Experiences of Black Women Athletics Administrators in the NCAA Division I Workplace

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Conference Theme - Race Forward (College Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Live Q&A for Race Forward (Asynchronous)  
Saturday June 5, 2021, 10:25 AM - 11:25 AM

There is little research on Black women in the college athletics workplace. Black women are also significantly underrepresented in administrative positions within college athletics, resulting in a lack of role models and mentors for future athletics administrators and isolation within the workplace. The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of NCAA Division I Black female senior-level administrators in the workplace. Research questions included: 1) what are participants’ experiences of racial microaggressions and barriers in the workplace; 2) how do these experiences impede black women in pursuing leadership positions; and 3) what coping strategies are used to deal with these experiences? This study provides important information for athletics administrators to create more inclusive and empowering work environments to foster success.

This study was modeled after the Holder, Jackson and Ponterotto (2015) study of Black women managers in corporate America utilizing an organizational framework and phenomenological qualitative methods to achieve a genuine, in-depth understanding of their experiences and coping strategies. Of a population of 74 Black women athletics administrators in senior positions within Division I athletics departments in 2019, 40 were invited to participate in the study, with seven participants chosen as a representative sample. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol to fully understand their lived experiences. Interview transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS software and codes with similar meanings were clustered into themes by three researchers to insure reliability. Thirty-nine codes emerged which were organized into 12 themes.

Four themes of racial microaggressions were revealed: environmental manifestations, external interactions, stereotypes of Black women and exclusion. The experience of racial microaggressions solicited various reactions, especially anger and frustration, and consequences that impacted their careers such as choosing to educate others rather than letting microaggressions pass. Six themes of coping strategies were identified: religion and spirituality, armoring, self-care, shifting, community, and champions and mentorship. A unique and unexpected finding was the number of microaggressions in external interactions with athletics department donors and fans. Positive findings included perceived increased strength and character due to the experiences, and that microaggressions become less frequent as Black women advance in their careers.

This research provides a unique contribution to the field by providing insight into the nuances of racial microaggressions in college athletics and distinctive ways in which Black senior-level administrators respond to these frequent interactions. The participants shared examples of environmental racial microaggressions and as well as individual racial slights experienced throughout their career. The most prominent impact was to react by educating others. The findings highlight the need for athletic directors and presidents to foster inclusive athletic departments that provide opportunity for employees to reach success by being their authentic selves.