her domestic obligations (Jewell 1993). The jezebel portrays Black women as "naturally thick and curvy as she is normally portrayed as having larger than average thighs, hips, and posterior" (Ray 2014: 784). Broad-stroked characterizations feed into the sexualization of Black women's bodies, portraying them as deviant "freaks" and "hoochies" (Collins 2000). These stereotypes pigeonhole Black women—not only in physically objectifying ways but non-physically as well by depicting them as being incapable and undeserving of participating in activities that are self-nurturing.

This study brings together previous research on Black middle-class identities, sports identities, and the experiences of Black middle-class women, heightening their voices in ways that are lacking in prior literature. Building broadly on the cultural theories of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1978, 1984), this study explores the life stories of middle-class Black women who run to show how they have utilized this activity as part of their cultural toolkits (Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2013; Swidler 1986). Karyn Lacy's (2007) notion of the *Black middle-class toolkit* provides a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural significance and latent functions of running in shaping middle-class Black women's identities and daily lives, moving beyond the manifest functions of running previously highlighted in scholarly work.

Relevant Literature

Athletic Identities, Running, and Social Class

Athletic identities such as the runner identity are important to study because activities and behaviors performed freely and by choice—such as sport and leisure activities—are said to influence an individual's self-perception more so than behaviors that are not enacted with agency (Haggard and Williams 1992). Previous research has focused on the ways in which motivations for starting to run can vary. Achieving personal goals, improving fitness, gaining mood control, bettering physical health, and strengthening self-concept are among the reasons that people engage in recreational running (Clough, Shepherd, and Maughan 1989; Masters and Lambert 1989). Other scholarship differentiates between the motivations of men and women. Ogles, Masters, and Richardson (1995) found that men are more likely to identify as "obligatory runners." Therefore, men tend to rely on achievement and recognition as an incentive. Women are more likely to have a diverse range of motives for running such as improving self-esteem, managing weight, and coping with stress (Ogles, Masters, and Richardson 1995).

Research on runners is particularly relevant in the contemporary social context given its popularity. Yet, despite its more ubiquitous nature in the United States, recreational long-distance running continues to be disproportionately middle class. According to Running USA (2016a), 79 percent of those who identify as non-professional runners have at least a bachelor's degree. Nearly half (43 percent) have completed post-graduate education. Additionally, at least 40 percent of recreational runners have a household income of at least \$75,000 per year (Running USA 2016a). Sports and exercise are markers of cultural capital, as tastes in sports and health activities reflect social class and sensibilities (Bourdieu 1984).

Recreational sports are arguably what Bourdieu described as a *field* (1984), insofar that it consists of a variety of systems of social positions based on the accessibility of particular sports. Recreational sports are structured hierarchically with some being predominantly for those in higher social classes (e.g. golf and tennis) and others being practiced primarily by those of the working class (e.g. boxing) (Bourdieu 1978). As such, running falls somewhere in the middle, skewed toward those with more

privilege and resources. Participating in the routines and lifestyle activities of a runner requires a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Michele Lamont and Annette Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as “institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for cultural and social exclusion” (p. 153). Those who have an excess of time and the financial means to pursue an activity such as running are able to preserve special membership to this privileged status group. To illustrate this point, runners spent an average of \$247 on running gear in 2016. That same year, about 75 percent of runners participated in a race that required overnight travel, spending an average of \$587 for the experience, excluding race entrance fees (Running USA 2016a). For most half marathons, the entry fee is at least \$100 (Running USA 2016a). Undoubtedly, becoming a full participant in the dominant running culture requires capital in its various forms.

There is a particular set of cultural capital runners acquire over time through socialization and formal education ranging from knowing how to train for particular race distances, buy appropriate running shoes, and properly fuel for long runs, to the protocol and expected etiquette for lining up at the starting line for a race. Based on interviews with runners, Emmanuelle Tulle (2007) described the multidimensional process of becoming a runner. The participants in her study trained several times per week, oftentimes with friends. Running also required knowing a particular set of terminology (Tulle 2007). For many of them, their spouses were members of the same running organizations, and weekly schedules were created around planned races and training regimens. Running was a lifestyle that took time to integrate into various aspects of everyday life, including social relationships and time management. Through routinized running and interaction with other runners, those who “become runners” acquire the knowledge and cultural capital necessary to assimilate into this group.

Being a recreational runner is not only embedded into daily schedules and social relationships, but can also be inscribed on the body. Arguably, running “produces a body which is more at ease in the middle-class milieu or habitus” (Turner 1992). This differs from lifting weights, which has been said to impress working-classness onto the body (Turner 1992). Pierre Bourdieu (1978) writes that the physical presentation of the self is a display of habitus. Upwardly mobile, middle-class individuals gravitate toward activities that lead to an attractive body-for-others (Washington and Karen 2001). Bourdieu (1978) elaborates:

... strictly health-oriented sports like walking or jogging which, unlike ball games, do not offer any competitive satisfaction, are highly rational and rationalized activities. This is firstly because they presuppose a resolute faith in reason and in the deferred and often intangible benefits which reason promises (such as protection against ageing, an abstract and negative advantage which only exists by reference to a thoroughly theoretical referent); ... Thus it is understandable that these activities can only be rooted in the ascetic dispositions of upwardly mobile individuals who are prepared to find their satisfaction in effort itself and to accept—such is the whole meaning of their existence—the deferred satisfactions which will reward their present sacrifice. (P. 838–39)

Middle-Class Blacks: identity and Experience

W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier were two of the early scholars whose research brought light to the diversity of Blacks’ experiences, particularly by social class (Landry and Marsh 2011). However, much of the research on Blacks continues to focus on poor Blacks, even though about 75 percent of Blacks are not poor (Pattillo 2013). The assumption in the 1970s and 1980s, Mary Pattillo (2013) contends, is that “upwardly mobile African Americans were quietly integrating formerly all-white occupations, businesses, neighborhoods, and social clubs ... moving out of all-Black urban neighborhoods and into the suburbs” (p. 2). Thus, they became less of a concern for researchers and policy makers. Place of residence plays a large role in middle-class Black identity, which is understudied as research has focused primarily on Blacks who live in “blighted urban neighborhoods” (Lacy 2007: 22). This study adds to a relatively small but growing literature on middle-class Blacks, focusing on those who live in smaller cities and majority-white suburban areas rather than those who currently live in predominantly Black suburban areas or urban centers.

William Julius Wilson (1978) argued that in the years following the Civil Rights Act, class became more important than race as the major determinant of life chances for Black Americans. He wrote that college-educated Blacks with a college education were able to have an equal or better opportunity to secure a middle-class job as their white peers. This argument was met with contestation. While class is undoubtedly a factor in an individual's life chances and day-to-day choices, leading many middle-class Blacks to find themselves in similar workplaces and social spaces as whites, identity research supports that for some middle-class Blacks, attachment to Black identity is so strong that it overrides a sense of solidarity with middle-class whites, which leads to a closer attachment to lower-class Blacks (Hochschild 1995). The entanglement of race and class is complex and cannot be fully understood without examining their intersections.

The day-to-day life experiences of middle-class Blacks are tied in part to outward appearances and how they differ from those that they most frequently come into contact with (Banks 2010). For middle-class Blacks, they often find themselves in social contexts where they are the only one that looks the way that they do due to their token racial status. As Patricia Banks (2010) writes, "phenotype has played an important role not only in how Blacks in the United States have been defined by others but also in how they have seen themselves" (p. 13). Tokenism and subsequent social rejection endured by members of the Black middle class in predominantly white spaces such as the workplace could result in mental health issues, since social mobility is arguably "a double-edged sword" (Jackson and Stewart 2003:444) for middle-class Blacks who have worked their way up in white-collar jobs but "continue to face racist attitudes in their workplaces." Another aspect of being a token in a professional, predominantly white working environment is feeling isolated from feeling like the "only one." In Banks' (2010) study of upper-middle-class Blacks' consumption of Black art, she found that oftentimes her participants wanted to see themselves in the art they displayed around their homes. This could in part be due to the fact that they do not "see themselves" in the predominantly white, middle-class social settings where they often find themselves. In short, middle-class Blacks' experiences are colored by their token racial status, and their outward appearances can make it difficult to fit in in predominantly white social spaces.

Some researchers have looked specifically at the unique experiences of middle-class Black women, particularly those concerning the family. Middle-class Black women have long challenged traditional notions about motherhood, decentering dominant discourses shaped by the experiences of middle-class white women. In his book, *Black Working Wives: Pioneers of the American Revolution*, Bart Landry (2000) argues that Black middle-class wives sparked the "revolution" of women working outside of the home well before it became more common and acceptable among middle-class white women. Consequently, middle-class Black women were at the forefront of spurring more egalitarian spousal relationships. In addition, while Black women have been stereotyped as having high numbers of unplanned births, higher education—a hallmark of middle-classness and upward mobility—is associated with delayed and lower fertility for not only white women but for Black women as well (Yang and Morgan 2003). As such, middle-class Black women challenge this stereotype. Although these are arguably positive and progressive aspects of middle-class Black women's experiences in the family, Black women of all classes have a disproportionate burden of being the sole breadwinner and present parent because of high rates of single motherhood (McAdoo 2007). Harriette Pipes McAdoo (2007) writes that it is "not possible for every Black female college graduate to find a mate among her peers" (p. 282–83) due in part to high incarceration rates and low college graduation rates among Black men. Researchers have highlighted how these challenges are unique to this population.

Hair is another contentious issue, with challenges that are unique to middle-class Black women. It plays a central role in middle-class Black women's identities and self-presentations in daily life. Cheryl Thompson (2009) writes that "for the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience" (p. 831). Specifically, "the crux of the Black hair issue centers on three oppositional binaries—the natural/unnatural Black, good/bad hair, and the authentic/inauthentic Black" (Thompson 2009:831). Complementarily, Ingrid Banks (2000) writes that "hair shapes black women's ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of

beauty, and power” (p. 3). In focus groups of black women of different ages, educational levels, and professional tracks, Ingrid Banks’ (2000) conversations with physicians in their 40s illuminated the role that the Black Power Movement played in these women’s views on the politics of hair straightening, as hair is “an indicator of one’s politics, one’s commitment to the movement, and [the] relationship between hair and notions of blackness” (p. 124). This middle-class focus group also spoke about the effect that hairstyling had on their ability to swim and engage in exercise routines (Banks 2000). The ways in which Black women style their hair has been scrutinized and regulated, particularly for middle-class Black women seeking employment and navigating the workplace (Caldwell 1991; Greene 2011; Thompson 2009; Weitz 2001). Historically, straightened hair was viewed as a marker of upward mobility and middle-classness among Black women (Craig 2002; Thompson 2009). Therefore, the way that middle-class Black women choose to wear their hair is an important decision, as it shapes their interactions with others and their public perceptions. Undoubtedly, hair can be symbolic as Black women grapple with how they are representing “Black culture,” while also taking part in predominantly white work cultures.

Culture is inextricably linked to the identities of middle-class Blacks. Identities and experiences of those in the Black middle class are in part composed of the cultural toolkits they use (Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2013; Swidler 1986). Culture is a broad term that is used in a variety of social and research contexts. One way that Ann Swidler (1986) frames culture is as a toolkit “of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (p. 273). Karyn Lacy (2007) writes that the Black middle-class toolkit encompasses “public identities, status-based identities, racial and class-based identities, and suburban identities” (p. 14). These identities are performed in order to establish their class status to whites, to differentiate themselves from less-educated and financially disadvantaged Blacks, and to relate to other middle-class Blacks (Lacy 2007). Through activities, group memberships, and public displays of tastes and dispositions, middle-class Blacks construct their identities through the implements they have stocked in their toolkits. This study frames running as a tool that can be used among those in the Black middle-class.

Methodology

The Life Story Method

Life stories are “oral autobiographical narratives” which aim to describe “the interviewee’s life trajectories in social contexts in order to uncover the patterns of social relations and the special processes that shape them” (Bertaux and Kohli 1984:215). Life story interviews are conducted with the goal of eliciting stories—constructing a plot that is illustrative of change and development throughout the life course—rather than responses to specific questions. The life story is “anchored around pivotal life events that shape the trajectory of and meaning to the life story” (Erdmans and Black 2008: 79). Unlike more structured qualitative interviewing methods, interpretive, narrative modes of inquiry such as life story interviews allow the interview to go in a variety of directions, providing an anti-positivist response to previous work on running motivations and portrayals of a monolithic “Black experience.”

Life story interviews rely on unrestricted probes about life events (Erdmans and Black 2015). The probes used in this study were chosen because they prompted participants to expound upon pertinent information about running and its potential antecedents during the course of their lives, as well as to get at key life events and influential institutions that on the surface may not appear to directly play a role in future running behavior. The probes used in this study were: 1) childhood and family growing up; 2) sports and exercise as a child and adolescent; 3) body image throughout the life course; 4) first experiences running; 5) current role of running in daily life and routines; 6) health and illness throughout the life course. Structured questioning can lead to participants fragmenting their own lives by highlighting their different professional and family roles during discrete moments of the

interview. In contrast, life stories can “keep intact the wholeness of social life” (Erdmans 2007:8). This allows the researcher to look at narrators as comprehensive beings with overlapping trajectories shaped by interconnected roles, social location, historical contexts, and contemporary social conditions (Leavy 2011). By probing about different moments and layers of their lives, this type of study is inherently intersectional by bringing the narrators’ *whole being* into the story. It is not just about their experiences as women, middle-class people, or Black Americans, and the probes are not presented in a way that would require participants to describe their lives solely through one of these lenses. Rather, life stories reflect the full picture of these women’s lives as they are shaped by the inextricably linked aspects of their social locations.

In life story research, researchers are not positioned as the “knowing” party, but rather, narrators are active participants in the shaping of data. It was important that the women in my study felt that they had a stake in the research: not only as subjects but also as the authors of their own life stories. In this type of study, researchers should let the narrators have some agency in how they are represented via their retelling of the life stories while at the same time holding true to their obligations as researchers to “complement and contextualize the explication of informants’ accounts” (Gubrium and Holstein 1999:569–70).

Sample

A purposive snowball sample was used in this study. Recruitment was done through personal networks, referrals, and predominantly Black running groups on social media. The criteria to participate was that the individual must identify as: 1) a woman; 2) Black; and 3) someone who runs. Specifically, they must run for fitness or leisure rather than for high-level competition (e.g., not Olympians or professional runners).

The data presented in this article is based on three life stories that are part of a larger, ongoing life story study of Black women who run ($n = 23$). While this sub-sample is arguably small and not, as Daniel Bertaux (1981) describes, “representative at the morphological level (at the level of superficial description)” (p. 37), it is representative at the sociological level, “at the level of sociostructural relations.” Because the aim of this study was to understand the practice of running and to understand the process Black women experience in entering this activity, as opposed to predicting, for example, the most common life event that leads this particular population to routinized running, a smaller sample size is fitting—particularly given the rich data that life stories provide. In studies such as these that are exploratory, theme-generating studies, “it is not only reasonable to have a relatively small number of respondents, but may even be positively advantageous” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006:491) because it permits repeated contact with subjects, that, consequently, enrich validity and reliability. Further, life stories are able to capture the intricacies and qualitative nuances of individuals’ experiences even if the women are quantitatively similar. There was a vague interconnectedness of the subjects in this sample—a couple of them attended the same university and grew up in the same geographic area, albeit years apart and they did not know one another. Yet, this type of research is able to show the dissimilarities of those who look similar on paper through the details embedded in their biographies.

Analysis

After each interview was completed, they were transcribed verbatim. In the presentation of the narrators’ stories, some of the “ums,” “likes,” pauses, and other details of verbal delivery were removed, and quotes were reconstructed as long as it did not take away from the meaning and significance of what was being said.

Line-by-line thematic coding was conducted with the assistance of NVivo qualitative research software. Codes were literal in the sense that they used the narrator’s own language to create the

code. In other instances, the codes were based on an interpretation of what was being said. Subsequently, some codes were unpacked or sub-coded while others were aggregated.

Constructivist grounded theory framed this analysis, as this framework emphasizes the “subjective interrelationship between the researcher, the participant, and the co-construction of meaning” (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2008:26). The interpretations of the narrators’ life stories are social constructions—just as the retelling of life stories by the participants is.

Methodological Considerations

In this type of interpretive research, acknowledging my positionality is important. I identify as a middle-class, Black, female runner. Christina Chavez (2008) argues that some benefits of having insider positionality include greater ease in building rapport with participants, having a more nuanced perspective when representing respondents in the write-up of findings, and building a more “equalized relationship between the researcher and participants” (p. 479). However, Chavez (2008) argues this positionality can complicate the researcher role by engaging in too much reciprocity during the interview exchanges and blinding the researcher to the taken-for-granted aspects of participants’ lives. While acknowledging these limitations, my insider position was harnessed as a strength. As Robert Merton (1972) writes of insiders, “only through continued socialization in the life of a group can one become fully aware of its symbolisms and shared realities; only so can one understand the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings, and values” (p. 15).

Findings

I present excerpts from the life stories of three of the study’s participants: 1) Ciara; 2) Toni; and 3) Jeanette. All of the names and identifying locations have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants. The narrators are quantitatively very similar—all three self-identify as Black women, all three have college degrees, and all three live in the Midwest. But despite their similarities, each of the women was different in their life stories and experiences with running. My analyses of the life stories of these women revealed that by participating in this predominantly white, middle-class activity, they were able to develop their Black middle-class toolkits to include running and its associated lifestyle components (Lacy 2007). As such, running can be understood as “nonmaterial culture” and is a cultural symbol because as a ritual, routine, and lifestyle, it “has more meaning than [its] original function suggests” (Lacy 2007:13). These women cultivated their identities in relation to middle-class whites, lower-class Blacks, and their middle-class Black peers.

The life story excerpts included in this article exemplify three types of identities in the Black middle-class toolkit that Lacy (2007) conceptualized: 1) public identities; 2) status-based identities; and 3) race and class-based identities.

Ciara, 26

Ciara is a 26-year-old graduate student at a large research institution in the Midwest. She is one of five children, raised by her parents and grandparents in a predominantly Black, southern urban area. Her parents own multiple homes, and she says she was one of “very few privileged people” who had the opportunity to attend the higher-quality, performing arts schools for middle and high school. It was during middle school that she first participated in athletics, but physical activity was not a prominent part of her childhood narrative. She noted that while on the basketball team in 7th and 8th grade, she was very self-conscious of her body and felt fat compared to the other girls. She elaborated on when she became more aware of her body, recounting a time when an adult man hit on her when she was 11 years old:

I never understood why men were so aggressive towards me. As a result, I started understanding. Oh, it's how I look. I really do believe that that's a part of Blackness in general. Like we always put more onus on the girl. Because it's like we're too sexy or something. We always put more pressure on the girl.

I think being a Black woman and having like the type of body that I have like people assume that you are like this hypersexual like being and it's like, I'm not that. And if I was that—which I mean I am pretty sure we all at times can be that type of person—that is not all it is to me but I have media that suggests otherwise, right? There is a community of people—you know whether it's the church or just like mainstream America—that tells me that that is what we're supposed to be. And I think like we're in a really interesting part of history that has allowed Black women to like reframe the narratives that have been used against us for far too long.

Of her childhood, Ciara said that her “upbringing was definitely rooted in all things Blackness.” Her parents traveled to Africa when she was a child, which she says “sparked this urge in me to really want to learn as much about the continent as possible.” She attended a historically Black college for her undergraduate education, and she was a member of a Black sorority.

Ciara gained weight during college in part due to the stresses of school and relationships but decided after a break-up with a boyfriend toward the end of college that she would try to lose weight by doing cardiovascular exercises and lifting weights. By the time she graduated from college, she lost 50 pounds and was the smallest she had been in many years.

It was not until she moved to a northern state and attended a predominantly white institution for graduate school that she had more regular contact with whites and noticed that running was a popular activity among her new peers.

She started running a couple of years prior to my interview sessions with her:

I got into it largely because I guess since moving to the Midwest it was like everybody runs [laughs]. Like you see it everywhere so it's almost like a Groupthink mentality and it's like a lot of races and a lot of this many k's and all of that.¹ And so a lot of people up here do it. It's the most easiest thing to do, right? Like you don't have to actually go into a building. And there's this cute little running path that I like to go to and it's really awesome. I go alone. It's great. So I'm really trying. It's one of those things I'm really trying to force myself to be a little more diligent about. I get into like these spells in which I'm doing it all the time and then I slacked off but I'm getting back into it.

One thing I noticed when I was running literally every other day earlier this year was like not only was I losing weight or just maintaining my weight loss really well but I also was sleeping a lot easier, or deeper rather, which is something I've struggled with on and off for years now. And it's a conversation starter too. Like I said, it's like a Groupthink mentality. A lot of my colleagues up here do full marathons. You know, it's just really a conversation starter.

For Ciara, being a runner is framed as a part of her *public identity* (Lacy 2007). Running was a way that she could relate to middle-class whites. This was important as it was the first time she had lived in a predominantly white area. In another portion of my interviews with her, she mentioned skipping lunch with her colleagues to go for runs, or spending her breaks from classes going to the gym. By making her running known to the public via declining social invitations, she was cultivating a public identity that aligned with the middle-class whites she regularly interacted with on campus. This could help her prevent being treated as an outsider. Ciara could use running as a status symbol, establishing herself as relatable to her middle-class white colleagues.

Taking a life course perspective, Ciara's consciousness of her body started at an early age with her most prominent memories rooted in religion, interactions with men, and sports. That consciousness is a thread throughout her narrative and relates to her decision to run and move her body in a new way. As such, by running she embodies her statement that Black women can “reframe the narratives that have been used against us for too long.” She goes against the negative stereotypes pitted against Black women.

Ciara's mention of the delayed gratification of running—maintained weight loss and improved sleep she attained by making running a habit—and her acknowledgment that running was something she felt obligated to be diligent about, align with what Pierre Bourdieu (1978) previously wrote about this type of activity as being “rooted in the ascetic dispositions of upwardly mobile individuals

¹This is referring to the distance in kilometers of many races (e.g. 5k; 10k).

who are prepared to find ... the deferred satisfactions which will reward their present sacrifice” (p. 839). Making others aware of her participation in an activity that required sustained sacrifice and dedication further aligned herself with the in-group.

Toni, 35

Toni grew up in a mixed-race midwestern suburb with two middle-class parents. As a child, Toni was very involved in sports. She was on the basketball team and participated on the track team briefly as a sprinter before switching over to field events. Running for the sake of running was not enjoyable for her as a child. When she was required to run a mile in gym class, she did not understand why: “I was probably one of the last people who came in,” she said. “I wasn’t really motivated, kind of like, ‘What is the point of this? Is it going on my permanent record, really?’” She said she was always bigger than the other children her age, and in middle school she started getting teased. This was when her desire to lose weight initially emerged. During college she gained a significant amount of weight, so she tried to make changes to her dietary habits toward the end of college.

In her 20s, Toni received a graduate degree in public health from the same university that Ciara attends for graduate school. She started running consistently at age 30 to give herself something to take her mind off of the stress of her husband’s deployment. Wanting to lose weight from two pregnancies, she continued to run regularly and participate in races. To date, she has completed numerous half marathons, marathons, and ultra-marathons. After spending several years as a stay-at-home mom, she now works part-time as a running coach at a sporting goods store and also works for a public health organization. She is also an active member of Black Girls Run! and was one of the founding members of the chapter in her town. After participating in numerous races where she was one of the only Black women, she has found a community among those in the group.

Toni spoke at length about her son and daughter, who are now in elementary school:

I think they will be athletic and they will find something they like, but I’m not pushing it now. You know my daughter, she’s done a few 5Ks with me, and she’s liked it, for the most part, until we get to about Mile 2½. But nonetheless it’s kind of like all they know. Like the whole running thing is all they know, because from the get-go, like when my husband was deployed to Iraq, I had to get my runs in and I had a double stroller and it took some time. You know they would bicker at first, but I learned to make sure there’s a snack. Stop halfway through. Stop at a playground. And that was just what they were used to. So they knew that Mom would have to run for an hour or two miles pushing them with a stroller, and then over time, one child would leave the stroller and one would be on the bike. I literally pushed them until I could no longer push them.

I remember trying to get Mari, when she was five-and-a-half and my son when he was four in a double stroller. I mean it was 120 pounds. I was still pushing them until they literally couldn’t fit anymore. But now what they do is they both will go over to Highland Park and they’re both on two-wheelers. Just last week we did 12½ miles. I ran 12½ miles and they were on their bikes. The next morning, they got up and I walked and ran 4½ miles to Wilson Nature Center, and they did too. So it’s just something that they’re just used to. So hopefully it’ll be a good memory, it’s like ‘Aw, she always made us do that.’

I remember my dad pushing my brother in a jogging stroller, you know, and me riding my bike, and I remember going down Miller Avenue and being able to see the big office buildings. You know, those are vivid memories of mine, so I’m hoping at some point that that will be like a fond memory for them.

Toni talks about being a runner as a part of what Lacy (2007) calls a *status-based identity*, which is “critical to the intergenerational reproduction of a middle-class status” (p. 14). As a byproduct, running as a status-based identity differentiates Toni and her family from lower-class Blacks. Toni is now living and raising her children in the same middle-class area where she grew up herself. Although she says that she does not make her children participate in running, she makes clear that it has become something that is a taken-for-granted aspect of their lives—this lifestyle is “all they know.” By making running a part of her children’s lives from an early age, she can help ensure that they can have the cultural capital necessary to make their position in the middle-class assured for the rest of their lives.

Both Toni and Ciara shared the middle-class narrative of wanting to lose weight after gaining it during college, and pursuing weight loss through exercise. For Toni, running also became a critical part of coping with the stress of her husband's absence. Even though she is married, her experience having to live for periods of time as the sole parent at home aligns with previous literature on Black women's family experiences. The utility of running as a way to cope with these challenges is highlighted in Toni's narrative.

Jeanette, 48

Jeanette grew up as one of nine children and lived in a predominantly Black working-class city until she was about 8 years old. Subsequently, her family moved about an hour away to an all-white neighborhood close to where Toni grew up, which she described as a "culture shock." Organized sports were not a part of her childhood.

Jeanette attended a major state university for a couple of years before dropping out and having a child. After that, she moved to a major southern city with a substantial middle-class Black population, working as a waitress with the goal of later attending a historically Black college. Her plan deviated when she had a second child, and wanting familial support, she moved back to her hometown—later re-enrolling at her original university where she graduated with her bachelor's degree. She has wanted to go to graduate school for several years but has put it off to help pay for her sons' college educations. Now, she is contemplating going to law school while employed at a community mental health organization, working with adults with mental illness and substance abuse issues.

At the time I interviewed her, Jeanette had been running for about six years. She has completed several races, including a couple of marathons, and enjoys traveling with others she has met in Black running groups on social media to participate in races.

Jeanette started running in part to lose weight but also to cope during a time when she was experiencing other difficult life changes—a divorce and a move:

It was no health crisis. It was no, you know, doctor that said, 'You've gotta change or else.' It was more of a personal crisis for me. I was unhappy in my marriage. I had gained a lot of weight in my marriage, and I just needed to do something, and I didn't really know that it was gonna be running and exercise. That was just really a start. So I mean I guess there wasn't any one particular thing. I think it was just a combination of things that you know life had just said, 'There's more to life than this, than what you're living.'

I love to run. It's time-consuming, in a way, when you start getting into your longer miles. But for me, that's actually the part that I like. After a hard day at work, a stressful day at work, if I've got an hour or an hour and a half to just go run, it changes the whole scope of everything. I think the adrenaline, the 'runners' high,' if you will.

It's also the people that I've met through running. We have similar stories. We have similar goals. So it's just a way to click with other people, but I mean I guess it could've been anything.

A salient part of her experience as a runner has been being a member of several different running groups:

I run with the Finish Liners. I run with Black Girls RUN! I run with a group called the Mid-State Track Club. I am part of a group called the National Black Marathoners Association. Some of us here in town are part of that group, but with that group, so many of us have connected through Facebook, and then when we do destination races and travel, we meet up. So many of those people I do know personally, because we've done several races together, but many of them, I've yet to meet. You know we're just all Black people who like to run and we like distance running, and are into health and things.

You can discuss things that affect all runners, regardless of race, and regardless of gender with your groups like the Finish Liners, or your groups like Mid-State Track Club. But when you have your groups like Black Girls RUN! or the National Black Marathoners Association, you can tailor those conversations to things that affect us as Black, specifically. I mean there's a lot of exclusions still in our society. So these groups give us a place to be included and share our own sentiments about things and share just the things that affect us as a race and as a culture.

Recently, there was a group of us. We were talking about politics. And you can talk about politics in both groups, but you can be more free when you're talking about politics as it relates to Black people, more so because you don't really want to offend your white friends or your friends of other races, even though they may be thinking the same thing and they don't know how to say it to you. And so it's kind of—you can just be a little more free with some of that stuff. And then there's also the stereotypes, the things like, 'Don't you wish you were Kenyan?' 'Well no. I don't.' You know, as it relates to running and speed. So you get that awkwardness sometimes.

And then with National Black Marathoners, about the end of 2011, I was contemplating running my first marathon, and someone added me to that Facebook group, and so you know there was a wealth of information, and then I did my first marathon. I thought 'Okay. I could do this again, maybe.' So I actually did a couple more that year, and being part of that group, just a wealth of information on marathoning and stuff like that. So that's kind of how I came to know these groups, and to become part of those groups.

Jeanette's experiences reflect in part what Lacy (2007) calls *race and class based identities*. Lacy (2007) writes that middle-class Blacks travel back and forth regularly between Black and white worlds. Once she became a runner, Jeanette was a member of both predominantly white running groups and predominantly Black running groups, which has allowed her to socialize and relate with middle-class whites in some groups while maintaining a strong sense of Black racial identity in others. Traveling with other Blacks to participate in races—a predominantly white activity—further cultivates her membership in both predominantly white middle-class activities and Black middle-class groups. Lacy (2007) writes that “middle-class Blacks who spend much of their workday lives in white-dominated settings may seek access to and immersion in the Black world for an additional and more positive reason than temporary refuge from discrimination and alienation” (p. 152). For Jeanette, this came in the form of relieving stress, talking with people with similar life experiences, and gaining cultural capital from her peers in the form of new knowledge about running. Jeanette's sentiments about being able to speak more freely when interacting with those in Black running groups aligns with previous work on the tribulations of being a racial token in predominantly white spaces. Further, for similar reasons as those in Patricia Banks' (2010) study of Black art consumption, being able to see herself in those she interacts with online provided a reference group and a sense of similarity that she could not as easily attain in other settings.

Discussion

For the women in this study, running had both manifest and latent functions. Running is a way that middle-class Black women can lose weight, improve health, and cope with stress. Given the chronic stressors that middle-class Black women often face, including tokenism in the workplace and lack of support in some family structures, exploring the utility of an activity that is growing in popularity among middle-class Black women is important—particularly if it allows them to carve out a sense of empowerment and agency. Digging deeper, a cultural framework reveals how running can have latent implications for cultivating a middle-class Black identity. These women were able to bond with middle-class whites and Blacks, differentiate from lower-class Blacks, promote intergenerational middle-classness, and work toward a lifestyle and body type that align with dominant middle-class ideals.

Life story interviews allow for looking at individuals' lives on the whole, relying on the premise that we cannot fully understand the multidimensional features of particular lifestyles that make them significant without looking at the entirety of individuals' lives and the interconnectedness of their salient roles and identities over time. Further, by letting middle-class Black women speak for themselves, we can better understand their experiences from their standpoints and through alternative frameworks.

How can we further capitalize on the utility of Karyn Lacy's (2007) Black middle-class toolkit framework and apply the findings of this study in future research? There is arguably great potential in creating linkages in research on activities commonly thought of as health behaviors and theoretical frames grounded in culture, particularly as researchers continue to try and uncover how to halt unequal health outcomes between different groups. The health activities a person engages in are a part of his or her habitus (Bourdieu 1984)—components of lifestyle, such as particular tastes, dispositions, and preferences in activities that are shaped by a person's social standing and its accompanying life choices.

William Cockerham's (1995, 2005) health lifestyle theory builds on this idea by linking culture and health, describing health lifestyles such as running as "pattern[s] of voluntary health behavior based on choices from options that are available to people according to their life situations" (Cockerham 1995: 90). Health lifestyle theory has been applied to understand why individuals participate in certain health-related activities. This understanding of health behaviors lends itself to a cultural toolkit framework. The rituals Ann Swidler (1986) described as part of one's cultural toolkit are based on the options available to them, given their social location. Karyn Lacy's (2007) addition to this framework is inherently more specific and intersectional, looking at how race and class shape particular lifestyle choices. For all of the women in the study, running was a health lifestyle that was accessible to them given their middle-class standing, and that activity not only bettered their health, but it also improved their general well-being and created a stronger sense of self-identity in ways that may go under the radar in more traditional studies of health behaviors using health-centered frameworks.

In order to better understand how some groups have better or worse health outcomes than others, researchers need to be as intersectional, specific, and in-depth as possible, looking at how health behaviors fit into the matrices and layers of individuals' lives. Just as life story interviews, grounded in the life course perspective, rely on the premise that we cannot understand someone's current life situation without looking at past life experiences, we cannot fully understand the meaning and motivations behind individuals' health behaviors until we understand the fullness of individuals' identities—the public, status-based, race-based, and class-based identities that make up *everyone's* cultural toolkits—and the intersections of these identities throughout time and within different sociohistorical contexts.

Presently, the pursuit of health is a predominant part of middle-class culture—described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) as the middle-class "cult of health" (p. 231). If this is the present reality, then researchers seeking to eradicate health inequalities should seek to find ways to change the culture. As such, in order to change culture, we need to better understand it. Researchers should strive to re-center the pursuit of health—and the right to live a healthy life—as a part of human culture, particularly if we consider health as a human right (Farmer 2004; Mann 2006; Susser 1993). Illness (and lack thereof) shapes well-being, sense of identity, and general quality of life for all human beings. Yet, having the privilege of emphasizing health lifestyles in one's daily routines is a privilege, as many runners' lifestyles indicate.

About the author

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