An Exploration of Black Women’s Intersectional Identity in the Context of Athletic Administration

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While the benefit of sport participation is well documented, sport also serves as a prominent social institution that incorporates many of society’s harmful ideologies, including those related to race and gender. Intercollegiate athletic administrations (ICA), such as those found at NCAA Division I universities, are conspicuous as propagators of sport culture in American society and showcase many of its beneficial and harmful practices. The present study examined the experiences of black women working in executive roles in the ICAs of NCAA Division I universities. Using an interpretive methodology, this study employed qualitative interviews to explore the experiences of black women employees against the backdrop of dominant culture of ICA at Division I universities.

Theoretical Perspective
The organizational culture of ICA perpetuates ideological structures based on gender and race, which leaves black women marginalized. In athletics, ideologies privilege a system based on meritocracy, competition, and domination afforded to and controlled by white men (Hylton, 2010). As such, culture of intercollegiate athletics has been recognized to resemble hegemonic structures based on gender and race, conceptualized as hegemonic masculinity and whiteness.

The concept of whiteness concludes that racism is perpetuated by socially constructed hierarchical power systems privileging white identity and allowing for color blind-ness by those in power (McDonald, 2005). Similarly, the acceptance of men as sole participants and stakeholders reinforces the power structure to reflect the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Whisenant, Pedersen & Obenour, 2002). Hegemonic masculinity is the privileging of masculinity, qualities most associated with men, over femininity, most associated with women. Men are considered superior athletes and leaders, thereby, forcing women and minorities into positions of inferiority and subordination (Whisenant, Miller & Pedersen, 2005), especially black women. As such, being a woman and black leaves them underrepresented for leadership opportunities and upward mobility in athletic administration.

Black women’s positioning within these oppressive organizational structures, requires a relational understanding of the impact of their identity on experience. To understand the experiences of black women requires an in depth analysis of identity’s social constructs. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1991), assists in this process as it allows the researcher to focus on various forms of identity, race, sex, sexuality, and religion, simultaneously, rather than each construct of identity separately. Conducting an intersectional analysis of their dynamic identity allows a confrontation of systematic structures that were previously left invisible and inferiorly positioned, without a clear understanding of how.

Methods
Given the subtly and nuance of cultural constructs, such as race and gender, a qualitative design was best suited to the present study. Each participant was a black woman serving as an executive athletic administrator at their respective institution. Guided by a semi-structured protocol, interpretive interviews were employed in an effort to allow participants a degree of autonomy in expressing their experiences with ICAs. Semi-structured interviews lasting about 45 minutes were conducted with 12 participants. Additionally, the primary researcher maintained a ‘researcher journal’ to document any influence of personal subjectivity on the research experience. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and data analysis began by engaging in phases of open and focused coding, which a consolidated set of themes (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Subsequent themes were then compared to the interview transcripts in an effort to bolster their trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007).
Findings

Results indicated that understanding the experiences of black women requires an intersectional understanding of identity. Experiences related to gender and race/ethnicity are at times distinct from one single facet. When considering gender, themes related to social network and stereotypical gender roles are often cited as hindering to their upward mobility. When considering race, many of the participants recognized that as a black woman they felt that being black served as a greater hindrance to their organizational hierarchical standings, than just being a woman (McDowell, Cunningham, & Singer, 2009). Identified themes related to race resided on issues related to discrimination, inequality, and racial stereotypes.

Black women's lack of hierarchical administrative position in ICA, is directly related to its acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. They find themselves stagnant within ICA's at a greater rate, more than white women and black men. As ICA is observed to possess both ideological stances of whiteness and hegemonic masculinity, white identity and men are able to dominate their acceptance into leadership positions. In turn, black women are left overlooked and over-represented in positions that are less likely to be approached for promotion and prominent stature within the organization (Bell & Nkomo, 1998). The organizational culture of ICA will continue to discriminate against black women, unless these unjust social orders are challenged and made visible by its leadership.

Implications

Considering sport's inception of modern sporting endeavors as an inclusive instrument, its ability to function as a progressive and developmental force in society is being questioned. Findings from this study make a meaningful contribution to this debate, by shedding light on underlying cultural factors that privilege certain identity categories over others within the context of certain ICA. This study’s findings suggest that progressive scholars and administrators should focus their attention towards organizational and cultural practices that subtly construct intercollegiate sport as bastion of white, masculine privilege. Our findings indicate that certain individuals are relegated to an ‘outsider within’ status not because of professional ineptitude, but due to their marginalized identity status within an organization culture that is ideologically white and hegemonically masculine. The marginalization of black women or any identity category within ICA is not only unethical, but harmful to the very virtues that sport purports to impart on its participants and the larger society. Without addressing such practices, sport and ICA fail to fulfill their potential as important developmental contexts within American society.