Why Are There So Few Black Women Head Coaches in College Basketball? An Intersectionality Analysis

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A FanSided 2019 article states, “women of color make up 16% of the head coaching positions in all of NCAA Division I women’s basketball” (Wimbish, 2019). The article goes on to suggest a lack of “fit” and “opportunities” is to blame for this gendered and racialized discrepancy. For instance, when the coveted University of Tennessee head women’s basketball coach search took place, Kara Lawson was the only woman of color to make their top-15 candidate list and was considered a “wild card” (Wimbish, 2019). Kara Lawson, an Olympian and WNBA Champion who has won at every level, but has only coached in the NBA, was the only woman of color. Yet, was still considered less than fit, for a women’s basketball team that has not been a national championship contender in over a decade.

According to the most recent data from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES), Black women comprised merely 14 percent of head coaching positions in Division 1 women’s basketball. Black men held 5.5 percent. However, White women and White men made up 46.5 percent and 31 percent, respectively. This amounts to White head coaches holding 77.5 percent of head coaching positions. Yet, at the same time, Black women represented 41.9 percent of Division 1 women’s basketball participants in this data. This suggests Black women suffer from different barriers than Black men and White women (Lapchick, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black women in college basketball, through the application of intersectionality framework and analysis.

Critical race theory and critical feminist theory are appropriate lenses to highlight the experiences that Black women confront in college basketball. Critical race theory focuses on the impact and prevalence of race and racism in American society (Tate, 1997), and critical feminist theory centers hegemony and asks us to reassess our current understandings of knowledge, authority, and spaces of empowerment with regard to gender (Rhode, 1990). Yet, while both have a desire to encourage systemic changes, they have largely developed independently and thus do not consider the other’s expertise. That is, while critical race theory does not take into consideration the specific gendered treatment of Black women, critical feminist theory does not consider the specific racialized treatment of Black women. Thus, critical race theory and critical feminist theory will be utilized to dovetail into an intersectionality analysis, which takes both under consideration.

We will conduct semi-structured interviews with Black women in college basketball. Questions will focus on their lived experiences such as career movement, professional development, and treatment in the field. Theoretically, we aim to extend the literature on intersectionality, particularly as it relates to race and gender. Through this inquiry, we hope to better understand the barriers to Black women coaches in NCAA Division I basketball. Thus, we will develop a deeper understanding of racism and sexism in college sports. Also, we will provide a set of recommendations for the NCAA to extend its widely proclaimed diversity and inclusion efforts.