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THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PARTICIPANTS IN
ORGANIZED TENNIS LEAGUES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

by
Paul Gremillion
August 2018

Accepted by:
Dr. Mariela Fernandez, Committee Chair
Dr. Betty Baldwin
Dr. Gregory Ramshaw

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that adult participation in sports leagues can have positive impacts on mental and physical health in addition to expanding a participant's social network. However, a relatively small percentage of US adults participate in sports leagues, and an even smaller percentage of adult ethnic minorities participate in these leagues. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African Americans participating in an organized tennis league in the southeast United States. The research objectives were to determine the impacts of participating in a United State Tennis Association (USTA) tennis league for African American adults and the role USTA tennis leagues play in creating a sense of belonging for African American participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen African Americans participating in tennis leagues in Columbia, South Carolina. Through open and axial coding, themes were constructed. Major themes involved the process of joining a tennis league, the benefits of playing in a league, and a sense of belonging. Elements that were crucial in drawing new players and retaining existing players were identified. Findings from this study should assist tennis organizations and professionals in recruiting African Americans to recreational tennis.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, April, who encouraged me to follow my dreams and supported me through the difficulties of graduate school. Without her sacrifices I would not have been able to accomplish many of my goals. It is also dedicated to my mother and father, who continue to inspire me daily.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Mariela Fernandez for her patience with me in this process. Her willingness to let me explore issues I found important combined with her prodding me to examine different viewpoints made this a truly growing experience. I would also like to thank members of the PRTM staff. Mikah, Karin, Sabrina, Annette, Alexis, and Tequilla always willingly helped me with whatever I needed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Although the sports and recreation landscape has changed since the abolishment of slavery, the impact of slavery and segregation still exists. When the US Supreme Court established the policy of providing equal but separate facilities for people of different races (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896), African Americans were relegated to schools, parks, and recreational facilities that were separate from Whites' facilities, but supposedly equal. Research suggests that separate was far from equal regarding access to or the quality of sport facilities (Holland, 2002; McKay, 1954). Although the US Supreme Court ruled over fifty years ago that the separate but equal doctrine was unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 1954), racial inequality still exists in many aspects of society including sports and recreation (Moore, Roux, Evenson, McGinn, & Brines, 2008). Tennis serves as a prime example of the persistence of racial inequality.

Tennis has a long history of segregation in the US (Ashe, 1988a). Shortly after tennis took root in the US, the United States National Lawn Tennis Association (USNLTA) was formed to organize tournaments, but African Americans were barred from participating in any USNLTA tournaments, solidifying segregation within the sport (Lawrence, 2014). African Americans did play tennis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the sport was primarily played at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) and at private clubs in larger cities such as Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, effectively making it a sport for well-educated and wealthy African Americans (Lawrence, 2014). Public parks were segregated during this time, and few

parks for African Americans had tennis facilities (Ashe, 1988a). Lack of places to play tennis and segregation within tennis contributed to the sport being deemed a “White” activity (Ashe, 1988a).

Although USNLTA, now known as the United States Tennis Association (USTA), no longer bars African American players from its tournaments, league integration was in one way harmful to the culture of African American tennis (Wiggins, 2004). The American Tennis Association (ATA), which was formed to organize tennis tournaments for participants of all races, in addition to training young African American tennis players, has lost substantial membership since the USTA lifted its bar of African American players (Ashe, 1988a). Even though the ATA still holds tournaments and offers youth training, the decline of this organization has contributed to the overall perception of tennis being a “White” sport (Wiggins, 2004).

Although some African Americans have been very successful as professional tennis players, media perception of these athletes contributes to the notion that African Americans are anomalies in the professional tennis landscape. For instance, Serena and Venus Williams’ tennis careers have been blemished by episodes of overt discrimination, tennis commentators focusing on their cultural differences, and the media’s fascination with their physical differences from White players (Spencer, 2004). By focusing on the differences between African Americans and athletes of other racial affiliations, the media has also perpetuated the idea of tennis being a “White” sport. Given that a sense of belonging is impacted by a feeling of being needed within an environment, media

coverage of professional African American tennis players could have a direct impact on whether African Americans feel welcome at tennis courts.

Despite the decline of the ATA and continued racial inequality, a thriving African American tennis community exists in Columbia, South Carolina. Additionally, this community has a strong presence in the local USTA tennis league, which suggests that African Americans feel a sense of belonging within the greater tennis community.

Previous research on how African Americans choose leisure activities provides insight to how a sense of belonging within the tennis community is created. Greenview Park, which has eleven tennis courts and is in a historically African American neighborhood, serves as a safe haven for African Americans to play tennis without fear of discrimination.

Anthony Lewis, an African American tennis coach at Greenview Park, recruits, trains, and encourages new players to tennis, who in turn recruit their friends and family to the game. Although both Greenview Park and Anthony Lewis are central to the African American tennis community in Columbia, other factors contribute to an overall sense of belonging.

To achieve a sense of belonging, research has shown that individuals must not only feel needed in an environment, but they must also feel a “fit or congruence with other people, groups, objects, organizations, environments, or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics” (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992, p. 174). In other words, a common bonding element must be present for sense of belonging to occur. Recreation has been cited as an element that can lead to fit or congruence within an environment and contribute to sense of belonging

amongst participants (Bailey & McLaren, 2005). Research has also shown that feeling a sense of belonging contributes to a positive impact on mental health (McLaren & Challis, 2009), in addition to emotional and cognitive well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The health and well-being implications of previous studies on this “sense of belonging” have illuminated the importance of further research into the relationship between sense of belonging and recreation.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of African Americans playing in adult recreational tennis leagues. Although previous studies have focused on how adult recreation leagues fulfill basic needs and create a sense of community (Legg, Wells, Newland, & Tanner, 2017), the experiences of African American participants in tennis leagues have received limited attention. Additionally, the location of this study in a southeastern state holds significance due to the history of slavery, segregation and racial discrimination, which have all contributed to de facto segregation and contentious race relations. Another study of African Americans in this area found that recreational preferences are impacted by a desire to avoid discrimination, a desire to avoid areas traditionally unsafe for African Americans, and knowledge spread among peers (Le & Holmes, 2012). These recreation preferences are evidence of the impact that race relations have on African Americans’ choice of leisure activities. This study explored two primary research questions: First, what elements impact African Americans’ decision to start and continue playing in USTA tennis leagues? Second, what role do USTA tennis leagues play in creating a sense of belonging for African American participants?

Importance of Study

Sense of belonging is related to both social and psychological functioning (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). Sense of belonging is also positively related to continued competitive sport participation (Robinson & Carron, 1982). This is not surprising considering that physical involvement, with the attribution of meaningfulness to that involvement, is one of the consequences of a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1996). A lack of a sense of belonging can also prevent people from using recreational facilities (Gobster & Delgado, 1993). Given that physical activity is positively associated with physical health (Ekelund et al., 2016; Petruzzello, Landers, Hatfield, Kubitz, & Salazar, 1991; Warburton & Bredin, 2017; Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006), further research on increasing a sense of belonging in recreational sports leagues is needed. This study provides insights into the interpersonal factors that impact this sense of belonging. Additionally, the aspects of the league format that impact a sense of belonging, such as competition, opportunity for socializing, and formation of teams, were investigated. Utilizing this information, league administrators can alter how leagues are run to maximize not only the physical benefits, but the psychological and social benefits as well.

Although some tennis studies have focused on ethnic minorities, most focused on the experiences of Whites, while few discussed African Americans' experiences. Research has revealed that people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds derive diverse benefits from the same recreation activities (Kuykendall, Tay, & Ng, 2015). To fully understand the benefits that African Americans have obtained from participating in

tennis, this study examined the experiences of African Americans within tennis. By examining the experience of African Americans, this study illuminates the unique benefits and challenges faced by African American league participants.

Chapter Summary

The sports and recreation landscape has changed in many ways since the end of the Civil War, but the impact of slavery and segregation remains. Sports and recreation facilities are now integrated, but discrimination and segregation still exist within many facets of life. Historic practices, the decline of the ATA, and media portrayal of African American tennis players all contribute to tennis being perceived as a sport for Whites. Yet, African Americans do participate in USTA tennis leagues. However, lack of research exists on what elements determine sports league participation for African Americans or how tennis leagues can increase a sense of belonging for African Americans. Without examining the experiences of African Americans in recreational adult tennis leagues, administrators cannot create league policies that attract African Americans or ensure that positive benefits are maximized. This study provides insights on African Americans' experiences in adult recreational sports leagues with specific focus on a sense of belonging.

To help answer the research questions, chapter two consists of a brief review of the history of recreation and the ever-changing benefits derived from recreation. Sport participation, including the acculturating factors, is discussed before moving on to a review of previous leisure studies on African Americans. The impact of historical treatment of African Americans on recreation participation is reviewed as well as the

current issues effecting African American athletes. An overview of tennis leagues, benefits, social aspects, and league configuration is presented. Finally, the concepts undergirding a sense of belonging are dissected.

Chapter three outlines the methods used for this study, including the choice of study site. The chapter includes more information on study participant qualifications and selection criteria. An in-depth overview of the procedures used to collect data, including interview protocols, is presented, followed by the measures taken for analysis and theme creation.

In chapter four, findings are presented starting with the demographic makeup of participants. The first theme, encouragement and support to become a league participant, examines the process, including social influences, of becoming a USTA tennis league participant. The second theme focuses on the benefits reported by study participants, all dealing with health and well-being. The third and final theme, elements that impacted sense of belonging, discusses not only factors that contributed to a sense of belonging but factors that detracted from sense of community.

Chapter five examines the entire picture painted by the data to determine the essence of participants' experiences. Additionally, study findings are compared to previous research on the benefits of participation in adult recreational sports leagues and sense of belonging within these leagues. Findings on sense of belonging are also contrasted with existing concepts of belongingness. The practical implications of the research are discussed, as well as recommendations for practitioners. These recommendations will lead to considerations on the future directions of study and limitations of the current study. A review of the importance of the study closes chapter five.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

African Americans have their own history of recreation based on slavery, segregation, and social inequalities, which has contributed to unique barriers to recreation participation for African Americans. A review of previous research on African American recreation leads into an overview of issues currently impacting leisure trends for African Americans. The history of tennis in the US is reviewed, as well as tennis specific barriers for African Americans. Strategies for increasing African American participation, including increasing a sense of belonging, are discussed, and an analytical concept of a sense of belonging is dissected.

Leisure Studies on African Americans

This section focuses on the lack of sense of belonging for African Americans in certain recreation and leisure settings. Discrimination, past and future threat, is examined in relation to the sites where African Americans feel comfortable recreating. The impact of adhering to dominant cultural norms and barriers related to African American participation in recreational activities is also discussed. An inspection of the benefits of recreational participation for African Americans and management implications completes this section.

Lack of sense of belonging. As discussed previously, sense of belonging has been identified as a key indicator of continued participation in organized sports (Miletic, 1998; Robinson & Carron, 1982). In the race and ethnicity research, past discrimination affecting African Americans has been heavily discussed, which can negatively impact

sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007). A study of users at Chicago's Lincoln Park found that one in ten minorities had encountered discrimination, with reports highest among African Americans (Gobster & Delgado, 1993). This led to African Americans using areas of the park that were considered as predominantly minority (Gobster & Delgado, 1993). African Americans reported incidences of discrimination not only from other park users but also from police officers and park staff, which may have contributed to African Americans not feeling welcome in the park at all (Gobster & Delgado, 1993). Through a later study of the same park, Gobster made inferences into the motivations for participation in different recreational activities by various ethnic groups (Gobster, 2002). One of these motivations was the potential for encountering discrimination or racial epithets.

Research on expected racism found that these expectations can stem from previous experiences, experiences of friends, or reports of racism in a particular area (Blahna & Black, 1993). This expectation of racism greatly influenced where African Americans felt comfortable recreating, with reports of a general discomfort in areas dominated by Whites (Blahna & Black, 1993). These findings were confirmed by another study which reported that African Americans were found to prefer parks where they could see other African Americans recreating (Taylor, 1989). Areas of reported racism are not the only ones avoided by African Americans. West (1993) found that African Americans would avoid unknown places for fear of potential discrimination. In contrast, certain park and recreation areas have become favored by certain ethnicity groups (Gramann, 1996). These parks provide a sense of belonging for those within an ethnicity

group, but they are also often reported as underserved by park staff and lacking in amenities (Gramann, 1996).

Institutionally racist practices, such as differential upkeep, maintenance, and amenities at parks mainly used by minorities, have been found to influence where African Americans recreate (Blahna & Black, 1993). Unlike interpersonal racism, which occurs at the individual level, institutionally racist practices were found to be policies that impact a minority group. Discerning whether the original intent of these policies was nefarious is difficult, but, and regardless of intent, the effect of the policy was discrimination of a marginalized group (Blahna & Black, 1993). Glover's (2007) study of youth baseball leagues noted several institutional policies that led to lower rates of African-American participation. The draft system employed by the league caused African-American to be spread across teams, often resulting in a sole African-American being on a team (Glover, 2007). Games were played in various parks throughout the city which were difficult for African-American parents to attend due to the lack of transportation options (Glover, 2007). These seemingly innocuous policies contributed to an African American community creating their own league (Glover, 2007).

Other barriers. As mentioned previously, sense of belonging is not the only constraint to African Americans participating in organized sports. In a 2007 study, the impact of race on leisure barriers was examined in context of other social factors (Shores, Scott, & Floyd, 2007). Ethnic minorities face not only structural barriers such as distance of recreation facilities, but also interpersonal barriers such as certain activities being perceived as unacceptable by friends and family (Shores, et al., 2007). These barriers are

compounded for ethnic minorities of lower socio-economic status who often cannot afford to travel long distances to recreation facilities and find local facilities overcrowded and in poor condition (Stodolska & Shiness, 2010). Research has found that barriers contribute to lower ethnic minority participation rates for both adults and children in athletic leagues and recreation programs (Shores & West, 2008).

A meta-analysis of studies on the constraints to recreation for African American women found that lack of time due to both work and household responsibilities was a barrier to physical activity (Joseph, Ainsworth, Keller, & Dodgson, 2015). African American women reported physical activity as taking time away from their families and household duties and, therefore, they perceived physical activity as a selfish pursuit (Im et al., 2012). Lack of community support was also reported as a barrier to physical activity (Sanderson, Littleton, & Pulley, 2002). Respondents stated that they didn't have active friends within their community to exercise with or motivate them, and they also reported negative remarks while exercising in their neighborhoods (Sanderson, et al., 2002). Such remarks contribute to African American women not feeling a sense of belonging when engaging in physical activity.

These types of remarks likely influence safety concerns which African Americans are more likely to report as a barrier to outdoor recreation than Whites (Johnson, Bowker, & Cordell, 2001). In a review of data on neighborhoods and obesity, researchers found that the sense of safety within a neighborhood contributed to physical activity rates, as did access to local recreation facilities (Black & Macinko, 2008). However, researchers examining census blocks found that neighborhoods with higher rates of ethnic minorities

were less likely to have a physical activity facility within a five-mile buffer (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, Page, & Popkin, 2006). Furthermore, neighborhoods with a high rate of ethnic minorities and a low rate of total education had the lowest rates of physical activity facilities within a five-mile buffer (Gordon-Larsen, et al., 2006). Even when local recreation facilities are available, access may be limited for nearby residents. For example, in a study of a traditionally African American recreation center, little league baseball players were forced to play at fields further away from their house due to league policies (Fernandez & Witt, 2013).

Competing recreation interests among groups in shared recreation spaces has been reported as a barrier to participation as well. In a study of recreation use by ex-urban immigrants to the Grand Teton area, conflicts of appreciative versus the non-appreciative use of recreation areas was documented (Peterson, Mertig, & Liu, 2007). Ex-urban immigrants participated in more appreciative recreation and wanted to limit ATV use in certain recreational areas to serve the interests of hikers (Peterson, et al., 2007). In a study of the different constraints to participation among various ethnicities, African Americans were more likely to report a lack of desired activities as a reason for not visiting a park (Stanis, Schneider, Chavez, & Shiness, 2009). Lack of desired activities for African Americans indicates that the parks cater to activities preferred by other ethnicities.

The benefits of physical activity on a person's physical health has been reported and confirmed by several different studies (Ekelund et al., 2016; Petruzzello et al., 1991; Warburton, Bredin, 2017; Warburton et al., 2006), and the obesity epidemic in the United States has focused attention on the importance of adults staying physically active. Mental

and social health are also known to improve with physical activity (Asztalos, et al., 2009; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). Considering that minorities face different barriers to participation than Whites, recreation professionals have a responsibility to incorporate strategies for reducing these barriers. In a study of why African Americans do not visit a nearby national park, findings supported the park utilizing an informal and targeted approach to communicating information about the park to African Americans (Le & Holmes, 2012). Study participants also recommended partnering with community organizations to offer special events aimed at African Americans and advertising these events at churches, schools, and other organizations (Le & Holmes, 2012). To increase a sense of belonging in the park, study participants recommended recruitment of rangers and volunteers from minority groups (Le & Holmes, 2012).

African American Recreation

Historical factors have played a large part in shaping the current landscape of African American recreation. Many African American ancestors were brought to the US as slaves and afforded little time for recreation (Wiggins, 2004). This time was often used to hunt and fish to supplement food resources, but traditional dancing and athletic competitions occurred as well (Wiggins, 2004). These leisure activities were important to community development and identity formation (Wiggins, 2004). In a perverse parallel to modern professional athletics, some slaves were jockeys in horse races and participated in boxing matches, a few winning enough money from prizes and gambling to purchase their freedom (Wiggins, 2004). Although Whites and African Americans competed

against each other in horse racing and boxing, African Americans were not always allowed as spectators to these events (Ashe, 1988a).

This notion of separate recreation spaces for Whites and African Americans was reinforced by segregation after the abolition of slavery. African Americans could not compete with Whites in athletic leagues, attend the same recreation facilities, or visit the same parks. Not surprisingly, when segregation was abolished by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, de facto segregation still existed in many leisure arenas. In the late 1960s, parks and recreation facilities often were in White neighborhoods, and many facilities located in traditionally African American neighborhoods were in dire need of upgrades and renovations (Holland, 2002). Funding from the federal government assisted in building new facilities and upgrading existing facilities in many traditionally African American neighborhoods, but inequality in recreational facilities persisted (Holland, 2002). Even when African Americans moved into White neighborhoods, “White flight”, or the exodus of Whites when African Americans moved into a neighborhood, resulted in a lack of upgrades to public facilities by city administrators (Wiese, 2005).

The history of slavery and segregation in the US has led to de facto segregation in many neighborhoods, which contributes to creating places where African Americans do not feel welcome. Sense of belonging was explicitly examined in Philipp’s (1999) study of feelings of welcome in leisure activities. Philipp asked African Americans how welcome they felt participating in certain recreational activities, and he also asked Whites how welcome they thought African Americans would feel participating in these activities. Boating, hunting, camping in the mountains, and going to country clubs were all

activities that African Americans listed as feeling somewhat unwelcome to do, with going to country clubs the most unwelcome activity. Whites thought that African Americans would feel more welcome doing these activities, but they also listed going to country clubs as the activity that African Americans would feel least welcome doing (Philipp, 1999). These findings illuminated the persisting attitude of African Americans being unequal to Whites and treated differently, an issue that was brought to the forefront of public attention by recent social movements (e.g., Jee-Lyn Garcia & Sharif, 2015).

Segregated neighborhoods also influenced the socialization of African American youth. In a study of the socialization of African American males, several participants, who were former collegiate athletes, reported neighborhood peers and role models stimulated their desire to play sports (Beamon, 2010). However, this emphasis on sports resulted in less importance placed on other aspects of life such as education (Beamon, 2010). Further complicating this socialization trend, research has indicated that African Americans are underrepresented in college coaching positions, particularly head coaching positions (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006). Head coaching positions, which typically are held by former athletes, were found to be among the best paying positions within the field of athletics (Cunningham et al., 2006). Part of the lack of African American head coaches in college can be blamed on media coverage of black athletes, which research has shown often paints them athletically superior to White athletes but intellectually inferior (Mastro, Blecha, Atwell Seate, 2011). Moreover, African American athletes were found to be disproportionately linked to crime in media coverage (Lapchick, 2000).

Media coverage of Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem has also been mainly negative, including elements of demonization and delegitimization (Pena, 2017). Kaepernick's protest even brought criticism from the President of the US, who indicated that his protest could be stopped by harsh penalty from the NFL (Pena, 2017). This reaction was indicative of the portrayal by many media outlets that athletes should not use sports as an arena of protest.

Although media portrayal of African American athletes has often been negative, Nike has utilized African American athletes to encourage a greater sense of belonging in golf, along with sports in general for women. Tiger Woods was the focal point of a Nike advertising campaign that portrayed ethnic minorities playing golf, a sport with a history of racism and elitism (Uchacz, 2017). Serena Williams was featured in a Nike advertising campaign meant to encourage women to participate in sports (Howard, 2007). The campaign was in response to racist and sexist comments made by a radio DJ regarding a women's basketball team (Howard, 2007). However, a lack of research has been conducted on the impact of this advertising. As will be discussed in the next section, the USTA has devised its own plan for attracting African Americans to tennis.

The Case of Tennis

Although tennis was first played by members of the upper class, the middle class began playing tennis in the early 20th century due to its relatively inexpensive equipment and the advent of clay courts, which were more durable than their grass counterparts (Cummings, 1957). Colleges and universities were early adopters of tennis, and tennis was a way to engage socially with students from other schools (Cummings, 1957). Like

many sports that were popularized during the rational recreation movement, tennis was viewed as an acceptable way to get physical exercise and engage in competition (Cunningham, 1980). The USNLTA, founded in 1881, served as the governing body for tennis in America and held the first official championships of the United States in August of the same year. (Baltzen, 1995).

On the inception of the USNLTA, African Americans were barred from participating in any tournaments (Baltzen, 1995). As African American tennis participation grew in the early twentieth century, a need also grew for tournaments for African Americans and a national governing body (Ashe, 1988a). The ATA was formed in 1916 with the following goals: developing tennis among African Americans in the US, encouraging the formation of clubs and building of courts, encouraging the formation of local associations, and developing junior players (Ashe, 1988a). The social aspect of tennis has long been an attraction to African Americans. Early ATA tournaments held at HBCU's were described as all day occasions that included dinners, dances, and parties (Tignor, 2016). Youth participants were able to visit college campuses and often stayed with local families (Tignor, 2016). Tennis tournaments were an arena for networking and gaining social status.

Over 150 African American tennis clubs with 28,000 players existed by the end of the 1930s (Djata, 2006). Much of this was due to the commitment of the ATA to develop young African American tennis players and the growth of tennis at HBCU's. The ATA was also committed to integrating the USTA and put pressure on the USTA by attempting to register players for USTA tournaments (Ashe, 1988b). In 1948, Oscar

Johnson, an African American junior tennis player, was able to compete in a USTA event after pressure from ATA officials (Ashe, 1988b). However, the true color barrier wouldn't be broken until Althea Gibson played in the USTA Nationals at Forest Hills. After countless letters and prompting by ATA officials, the USTA agreed in 1950 to admit Gibson to the Nationals at Forest Hills (Ashe, 1988b). The USTA was also pushed by Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in major league baseball and by a scathing letter from Alice Marble, a former USTA singles champion and touring professional (Ashe, 1988b).

Although integrating the USTA is often cited as one of the ATA's greatest accomplishments, it also may have contributed to its decline in membership and influence (Wiggins, 2004). Once African American players were able to play in USTA tournaments, attendance at ATA tournaments diminished. Additionally, grassroots programs offered by the USTA to develop young players became favored over the ATA youth development programs. In the early 1980s, the USTA also developed nationally-organized adult recreational tennis leagues (LaDue, 2015). Although adults were already playing in tennis leagues across the country, the USTA had not unified the leagues up to this point (LaDue, 2015). By creating a national league, the USTA was able to standardize rules, create a national marketing campaign, and have teams advance to state, sectional, and national championships (LaDue, 2015).

From 1980 to 2014, USTA league participation expanded from 13,000 participants to over 869,000 participants per year (LaDue, 2015). Increased participation was due in part to an expanded offering of leagues at various skill levels, ages, and

formats, as well as a major tennis equipment manufacturer sponsoring the league each year (LaDue, 2015). The USTA described tennis leagues as a way to forge relationships and develop friendships. Leagues have been divided by gender, age groups, and National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP) rating, allowing players with similar skills and abilities to compete against each other. In addition to the social benefits of league play, the USTA promoted adult recreational tennis leagues as a great way to stay active and improve tennis skills (Adult Recreational Tennis, n.d.).

Utilizing a rating system to divide leagues is key to ensuring that players compete against others with a similar skill level. The NTRP was developed by the USTA in 1979 and rates players on a scale from 1.0 (beginner) to 7.0 (expert). A 1.0 rating is for a player just starting to play tennis, and a 7.0 rating is for a player who makes his or her living from tournament prize money (NTRP: National Tennis Rating Program, n.d.). According to the “2018 USTA League Regulations” (2017), recreational tennis leagues begin at a 2.5 level for women and a 3.0 level for men, but players can participate in leagues one level above their rating. All men and women with a rating of 5.0 or above compete in the same league (p. 12). Leagues are also divided by age with the categories of 18 and over, 40 and over, and 55 and over (p. 12) for each rating category. Participants can compete in multiple age categories if they meet age stipulations (p. 13).

Leagues consist of at least two teams, and teams consist of at least eight players. Teams play each other throughout a season, with the top team from the league advancing to a state or regional championship (“2018 USTA League Regulations”, 2017, p. 10). Team matches usually consist of two individual singles matches and three individual

doubles matches, though local leagues are able to alter this format if they desire (p. 20). The USTA also allows local leagues to decide match scoring and formats but recommends a best of three tiebreak sets (p. 19). League rules stipulate that teams alternate between playing matches at their home courts or at their opponent's home courts. Home courts can be public tennis facilities or private clubs, and home teams pay court fees, provide tennis balls, and usually provide drinks and snacks for after the match.

Although African Americans do participate in league tennis, the USTA has indicated a desire to attract more African Americans (USTA African American Engagement Guide, 2017). As part of their recruitment efforts, the USTA has examined some of the motivations and barriers to participation for African Americans (p. 3). On average, African Americans watched more professional tennis than the general population, but they were also less likely to participate in the sport (p. 3). Some of the barriers to tennis participation are similar to those previously discussed barriers regarding physical activity. African Americans lack access to quality courts and instruction, particularly within traditionally African American neighborhoods (p. 3). Research has also shown that African Americans do not feel completely welcome playing tennis (Philipp, 1999).

To combat these barriers, the USTA has built and improved tennis courts in traditionally African American neighborhoods and developed African American leaders in the tennis community (USTA African American Engagement Guide, 2017). D.A. Abrams, chief diversity officer of the USTA, stated, "It's important for people to see themselves in the game. When you see like faces, it's more inviting, more engaging, you

feel welcome. Therefore, you tend to stay around longer, you continue to play” (Sias, 2016, para. 10). Feeling welcome has been identified as one aspect of sense of belonging, which contributes to maintained participation in a recreational activity.

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging has long been used to describe feelings of integration within a social group. Maslow and Lewis (1987) identified it as a basic human need, but further research on what constitutes a sense of belonging was lacking (Hagerty et al., 1992). To gain a better understanding of sense of belonging, researchers used a hybrid model of concept development to examine the concept (Hagerty et al., 1992). The hybrid model consisted of (a) reviewing literature to develop working definitions, (b) collecting data via clinical observation and interviews, and (c) analyzing the findings to clarify the concept (Hagerty et al., 1992).

The following definition of sense of belonging was developed through analysis of existing literature: the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment (Hagerty et al., 1992). This definition indicated that simply socializing with others will not create a sense of belonging, and later studies have confirmed that sense of belonging only occurs when participants feel they are a necessary component within an environment (Bailey & McLaren, 2005; McLaren & Challis, 2009). However, achieving the feeling of being an integral part of a system varies from person to person and group, a challenge to measuring sense of belonging (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012).

Hagerty et al. (1992) noted that two dimensions of sense of belonging exist, which work congruently to determine belongingness: valued involvement and fit within a system. These are the defining attributes of sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992). Baumeister and Leary (1995) concurred that the need for approval is a prerequisite for forming social bonds which are integral for satisfying the need to belong. Hagerty et al. (1992) also identified three antecedents necessary for sense of belonging to occur: a person must have “(1) energy for involvement, (2) potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and (3) potential for shared or complementary characteristics” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 174). These three antecedents illustrate that a simple desire for belonging cannot be met without having some sort of binding commonalities to others.

Much like antecedents required for sense of belonging to occur, Hagerty et al. (1992) noted three consequences should occur as a result of achieving a sense of belonging: “(1) psychological, social, spiritual, or physical involvement; (2) attribution of meaningfulness to that involvement; and (3) fortification or laying down of a fundamental foundation for emotional and behavioral response” (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 174). Considering the intrapersonal nature of a sense of belonging, observations could not be solely relied on to determine the presence of a sense of belonging. Researchers noted that participants should report feeling valued, needed or important with respect to other systems or environments, and there are common characteristics that encourage fit within the system as evidence of feeling a sense of belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Sense of belonging was also one of the attributes of membership, which contributes to a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership is denoted

by who is part of a community versus who is not, and membership requires commitment but also affords privileges (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Similar to the concept analysis of sense of belonging, the community offers a manner of creating a self-identity, but members must be willing to make personal sacrifices for the overall good of the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Other attributes of membership and sense of community, such as a common language system and shared emotional connection, could contribute to a sense of belonging as well. Combining the characteristics of sense of belonging described by McMillan and Chavis with the definition, antecedents, and consequences of sense of belonging developed by Hagerty et al. provides a way to examine sense of belonging in the current study.

Sense of belonging in sport. Participating in organized sports offers many health benefits, but participants joining teams must be willing to learn the written and unwritten rules of the game. These unwritten rules are generally learned through practices within the sport league, observing other players, and social gatherings. Additionally, purchasing sports equipment and clothing is identified as part of the process of creating an identity associated with a sport (Donnelly & Young, 1988). New sport participants normally use modeling of more experienced participants to adopt mannerisms, styles of dress, speech, and behaviors (Donnelly & Young, 1988). In turn new participants, over time, are accepted into the subculture of their sport and create their own identity related to that sport (Donnelly & Young, 1988). Research has shown other factors, such as team cohesion, coaching, and derived enjoyment, contribute to maintaining an identity with a sport (Robinson & Carron, 1982). Walseth (2006) found that sense of belonging in sport

was impacted by the culture that was associated with that sport and individual's ability to assimilate to that culture.

Many people are introduced to recreational sports leagues as a child, but participation in organized youth sports requires parental involvement. Not only do parents have to ensure that their children are registered for the league and able to get to practices and games, they are often required to volunteer as a coach, fundraiser, or league administrator (Legg, Wells, & Barile, 2015). However, a byproduct of parents volunteering for a youth sports league is meeting other parents and forming a community (Legg, Wells, & Barile, 2015). Greater choice in volunteer role and length of time volunteering both directly impact the sense of community felt by parents (Legg, Wells, & Barile, 2015). In turn, children are more likely to continue playing in organized sports leagues if their parents are involved (Wheeler, 2012). Research has also found that children who play organized sports are more likely to continue playing organized sports as an adult due in part to their introduction to sports culture as a child (Wheeler, 2012).

When players no longer feel a sense of belonging within a sport, then they are likely to discontinue sport participation (Robinson & Carron, 1982). Some other items have impeded sense of belonging within sports. For instance, learning the written and unwritten rules can be a daunting challenge to potential new participants. Often recreation administrators have designed leagues that cater to participants with previous experience within the sport (Allison & Hibbler, 2004). Additionally, the monetary cost of playing sports serves as a constraint to participation (Allison, Dwyer, Goldberg, & Fein,

2005). This means that individuals with fewer discretionary funds have been unable to afford the styles of dress or equipment needed to become part of a sport's culture.

Chapter Summary

The benefits of recreation and physical activity have changed over time as the types of recreational activities and reasons for participating in these activities have changed. In many ways our culture is reflected by what we do with our recreational time. Unfortunately, this included the negative aspects of our culture such as racial discrimination, which influences what recreational activities African Americans feel comfortable doing. Institutional racism has further segregated Whites and African Americans and contributed to African American lives being devalued. Further, past studies have identified that unique barriers to certain leisure time activities, including tennis, still exist for African Americans. The USTA has identified strategies for eliminating some of these barriers and African Americans have participated in USTA league tennis. By utilizing developed concepts of such as sense of belonging, a better understanding is gained regarding what contributes to African Americans feeling welcome in tennis leagues.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine African Americans' experiences in participating in league tennis with a focus on sense of belonging. Specifically, this study examined the following questions: *what elements impacted African Americans' decision to start and continue playing in USTA tennis leagues; and what role did USTA tennis leagues play in creating a sense of belonging for African American participants?* A cross-sectional qualitative design was used to allow study participants to explain in their own words what attracted them to league play and the sense of community within their league. Using a phenomenological approach, common elements from interviews were utilized to uncover the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

Study Site

Columbia, SC was chosen as the study site. According to the latest Census figures for Columbia, 47.9% of residents identified as non-Hispanic White, and 41.1% of residents identified as Black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Although Columbia has a diverse population, signs of de facto segregation of neighborhoods exist. The Social Science Data Analysis Network utilized data from the 2000 United States Census to determine whether the exposure indexes, or racial composition of neighborhoods, were significantly different for Whites and African Americans in the City of Columbia (Frey & Myers, 2012). For Whites, the average racial composition of a neighborhood was 77.2% White and 17.9% African American, whereas for African Americans, the average racial composition of a neighborhood was 35.4% White and

59.4% African American (Frey & Myers, 2012). The exposure indexes indicated de facto segregation occurs within neighborhoods in Columbia (Frey & Myers, 2012).

The ethnic makeup of neighborhoods in Columbia have been impacted by the history of segregation. In the early twentieth century, Columbia was ruled by the separate but equal doctrine in which African Americans were relegated to substandard public facilities (Moore, 1993). At the turn of the century, African Americans had one public school and no public hospital (Moore, 1993). African Americans were only allowed to live in certain neighborhoods within the city (Moore, 1993). The practice of segregation continued until ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court (*Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 1954), but some neighborhoods within Columbia are still known as traditionally White or African American.

One such neighborhood was Greenview, a planned community for returning African Americans from World War II (Baker, 2011). The Greenview neighborhood was built in the northern suburbs of Columbia, a historically less affluent area, and included a park within the neighborhood (Fitts, 2018). Greenview Park was one of the first public parks in a historically African American neighborhood in Columbia to include tennis courts. Greenview Park was important in the choice of Columbia for the study site because it provided access to study participants. Many African American tennis players played at Greenview Park, including players who competed in USTA tennis leagues. Additionally, the tennis professional at Greenview Park served as a gatekeeper to the African American tennis community. Columbia was also chosen due to the researcher having ties to the tennis community from previous participation in Columbia tennis

leagues. However, the researcher did not know any of the participants or the tennis coach prior to beginning the research project.

Study Participants

For this study, African Americans adults were recruited. They needed to be eighteen years of age or older and had either played in a USTA tennis league in the fall of 2017 or were playing in a USTA tennis league in the spring of 2018. Participants were required to have played in a tennis league in Columbia, SC, and, to minimize bias, employees of the USTA were not allowed to participate in the study. Additionally, participants were required to have a NTRP rating of 5.5 or lower to ensure that they had not played tennis professionally. Professional tennis players, who have benefited monetarily from playing tennis, may be biased towards the USTA and would have an inherently different experience than recreational players.

Although previous research has investigated the impact of playing in USTA tennis leagues, African Americans were minimally represented in that study (Legg, et al., 2017). Studies of African Americans in tennis have focused on professional tennis players (Schultz, 2005; Spencer, 2004). African Americans were chosen as participants in this study because of the history of African Americans in professional and recreational tennis combined with the lack of previous research on the experiences of African Americans in tennis leagues. The decision to study participants in USTA tennis leagues was based in part on previous research regarding the benefits of recreational sports leagues. For example, a study found that participation in recreational sports leagues leads

to psychosocial benefits that are not derived from individual physical activity (Eime et al., 2013).

Another study found that recreational sports leagues can be used to build and strengthen surrounding communities (Vail, 2007). Research specifically on adult recreational tennis league participants found that the league contributed to members' feelings of a sense of community (Legg, et al., 2017). Because research has found that participation in sports leagues results in different benefits than just participating in sports, participants in tennis leagues were chosen for this study.

Although children often participate in recreational sports leagues, research found that continued participation into adulthood is rare (Eime et al., 2016). This was concerning for two reasons. First, maintaining a physically active lifestyle across the lifespan was found to benefit overall health (Penedo & Dahn, 2005). Second, research identified social support, such as having teammates on a recreational sports league, as a key determinant in whether adults maintain a physically active lifestyle (Troost, Owen, Bauman, Sallis, & Brown, 2002). Due to the impact that tennis leagues can have on adults' physical activity levels, adults were chosen over children as participants in this study.

Data Collection

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). To recruit eligible participants, a purposeful sampling technique was used (Seidman, 2013). An information session at Greenview Park in the fall of 2017 gave participants an overview to the study and introduced the researcher (refer to Appendix A). The Greenview Park

tennis professional ensured potential participants attended the information session and provided buy-in to the study. Potential participants provided their contact information, and individual interviews were scheduled. Participants were also recruited after four cardio-tennis clinics were held at Greenview Park by the tennis professional. The researcher participated in these clinics which were mainly attended by players with only a few years of tennis experience and recruited study participants after the clinic. Researcher contacts within the Columbia tennis community were also used to recruit study participants.

Data was collected through interviews and field notes. Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone starting in December of 2017 and completing in March of 2018. Phone interviews were conducted when participants were not able to meet in person. All interviews were conducted individually, and participants' identities were kept confidential. Participants were advised of their role and provided a copy of an IRB statement (refer to Appendix B) regarding the study prior to the beginning of interviews. Participants were also asked whether they would feel comfortable having the interview audio recorded. Once agreeing to participate in the study and being recorded, the audio recording began (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). During and after the interview, the researcher took field notes on the participants' answers. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were used to clarify sections where the recording was inaudible.

Interview protocol and field notes. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing the researcher to probe for further information as needed and participants to speak about subjects they felt were important (Durand & Chantler, 2014).

Open-ended questions facilitated a conversational style interview and minimized researcher bias (Durand & Chantler, 2014).

Initial interview questions (refer to Appendix C) asked participants to recall their first experience with tennis and share how they became members in a tennis league. These questions were intended not only to get the participants comfortable with the interview process but also to encourage them to start reflecting on their own tennis history (Seidman, 2013). Researchers probed participants to further explain concepts that were unclear (Seidman, 2013). Subsequent questions asked participants about the personal impact of participation in a USTA tennis league. These questions required participants to discuss why they played, what they enjoyed about the league, and what made them prefer tennis over other sports. Finally, questions were asked about the social aspects of participating in a USTA tennis league. Although the interview questions were somewhat structured by subject, interviews did not necessarily flow in this manner, and participants were encouraged to speak about subjects pertaining to their tennis league experience that they were not asked about.

Field notes, including observations and reflections, were used after each interview to identify emerging topics and researcher bias (Durand & Chantler, 2014). Subsequent interviews were altered to ensure emerging issues were discussed and participants were minimally influenced by the researcher (Durand & Chantler, 2014). For instance, in the first interview conducted, the participant noted that tennis players from Greenview Park were often moved up in rating after their first season. This resulted in the researcher reviewing the ratings system (players are moved up or down in rating based on their

performance in league matches) in addition to asking participants if they felt tennis players from Greenview were treated differently by the tennis league.

Another topic noted during the first interview was the impact of watching professional tennis. The participant stated that she had attended several professional tennis matches with her teammates and was traveling to attend a professional tennis tournament. In subsequent interviews, participants were asked if they watched professional tennis. Interview questions were also refined based on field notes and participant answers. In the first two interviews, participants were asked to tell the researcher about teammates they got along with and teammates they did not get along with. In subsequent interviews, participants were asked to tell the researcher about traits of their teammates that they liked or did not like. After the fourth interview, instead of asking participants how competitive most of their matches were, the researcher asked how competitive most of their matches were in spirit and in score. By phrasing the question on competitiveness in this manner, participants were encouraged to discuss both their competitive mindset and the level of their competition. Field notes were also used to record statements made after audio recording ended.

When the interview finished, audio recording stopped, and participants were asked to take a short demographic survey (refer to Appendix D). The survey was completed on the researcher's computer for in person interviews. For interviews conducted over the phone, participants were emailed a copy of the survey. The demographic survey collected data on age, income, education, and marital status.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in Excel. Initial and axial coding were used to develop themes from the data. Following established methods for analyzing qualitative data, interview transcripts were read in full prior to developing concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After initial reading, a manual coding process was used to develop themes from the data (Basit, 2003). Coding began by labeling the raw data with concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Any significant statements about the experience of playing in a tennis league were labeled with a concept. Concepts were developed by analysis of the data regarding elements that influenced participants' decision to play in a tennis league and sense of belonging. Concepts that did not fit into these two categories were noted as well (Seidman, 2013). To organize concepts, a spreadsheet was created for each participant. Concepts were listed in individual columns and quotations from the interview that represented the concept were listed below.

After creating concepts, axial coding was used to develop themes, or meaning units, from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Concepts were compared and categorized by topic and similarity. Similar concepts were grouped together and comparisons between themes were made to ensure continuity of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Titles were created for the themes, and similar themes were collapsed together to create subthemes. After creation of themes and subthemes, interview transcripts and observations were reviewed to ensure accuracy of analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2013).

Trustworthiness of data. To address the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis, member checking was conducted (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants

were asked via phone conversations to confirm that their experiences matched the themes and subthemes derived from the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). By doing this, researchers ensured that analysis was accurate.

The researcher also wrote a reflection of his views and experiences with tennis leagues and recreating with African Americans prior to starting the research project. The reflection allowed the researcher to better understand his biases and how to minimize their impact on the research. Two main assumptions were identified through this process. First, the researcher's experience with tennis leagues had been positive and resulted in personal benefits. Second, the researcher felt that intergroup recreation, between African Americans and Whites, decreased prejudice and benefited all participants. Interview questions were developed that did not reinforce researcher bias, and other researchers assisted with refining interview questions. Identifying researcher bias also assisted with conducting interviews in which participants were able to discuss the negative and positive aspects of league participation.

Chapter Summary

Participants in this study, adult African American's playing in USTA tennis leagues, were chosen due to the unique history of African Americans and the lack of previous research on African Americans playing recreational tennis. Because this is a very specific population, there were a limited number of locations in which the study could be conducted. Columbia, South Carolina, was chosen for several reasons: a diverse population, historical race relations, and a thriving African American tennis presence.

Access to participants, due in part to the willingness of a gatekeeper to assist the researcher, also made Columbia a favorable location for this study.

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with study participants conducted in person and over the phone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. A semi-structured format was used to conduct interviews, and participants were encouraged to discuss items of personal importance. Interview questions focused on participant's personal history with tennis, the impact of playing in a tennis league, and the social aspects of playing in a tennis league. Probes for additional information were used when necessary, and new areas of interest that emerged in interviews were addressed in subsequent interviews. In addition to interviews, data was collected through interviewer notes and observations of league tennis matches.

Analysis of data was completed using a coding process that led to creation of themes and subthemes. An initial coding process was first used to identify concepts within interviews. Axial coding was then used to arrange concepts into larger groups based on similarities. From these larger groups, themes and subthemes were determined. Themes were compared with interview transcripts to ensure goodness of fit. Member checking was conducted to confirm trustworthiness of analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter begins with an overview of the participants' characteristics. Knowing some background information about each participant was helpful when reexamining the data after themes were constructed. Three major themes were drawn from the data: *encouragement and support to become a league participant*, *perceived benefits of playing tennis in a tennis league*, and *elements that impacted sense of belonging*. Encouragement and support from friends, family, and tennis professionals was necessary for participants to start playing tennis and join a tennis league. For many participants, lessons were an integral part of the process of joining a league as well. Many of the perceived benefits of playing in a league were universal to all participants. Players recognized the physical benefits, particularly the role tennis played in maintaining an active lifestyle in older age, as well as the mental and social benefits. Making new friends and having consistent interaction with teammates was not only a social benefit, but it contributed to a sense of belonging. In addition to social interaction, four other elements that impacted sense of belonging were identified: shared culture, communication, competition, and tensions caused by race relations. Each of these elements was described by participants in an array of manners, including ways in which they positively and negatively impacted sense of belonging.

Demographics of Participants

A demographic survey was completed by twelve of the thirteen study participants. The average age of participants was 52 years, with the youngest participant being 24

years old and the oldest participant being 62 years old. All participants except one were over 40 years old. Participants tended to be well-educated, with eight having at least an undergraduate degree and four having a graduate degree. Participants tended to have a high yearly household income as well. Only one participant had a yearly household income of under \$50,000, and eight participants had a yearly household income of over \$100,000. In comparison, the median household income in Columbia for 2016 was \$42,875 (US Census Bureau, 2016) (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Demographic Data on Study Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Marital Status	Age	Education Level	Yearly Household Income
Rosalie	Did not complete demographic survey			
Erika	Married	60s	Graduate degree	> \$100,000
Robert	Married	50s	College degree	> \$100,000
Sharon	Married	50s	College degree	> \$100,000
Jennifer	Divorced	50s	Graduate degree	> \$50,000
Paula	Married	40s	High school degree	> \$100,000
Kris	Single	Younger than 40	High school degree	< \$50,000
Edwin	Married	60s	High school degree	> \$50,000
Porter	Married	60s	High school degree	> \$100,000
Monica	Married	50s	College degree	> \$100,000
Stephanie	Divorced	50s	Graduate degree	> \$100,000
Emma	Married	50s	College degree	> \$100,000
Linda	Single	40s	Graduate degree	> \$50,000

Encouragement and Support to Become a League Participant

Most participants, all but two, started playing tennis after being encouraged by friends or family. However, taking lessons, where participants were encouraged to play in a tennis league by a tennis professional, seemed to be integral for participants to join a tennis league. These two levels of encouragement were divided into two subthemes: a) Encouragement and support from friends and family and b) Encouragement and support from a tennis professional. Table 3.2 was used to identify who encouraged participants to start playing tennis or join a league and which participants took tennis lessons.

Table 3.2

Encouragement to Play Tennis

Participant Name	Encouraged by friends and family to start playing tennis	Encouragement and support from friends and family to join league	Took tennis lessons	Encouragement and support from tennis professional to join league
Rosalie	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Erika	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Robert	Yes	Yes	No	No
Sharon	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Jennifer	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Paula	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kris	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Edwin	No	No	No	Yes
Porter	Yes	Yes	No	No
Monica	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stephanie	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Emma	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Linda	No	No	Yes	Yes

Encouragement and support from friends and family. Participants were asked about their first experience with tennis, and for many this initial experience was part of the process of joining a league. For participants who were new to the game, the first step was trying to play tennis. All but two participants mentioned friends or family when asked about their introduction to tennis. Monica talked about watching ladies play tennis before she started playing:

I used to see, you know driving along, I used to see ladies at Parklane. And I would wonder, "What are they doing?" Looking out for years, I'd see that, and I'd wonder, "What are they doing? How are they playing this?" So, to know two ladies who are actually doing it actually sparked my curiosity even more.

Having friends that encouraged her to start playing tennis was a large reason why Monica decided to start playing. She recalls:

They talked about it to me for at least a couple of years or so in talking with them about coming out. And, you're always a little concerned about trying something different. And just, one day I decided, "I'm going to try", because I'd seen how much fun they seemed to have talking about it. And I just took a chance.

For many participants, having friends and family that played tennis was a gateway to start playing. "My sister tried to convince me to play tennis for years," Emma stated, "My sister tried and tried, but I said, 'Who wants to play tennis? Black people don't play tennis.'" Emma decided to attend a "Friends and Family" day at Greenview Park, and said, "I went that day and fell absolutely in love with tennis that very day." Paula was

hesitant to play tennis but felt obligated to attend lessons after her mother paid for them.

She recounted the lessons:

I was going to quit lessons, but my mom had paid for me to have five lessons. I was going to quit the very first lesson, the second lesson, and the third lesson, but I had to go because she had already paid. And the fourth lesson, I really did enjoy the tennis. So, by then, I liked it, but I really wasn't into tennis.

For eight participants, encouragement and support from family and friends also played a role in their decision to join a tennis league. For Kris, who played tennis in high school, several different family members influenced his decision to begin playing tennis again. His mother encouraged him to sign up for the tennis apprentice program after reading an article about it. When asked about her influence, Kris stated:

I was definitely procrastinating and just thinking about scheduling, and she was like "You know, you've always wanted to play tennis, so here's your opportunity", so I just always listened to Mom and went ahead and signed up.

Kris noted other people encouraged him to play tennis as well:

My ex-fiancé kind of pushed me as well and helped me financially, buying racquets and balls and things. And my brother as well, because my brother plays tennis. He practiced with me, and he pushed me as well.

Porter stated that his wife played tennis which influenced his decision to play tennis.

Porter said, "She (wife) found the team, taught me how to sign up online. Actually, she signed me up at first online herself." Encouragement and support from family and friends played a role in getting several participants to try tennis, but all participants received

encouragement and support from either friends and family or a tennis professional before joining tennis league.

Encouragement and support from a tennis professional. Family and friends acted as a gateway for participants to start playing tennis, but encouragement and support from a tennis professional was key for many participants joining a league. Ten participants took tennis lessons before joining a tennis league. Of those ten, nine took lessons from Anthony Lewis at Greenview Park. Lessons were a way to meet new players who often formed the basis of a new team. Emma described her experience with lessons, “We got together, we would hit with Anthony, take lessons. Then we formed a little team, and the rest is history.” Rosalie, Erika, Monica, Linda, and Sharon shared similar experiences. Kris was the only male who took lessons before playing in a tennis league. Kris and Stephanie were also the only players who participated in the USTA Tennis Apprentice Program. This program is designed for people who are new or beginner tennis players, and the cost of the program includes registration cost for one season of USTA league (“Tennis Apprentice”, n.d.). Additionally, the program includes four lessons and a new tennis racquet (“Tennis Apprentice”, n.d.). Both players also formed league teams with the other participants in their program.

The tennis professional who led the classes was also instrumental in getting participants to join a tennis league. Monica was hesitant about joining a team, but encouragement from the tennis professional persuaded her to join. “One of the ladies said, ‘Oh, he’s (Lewis) going to put you on a team,’” recalled Monica, “I said, ‘What? I didn’t come to do that.’ They said, ‘Don’t worry. He’s going to put you on a team.’” She

later noted that, “He (Lewis) encouraged us to form a team. Really you had to feel comfortable with him in order for him to encourage you.” Emma, Rosalie, Stephanie, Jennifer, Kris, Linda, Sharon, and Paula also noted that the tennis professional teaching their class encouraged them to play in tennis league. Emma said, “He (Lewis) encouraged us to go to USTA and sign up. And we, you know, he guided us through the process of forming a little team, and we took off. And we thought we were awesome.”

In addition to encouragement, the tennis professionals offered assistance in navigating the sign-up process. Linda, recalling her experience, said, “Chett (tennis professional at a different park), after playing maybe six to seven weeks, he told me, he said, ‘Hey, if you enjoy it, you should start your own team.’ And so, my first team I was actually a captain for.” In addition to assisting with registering for the tennis league, Paula and Monica recalled that they received assistance with learning the other aspects of league tennis. Monica said, “He (Lewis) recruited someone who had already been through it to be the captain so that she could walk us through it and we could learn from her. How to act and what to do.” This will be discussed further when looking at sense of belonging in tennis leagues.

Perceived Benefits of Playing in a Tennis League

When asked about the personal impact of playing in a tennis league, participants mentioned several benefits. Three subthemes of perceived benefits of playing in a tennis league were developed. First, participants all noted that they engaged in physical activity through tennis. Second, stress relief and other mental benefits of tennis were stated. Finally, social benefits were the most talked about impact of tennis league participation.

All participants mentioned social benefits, and many stated this was a reason they continued to play in a tennis league.

Physical activity. All participants referred in some way to the physical benefits of playing league tennis. Five participants noted that tennis was a way to stay active as they got older, and three participants noted that tennis replaced another sport that they no longer felt comfortable playing. Emma described how tennis helped her maintain an active lifestyle:

I've always lived an active lifestyle. I was a basketball player. My husband was a basketball player. My daughters were all basketball players. And I got to a point where, of course, I'm too old to play basketball competitively and where it gave me good exercise. And, I think I went into a little slump for a while, because my girls had their activities, playing basketball, my husband was a coach, and everybody had something. And, I'm coming home on the couch every evening. And, I think I kind of went into a little depression. And so, tennis gave me an opportunity to be active at my own pace and own level, and peers at my own level, and better and lower. So, it gave me an opportunity to be active again. And, I plan to be active, I want my girls to see us as we age being active still, because kids emulate what they see.

Stephanie reported that tennis had taken the place of running for her:

I'm a runner, and I started having problems with my knees. It was just too much pounding. I was running like twenty miles a week and it was tearing my body up.

And so, I said I need activity but not something as rough as running. Tennis to me was a good alternative.

For others, tennis was noted as a good workout, but also a reason to stay in shape. Edwin, noting the importance of mobility in tennis, stated, “You get a great workout. I'm short in stature, but I move pretty well. And, that's the beauty of playing tennis. If you can move, you've got half the battle won.” Kris stated, “I feel better physically. I eat better as well because I want to keep up.” For Paula, tennis was a fun way to get physical exercise.

Mental benefits. Eight participants noted the mental health benefits of tennis. Monica, Paula, Rosalie, Erika and Kris referred to tennis as a stress reliever. Kris said, “Just to be able to clear my mind, or if I was angry about something, I'd be able to take it out on the ball. I mean, it's a stress reliever.” Edwin, describing his focus on tennis strategy while playing, stated, “You have to think outside the box and think ahead. In my little feeble mind, the ball is always coming back.” Linda also stated that she focused on strategy when playing to improve.

Conversely, Porter and Jennifer said they concentrated on having fun. Other participants noted the fun aspect of playing league tennis. Monica tied together socializing, physical exercise, and mental health:

The social part of it. The exercise. All of that really makes a difference. Keeping the stress level down. You don't even realize you're getting it down. To laugh and cut up. Have fun. Especially at our age. You know the older you get the lesser people you start to mingle with. And so, to have this type of activity to go to and become a part of is really special.

Linda noted that playing in a tennis league was rewarding. She stated, “It’s a personal fulfillment. If not, I wouldn’t have kept playing for the amount of time I have. It’s just something I enjoy doing.” Participants noted that part of the enjoyment came from the social aspects of tennis leagues.

Social benefits. All participants stated that playing in a tennis league benefited them socially. Six participants stated camaraderie was one of their favorite aspects of the league or something they would miss the most if they quit playing in their league. Emma stated, “I like the, just the, socialness and the camaraderie of being on a team. So, even if I’m not in the lineup, I like to go support.” Kris also noted that he enjoys seeing his teammates regularly. He described what he would miss most about his league if he quit playing:

I would definitely miss my teammates, even though I’m able to see them outside of the tennis league, but there’s just something about being able to play with them and getting together on that certain day to meet up with everybody to play.

Monica reported that socializing motivated her to participate in league.

Making new friendships was a social benefit of league tennis reported by participants as well. Jennifer said, “I’ve developed friendships that I didn’t have before with the ladies that I play with.” Paula, Porter, and Kris also stated that they enjoyed the new friendships created through their new teams. Monica shared, “Those are ladies that I started with. Those are ladies that I’ve actually developed real good friendships with. So, that’s my team.” Monica played on another team as well but refers to her original team as

her “family”. Sharon noted that she extended her social network by meeting people at the regional and national championships:

We've gotten to meet a number people, probably 50 to 100, in terms of people that you wouldn't have interacted with before. Overall, including maybe one-time contacts, so we got to meet people at regional championship and then nationals. It just builds really like a camaraderie or whatever. Even though you really never met you all play tennis. It's a conversation starter and lets you have something in common.

Rosalie noted that she used tennis for networking and finding jobs.

Another social benefit reported by participants was having a larger network of people to play tennis with. Jennifer stated, “I found that before I joined the league, I would play, but it was just so sporadic. So, it's frustrating not having someone to play with all of the time. That was the benefit of the league.” Seven participants reported playing on more than one team. When asked about this, Kris said, “The second team, I just wanted to go out and venture and meet new people.” Stephanie, who plays on two teams, discussed her playing schedule:

My teams are like serious. They're playing out at Greenview every other day. We have clinics on Sunday at 5:30. Our matches are on Monday and Wednesday. So, I'm playing Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and then Anthony normally has Cardio tennis on Saturday. We do that as well. And then they'll send out, you know, like a text, "Does anybody want to hit today" and somebody is always hitting. So, you could actually play every day. They play a lot of tennis out there.

Participants also reported that they felt comfortable with going out to the courts unannounced and finding someone to play tennis with. Rosalie stated that she enjoyed meeting people by asking to play with them. Paula said she didn't always feel like more advanced players were willing to play with her when she was new, and she didn't want other new players to feel the same way:

I made sure as I learned how to play tennis, the new faces that I saw coming along, that I would always be nice and kind and say, "You got someone to hit?" You know, I made sure there's nobody new come out there that I don't know. Because I always, because that happened to me, I always try to make people feel very comfortable.

Feeling comfortable and welcome while playing tennis was a key element of sense of belonging, the third theme that developed from the data.

Elements That Impacted a Sense of Belonging

Evidence of sense of belonging was reported in many ways by participants and several elements were identified that impacted sense of belonging. Each of these elements is discussed as a subtheme. The first subtheme was social interaction. The league format encouraged players to socialize after matches, thereby creating new friendships. Participants also reported getting together with teammates outside of tennis to enjoy other common interests. The second subtheme was shared culture. Learning the culture of tennis brought together teammates, especially first-time players.

Communication was the third subtheme. Communication between team captains and players allowed participants to voice their opinion and contribute to team goals.

Competition, the fourth subtheme, made participants feel valuable to their team but also led to some players feeling less enjoyment due to pressure to win. Tensions caused by race relations were reported by participants, and these contributed negatively to sense of belonging within the tennis league or on a tennis team. Tensions caused by race relations was the fifth subtheme.

Social interaction. The format of matches within the league encouraged socializing. All participants noted that after their individual match they normally socialized while sharing food and drinks with their opponents. During this time, they cheered for their teammates still playing while getting to know their opponents. Porter described what he enjoyed about this aspect of the league:

I guess the funnest thing, the best thing, is after a match, and you've actually won. That's a beautiful feeling, you know, to go up and socialize with the guys and everybody commending you on playing hard and having a good game and stuff like that, you know. That's probably the ultimate prize, when that happens.

Jennifer also noted the appeal social aspect of tennis league:

I like that it's social. My other sport is cycling, which I do by myself. When I found tennis, all the different people that I have to interact with, form friendships with. I enjoy that aspect of it. Cause we do things outside of tennis as well.

All but two participants stated they interact with their tennis teammates outside of tennis. Stephanie said, "I like my team. We hang out outside of the court. We do happy hour, so it's really a social thing as well. We do pot luck's over at each other's houses." Linda, Sharon, Paula, Porter, Kris, Jennifer, Rosalie, and Emma also reported getting together

informally with teammates for happy hour, to watch sports, or share a meal. Sharon and Erika reported going on extended trips with teammates, including to other countries. Emma stated that her team would stay together if they advanced to the state or regional championships. Although tennis was the common interest that brought participants together, their willingness to socialize with teammates outside of tennis indicated other common interests, which was one of the required antecedents to sense of belonging.

Shared culture. Once participants decided to start playing tennis, they had to learn basic technique as well as the basic rules of the game, which was the beginning of an acculturation process. To play in league tennis, players had to learn more rules of tennis, the written rules of the league, and the unwritten rules, or accepted norms of the league. Some of the unwritten rules were the format of warming up with opponents before matches, determining who served first, and keeping score during the match. For some participants, this was an exciting and novel time in which they bonded with other new players. Ten of the participants took tennis lessons from a tennis professional. All the participants who took lessons formed a league team with the other people attending the lessons. Kris, describing the general spirit on his first team, said, “Everybody was so psyched to ‘Oh, it’s your first time? Yeah, it’s mine too’. So, we get out here, and either we’ll lose together, or we’ll win together. So, that’s how it was.” Paula recalled being appointed the captain of her first team:

I got real busy, and said, “OK, well let me figure out the scores”, ... and when I went back to my group, everything I learned, and some of them was older or they wasn’t going to read the information, and I would always print it out and be like,

“Oh, this is what we need to know. This is what.” And so, when we started playing league, it was a lot of them barely could keep the score. I even bought little tablets, the little tiny tablets, like, “This is your tablet to keep in your tennis bag and this is your pencil, you know, keep up with your score”, until we got it. It was very, the newness of the game was the best time for me. The newness of the game.

Sharon, recalling her initial season, stated, “That first team I was on, we only won one match, and you’d have thought we won the lottery.” Stephanie recalled finally understanding the ratings that her friends who played tennis had previously talked about.

Uniforms or team colors were another manner of creating a sense of belonging. Eight participants said they wore uniforms or team colors, but three specified that this was more prevalent in the lower rated leagues. Rosalie recalled wearing uniforms her first season but stated now her teams usually picked colors before the start of the season. Kris, Jennifer, Erika, Sharon, Paula, Monica, and Stephanie also said their team chose matching colors to wear for matches. Paula felt that uniforms were important for a team:

When I captain, we do have uniforms for the team. A lot of people don’t like to do the uniforms. Why? I don’t know. But I think of a team as a team. Teamwork, you know. I think a team should look alike. I do like the uniforms. But I noticed the further I went up in this league. They don’t do that.

Emma noted the need to purchase equipment and gear after deciding to play tennis. She stated, “I went and bought my first racquet and a bag. I ordered some tennis shoes and the

gear. I was hooked from the first day.” Having proper tennis equipment was another way of acculturating to tennis.

Eleven participants played out of Greenview Park, and for these participants learning the culture of Greenview contributed to sense of belonging as well. For Paula, she felt like meeting other players at the park was important:

So, what I did was just start speaking to everybody. I wouldn't call them by their names, everybody was 'Hey y'all', just like that. And I never, I don't do cliques well, and so I started doing different things. We had a cancer event out there. We had different events.

Through these events, Paula was able to meet individuals from different cliques at the park and became accepted within these groups. “We have all kind of people at Greenview,” Paula said, “You know, and everybody is like a big family.”

Stephanie noted that Greenview Park and the tennis professional there attract people from all over the city. “People come not only from Greenview. Those people come from all over the city, and they just come to be coached by Anthony,” Stephanie stated, “That’s kind of how everybody congregates there.” Stephanie also noted that she felt comfortable finding a pickup game at Greenview:

If you go out to Greenview, I think there is about five or six different teams out there. You could always pick up a game. You see the same people all the time, so they don't have to necessarily be on your team.

Monica found that encouragement from other players at Greenview Park convinced her to play league tennis. “I got involved through someone else who was actually out here

playing and enjoying it and was really trying to get other people involved in it,” stated Monica. Having an accepting community at Greenview Park contributed to a sense of belonging for many of the participants.

Communication. Communication was an element of joining a tennis league that added to a sense of belonging. All participants confirmed that team captains communicated to them practice times, locations of matches, and match lineups. Being privy to this information contributed to participants feeling like an important part of a team. Six participants were captains of their team or had served as a captain before. All participants provided input to their captains regarding their schedule availability, and participants who served as captain noted that they rarely ran into scheduling issues. Kris noted the importance of his captain:

Well, our captain is very understandable about your schedule. If he schedules you to play and you tell him, even if you tell him maybe that morning of the day of the match that you possibly can't make it, he's very understandable. He gets another. He gets an alternate to fill in. He's great at doing that. Being able to replace somebody in any instances. If he has to get out there and play, which he loves to play, most of the time he does play, he's there or he's there when he doesn't play.

In addition to sharing information about match lineups, captains often set the attitude of the team. Porter described the captains on his team at his private tennis center in comparison with his captains at Greenview:

I would just think that on the (private club) team the captains are real, super laid-back people. They just, they're really open to whether you can play or whether

you can't. I think that the emphasis for them is just having a team where they can go out and play versus the other (Greenview) side of it is not only having a team but having a team that you can go out and win.

Five participants noted that their captain would ask the team at the beginning of the season if they wanted to focus on winning or just having fun that season, which would impact how the captain determined the lineups for the season. This was only one aspect of the league in which players differed on their level of competitiveness.

Competition. All participants mentioned competition at some point during their interview, but competition was talked about in many different contexts. For several participants, the competitive aspect of matches was enjoyable and motivated them to get better. Sharon stated, “I didn’t want to suck, and I wanted to ... help the team not hurt it.” Linda noted that whether she was playing singles or doubles, she wanted to play her best for her team. Being an asset to the team created a sense of belonging. Kris expressed feeling very competitive on the tennis court:

I like to win every point. I know that's not possible, but if I could I would. But I like to win every point. It's just, I think you have to be like that to be able to win your matches, or to even better yourself even if you don't win.

However, nine participants noted that players could be overly competitive. Porter, who said he enjoys the competitive aspect of the game, talked about the importance of not getting too competitive:

It's a game that you can really enjoy for a long time if you're smart about it. If you play the right way and you prepare yourself physically the right way. But, I

think more importantly, just understand, and this is what my wife had to tell me early on, it's just recreation. It's simple recreation. A way to form friendships and stay in shape. You know, try to stay physically, a way to stay in shape. And it's just a recreational game, it's no more than that.

Rosalie observed that some players can get a “little cheaty, a little ugly, but everyone wants to win.” Erika, Robert, Sharon, Jennifer, Paula, Edwin, and Stephanie also said players could be overly competitive. Because league rules mandate that players call their opponents’ shots in or out, accusations of cheating can arise. Paula recalled a time when she had to tell her opponent, “You call your court, and we got our court, and we’ll make this happen.” When questions of honesty arise, tensions between groups can occur that disrupts a sense of belonging.

Tensions caused by race relations. In addition to accusations of cheating, tensions associated with race relations occurred in the following manners: league treatment seemed to be preferential to Whites, African American tennis players were referred to in a derogatory manner, and the lone African American on a tennis team felt excluded. These tensions impacted the participants’ sense of belonging although each individual dealt with it in a different manner. Paula recalled an incident at a pre-season tournament where a match was not forfeited even though her opponent arrived well after the required time. Additionally, a league official told Paula that her opponent had gone to the wrong court. However, when her opponent showed up, the opponent said she had forgotten about the match, not gone to the wrong court. Paula also recalled a time when this same league official allowed a White team captain to reschedule a match after she

had not allowed Paula to reschedule the match. Even though Paula has a good relationship with this league official, these actions made Paula feel that the official was “a little racist”.

Sharon also noted that wild cards, which allow teams that lost in the city championships to advance to the state championship, seemed to be preferentially doled out:

On a number of occasions that we're aware of, where we won the flight, you know won our flight and then there will be some of the same teams at states or that year the wild card is offered for those teams.

When Sharon inquired to league officials about how a wild card was determined, she was told that it was done by a computer formula. Sharon joined the state diversity committee in part because she felt that preferential treatment was being given to teams playing out of other locations in Columbia. Rosalie, who previously served on the USTA state diversity committee, noted that there were not many minorities that make decisions at the state level.

Unlike Sharon and Rosalie's experiences, Emma encountered a White woman who made a racist statement, even if that was not her intention. Emma recalled the situation and how she dealt with it:

When she found out I played at Greenview she said, “How do you like playing out there at Greenview with those Black bitches?” Because I know her, I know she didn't mean Black, as in White Black thing. She was just speaking the obvious. We're predominantly Black. So, I didn't take offense to it, but I eventually talked

her into joining a team. Actually, it was my team that I invited her to join, and she came out and absolutely loves it. So, her coming in, I think it changed her perspective about what she was thinking about Greenview Park.

Emma also stated that she hoped her friend was sharing her experience with other

Whites:

What I would like her to do is share that with her White counterparts who may have some skepticism with playing out here. We're not crazy people. We're professionals out here, and you have people on different levels with different backgrounds and different mindsets and different attitudes just like you do at any other park or any other club.

This type of prejudice has traditionally been associated with de facto segregation. Lack of intergroup contact perpetuates stereotypes, whereas intergroup contact may lead to individuals empathizing with different group members and prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

Although Emma's friend found Greenview to be a very welcoming park, Sharon noted that she did not feel as welcome playing in another league as the only African American on a team. She explained that her sense of belonging was impacted by how her teammates treated her:

You're the only one. You feel like odd man out. Because you're not involved. Same thing, you know, the little interactions. "So and so's baby." Or "So and so's husband." And "We got together." And you know, taking weekend trips together, but I'm not involved. So, you do feel like odd man out. So, I'll say, "OK.

I'm not going to pimp myself anymore. (laughs) I'm going to go feel like I'm really needed. Really a part. Secret weapon." You want to play, but you don't; the camaraderie is different.

Sharon was recruited by the other team because of her playing ability, but she didn't feel like a part of the team due to her race. Only two study participants did not play on predominantly African American tennis teams, but these two participants both noted that they had developed friendships with their teammates. This may be in part to the fact that both of these participants still play with many of the teammates who were on their original teams.

Chapter Summary

The demographic survey of the participants in this study revealed that they were older and had a higher income than the average Columbia resident. This may be indicative of the cost and time requirements for playing in a tennis league. This could also be explained by the fact that many participants were encouraged to join a tennis league by family and friends, many of whom would be similar in age and income level to the participants. Once participants decided to play tennis, lessons and encouragement from tennis professionals were instrumental in getting the participants to join a tennis league.

Participants reported three types of benefits from playing in a tennis league: physical activity, mental health benefits, and social benefits. All participants reported some physical benefit from tennis, from staying active to eating better. Tennis relieved stress reportedly and caused some participants to focus and concentrate while playing.

Social benefits included camaraderie, making new friendships, and expanding one's social network, particularly of potential playing partners. The social aspects of tennis also contributed to the third theme that was constructed from the data, a sense of belonging.

The structure of the league, which included time for socializing after the match, was one element that contributed to a sense of belonging. Participants also tended to engage in activities with teammates outside of tennis, which also strengthened their feeling of belonging and encouraged discovery of other common interests. By learning the rules, written and unwritten, of tennis, participants acculturated themselves into a larger group. This acculturation process continued when participants joined a tennis league, thereby becoming a part of a tennis team. Participants also felt a sense of belonging at Greenview Park through meeting other frequent park visitors and attending park events. A team captain facilitated communication between team members and set the tone for the team, including competitiveness. Although participants enjoyed the competitive aspect of tennis, some disliked overly competitive players which detracted from a sense of belonging. Other tensions that detracted from a sense of belonging were the perception of preferential treatment by league administrators, incidents of prejudice regarding Greenview Park, and not feeling welcome by teammates of a different race. The next section will examine how these findings form the essence of the participants' experience playing in a tennis league.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section, the essence of the experiences determined from interviews is examined along with the elements that contributed to this essence. These findings are also compared with previous studies on constraints to participation in recreational leagues, determinants of continued league participation, and sense of belonging. The practical implications of the research results are discussed focusing on current practices that impact study participants and new policies that could expand African American participation in USTA tennis leagues. Recommendations for future directions of research are largely based on furthering the current research. Limitations are also noted before a brief discussion of the importance of this study.

Sense of Belonging

The goal of this research is to examine African Americans' experiences playing in organized tennis leagues through a phenomenological lens. Through analyzing interviews, meaning clusters or themes were constructed. Examining these themes together, the essence of these experiences suggests that African Americans feel a sense of belonging in recreational tennis leagues in Columbia due to several factors. These factors, which will be discussed in more detail, are an existing African American tennis community, an African American tennis professional, a tennis center located in a historically African American neighborhood, and the structure of the tennis league.

Study participants noted the role of friends and family, many of whom are members of the tennis community, in influencing them to play tennis. This is consistent

with previous research on recruiting participants to sports leagues, which noted the importance of significant others in recruitment efforts (Green, 2005). Shores, Scott, & Floyd (2007) found that ethnic minorities are unlikely to participate in recreation activities perceived as unacceptable by family and friends. Similarly, other research has found that potential new participants to a sport were unlikely to play unless they have friends who play the sport (Allison, et al., 2005).

Almost all participants noted that their first experience with playing tennis was due to a friend or family member. One participant noted that when she first started playing, she was on the only team comprised solely of African Americans in her league. This made her initially feel less of a sense of belonging, but she persisted with tennis and felt responsible for making other new players comfortable. This account is consistent with other literature that investigated why African Americans do not participate in certain recreation activities (Gobster, 2002). An existing African American tennis community is essential to recruiting new African American tennis players.

Another key aspect of this community is Lewis, an African American tennis professional. He contributes to tennis being perceived as a sport played by African Americans and encourages people within the African American community, at church and school, to play tennis. For several participants, their introduction to tennis was taking lessons from Lewis. These lessons not only serve as a gateway into the tennis community but as a gateway into league tennis. Lewis encourages those taking lessons to form a team and join a tennis league. In addition to having support from family and friends, taking tennis lessons and joining a tennis team creates a support system for study participants,

which encourages continued recreation participation (Sanderson, et al., 2002). Through tennis leagues, participants meet new people, which expands their potential playing partners. Green (2005) notes that socialization was a key component of retaining players in a sports league, and all study participants state they intend to continue playing in their tennis league.

Lewis also contributes to the tennis community by holding weekly tennis clinics. These clinics allow tennis players to expand their tennis network in addition to improving their skills. Many participants also noted that their teams attended weekly tennis clinics with Lewis and that Lewis was often present at their home matches. Not only does Lewis recruit new members to the tennis community, but through his support and presence, he also serves as a leader of the community.

Greenview Park contributes to creating a sense of belonging in tennis leagues because participants felt welcome at the park. This sense of welcome is partially due to Lewis being the tennis professional at the park. The park, located in a historically African American neighborhood, has a history of serving as a meeting place for African American groups and being a center for African American athletics. Previous research suggests that a park's history contributes to African American's feeling welcome (Fernandez & Witt, 2013; Gobster & Delgado, 1993; Taylor, 1989). In this case, Greenview park is known to be a place where African Americans recreate and, therefore, is likely to be a place where blatant acts of racial discrimination against African Americans are minimal.

Participants noted that they drove from many different areas of town to play tennis at Greenview Park. Paula stated that she passed several other tennis centers on the drive from her house to Greenview Park. The park's other amenities, a playground, gymnasium, and covered picnic area, provide a place for kids to play while their parents play tennis. Participants noted that they feel comfortable finding pick-up matches at Greenview Park, which indicates a feeling of belonging within the tennis community. This level of comfort is due in part to tennis clinics being held at the park on a regular basis and the existing tennis community at Greenview Park being welcoming to new tennis players.

The structure of tennis leagues contributes to sense of belonging in several ways. Participants are members of a team, which in turn makes them feel part of a group. The team practices together, has a team captain, and relies on each other to win matches. Participants feel compelled to improve and play well for the sake of the team. Feeling needed is noted as a necessary element for a sense of belonging (Hagarty et al. 1992). Each match also includes a social element in which players share food and beverages after playing their individual match. This social time allows players to increase their tennis network and maintain relationships with their teammates. A previous study found that exercising with others was correlated with a greater sense of belonging (Feuerhahn, Sonnentag, & Woll, 2014).

By using a rating system, tennis leagues ensure that participants compete against players of a similar skill level. Participants reported that most matches are competitive, and many participants enjoy the competitive aspect of league play. Participants also noted

that competition increases their sense of being a team member and not just a lone tennis player. Similarly, Robinson and Carron (1982) found that team cohesion contributes to players maintaining their identity within a sport. Players also expressed feelings of responsibility to the team such as showing up for practice in bad weather, not wanting to let down teammates, and improving their skills. Players are rewarded for their sacrifice to the team through praise and encouragement from other players, a form of approval necessary to develop a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This is evidence that each player feels he or she is an integral part in the success of their team.

Creating a sense of belonging within tennis leagues for African Americans is necessary to increase African American participation. The factors that lead to this sense of belonging discussed above are some of several findings from this study that can be used in the field of recreation.

Practical Implications

In many ways, study participants seem to be an anomaly in the world of tennis. Although African Americans have a rich history within tennis, the decline of the ATA, lack of access to courts, and media portrayal of African American tennis players all contribute to the image of tennis as a “White” sport. However, this study identified elements that encouraged African American participation in USTA tennis leagues which are supported by previous research. Some of these elements could be implemented into other USTA tennis leagues to increase diversity.

In a study of why African Americans do not visit a nearby national park, participants suggested that more African American rangers and volunteers would increase

a sense of belonging at the park for African Americans (Le & Holmes, 2012). Similarly, having an African American tennis professional at Greenview Park is instrumental in creating a sense of belonging for study participants. Lewis, the tennis professional and coach, was responsible for teaching nine of the participants when they initially decided to play tennis. He also encouraged these players to join a USTA tennis league and assisted in creating teams, registering, and learning league rules. Previous research notes that retention in sports leagues requires participants to stay motivated (Green, 2005), and Lewis contributes to this motivation by encouraging participants to improve their skills through competition and attending clinics.

Although an African American tennis professional may not be available for every tennis league, Lewis's practices could be emulated. A sense of community was fostered by the long hours he spent at the tennis courts and his willingness to assist new players in finding playing partners. He encourages players to attend cardio tennis clinics to meet others and utilizes text messaging to inform potential participants about these clinics. In the Le and Holmes (2012) study, African Americans participants advise that partnering with local organizations is a good way to increase park visitation. Similarly, Lewis uses his associations with a church and a local school to increase tennis participation. Other research found that partnering with African American churches can be a successful way to implement fitness programs (Bopp et al., 2006).

Greenview Park also plays an important role in attracting African American players to tennis and retaining African American players in USTA leagues which could be emulated in other areas. Eleven courts with lights are located at the park, and they

surround a covered area with picnic tables underneath. Directly beside two of the courts is a playground area, and the park also had a new swimming facility, a gymnasium, and a building with meeting rooms. The picnic area provides a place for people to socialize when not playing tennis, a manner of strengthening the tennis community. During matches and clinics, kids can play on the playground while their parents play tennis. The additional facilities also encourage families to come out to the park together and participate in different recreational activities.

Future Directions

Initial research concepts were more focused on the impact of participation in USTA tennis leagues on race relations for Whites and African Americans. Tennis leagues in the study area are one form of recreation in which members of different races have meaningful contact, suggesting that empathy for other races may be developing. However, measuring such impacts requires a longitudinal study, which should be explored in future research. A contrast of experiences of White and African American participants playing in the same tennis league could also provide useful information on how sense of belonging is created.

Future studies should also focus on league participants who have lower socio-economic status. Having less income compounds the number of barriers to recreation. Disposable income is needed to buy recreational equipment, take lessons to learn new recreational activities, and access many recreational facilities. Learning how these constraints are negotiated would be beneficial in recruiting more low-income players. However, the socio-economic status of our study population may be representative of

USTA league participants in general. Although tennis is no longer for just the wealthy elite, there is still a considerable time and money cost to learn tennis and play in a league (Lawrence, 2014). Our sample also skewed towards older adults, which contrasts statistics on recreation league participation. The two youngest players in our sample played on teams that were not predominantly African American, which may indicate that younger African Americans feel more of a sense of belonging on teams that are predominantly White or a mix of races. Future research should focus on barriers to young African Americans playing in tennis leagues and how they perceive a sense of belonging within tennis.

Another group that was exempt from this study is Hispanics. The USTA has begun recruiting Hispanics to tennis leagues, and there is also a long tradition of Hispanics playing tennis. However, language and other cultural barriers, which impact a sense of belonging, have yet to be examined in terms of tennis league participation. Hispanics may also derive different benefits from playing tennis. If the USTA truly wants to attract this population, further research needs to examine how to assist Hispanics with overcoming barriers and recruit them to tennis leagues.

Limitations

As with all research projects, there are limitations to this study. The qualitative design of the study indicates that findings are not generalizable. Although results are not generalizable, some of the findings may be helpful in recruiting African Americans to USTA leagues in other locations. Further, given the unique study population (i.e., older African Americans of middle-income households with higher levels of education) and

cross-sectional design, findings from this study only represent one sample population at one specific time point. As mentioned previously, the study site, Columbia, South Carolina, has a unique history of race relations, which undoubtedly impacted the experiences of participants. Racial aspects deemed significant in this study may not arise in similar studies conducted in other areas. Participants were certainly influenced by Greenview Park and the tennis professional, two unique elements.

Researcher bias must also be addressed. The researcher is a lifelong tennis player who has participated in tennis leagues previously. He approached this study with the belief that tennis leagues had certain benefits including creating a sense of belonging amongst participants. Furthermore, the researcher is White, which makes him an outsider regarding his study population. Although the researcher utilized a reflective journal to identify bias which would impact the study, outsider status could not be altered and most likely impacted study participants.

A final limitation was the lack of statistics on African American USTA league participants. Although the USTA has acknowledged that they are actively recruiting African Americans to tennis leagues, they do not collect race information on league participants. Therefore, no statistics could be used to confirm underrepresentation of African Americans within leagues.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study is important because it examines a population, African American adult tennis league participants, previously absent from recreational studies and provides insight on how this population could be increased. A better

understanding of the process that takes African Americans from non-tennis players to tennis league participants has practical implications for tennis advocates and recreational leaders. Additionally, this study confirms that African Americans derive many of the same benefits from tennis leagues as reported in previous studies, one of which is sustained physical activity. To curb obesity, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention recommends that adults engage in moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes a day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017), and this study found evidence that tennis league participants are meeting this recommendation. These results are even more significant when considering that the average age of study participants is over 50 years and physical activity tends to decrease with age.

Perhaps most important and practical are the study findings on sense of belonging. The historical discrimination of African Americans by the USTA has left a lasting impact on the African American community. Lack of access to parks and tennis courts for African Americans prior to desegregation also contributes to tennis being considered a “White” sport. However, this study found that some African Americans have managed to negotiate the barriers to tennis league participation and have created an African American tennis community. The participants in this study provide hope and inspiration for other emerging African American tennis communities. For the USTA to recruit and retain African Americans in tennis leagues, they must foster a sense of belonging. This study uncovered some key aspects to a sense of belonging and provided insight on how a sense of belonging can be encouraged through tennis leagues.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in Study



My name is Paul Gremillion, and I would like to invite you to participate in research I am conducting. I've recently gone back to school to study parks, recreation, and tourism management at Clemson University. Before this, I lived in the Columbia area, and I played league tennis for a few years. During the course of my studies, I realized how beneficial tennis is as a lifelong sport for physical and mental health. However, I also found that African American adults are underrepresented in tennis leagues. Figuring out why this is and what can be done about it is the driving factor behind my research.

To collect data for this research, I am interviewing African American adults playing in USTA tennis leagues. Interviews are focused on gaining insight on what factors led to league participation, the perceived benefits of playing league tennis, and what factors determine continued participation. I am also interested in what contributes to a sense of belonging or a lack thereof. Interviews are conducted in a conversational style to allow other topics of interest to arise. My main goal is to let you tell me about your experiences and what you feel is important.

Participation in this study will be strictly confidential and all interviews will be conducted individually. Once I have developed common themes from the interviews, I will be following up with interviewees to ensure the developed themes match your experiences. Findings from the research will be presented to the USTA for use in developing future tennis programs aimed at increasing African American participation. If you would like to participate in this study, please contact **Paul Gremillion at 843-250-4356 or jgremil@clemson.edu**.

Thank you,

Paul Gremillion

Appendix B

IRB Statement

Information about Being in a Research Study
Clemson University

A Qualitative Examination of the Experiences of African American Participants in Organized Tennis Leagues

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Dr. Mariela Fernandez along with Paul Gremillion is inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Fernandez is an Assistant Professor at Clemson University. Paul Gremillion is a student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Fernandez. The purpose of this research is to examine the lived experiences of African Americans participating in an organized tennis league in the southeast United States. The research objective is to determine the benefits to of league participation for African Americans including the creation of a sense of community.

Your part in the study will be to complete a one on one interview with Paul Gremillion. The interview will be loosely based on a set of predetermined questions, but a semi-structured interview design will allow for exploration of different topics as they emerge. The interview will be audio recorded. After the interview is complete, you will take a survey which will ask you for personal demographic data. Paul Gremillion will also take notes on his observations throughout the interview and survey process, including after audio recording has stopped. After all interviews have been analyzed, you may be contacted by phone to confirm research findings. All audio recordings will be destroyed once the study is complete.

It will take you about thirty minutes to one hour to be in this study.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand factors limiting African American participation in league tennis and ways to increase a sense of belonging for all league participants.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we collected about you in particular. You will be assigned a code once you decide to participate, and you will be referred to by code throughout the research. Any identifying information will be kept by Paul Gremillion on a password protected computer.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Mariela Fernandez at Clemson University at 864-656-2389.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

A copy of this form will be given to you.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your first experience with tennis.
2. How did you get started playing tennis?
3. How did you learn about your tennis league?
4. Why did you decide to join your tennis league?

Probe:

- a) Have you played in a league before?
 - b) Was a particular person instrumental in getting you to play in your tennis league?
 - c) Why do you continue to play tennis?
 - d) What is your current NTRP rating?
 - e) Do you watch professional tennis?
5. Tell me about the sequence of events for a normal match.

Probe:

- a) Do you socialize before or after the match?
6. Who do you most often play tennis with?

Probe:

- a) Do you play with others outside of the league?
7. What do you enjoy most about playing in your tennis league?

Probe:

- a) What aspects of tennis do you enjoy more than other sports?
8. What are some things you would change about your league?

9. How are league decisions made?

Probe:

a) Do you feel the decision-making process is fair?

10. Tell me about any personal changes you have noticed directly tied to playing in your league.

Probe:

a) Skill-level:

b) Physical Benefits

c) Social Benefits:

d) Psychological:

e) Knowledge of sport:

11. Can you share some tips that would help someone who has never played tennis before?

12. Can you tell me how the skills you've learned in tennis have affected your personal life?

13. Do you intend to play in your tennis league in the spring?

Probe:

a) If no, ask, do you think you will continue playing tennis after your league is over?

14. Tell me about some of your team members that you really get along with.

15. Tell me about some of your team members that you don't get along with.

16. Do you interact socially with any of your team members outside of your tennis league?

Probe:

a) If yes, ask, what are some of the ways you interact with your team members outside of tennis?

b) Are you friends with any of your teammates on social media?

17. Do you intend to keep in touch with your team members once your league is over?
18. Tell me about how decisions are made on your team, especially about who plays in matches.
19. Does your team have uniforms?

Probe:

- a) If no, ask, do you wear a specific style of clothes for matches?
20. Do you feel more comfortable playing at your home courts than at other tennis courts?

Probe:

- a) If yes, ask, why do you feel more comfortable at your home courts?
 - b) Do you feel more secure now than when you first started in your league?
 - c) Tell me about the signs up at your tennis courts.
21. Tell me how competitive in spirit and in score most of your tennis matches are.
 22. What would you miss most if you stopped playing in your tennis league?
 23. Are there any other aspects of your tennis league we have not discussed that are important to you?

Appendix D

Demographic Survey

Please remember all answers are strictly confidential.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Some high school
 - b. High school degree or diploma
 - c. Some college
 - d. Undergraduate degree
 - e. Some graduate school
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. Doctoral degree
3. What is your yearly household income?
 - a. Less than \$10,000
 - b. \$10,001 to \$20,000
 - c. \$20,001 to \$30,000
 - d. \$30,001 to \$40,000
 - e. \$40,001 to \$50,000
 - f. \$50,001 to \$75,000
 - g. \$75,001 to \$100,000
 - h. \$100,000 to \$200,000

i. Greater than \$200,000

4. What is your marital status?

a. Single

b. Married

c. Divorced

d. Widow

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