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## **Understanding the Importance of Intrinsic Motivation: An Analysis of Intrinsic Motivation and Positive Student Athlete Experience Integration**

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### **Introduction**

The statistics presented in Harper, Williams, & Blackman's (2013) manuscript, *Black Male Student Athletes and Inequities in College Sport*, captured the attention of athletic stakeholders, educators, and scholars regarding the plight of the intercollegiate, African American male student-athlete (AAMSA). The data revealed the graduation rates of AAMSAs in Power Five (i.e. Pac12, Southeastern Conference, Big 12, Big 10, Atlantic Coast Conference) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletic conferences. Institutions such as Northwestern University, which holds a graduation of 94% by AAMSAs (Harper et al., 2013), and Stanford University, which has an 89% graduation rate of AAMSAs (Harper et al., 2013), are great examples of how student athletes' harness both physical and intellectual prowess. However, the data also revealed a gap in athletic success and intellectual development for AAMSAs at consistent football national championship contenders and powerhouses. And although national championship contenders produce more professional talent, the current NCAA Academic Progress Rates (APR) for Football Championship Schools (FCS) and Football Bowl Schools (FBS) have the lowest averages out of the NCAA sports (NCAA, 2018). This metric is important to consider since it accounts for retention and eligibility of each student athlete for each academic term. It reflects an effective and timely assessment of academic success at colleges and universities (NCAA 2018).

There is a consistent debate regarding the academic capabilities, career choices, and decision-making skills of AAMSAs. Many studies highlight race as a direct threat to success and positive social influence at many colleges and universities. In the realm of race, prominent pieces of work (Cunningham & Welty-Peachy, 2010; Donnor, 2005; Edwards, 1975, 1985; Singer, 2005, 2008) have highlighted the image of the AAMSA through a critical, social lens, such as Critical Race Theory, in order to convey detailed images of realities within populations of color. There is also extensive research analyzing the academic motivations, successes, learning potential, intellectual capabilities, and likelihood of attaining learning disabilities of AAMSAs in relation to different student populations. While there are numerous higher education personnel attuned to the literature, many individuals hired in the athletic domain are not well-versed in education, behavioral studies, special education, and health-related fields in order to properly carry theory into practice as they work with AAMSAs. The individuals are not always adept to understand, educate, assess, and diagnose students with educational disabilities or behaviors. Thus, many individuals who work with this population classify them in terms of "at-risk", having learning disabilities, and having mental health issues (Carrington, 2010; Coakley, 1982; Donnor, 2005; Edwards, 1973; Singer, 2008, 2015). While some diagnoses and situations that students may encounter are valid and understandable, these diagnoses are often fail-safes for individuals who perceive the capabilities and potentials of student athletes through a deficit-oriented lens. As a result, the undesirable societal image of AAMSAs still persists (Donnor, 2005; Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2017; Singer, 2015).

Harper et al. (2013) discussed the positive and negative characteristics associated with AAMSAs and beliefs about improvements needed in areas of academics. The research presented a picture of successful AAMSAs and a romanticized, pragmatic plan of closing the gap between athletic superiority and academic inferiority existing within the AAMSA population (Beamon, 2014; Travers, 2018). Research identified universities such as the University of Notre Dame, Villanova, Penn State, and Duke as institutions equipped with

personnel and support systems willing to help AAMSAs attain the skills necessary to benefit them as they seek to become successful individuals after expired eligibility (Harper et al., 2013). These universities graduate AAMSAs at the highest rates when compared to other universities (Harper et al. 2013). Decision-making skills, however, cannot be based on external factors, the university system, nor race alone. Indeed, race is a big part of their existence, however, race is a social construct of human existence (Carter & Larke, 2005; Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Marrero, 2017; Moultry, 2014).

Accordingly, deficit-laden societal frameworks have historically been used to analyze and explain specific populations, such as AAMSAs, in a problem-focused manner, rather than focusing on assets, developmental achievements, and capabilities (Bobo & Charles, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Deficit-laden frameworks also highlight disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social and economic division (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the case of AAMSAs, deficit-laden societal frameworks only contribute to the existing, deficit-oriented literature. Therefore, the goal of this study, if applied to a societal framework, would be to focus on AAMSAs and the support systems that help them thrive. Decision-making skills and life transitions, if analyzed positively, are associated with motivation and external forces which build and sustain pursuit, well-being, and success. They can be analyzed through theoretical frameworks capturing the psychological aspects of individuals within the sampled population of AAMSAs in order to understand their choices in the quest for success. Therefore, this study focuses on the positive psychological factors associated with the target population in an attempt to break away from research that is problem focused.

This study seeks to identify and highlight the influential intrinsic motivators of intercollegiate AAMSAs to obtain professional and graduate degrees.

## **Research Questions**

Each participant received consent forms in order to participate in the study. After each participant signed the consent form, 45-90-minute, semi-structured interviews took place in order to obtain data pertaining to the following research questions:

1. In what ways do intercollegiate AAMSAs describe their athletic and academic experiences?
2. In what ways does participation in athletics influence the academic outcomes of intercollegiate AAMSAs?
3. In what ways do intercollegiate AAMSAs describe the influential experiences and factors needed to help them persist through graduate school?

Because much of the literature focusing on AAMSA's is problem-based, this study attempts to delve into the positive aspects of specific individuals that have defied the norms and stereotypes that cloud this population. The research questions that guide this study have the purpose of highlighting the influences, influencers, and experiences that have the potential to create change in the perceptions and realistic outcomes of AAMSA's.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The life of a student navigating the university system is both positive and negative, as their experiences can be characterized as engaging and supportive, or challenging, demanding, and complex (Infurna & Infurna, 2017). If students encounter challenges, their struggles can vary from the lack of basic needs and wants to the pressures of success and social influence. While numerous students experience daily issues, the physical and psychological demands inflicted upon intercollegiate AAMSAs tend to be significantly greater than students who do not participate in demanding extracurricular activities such as intercollegiate football, basketball, baseball, softball, volleyball, and track. These activities require great amounts of physical and mental output. The literature associated with AAMSAs who participate in physically and mentally demanding sports highlights the experiences, academic outcomes, and post-eligibility concerns intercollegiate sport participation influences such

as coping mechanisms and life outlook (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Because of rigorous daily schedules and high visibility associated with their campus presence, the psychological demands of AAMSAs increase due to various needs, responsibilities, identities, and aspirations. For instance, many AAMSAs have difficulty navigating competing expectations of academic, athletic, and social identity. Hence, an understanding motivation and the enduring process to achieve success can lead to better understanding of how AAMSAs achieve athletic and academic success.

Additional challenges surface when expectations collide within the psyche of AAMSAs, including academic subconscious/awareness, social isolation, alcoholism, and drug use and abuse. Because of the added psychological demands AAMSAs must endure, a framework identifying psychological differences within the AAMSA population will guide this study. In this instance, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an appropriate theory to guide this study because it highlights the integrative factors and experience that shape their life outcomes. Because AAMSA's are in pursuit of multiple goals that stretch their capacities and express their talents and propensities, these individuals work to constantly and consistently actualize their potentials (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Within this perspective, synthesis, organization, and relative unity of both knowledge and personality are important to understand and analyze along with wholeness, vitality, and integrative tendencies (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

SDT states individuals have natural and constructive tendencies they develop throughout their lifespan (Adams, Little, & Ryan, 2017; Ryan, 2004, Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2019). SDT is a metatheory comprised of four theories – Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, Causality Orientations Theory, and Basic Needs Theory -- which highlights the internal resources in the process of human development and personality and how they influence behavior and self-regulation. Within this metatheory, human motivational analysis is employed through organismic theories highlighting the importance of evolved inner resources for the development of behavioral self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997). Growth and psychological needs outline SDT as the basis of self-motivation, personality integration, and fostering growth conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, Frederickson, 2001; Gill, Williams, & Reifsteck, 2018).

In addition, the descriptions within SDT apply to three important criteria for optimal attainment of psychological needs. Competence, relatedness, and autonomy provide the basis of categorizing environmental and supportive mechanisms vital human functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2016; Riley, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Competence is associated with the effectiveness in ongoing interactions with social environments and interpretations of certain environmental contexts and tasks (Riley, 2016). Relatedness is associated to care and nurturance for others and by others (Deci & Ryan, 2016). Examples can include intimate relationships, community involvement, and familial commitment. This specific component creates a sense of belonging within the individual. Autonomy is the perceived origin and source of individual behavior (DeCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; 2014, 2016; Reeve, 2014; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Although SDT is associated with success, the assumption of growth and integration is not without opposition. Among the stauncher opponents of constructs concerning growth and integration have been operant behaviorists who assume there is no inherent direction to development and suggest behavioral regulation and personality are a function of reinforcement histories and current contingencies (Skinner, 1953, Deci & Ryan, 2014; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2019). Intrinsic motivation and the relation it has on development cannot be integrative tendency, because relevant contingencies organize and create systems (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2019). Nonetheless, SDT is a mechanism based on the deconstruction of specific human phenomena.

## **Cognitive Evaluation Theory**

Reward contingency is an important component of behavior and activity participation (Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Riley, 2016; Wlodkowski, & Ginsberg, 2017). Reward contingencies include task non-contingent rewards, which include participation rewards. Task-contingent rewards are based upon completion of activities. Performance-contingent rewards are based upon performance in specific activities. Accordingly, Deci (1972) found contingent rewards dramatically affect intrinsic motivation as opposed to non-contingent rewards and no rewards. This study in turn, is a foundational piece of literature which applies to various disciplines including psychology, education, and the physical and cognitive sciences.

Regarding motivation specifically, external events including rewards and communications must have two regulatory aspects of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 2016). These aspects function and control how individuals perceive their environments. Information conveys feedback in the context of SDT and control refers to rewards and communication pressures which influence people toward specific outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2014, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b; Ryan et al., 1983). Therefore, Cognitive Evaluation Theory predicts and interprets the effect external events have on intrinsic motivation by providing an analysis of information and control in the perception and navigation of activities (Gill, Williams, & Reifsteck, 2018; Riley, 2016; Ryan et al., 1983).

## **Organismic Integration Theory**

Research in SDT focuses on how desirable behaviors are intrinsically motivating (Sheldon, Arndt, & Houser-Marko, 2003; Westrate et al., 2018). Thus, numerous studies have analyzed the relationship between positive human functioning and the achievement of optimal health and well-being (Linley & Joseph, 2005; Lopez, Pedratti, & Snyder, 2018; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). As a result, Organismic Integration Theory emerged as a criterion for growth and positive psychology (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2016; Joseph & Linley, 2005).

Germer et al. (2016) analyzed how internal motivation is the result of progression through a continuum. Actions and behaviors on this continuum derive from external regulation to individual integration. Regulation can be operative and differ in autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012, 2014, 2016; Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2016; Mills, 2016, Ryan, 2009; Westrate et al., 2018). Autonomy is robust throughout research regarding SDT, due to its association with persistence, performance, and well-being at activities (Ryan, 2009; Westrate et al., 2018). In addition, the research of Deci and Ryan (2000, 2002, 2014, 2016) demonstrate internalization and integrative values through choice, efficacy, and connection.

## **Causality Orientations Theory**

Causality Orientations Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002, 2014, 2016) differentiates behavior, motivation, and psychological processes exhibited within individuals in social settings (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2014, 2016; Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994). Control processes help an individual deconstruct and classify orientations (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Orientation classifications apply to autonomy, control, and impersonal orientation. Koestner and Zuckerman (1994) and Ryan and Deci (2019) found the relationship between causality orientation, personality, and autonomy is consistent with positive self-efficacy and self-esteem. Also, individuals who orient high in autonomy do not act out of guilt and are associated with attaining self-actualization (Vallerand et al., 1992). The control orientation identifies pressure and extrinsic forces as influencers of tasks, behaviors, and activities. Control influences the need to achieve certain results in an activity derived from the perception of external prompts from a significant other. When controlled individuals persist vigorously at an activity in the absence of external controls it reflects controlled self-regulation (Flunger, Mayer, & Umbach, 2019; Koestner, Bemieri, & Zuckerman, 1992; Ryan & Deci, 2019). The impersonal orientation is related to negative self-evaluations, amotivation, low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2016; Vallerand

et al., 1992; Strauss & Ryan, 1987). In achievement settings, the impersonal orientation is predictive of helpless feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.

### **Basic Needs Theory**

According to Nuttin (1984), psychological needs produce actions, behaviors, and control development. Basic Needs Theory, then, is a sub-theory of SDT grounded in human functioning outcomes derived from a combination of social environments, the pursuit of well-being, and need satisfaction. The amount of positive interactions an individual has with the environment results in an increase of competence. The increase in competence is independent and can apply across skills. Well-being relates to self-actualization and the degree of functioning a person exhibits in order to attain optimal performance (Flunger et al., 2019). In addition, Basic Needs Theory embraces the eudaimonic conceptualization of well-being (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2014, 2016; Krapp, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2019).

To summarize, the SDT framework supports individual growth and development. SDT affirms positive human activity, attests humans are growth-oriented organisms, and innately seek and engage in stimulating activities and environments to master potentials, capabilities, and strengths. This tendency towards actualization represents an interface and concept within social environments needed to increase and decrease positive adjustment.

### **Method**

In this case study, qualitative, ethnographic inquiry was used to convey the experiences of AAMSAs. In this inquiry, ethnographic representations of reality and the investigation of pedagogy and practice required cultural analysis with critical deconstruction techniques. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), case studies increase understanding and opportunities to identify consistency and trustworthiness (Merriam, 1988). Also, case studies provide data worthy of migrating across different disciplines (Merriam, 1988). In order to develop an understanding of athletic and academic perceptions, this study investigated the experiences of former intercollegiate AAMSAs prior to college, through athletic careers, and through graduate school. As the researcher in this study, I employed ethnographic methods to create detailed examinations of four subjects to generate knowledge about Self-Determination Theory as applied to the AAMSA population.

### **Participants**

This qualitative case study identified and highlighted the influential intrinsic motivators of four former intercollegiate AAMSAs to obtain professional and graduate degrees. Purposeful sampling techniques secured participants for the study who fit the criteria under consideration and from those whom the researcher can learn the most (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1988; Turner, 2004). In this instance, four individuals met the following criteria in order to participate in the study: African American, male, collegiate sport competitor at a Predominately White Institution (PWI) through their senior year, participated in revenue-producing sports and/or track, earned baccalaureate degree, entered graduate school, and earned graduate degree.

The participants exemplified the positive outcomes associated with the target population of African American Male Student Athletes. In addition, participants illuminated the positive forces of motivation which can be applied across cultures. Each participant received pseudonyms. Table 1 gives the background of each participant.

Table 1

*Background of Participants*

Name	Age	Parental Experience	High School	College Sport	Undergraduate Degree/Graduate Degree	Current Profession
Winslow Lawyer	30	Single Mother	City of Champions	Football	BA/JD	Attorney
Norris Jazz	29	Mother and Father	Funky Town HS	Football	BS/MS	Musician
Nathan Principal	32	Grandparents	Texas Tradition	Football	BS/M.Ed	Principal
Jacob Money	25	Mother and Father	Texas Speed	Track	BS/MBA	Accountant

The following section gives a brief description of the participants.

Winslow Lawyer is a 30-year-old African American male. Winslow is from a middle-class, urban neighborhood. His neighborhood is the home of the “City of Champions”. Winslow indicated he was surrounded by a diverse student population throughout his time in the community. He described the general student population as being very diverse, while many of his student athlete counterparts were African American. Winslow was transparent and relaxed throughout the interview process. In conjunction with transparency, Winslow revealed personal feelings and opinions and his experiences as a child, adolescent, and adult. He was confident in expressions and statements regarding race, education, and motivational experiences.

Norris Jazz is a 29-year-old African American male. Norris was born and raised in a large urban community known for its musical tradition and influence. Norris described his neighborhood as being primarily African American, and his academic experiences involved diverse students. In addition, many of his teammates were African American. He was very honest in his responses, which gave the interview value and depth. His perspective throughout the interview process gave the study insight and added to the context of the study.

Nathan Principal is a 31-year-old African American male. Nathan was born into a military family and raised in an urban community. This urban community is the home of numerous successful and professional athletes and performers. Nathan and his younger brother lived with his grandparents. His community shaped his experiences and perspectives through long-standing academic and athletic success. Nathan was confident and his responses were interesting. In addition, Nathan is currently an assistant principal and a member of a fraternity. His current profession gave him a unique perspective during the interview process. He was assertive in his comments regarding motivation and how ongoing experiences enhanced his development.

Jacob Money is a 25-year-old African American male. He has a military background and his parents lived in numerous cities and homes as a child and adolescent. Because of the background of the participant, he is an introvert and does not engage in extreme social settings. However, his perspective is useful in order to demonstrate the nature of collegiate athletics.

### **Data Collection**

The interview protocol consisted of 27 questions, which covered their family backgrounds, social influences and influencers, childhood and adolescent student athlete experiences prior to college, the factors that lead them to choose the college they attended (i.e. recruiting process), their student athlete experiences while in college, their experiences in graduate school, and their experiences post graduate school. Examples of the questions during the interviews range from “how did your coaches and advisors influence you academically?” to “what was your involvement in campus activities during your collegiate experience?” Each interview was

approximately 45-90 minutes in length. During the interview process, the participants conveyed vivid descriptions of experiences as student athletes, graduate students, and current professionals. Each participant elaborated on motivators, contributions, and contributors to their successes, failures, and achievements after athletics and graduate school. The interview process captured the actions and decisions made by the participants, progression, and classifications of different motivations for specific activities. Although the interview protocol consisted of 27 questions, additional questions were asked based on their responses. After completing the interview process, I transcribed data from the interviews with the assistance of a transcription service. In total, the data produced 64 pages of transcripts and 30 data units.

## **Data Analysis**

The initial stage of data analysis included coding the data in order to construct themes. The coding process used internal and external coding in order to identify terms, experiences, occurrences, descriptions, and responses associated within each specific theme. Internal coding creates a respondent-centered analysis (Spickard, 2017), and external coding helps the researcher answer questions posed in previous research, academic literature, societal phenomena, and various academic disciplines (Spickard, 2017). Of the 30 data units that emerged from the 64 pages of transcripts, 10 codes surfaced in order to categorize intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and then applied within the sub-themes of SDT. The motivations that surfaced within the interview process are addressed in the next section. Nonetheless, within these codes, themes emerged to approach the unit of analysis. When using themes as coding units, expressions of ideas were used in framing the theme. The choice of how the codes emerged was dependent upon context and comparability of outcomes and responses between the participants. Within several codes, many data units overlapped due to the nature of the theoretical framework, experience integration, and the nature of participant responses. Therefore, the coding process can be viewed as a continuum that captures how each code relates to one another. After the coding process was completed, the codes were then rechecked for consistency, reliability, and validity. After the codes were rechecked, conclusions were drawn in order to make sense of the themes. Member checking occurred in order to ensure dependability, credibility, and transferability. This process, both formal and informal, consisted of the participants verifying the data and interpretations collected through the interviews (Turner, 2004). This process also consisted of a summary at the end of each interview, which allowed the participants to verify interpretations and carry on informal conversations that are relevant to the study. In addition, myself as the researcher, along with the participants reviewed the 64 pages of transcripts. This process ensures validity and triangulates the data to corroborate the evidence. Also, it reduces bias from the investigator and cross-examines the integrity of the participants and their responses.

## **Findings**

SDT is a metatheory of four intersecting sub-theories. The theories link assumptions and how they influence psychological well-being. After I identified themes, the categorization process began and applied to different sub theories within SDT. Ten themes surfaced from the data. Table 2 classifies intrinsic themes and Table 3 classifies extrinsic themes. Although extrinsic motivation plays a key role in success, this study only seeks to illuminate intrinsic motivators and how they influence perceptions of results and environments. Accordingly, Ryan and Deci (2004, 2014, 2016) note how intrinsic motivation reflects the positive potential of human nature. In addition, intrinsic motivation influences individuals to seek challenging and stimulating environments.

Table 2

*Intrinsic Motivation*

Intrinsic Motivation				
High Academic Expectations (Know Your Assignment)	High Athletic Expectations (Being the GOAT)	Strong Work Ethic (Hard Work and Dedication)	Discipline (Read Your Keys)	Competitiveness (Win at All Costs)

Table 3

*Extrinsic Motivation*

Extrinsic Motivation				
Family Influence (Family Over Everything)	Community Influence / Traditions (Expect Greatness)	Social Influence (Be Mindful of the Company You Keep)	Teamwork (There is no "I" in Team)	Code Switching (Knowing How to Play the Game)

**“Know Your Assignment” (High Academic Expectations)**

This theme identified academic motivation as a contributor to academic outcomes. Organismic Integration Theory, Cognitive Evaluation Theory, and Causality Orientations Theory interact with each other within this theme. The contribution of intrinsic motivation to academic expectations was a result of internalizing inputs from family, coaches, recruiters, social settings, and academic advisors. Positive external factors sustained these experiences. For instance, Norris stated:

That’s what it was there. I’m a product of my environment. There wasn’t... a conscience decision to you know... I’m going to do the best I can on this test to be smart... I’m going to go out on the field and do the best I can do... to smack this dude on the next play. You just... the people around you are good... so I wanted to be good.

In addition, Organismic Integration Theory surfaced due to sustained success in athletics based on positive outcomes of academics. For instance, the academic accomplishments achieved by Winslow were influenced by athletic performance. To this extent, Winslow demonstrated autonomous growth. This is significant because the it contradicts deficit-laden social perceptions of AAMSAs, throughout society and existing literature, that describe them as being less motivated academically and needing academic support.

The statements made by the participants demonstrate progression through the SDT Continuum and its association with Organismic Integration Theory. The participants demonstrated integration in regulation and approached components of intrinsic motivation. Because these individuals had healthy and positive sources of external regulators, they integrated experiences they found success in.

In addition, Causality Orientations Theory demonstrates how the participants were autonomous in sustaining ongoing experiences as it relates to athletic and academic experiences. For example, Norris noted:

So, once that decision was made – ok I’m done with my math degree... do I want to double major or get a graduate degree... it was a no brainer for me... once you get out with a graduate degree, especially in physics... if you’re going to a tech related field... that looks way better than a double major... so that’s really why I went for a graduate degree. It was better than a double major.

Regulation through identification and integrated regulation identified completion of a bachelor’s degree, willingness to achieve accomplishments based upon intrinsic and extrinsic forces, and through deliberation of positive options of well-being. Joey, stated:

I had some classes, I could do some equations, I could memorize some crap, but I knew nothing about it. Um, if I was stuck in something my whole life and I'm miserable then I'm screwed...I need something that could give me the flexibility to focus on something...focus on civil engineering...or I could do some lobbying or working in the political sector as some public official...I didn't really have a game plan... but graduate school equipped me for that.

This specific statement demonstrates reflection and flexibility, which applies to the autonomy orientation of Causality Orientations Theory. This shows the process of how this participant decided to choose a degree more fitting to his outlook after his eligibility expired.

The ability and decision to choose a degree option demonstrated orientation towards a perceived choice and a benefit to well-being. Thus, autonomy orientation of Causality Orientations Theory applies to this theme.

### **“Being the GOAT” (High Athletic Expectations)**

According to Edwards (1973, 2000), the importance of athletics is in the mind of numerous young African American males. This specific theme concentrates on the importance of athletic expectations, the purpose of their involvement in athletics, and how their experiences played a role in to their perspectives. Thus, this theme is titled “Being the GOAT” refers to “Being the Greatest of All Time” and encompassed the importance of athletic experiences as they progressed throughout their lives. The participants within this study are African American and former intercollegiate student athletes. Consequently, their expectations and experiences as they apply to athletics and student athletes gives the reader understanding in how they integrated their ongoing experiences. This theme entails athletic commitment and how it contributed to their well-being.

Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, and Basic Needs Theory represent this theme. Each theory identifies how the participants internalized the experiences leading them towards athletic success. For example, Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Organismic Integration Theory both account for the external prompts and surrounding influences individuals use to carry out tasks and once again, we see multiple external prompts, external environments, and significant others who have played a major role within this theme and in their successes throughout their lifetime. Specifically, the information in this theme from accounts of the participants describing exposure to sports and types of feedback they received. For instance, Nathan noted:

We were held to a higher expectation than most... they expected more from us. We were put on a pedestal... so anytime we did anything – positive or negative – there was an awareness to it... they expected a lot from us because of the tradition of the district and the school... we were supposed to do right... we were supposed to be successful... on the field and in the class.

On the other hand, if we look at the data more closely, Basic Needs Theory within the context of this theme, suggests all motivations must derive from a need satisfaction or must have a direct relationship with well-being. As the participants expressed their narratives, the participants moved through the continuum found in Organismic Integration Theory (Germer et al., 2016) and integrated the regulations into their own. The integration process created concrete actions as they moved forward; thus, becoming an effective form of motivation and influence on their well-being.

For example, Jacob noted:

This was back when I ran the 100 meters. I found in retrospect that I wanted to be the fastest 100-meter runner and also in the 200 meters. I wanted to break all these records. Like have gold medals. I was totally immersed in the potential that I was perceived to have.

Winslow also noted:

You can trust me. I wanted it more than anybody that you could imagine. I would have played in the NFL for \$60 thousand... \$50 thousand a year. I would've still wanted to play. I love the game of football.

These examples demonstrate how their initial athletic experiences began out of interest, enjoyment, and the outlook of their potential.

### **“Hard Work and Dedication” (Strong Work Ethic)**

Motivation is associated with the amount of effort individuals put forth in activities (Deci, 1972; Ryan et al., 1983; Riley, 2016). This theme in turn highlights the process of how the participants integrated ongoing experiences. In addition, this theme is related to intrinsic motivators analyzed within this study. The work ethic exhibited by the participants, as told in their narratives, propelled them to exceed levels of expectation by family, peers, and athletic and academic stakeholders who contributed to their experiences and success.

As the sub-theories of SDT relate to this theme, Organismic Integration Theory, and Basic Needs Theory represent this theme. This is due to the determined and persistent behavior they exhibited in the activities they found interest in. Determination and persistence to do well in certain activities is a performance contingency within the aspect of Cognitive Evaluation Theory; however, the reward effects of participation do not exist due to enjoyment of the activity, interest in the activity, and impact the activity has on well-being. The data revealed how the participants worked to actively transform external regulators into self-regulation. Thus, the determination and persistence found within the data has a direct association with Organismic Integration Theory. The participants also exhibited autonomy in order to obtain results of personal value and personal interest. This gives the data a direct association with Basic Needs Theory. Norris gave a great example of this:

No matter if you're on the football team or...if you're working at McDonald's – the person that you're working for...you want trust and if you've got a good work ethic and character... they can always depend on you to do the right thing, when they are looking or not looking...that trust... is going to always keep you employed...it's going to keep you on the field...those things apply to whatever profession you have...and for work ethic in school...that's a no brainer...do your homework, study, make sure you're fully prepared...that's determined by work ethic.

Moreover, the data demonstrated the internalization process and transition into integrated regulation. The data also reflects the increase in work ethic and the differing effects it had on the reward effects of their outcomes did not matter. In addition, as the participants shared their experiences, the data depicted evidence demonstrating how participation in certain activities effects well-being. For example, Jacob entails how the two sub-theories coincide with this specific theme.

I was so committed to getting ice baths after a workout... getting the right amounts of sleep, getting the right amount of food, talking to my nutritionist. I would do two-a-days without the consent of my coaches... I'd go in the gym in the mornings... I would do cardio... weights... all on my own because it was a part of me... I needed to do this... it became the focal point of my college career from when I was about 21... my junior and senior year.

In addition, Jacob noted:

I'd go and have my own private sessions. Do my jump rope, do my power cleans... the coaches coached me in the afternoon but not in the mornings... I had a lot of freedom and flexibility to do what I wanted to do. As soon as I started doing this... at two points in my career... I was number one in the world... and I directly attribute that to those two-a-day sessions.

These statements demonstrate how the individuals were autonomous and independent during their development process. These statements also demonstrate competence due to understanding of necessary commitments needed in order to sustain enjoyment, interest, and results in specific activities.

### **“Read Your Keys” (Discipline)**

Discipline is correlated with the process of control and how it effects individual decision making

throughout different social environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2016). Hence, a theme capturing how these individuals interact in social environments and how they internalized external prompts emerged from the data. The combination of Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, and Causality Orientations Theory highlight this theme. This theme captures how the participants were autonomous in orientation while interacting in different contexts. In addition, this theme identifies how they have internalized external prompts into actions of value. For example, Norris, stated:

When I was in military school, I had the schedule every day from 6 AM to 7 AM... that was study time. And then from 6 PM to 10 PM was study time. So that's five hours every day. So, I kind of just told myself... I can study half that time and still be above the rest... so after football... I went and studied from 7 to 10 everyday... No matter if it was a test... if it was homework... I just found something to do from 7 to 10... I just wanted to keep that trend going while it was already instilled in me.

This specific statement represents the overall theme of discipline, while also representing the intersection of Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, and Causality Orientations Theory. Within Cognitive Evaluation Theory, perceived locus of causality, perceived competence, controlling mechanisms, and functional significance highlight this statement. While perceived locus of causality identifies autonomy and how social environments impact the internal motivation of individuals, perceived competence is concerned with competence and the effects social environments and contexts have on the perceived competence of individuals. Causality Orientations Theory surfaced due to autonomous behavior and control orientations toward tasks and activities. On the other hand, Organismic Integration Theory highlights motivation influences through identified regulation and integrated regulation.

Norris was previously in a controlling environment. He utilized the concept of functional significance in order to apply those previously learned skills in a more autonomous role. Thus, according to Cognitive Evaluation Theory, individuals must not only experience competence or efficacy, they must also experience their behavior as self-determined for intrinsic motivation to be evident (Ryan & Deci, 2014, 2016). This requires contextual support for autonomy and competence or abiding inner resources (Reeve, 1996, 2014) as the result of development for perceived locus of causality and perceived competence (Reeve, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2014).

In addition, Nathan noted:

Be disciplined enough to reach that goal...hard work – life is not easy at all and sports definitely prepares you for that...because you're out there every day, when everybody is in the dorms or at home in the A/C and we're out there – its three o'clock...in the middle of the day and we're working...with full pads on...sweating and hitting each other...that's hard...not a lot of people can do that...that's why everybody can't go to college and play football... because it's tough.

### **“Win at All Costs” (Competitiveness)**

Competitiveness is associated to aspirations, achievement, and well-being (Flunger, Mayer, & Umbach, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2014, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2019). The vivid responses the participants gave during the interview process shaped this theme. Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Basic Needs Theory highlight this theme. Within the context of competition, individuals usually partake in tasks and events challenging enough to test their will and potentials against other individuals in exchange for a reward. The winning individual usually receives the reward. In addition, competition levels raise when capabilities and potentials are equally matched. Therefore, this specific theme can be associated with the reward effects of intrinsic motivation and the outcome of certain motivations based upon their well-being which are direct components of Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Basic Needs Theory. The data uncovered numerous competitions between themselves, students, and athletes. For example, Winslow noted:

I'm a competitor... That's just how I live life... I don't care what it is, I'm going to always strive to be number one... I say... you can judge a competitor by what they do before and after a game. Everybody competes during a game, but... if you really want to know how much of a competitor he is, go... watch him at practice... no... watch him during summer workouts... then you know who really is a competitor... so for me, I did not want to sit on the bench... so I made sure I worked my butt off... I made sure I was not going to be outworked... I also made sure, I knew my assignments... all of the defense... so I had confidence that I was going to be better than you.

This specific statement takes on the assumption motivation must have a direct relationship to well-being. In addition, aspirations are an important part of Basic Needs Theory. Aspirations can be intrinsic or extrinsic. In this specific instance, the competitiveness of Winslow initiates out of interest in the specific activity and the enjoyment of attaining success over others in competitive tasks.

In addition, Nathan exemplified competitiveness in both athletics and academics. Regarding his athletic experiences, he stated:

I looked at everything... I looked at where you lined up... I looked at tendencies... what plays they run out of certain formations... so once you learn the game... it makes you a like a step quicker than everybody because you know what's going to happen 90% of the time... the other 10% you might get burnt but... I was usually right.

Regarding his academic experiences, he noted:

I looked at how they did things... I focused more in the classroom... so I can set myself up to go to grad school if I want to go to grad school or go to law school if I want to go to law school. So, I think after Kappa... my GPA went up because I focused more.

Familial influence also highlighted the competitive nature of the participants in areas they may have not noticed early on in their lives, as told through their narratives. As an example, Jacob competed in every phases of his life, which his family members recognized early in his life. Jacob noted:

When I was seven months old, his brother would taunt him... I was crawling... I didn't have a great sense of awareness at the time or anything like that... but I forced myself to stand up... I pulled the gate open and started walking on my own... from that moment on my mom always said she knew what type of personality I would have.

Also, because the participants were former athletes, and well as former graduate students, their perception of achievement, results, and satisfaction of life were direct results from their willingness to compete with others. Winslow noted:

I didn't want to become a veterinarian... so that's when I got involved in Teen Court... when somebody gets in trouble... you could be their attorney... and represent them... you could try to get their punishment dismissed or reduced... it was exciting... a competitive program... and I liked the idea of winning... and beating my classmates.

This section has addressed the significant factors that have influenced the participants of this study within the context of SDT. The sub-theories of SDT encompassed the experiences of high academic expectations, high athletic expectations, strong work ethic, discipline, and competitiveness. All of the experiences were integrative factors that the AAMSA's utilized to maximize their potential in their dual pursuits of excellence in athletics and academics. The concept of endogenous tendencies toward psychological growth and unity in development has shaped their everyday behaviors and the evidence from the findings demonstrate that individuals although controlled, fragmented, and even stagnated in some phases of their lives and pursuits, can progress towards positive growth through intervening, shaping, and directive behavior that has purpose and value (Ryan, 2000).

## Conclusion

The guiding research questions of this study captured the experiences of former AAMSAs as they matriculated through college, competed at a high level athletically, transitioned into graduate school, and graduated with their graduate degree. Intrinsic motivation was investigated study because it highlighted the influential factors utilized by the participants as they progressed toward success in the aspects of degree completion and the impact it had on their well-being. Social theories explain the effect of external forces and environments, such as the hindrance of potential for AAMSAs (Donnor, 2005; Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2015). Although SDT, on one hand, focuses on individualization and interaction in social settings, it does not deny the existence of societal forces, social settings, and environment contexts. When comparing the participants to the specified population (i.e. AAMSAs), the possibility of getting graduate degrees, according to current NCAA graduation rates (NCAA, 2018), APR metrics (NCAA, 2018), and societal images (Harper, 2013) is not likely. And although well intentioned peers, media, and community members inform AAMSAs of the possibilities to compete as a professional, the percentage and likelihood of student athletes making it to the professional ranks is only 1.6% (NCAA, 2018).

As a response to the 1.6% possibility of competing professionally, athletically and academically successful AAMSAs provide an alternate perspective in assessing the relationship between athletic participation, academic achievement, and attainment of educational and occupational goals (Dawkins, Braddock, & Celaya, 2008; Meekins, 2018; Sacco, 2012; Williams, 2018). This study utilized former AAMSAs who competed in football and track; the two sports with the highest AAMSA populations, the lowest graduation rates among student athletes and the general student population, and the lowest APR scores of all NCAA sports (Harper, 2013). Thus, findings from this study support existing literature in how AAMSAs have the positive growth-tendencies and psychological needs necessary to generate intrinsic motivation, personality integration, and fostering growth conditions (Gill et al., 2018).

Participants did not characterize the societal perception of AAMSAs. However, SDT can be applied to explain individual behaviors and attitudes and how the individual internalizes ongoing experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2019). The analysis revealed how the participants encountered the same barriers presented in existing research when comparing the same student population, but this study provides an alternative to combating those barriers through SDT and its the sub-theory Organismic Integration Theory. This sub-theory of SDT characterizes external motivation as being antithetical to SDT and although research highlights extrinsic motivation as being a supplement to attaining tangible rewards, it does, however, undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Additionally, Organismic Integration Theory is based upon a continuum rather than being dichotomous (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Because Organismic Integration Theory is the most commonly used sub-theme of SDT within this study, it suggests that although the student athletes exhibited intrinsic motivation or internalization, the student athletes had positive nutriments to sustain ongoing experiences. The participants also exuded all three of the components within SDT – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – in order to take full advantage of opportunities. These components surface in all five themes related to intrinsic motivation, while Organismic Integration Theory was found in four of the themes associated with intrinsic motivation and five of the themes associated with extrinsic motivation respectively. Additionally, the theme of “Know Your Assignment” utilized Organismic Integration Theory the most. This theme captured the process of integration as they received athletic honors, navigated their recruiting experiences, developed their academic abilities, sought out various support systems, understood and created career plans, and executed positive decision-making skills.

This study revealed how intrinsic motivators guided the participants in developing motivation inputs used to receive outcomes. In addition, integrated regulation is the basis of the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. This means the participants had external factors increasing their intrinsic motivations. For example,

Jacob references his strong work ethic was the focal point of his career while Norris describes his military experiences as an aid to his success in academics and athletics. These descriptions by the participants demonstrate autonomy and how they integrated them into their ongoing experiences. In addition, because of the variability of the participants' background, GPA, and other social factors, this study has limitations. Accordingly, if each student athlete utilized support systems, then maybe the statistics regarding the plight of AAMSAs will increase. Administrators, faculty, educators, psychologists, advisors, learning specialists, counselors, and success coaches should identify support systems and mechanisms necessary to aid student athletes in individual growth and development needed to sustain their success post eligibility.

This study helps scholars and educators maintain a success-oriented perception of the specified population. While many student athletes believe the path to economic mobility lies solely through professional sports, graduate and professional degrees are fundamental indicators of well-being (Harris, 2012). The information within this study also coincides with motivational literature in how maintenance and enhancement of growth requires supportive conditions (Deci, 1980; Deci & Ryan, 2002, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2014, 2016).

### Topics for Further Discussion

This study analyzed four African American males, all former athletes who attended PWI's during their athletic careers. It would be beneficial to research African American females to analyze the differences between the two populations. While this study analyzed with former African American student athletes who attended PWI's during their athletic careers, it would also be beneficial to replicate this type of study with student athletes who attended HBCUs. In addition, although the participants in this study were athletically gifted and accomplished, they did not make it to the professional ranks or embarked on other professional endeavors. This type of study would be interesting for athletes who have played professionally in their respective sport. This study exemplified the experiences of African American males. Lastly, it would be thought-provoking to create more research on African American student athletes who become graduate students. This information would indeed shift the paradigm of the African American student athlete context regarding academics.

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