

We're the Players': The Under-representation of Black Females as Head Coaches in Division I Women's Basketball

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**Socio-cultural
Abstract 2009-106**

**May 29, 2009
1:20 PM**

**25 minute oral
(Richland B)**

The 2005-06 season in Division I women's basketball marked the first year the highest percentage of female student-athletes was Black (44.6%). The percentage of Black females playing Division I basketball increased by almost 12% over a seven-season period – from 35.7% in the 1999-00 season to the last documented percentage of 47.4 for the 2006-07 season (NCAA, 2008). Similarly, the percentages of Black females in Division I women's coaching – as assistant coaches and as head coaches – are also increasing, although the percentage rate of increase is much slower. Black women made up 9.1% of the head coaches and 23.2% of the assistant coaches for the 1995-96 academic year (NCAA, 2006). In the 2005-06 academic year, those numbers rose slightly to 9.3% and 24.2%, respectively. Those percentages stand in stark contrast to the approximately 44.6% Black females that played women's basketball during the 2005-06 season. Although Black women have made gains the past two seasons, the gap between Black women playing and Black women leading is still large.

The struggles of Black women to gain head coach positions mirror the struggles of Black women throughout history. Oglesby (1981) saw the Black woman as invisible in sport and described her as "fleeting, if ever in the consciousness of the sporting public. Nobody knows her; not publicists, or researchers, or entrepreneurs, or published historians. ... The Black sportswoman is unknown" (p.1). Whether or not young Black athletes and Black coaches are competing on a level playing field to achieve this social mobility has been the focus of sport management research on the male side (Adler & Adler, 1991; Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004), but little has been done on the female side. Research suggests that the implications of racial ideology are different for Black men and Black women (Bruening, 2005; Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005; Corbett & Johnson, 2000). Few studies have looked at the combination of race and gender – and other possible identities – and thus, research on the sport experiences of Black women has received little attention. Not only does sport culture ignore the experience of women and people of color, it most specifically ignores women who are people of color (Bruening, 2005). Vertinsky and Captain (1988) noted that when the word "woman" is added to "Black," the result has been a set of racist and sexualized discourses that have determined a Black woman's route in society.

The purpose of the proposed presentation is to present findings from a study examining barriers contributing to the under-representation of Black women in head coach jobs in Division I women's basketball. The current study sought to examine the work experiences of Black women only, an approach lacking in sport management research. Leonard (1988) suggested that Black women have been disproportionately placed at the bottom of the social and economic ladder whereas White women have not been affected by racism and classism. The study was also aimed at testing Black feminist theory to see if it could be used to help create knowledge in the sport context and confirm that Black women are status deprived in sport contexts on the basis of race and gender (Simien, 2006). Standpoint theory and Black feminist theory were utilized as the framework for the current study. Standpoint theory suggests that the only way to understand the experiences of marginalized groups is to allow them to share their perceptions of how their social lives are constructed (Harding, 2004). The personal experiences tapped in the interviews provided insight into the intersectionality of sport with the social identities of race and gender. As the study results indicate, sexuality serves as an added component of the "double jeopardy" already experienced by Black women (Beale, 1979). This "triple jeopardy" has been described as a hindrance to Black women in gaining access to formal networks such as educational training and informal networks such as social relationships that can enhance career advancement (Abney, 2000; Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, & Forrest, 1991).

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 Black female Division I assistant women's basketball coaches. Nine of the 10 women had head-coaching aspirations. The grounded-theory, qualitative method used was exploratory in nature and designed to gather information about the work experiences of assistant coaches, their aspirations to ascend to college head coach positions, and their perceptions regarding the gap between Black women playing and Black women leading. In the data collected from the interviews, the women revealed several barriers impeding their ascension to head coach positions. Barriers included access discrimination, stereotypes and lack of consistent support systems. According to the participants, access discrimination – defined as limitations minority groups encounter that are not related to their actual or potential performance (Ilgen & Youtz, 1986) – manifested itself through limited candidate pools eligible to apply for head coach jobs, discrimination against unmarried women, and the lack of Black females or males serving in positions with input on the hiring of head coaches. The women in the current study discussed two prevalent stereotypes they experience as Black women in collegiate sport: 1. They were branded as "designated recruiters." At times the women felt they were perceived as only being proficient in reaching out to

2009 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2009)

young, Black female student-athletes and convincing them to attend predominantly White institutions; 2. The participants also noted they were considered proficient as student-athletes during their playing days but were not necessarily perceived as leaders now that they had reached the assistant coach level. "We're the players," one coach said. Black women have always contended with racist and sexist stereotypes. The research participants also decried the lack of consistent support and leadership development provided by athletic departments.

The proposed presentation will outline the practical implications of the study and speak to future directions in this research line. Implications include Black women needing to work harder than their White counterparts to establish networks with the powerful athletic directors that have a large say in the hiring of basketball coaches. They have to work harder to gain coaching credibility. Abney (2007) has suggested that Black women need to continue to play an active role in organizations such as the Black Coaches and Administrators, the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, and the NCAA. They must make themselves visible in their own athletic departments. Their active participation inside and outside their programs can begin to eradicate incongruous feelings about their leadership abilities. Athletic directors must be convinced to look outside their own networks to find candidates with non-customary backgrounds and experiences (Abney, 2007). Future directions in this research line include gathering qualitative data from athletic directors who have recently hired Black females as head coaches to understand their hiring process and using quantitative methods to compare the work experiences of Black and White female coaches and ascertain if there is a difference as to how they are socialized into the coaching profession.