Examining Perceptions of Whiteness for White Women Working in College Athletic Administration

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The 2016 U.S. Presidential election disrupted many American social spheres, including sport, and illuminated the role of race in American politics as White women shocked the populace by voting more in support of Donald Trump rather than Hilary Clinton (Cooper, 2018). Subsequently, the political views of White women (broadly) came under greater scrutiny, as their support of President Trump equated with supporting aims contradictory to feminism and women’s empowerment. Additionally, political views of White women influenced the latest pop culture moniker “Karen”, a socio-political and socio-cultural caricature of White women who uphold racist stereotypes and utilize their whiteness as a cloak of protection or innocence. Thus, post the 2016 election, American society has grappled with the racial identity of White women, not solely their gender identity (Cooper, 2018). Relatedly, sport management researchers have not examined the role of race in the experiences of White women in sport but have examined White women’s experiences of sexism and gender discrimination (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). Although women are under-represented in senior-level leadership positions and as head coaches in Division 1 athletics, White women hold the majority of SWA positions, athletic director positions, and coaching positions in collegiate sport leadership (Lapchick, 2019) and their racial consciousness is largely underexplored. Scholars described how Black male athletic directors intentionally sought to diversify their organizations, openly discussed inclusion, and remained cognizant of mentoring women and racial minorities (Singer & Cunningham, 2018). Further, Black women sport administrators perceived White women to hold advantages in career accession because they were hired by White male athletic directors (Price et al., 2017). However, there is limited scholarship examining whether White women perceive their racial identity provides career advantages (hiring, support, promotion) in college athletics.

Guided by Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), specifically whiteness (Owens, 2007) the purpose of this study is to examine to what extent White women working in collegiate athletics understand the significance of their racial identity as it relates to their professional experiences as sport administrators. By applying criticality to the racial status of White individuals, researchers seek to dismantle whiteness, an ideological perspective valuing White epistemologies and Whites’ social power in economic, social, and legal structures (DiAngelo, 2018; Hextrum, 2019). Owens (2007) asserts that whiteness sets the standard for ways of operating in educational, legal, and economic domains, which enables whiteness to be a cultural and ideological perspective.

We will deploy critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2000) to examine the significance of race in the organizational experiences of White women collegiate sport administrators. CDA situates the studied phenomenon to be in conjunction with social issues, while considering historical, political, and contemporary contexts (Mogashoa, 2014). We will conduct semi-structured interviews of 6 - 10 White women collegiate sport administrators and utilize reflective journaling as an additional data collection technique (Hindman & Walker, 2020). We will analyze our data using CWS with both open and fixed coding to develop themes regarding how participants understand the impact of whiteness on their professional experiences as collegiate athletic administrators.