

An Illustration of Hope: An Anti-Deficit Approach to Understand the Lived Experiences of Black Women Athletic Administrators

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Being that Black women account for less than five percent of those who hold Assistant and Associate Athletic Director positions, their access to power, status, and influence within NCAA Division I (DI) athletics is limited. While Black women's sport participation has increased, there are still limitations in gender and racial diversity amongst college sport leadership. Existing scholarship has highlighted and addressed these barriers. This study, however, implements an anti-deficit approach to examine the work experiences of Black women in college athletic leadership roles and focuses on their support structures and positive experiences to provide insights on how they achieve success in their respective roles. The purpose of this study is twofold: (a) discuss the strategies and supports utilized to overcome workplace barriers and (b) spotlight the positive experiences and advantages that this group's identities provide within the workplace. To bolster the anti-deficit lens, intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought frameworks serve as the analytic framework. Using semi-structured interviews and participant surveys with $N = 10$ participants yielded five (5) themes: (a) credibility, (b) role model/representation, (c) communities of support, (d) mindset, and (e) moving with purpose.

Keywords: Black Feminist Thought, intersectionality, athletics administration, liberation

Introduction

Sport continues to be a reflection of society by illuminating the disparities in resources and social supports. Historically and contemporarily, Black women are subject to these disparities – within sport too. This is seen through misogynoir-laden discourse (Razack & Joseph, 2021), sexualization (Biefeld et al., 2021), and the limited opportunities to assume leadership positions (Keaton, 2022). While the field has acknowledged these issues and contributed to inciting change (Keaton, 2022; Newman, 2014), few have utilized an anti-deficit approach which centers the experiences, tools, and methods used to challenge and overcome the structural disparities faced by Black women.

To contextualize the disparities regarding access to leadership within college athletics, data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) found that of the DI Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) Autonomy Conferences, only 3% of Athletic Director (AD) positions and 3.5% of Assistant and Associate AD positions were held by Black women (National, 2021). For DI FBS Nonautonomy Conferences, no Black women held the role of AD and only approximately 4% of Assistant and Associate ADs were Black women in 2020 (National, 2021).

These numbers are alarming considering the importance of the AD and the Assistant and Associate AD positions coupled with the growing presence of Black women across all sectors of college athletics. There has been consistent growth over the last 40+ years, a credit to the passage of Title IX; however, women in athletic administration have not experienced similar growth patterns (Lapchick, 2022; Welch et al., 2021). Previous research addressed this by focusing on the barriers and challenges that Black women face when pursuing and navigating leadership roles within college athletics (Bruening, 2005; Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; McDowell & Cunningham, 2009; Walker & Melton, 2015). This study, however, addresses the issue from a different perspective. By acknowledging the inherent challenges Black women endure while also considering the support structures and positive experiences of Black women athletic administrators as a way to improve the recruitment and retention of this underrepresented group. Furthermore, this anti-deficit approach provides a framework and method for scholar-practitioners to continue advancing equity work within college athletics. Through merging an intersectional lens with an anti-deficit approach, this study forges a new path that extends beyond acknowledging the experiences of Black women due to intersecting oppressions within the structure of college athletics, and highlights their responses to these oppressions.

Over the years, there have been calls for sport management scholars to reconsider research methods. The hope is that this study serves as the launch for a deliberate shift, particularly in illuminating and understanding narratives in the journey towards creating solutions through a two-fold approach (Chalip, 1997; Frisby, 2005). Singer (2005) requested that when conducting research related to persons of historically marginalized races and ethnic groups, there is a need for sport management research that utilizes race-based epistemologies. Additionally, researchers have made a call

for deeper exploration into the supporting factors and positive aspects of college athletics that have helped women and racial minorities persist in their respective roles (LaVoi et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Inspired by the work of McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017), this study implements an intersectional lens in conjunction with Black Feminist Thought. In detail, this study is designed to acknowledge the existing scholarship and contributions that expose the presence and persistence of intersecting oppressions within college athletics - with an emphasis on the experiences of Black women working within college sport. Building upon this, this study reframes the inquiry and analysis through an anti-deficit lens to better understand the methods to build and maintain success implemented by Black women in athletics administrative roles. In doing so, the findings and proposed implications center on pathways of success and opportunity, as opposed to oppressive structures and the narratives impacted by this.

The purpose of this study is two-fold: (a) to discuss the strategies and supports utilized by Black women to overcome workplace barriers and (b) spotlight the positive experiences and advantages that Black women provide within the workplace. To achieve this, the study was conducted utilizing the following research questions: 1) How does race and gender impact the work experiences of Black women in collegiate athletics administration?, and 2) How do Black women navigate the positive and negative aspects of a career within collegiate athletics?

Literature Review

Barriers that Impact Women's Experiences in Sports

To properly address the supports and positive involvements that Black women athletic administrators experience, it is imperative to recognize the factors that serve as barriers for entry and retention within the workplace for groups with similar identities (i.e., women and/or racial minorities). Previous research has outlined different explanations for the underrepresentation of women in coaching and athletics administration to include family-work balance, sexism, and male hegemony (Norman, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Welch et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers considered the lack of diversity from a multilevel perspective (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2019; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Cunningham (2010) noted that "sport organizations are multilevel entities that both shape and are shaped by a myriad of factors" (p. 396), therefore, a multilevel approach is appropriate when considering the underrepresentation of women in college leadership positions.

Research at the micro-level focuses on how individuals analyze their experiences and understand power (Burton, 2015). Specific factors include, but are not limited to age, occupational tenure, race, identity and intersecting identities, gender socialization, human capital, and social capital investments (Cunningham et al., 2019; Taylor & Wells, 2017). Moreover, various factors and demographic characteristics can interconnect and influence the opportunities and experiences for women within sports organizations (Borland & Bruening, 2010; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). For example, Bergman and Henning (2008) explained how in male-domi-

nated organizations, racial and gender minorities can be viewed as organizational intruders, thus limiting their chances of receiving the benefits of the hegemonic and historically exclusionary group.

Factors at the meso-level analyze how certain structures and processes preserve or challenge the lack of diversity in intercollegiate athletics leadership positions (Cunningham, 2010). Within sport management, researchers have followed Blau's (2007) approach of linking an individual's attitude/behavior towards their careers to their respective organizational experiences and opportunities. Cunningham and Sagas (2004) argued that, "it is possible that individuals generalize their poor (or good) work experiences within an organization as indicative of how work is experienced in other organizations throughout the occupation" (p. 239).

Other meso-level factors include organizational policies, organizational culture, and leader biases (Cunningham et al., 2019). In terms of organizational culture, sport organizations are institutionalized in that the culture involves the marginalization of women without question or critique (Cunningham, 2019). Cunningham et al. (2019) argued this leads to women leaving sporting organizations at a higher rate than men. Leader biases can also serve as a meso-level barrier (Cunningham et al., 2019). Common examples of such as utilizing masculine descriptions and linking leadership with masculinity, and offering subgroup members (i.e. racial and gender minorities) less resources, rewards, and opportunities than the dominant group within sports (i.e. White men; Burton et al., 2009; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008).

From a macro-level perspective, Burton (2015) argued for the recognition of sport as a gendered institution when reviewing the lack of diversity in athletic administration. As such, masculine hegemony and systemic sexism are macro-level factors that can have a negative impact on women's experiences (Burton, 2015). These gender ideologies are not only embedded within society, but also entrenched within sport and sports organizations (Cunningham et al., 2019). One final macro-level factor are external stakeholders (Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2019). Within sports organizations, external stakeholders are often key in the hiring of upper-level administrators and high-profile coaches. Unfortunately, many stakeholders within college athletics possess and accept gender stereotypes which lead to the underrepresentation of minority groups in leadership positions (Staurowsky et al., 2017).

Factors that Impact Black Women's Experiences in Sports

There is a limited but growing body of research related to Black women and their lived experiences in and through sport. Existing work has focused on college athletes (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2015; Cooper et al., 2020), coaches (Borland & Bruening, 2010), and athletic administrators and their marginalized identities (Armstrong, 2007; Bruening, 2005; Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; McDowell & Cunningham, 2009; Price et al., 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015). These studies provide noteworthy insights related to the experiences of African American athletic administrators and information regarding the marginalization of this group.

Many Black women athletic administrators say they face various challenges such as concerns and doubts related to their qualifications and abilities, disfavor from colleagues because of their respective positions, and have to assume roles to prove

themselves (Abney & Richey, 1991; Keaton, 2022). Such challenges lead to extensive pressures, anxiety and stress, and sometimes the unintentional confirming of certain stereotypes (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009). Furthermore, while in pursuit of athletic leadership positions, this group has also expressed experiencing racism, sexism, the inability to access the ‘good ole boy’s network,’ feelings of isolation, limited role models and mentors, and tokenism (Abney & Richey, 1991; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Wells & Kerwin, 2017). Unfortunately, such barriers often lead to Black women not being considered for leadership opportunities (Collins, 2000; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Notwithstanding the barriers that exist for this particular group, less work has addressed supports and positive aspects for Black women in sport administrative/leadership positions (Armstrong, 2007; Price et al., 2017). In Price and colleagues (2017) study on Black women administrators in intercollegiate athletics, participants noted increased exposure and the opportunity to serve as role models to college athletes as positive aspects that their status as a Black woman provided. Taylor and Wells (2017) identified inclusive environments, human capital, and social capital as supports in their study on DI ADs. Additionally, while they can sometimes serve as barriers, the following factors may also serve as supports for these women: power, stakeholders, organizational demography, organizational culture, and family-work life (Taylor & Wells, 2017). Similarly, Keaton’s (2022) work on Black women Athletic Diversity and Inclusion Officers (ADIOs) illuminate how participants’ positions as outsiders within their predominantly white athletic departments fueled their understanding of organizational inclusivity and their desire to cultivate this. Specifically, Keaton (2022) suggests, “...Black women ADIOs move beyond being more aware of their social plight and enact this consciousness to inform their job responsibilities, which demonstrates critical praxis” (p. 11). Finally, Armstrong (2007) spoke to how women in sports leadership often possess the ethic of caring for other Black women. Specifically, many participants were motivated to partake in their respective roles to help uplift and serve as mentors for others within their community.

Despite the above review, a keen focus on the experiences of Black women in college athletic administrative positions is warranted. Specifically, more scholarship is needed to consider the support structure and positive experiences of this group (Cunningham et al., 2019; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017).

Analytic Framework

Intersectionality

As described by Carter-Francique (2020), intersectionality is “an analytical tool utilized to identify, analyze, and transform the cultural, political, and structural dynamics within institutions” (p. 456). Coined by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality considers the experiences of marginalized groups and individuals in environments that perpetuate social inequities. However, intersectionality considers the overlapping and intersecting aspects of an individual’s racial, gendered, sexual, social and other identities (Collins, 2000). Crenshaw (1991) illustrated that the intersecting im-

pact of both racism and sexism on Black women's lives cannot be understood by solely reviewing race and gender dimensions; but instead must consider "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (p. 1244).

Structural intersectionality considers the way in which power structures and social categorizations meet and leaves marginalized individuals with an adverse experience. For example, the lack of racial and gender diversity within sport can be attributed to those who hold the majority of the power continuing to hire and promote those within their same social category (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Building upon structural intersectionality, political intersectionality explores how individuals that possess multiple social identities must consider various political agendas, they may likely be discouraged from expressing their beliefs to avoid offending his or her other social group, e.g. an African American executive's decision to be timid with her advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights so that she will not offend her other social group (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Finally, representational intersectionality is the effect that stereotypes and cultural demonstrations have on those with multiple identities, such as the large representation of White men in leadership positions in sport preserves the belief that this group is the standard for leadership when compared to their counterparts (Melton & Bryant, 2017).

When considering the unique and cultural nuances of Black women's perceptions, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) and Price et al. (2017) utilized intersectionality as a tool to analyze this group's experiences. Melton and Bryant (2017) contended that a large portion of both general and sport management research focuses on single aspects of diversity. As such, it is recommended that scholars who wish to add a critical perspective to their research should consider a qualitative approach when examining the multiple points of an individual's intersecting identities (Melton & Bryant, 2017). Within the athletics realm, existing work has taken an intersectional approach when reviewing the race, gender, and/or sexual orientations of their participants (Keaton, 2022; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Price et al., 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015; Welch et al., 2021). Moreover, Collins and Bilge (2020) remind us that intersectionality is not merely a tool for critical inquiry but also for empowering people (i.e., critical praxis). There is much potential to draw upon the latter as Keaton (2022) put out a call to action, challenging sport scholars to be more intentional in implementing this. Thus, to maximize the utility of this framework, both aspects should be considered.

Anti-Deficit Framing of Intersectionality

Building upon the role of intersectionality as a central component of the analytic framework, the decision to investigate and analyze through an anti-deficit lens was intentional and necessary given the existing scope of literature regarding the experiences of Black women within sport. Following the explanation provided by Crenshaw, who explained that intersectionality is a prism that should be used to a) understand problems and b) to use that understanding to undergird intervention and promote equitable outcomes (National Association of Independent Schools, 2018) -

the researchers believe the anti-deficit framing will assist in following Crenshaw's explanation. In detail, the anti-deficit framing extends beyond understanding the existing and compounding structures of racialization and gendering in college athletics leadership and centers the experiences of Black women in college sport leadership to resist, intervene, and promote the development of equitable spaces. While the anti-deficit intersectional lens is rather novel, the unique utilization of this approach in existing works mirror the goals of this manuscript. To note, Scheese (2018) used this approach when exploring and illuminating the experiences of college students with chronic illnesses. Within their work, Scheese noted that the impact of an anti-deficit intersectional approach shifts the research narrative from the existing oppressive structures and highlights the community responses despite those structures. Going further, Gonyo (2018) and their integration of an anti-deficit framing alongside an intersectional lens served to extend beyond the existing literatures explored the oppressions working against Black LGBTQ+ individuals on college campuses. In sum, while an intersectional lens is undoubtedly important in understanding the experiences of Black women within college sport leadership, the deliberate shift in the research narrative to focus on their strengths, outcomes, and methods to success illuminates a much-needed path towards equity and liberatory-driven scholarship.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought "attempts to discover and expose dominant ideologies, practices, and beliefs which restrict Black women's freedom" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 5). Historically, Black women have long taken on an "outsiders" perspective within society. For example, Collins (1986) painted the image of Black women who served in domestic roles for White families who were allowed to nurture their children and offer advice; however, despite having access to the family unit, Black women often remained "outsiders". This status, which Collins (1986) described as outsider within has "provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society" (p. 514) – as well as unique ways of assessing reality from both outside in and inside out (hooks, 1984).

Despite its similarities to critical feminist theories, Black Feminist Thought shifts the focus from unfair power relations, to placing the responsibility for Black women to be both self-defined and determined (Collins, 2000). Additionally, Collins (1986) contended that regardless of the challenges that exist, Black women can sometimes benefit from their status. Collins (2000) described this as a Black woman's racial and gender oppression serving as a source of inspiration and creativity. In turn, the significance of such an approach "may lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice" (Collins, 2000, p. 269).

Used to illustrate the nature of Black women's leadership in sport, Armstrong (2007) highlights concepts of Collins' Black Feminist Thought: (a) ethic of caring, (b) situation of struggle, and (c) internal empowerment. The first dimension relates to Black women's nature of nurturing and caring for others. The second relates to Black women's ability to manage and deal with racism and sexism without clear teaching or conscious learning. Finally, internal empowerment relates to Black wom-

en's ability to find a self-defined voice to "contend with domineering or subversive environmental conditions...by creating internally safe spaces as sites of resistance" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 6).

The existing literature provides strong support for using Black Feminist Thought as a guiding theoretical framework. By allowing Black women to be seen and their experiences to be understood, this allows researchers to analyze the experiences of this group through their respective narratives and addresses the need for supportive spaces despite the oppression that their racial and gender identities often cause them to face (Collins, 2000).

Methodology

Participants

The participants consisted of ten Black women athletic administrators (see Table 1). Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The criterion was: (a) identify as a Black woman, (b) be employed at a NCAA DI member institution, and (c) have experiences as an athletic administrator as defined through Myles' (2005), that is, someone holding positions within college athletic departments that can involve leadership, human resource management, financing, fundraising, media relations, academics, compliance, ticketing, marketing, donor relations, and facility management responsibilities. For the sake of this study, those who work in the aforementioned areas and hold the title of Assistant AD, Associate AD, Deputy AD, Senior Woman Administrator (SWA), and/or the equivalent of these titles were included within this study as these positions work closely with ADs and are pipelines to the AD rank (Lapchick, 2022). Snowball sampling was used to gather participants.

Data Collection

Two rounds of data collection were used. First, a background questionnaire was distributed to participants to collect demographic information (see Table 1) and assist with building rapport. Ensuring anonymity of the participants was imperative for the research team. Thus, participants were given a pseudonym, which was used throughout the research process. Second, qualitative semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide researchers with flexibility and structure (Patton, 2002). The interviews took place virtually through the use of video calls and lasted from 1-2 hours. Members of the research team took observation notes and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) - primarily due to the lead researchers' proximity to the research topic and ability to provide in-depth analysis of the participant responses through their shared identities (Braun & Clark, 2019). RTA places a heightened emphasis on researcher positionality and role of reflexivity within the data analysis process (Braun & Clark, 2019). Going further,

Table 1
Participants' Background Information

| Name | Marital Status | Children | Current Title | Total Years in College Athletics | Current Institution Type | Previous Institution(s) Type |
|----------|-----------------------|----------|---|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Laurn | Never married | No | Associate Athletic of Internal Operations/SWA | 7 | PWI | HBCU |
| Jill | Never married | No | Associate AD/Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer | 10 | PWI | PWI |
| Mary | Married | No | Assistant Vice Chancellor Deputy AD | 27 | PWI | PWI, HBCU |
| Monica | Never married | No | Associate AD for Administration | 10 | PWI | PWI |
| Brandy | Never married | No | Associate AD for Compliance | 8 | PWI | PWI, Conference Office, National Office |
| Ari | Never married | No | Senior Associate AD/SWA | 10 | PWI | PWI |
| Anita | Married | Yes | Deputy AD for Internal Affairs | 21 | PWI | PWI, HBCU |
| Erykah | Divorced or separated | Yes | Athletics Chief Operating Officer | 20 | PWI | PWI, HBCU, MSI/HIS |
| Jennifer | Married | No | Senior Associate AD Administration/Chief Diversity Officer | 24 | PWI | PWI, HBCU |
| Whitney | Never married | No | Executive Senior Associate AD/SWA | 17 | MSI/HSL | PWI, Conference Office, National Office |

Note. PWI= Predominantly White Institution; HBCU= Historically Black College or University; MSI/HSL=Minority Serving Institution/Hispanic Serving Institution

as explained by Braun and Clark (2006), RTA allows the development of codes and themes without the expectation for repetition of key words or phrases by emphasizing the researchers' ability to analyze and conceptualize the data. When reviewing the scope, purpose, and conceptual framework for this study - the RTA approach serves as the ideal analytic tool.

The RTA process consists of six unique phases: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, and the final write-up (Braun & Clark, 2006). To gain *familiarization* with the data, the lead researcher transcribed the participant responses and gathered data from background questionnaires and website biographies. Next, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcribed interviews as a form of member checking to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition the lead researcher leveraged their identities and experiences as a Black woman within college sports to take notes of patterns and key language. Building upon the familiarization phase, the remaining researchers reviewed the data and gained knowledge within the theoretical and conceptual frames to ensure accurate alignment prior to further analysis.

Next, the researchers implemented the *initial coding* and *initial theme generation* by grouping data by similarity through language used, then further analysis by exploring meaning and context - resulting in the early development of themes. To further *review and develop themes* and establish intercoder reliability, the researchers first reviewed and consolidated the early themes through individual-then-group discussion. To *refine and define themes*, the researchers selected core excerpts from the participant responses and leaned heavily on the anti-deficit framing to ensure the themes and definitions accurately met the goals of the study. The current manuscript serves as the *final write-up* for the RTA process.

Positionality

Milner (2007) contended that, "Researchers, in particular, are challenged to work through dangers and to reconsider their own and others' racialized and cultural positionality in conducting research" (p. 397). Within qualitative research, it is common for researchers to share similarities and be a part of the social group that is being investigated (Moore, 2012). This is true for the current study as the first author has an insider's perspective as a Black woman, former college athlete and who was serving as an athletic administrator at the Division I level. Multiple steps were taken to ensure the researcher's biases were minimized throughout the process. That said, this in-group membership helped build rapport with participants and appeared to be advantageous. Additionally, the other authors served primarily in an advisory position throughout this process. To note, each of the authors provided additional insights with integrating the anti-deficit framing throughout the analysis and the development and explanation of the themes. The combination of in-group membership and scholarly expertise assisted in accurately understanding, analyzing, and presenting the narratives within this manuscript.

Findings

Data analysis yielded five emergent themes that highlight the unique experiences and approaches used by Black women in college sport leadership. Table 2 provides the definitions developed for the emergent themes while highlighting similarities within the participant responses. Through the RTA approach, a key component of the theme development, refining, and write-up is that each theme accurately responds to both research questions. In detail, the themes directly respond to RQ2, while the analysis, supplemental quotes, and further discourse within this section directly responds to RQ1. As the themes were developed, the researchers found it necessary to connect each theme to either an old adage within the Black community or to a cultural artifact that has become a component of the Black lexicon.

Table 2.
Definitions of Emergent Themes

| Themes | Definitions |
|------------------------|---|
| Gotta Be Twice as Good | The perceived need or expectation to have exceedingly high credentials (education, experience, etc.) than their non-Black women peers within the field; this element is often communicated by non-Black women peers |
| All Eyez on Me | The additional professional, personal, and social expectation to serve as a role model or agent of representation due to the identity of being a Black woman in a white and male dominated field |
| It Takes a Village | The diverse and all-encompassing network of supporters ranging from colleagues, friends & family, and professionals in other sectors/industries |
| Staying Locked In | An internal guidance system implemented to address 1) the tumultuous nature of college athletics and 2) the racialized and gendered experiences of being a Black woman working within college athletics; this system centers on faith, mental fortitude, and self-empowerment |
| Ain't No Half-Steppin | A form of professional and personal operation that emphasizes intrinsic intentionality, strategy, and professional acumen to ensure ideal outcomes across all fronts |

Gotta Be Twice as Good

Gotta Be Twice as Good stems from the common phrase, ‘you gotta be twice as good to get half as much.’ This phrase initially highlighted the perceived need to excel in professional acumen, academic credentials, and practical experiences - largely due to the racialized and gendered barriers Black women faced in society. However, through deeper analysis and reflection, this theme reclaimed the first half of the saying and presented it as a badge of honor. The participants highlighted their desire

to earn various credentials and professional experiences as a way to break through racialized and gendered barriers and claim their spaces within college sport leadership. To note, Jennifer, who was born and raised in the rural South, spoke about how she was socialized to think about her intersecting identities as a Black woman. These lessons informed how she moved personally but also her understanding of the inherent challenges present for Black women professionally. From a young age her family preached the value of education in opening up opportunities and ensuring credibility. But for Jennifer, this wasn't enough. "You can't just walk into the profession, you have to prove yourself" she said. For Jennifer, this meant establishing a niche as she spoke of her track record revamping sport programs that had been plagued by poor academic metrics and the impact of this success on her career:

I had to prove that I could get [school name removed] football team off of academic probation and we have a good APR. I was known for being someone who could get your football team straight from an APR standpoint.

Jennifer further asserts that (in comparison to her peers) her professional performance held a considerable role in her being validated as a leader, whereas contemporaries received inherent credibility due to their title within the organization. "I also had to be known for something and be good at it first technically in the industry, before people could see me also as a credible leader" Jennifer expressed. Echoing similar sentiments, Whitney signals the perceived need of professional experiences to gain credibility and be seen as reliable:

When you look at just my career in a snapshot, what you're going to see is that I really, I try to coin myself as a 360 administrator, the person who knows what it's like to be on campus, in a conference office, and in the national office.

For Whitney, this need to go above and beyond stemmed from first-hand experience and witnessing incidents where women of color were not appreciated for who they are or the skills they possess. "As I got into my career, I felt like there were instances where I may not have been given opportunities because either I was young, or I was female or I was Black or all the above," she mentioned. Therefore, establishing a niche helped to counteract this reality.

Participants established that not only are they qualified for the positions in which they currently hold/are pursuing but they are highly educated as well. As evidenced in Table 1, all of participants earned postgraduate degrees – with four of the women having earned a doctorate. In addition to excelling in experience and education, many women within this study spoke to the need to excel in their role and exceed other standards too. Lauryn said, "I think as a Black person working for, you know, predominantly White institutions, you actually got to be above and beyond what would normally meet the requirements to be looked at." Whitney supported this as she argued:

We have to show up, we have to be better, we have to be smarter, we have to be more polished, we have to accomplish more, just to be considered half-way equal to what they may be able to offer. We are expected to be better.

In sum, the need for credibility within this sector of college athletics points to the long-standing exclusionary nature of sport administration – specifically towards Black women. As noted by Keaton (2022), intercollegiate athletics has not been the most receptive towards Black women as professionals. The participant responses mirror the findings highlighted by Keaton. Another essential component within the participant narratives is the tone and overall pride behind their professional and academic achievements. Within the interviews, the participants relished in their accomplishments, largely because they knew barriers were shattered because of their academic and professional prowess. This underlying tone of pride and success is why the theme centered on being twice as good, as opposed to the latter that center the existing problematic culture of college athletics.

All Eyez on Me

Representation is key and visibility is essential. When developing this theme, the researchers wanted to highlight the participants' communicated importance of being a role model and mode of representation. Even more so, the participants exhibited an aura of pride and an empowering braggadocio that came along with this heightened visibility and responsibility. An homage to the 1996 2Pac album, *All Eyez on Me*, this theme centers the embraces 2Pac's response to the immense visibility on him and his career primarily focusing on setting the tone for those around him while also proving his doubters wrong (Evans, 1995). Similarly, even with the challenges present, Whitney recounts the impact of her role model in shaping her path:

The SWA at my alma mater, played a very instrumental role in helping me decide that working in college athletics was something that I would want to do but even with that, I didn't see any women of color working in the space.

Likewise, Brandy recalled a time she was able to serve as a role model for another Black woman who was a part of her staff. In her early years breaking into the field, Brandy recalled feeling stifled and pressured to assimilate to certain standards of professionalism in the workplace. Now as a senior staff member, there is more leverage to push back against this for herself - and also others. Through her presence and conscious choices about fashion and hair (i.e., natural hair, head wrap) she strives to lead by example and curate a space where Black women can feel a sense of belonging.

It is now my responsibility, because I remember what it was like coming up and feeling like I had to look like everybody else in the office...She actually said like, thank you for creating a space where I can be myself and I was like *oh my goodness*.

Mary opened up about how serving as a representative figure in her role can be a complex task, particularly when mediating between groups – “I think it is a responsibility on my part to stand in this space because everybody is not equipped to stand in it.” She shared. With 27 years of tenure, Mary reflected on her triumphs and tribulations as a Black woman working in the white male dominated college sport space - and the wisdom acquired working in PWI settings. While beneficial at times, Mary went on to explain the strain that can take:

Obviously in the last two years with all the social justice awakening, shaking up, there have been times where different people have looked to me to be that person and luckily I am for it. And I feel a bit maternal for our staff. We have about 41 staff of color...I do feel a little bit like 'Get behind me I got this!'

It is worth noting that participants within this study not only served as role models and representatives for other colleagues within the industry, but for their athletes too. For example, Monica noted, "so knowing I'm having an opportunity to start to sit at tables where I can speak up, keeping those student-athletes in mind is what keeps me going." Specifically, she explained that this advocacy is increasingly important for student-athletes from marginalized communities and educating colleagues on the importance of meaningful diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Lauryn compared how representation may look differently at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) versus Historically White Colleges and Universities (HWCU). "Being at a HBCU and being a Black woman and you [get to] see, you know the potential of different people in different roles on that campus of what you could be.". Conversely, when speaking about her role at an HWCU, Lauryn mentioned, "because it's like [students at PWIs] don't see that [Black professionals in leadership positions] all day long versus like [HBCU students who] see a ton of Black people...so I think it's more impactful there."

As communicated by the participants, their increased visibility played a pivotal role across multiple fronts. The increased visibility amplified their efforts within positively impacting the culture and operations of their spaces for future Black women and other historically excluded communities. Going further, the concept of other-mothering (Collins, 2022), is readily evident in the participants' desire to work beyond their position and serve role models for Black women students and college athletes on their respective campuses.

It Takes a Village

As explained by Peay (2020), *It Takes a Village* is an old adage that has been established in the black community as a message for deeper support and community involvement to help achieve goals. The concept of having a village was key for the participants to achieve success and gain support as they matriculated throughout their careers. Jill, with whom community was paramount, advised others to "find your tribe." Specifically, she mentioned:

You know, I've talked about community, and the importance of that. For me, early on my community involved a lot of men. But in being in a male-dominated field, the boys are the ones I still dap it up with, and in some instances are going to be the power brokers, that's shifting a little bit...but being able to find, establish, grow, sustain that community over time is really important.

Meanwhile, Erykah contended that, "You can't do it alone. You got to find your network. You got to find your people, your tribe. You got to find your executive staff; your team that's going to help keep you all the way together."

Emanating from this village, mentorship was mentioned by several of the participants as a game changer for helping spark and develop successful careers within college athletics. Jill vividly recalled women who made a difference early in her career.

All of these really strong women who I've met throughout my tenure they poured into me early on and it's given me an opportunity to pay it forward... and all of that is so key to how I survive, how I continue to thrive in this field...I'm very much a product of the women who have poured into me.

But more importantly, the Black women who saw something in me early on.

Distinctly different, Whitney touched on how sponsorship has benefitted her career and allowed her to advance within the industry. According to Randel and colleagues (2021), sponsorship is a component of mentorship that involves the intentional exposure of the mentee/sponsee to networks and professional opportunities. "Every single job that I've held, I did not blindly apply for. Someone had advocated for me and that someone was someone that did not look like me." Whitney mentioned. Anita also provided insight on this – particularly the community within professional organizations like Women Leaders in College Sport (WLCS) and Minority Opportunities Athletic Association (MOAA). "That helped me create networks and relationships that can get me to where I am and people can, they know who [Anita] is, and they can speak for me in that room and recommend me for different things." she shared.

The experiences of the participants truly highlight the impact and importance of a village. The communal support from those within and outside their professional spaces were key in offering a sounding board, professional guidance, and general interpersonal support within their respective endeavors. While the white male centeredness of college athletics administration presents challenges, the impact of those challenges are greatly diminished due to the work of the participants' respective villages. Going further, the availability and ease of access to a village through professional networks, industry initiatives, campus communities, and Black Greek letter Organizations (BGLOs) illuminates a pathway for success for current and future Black women within college athletics administration.

Staying Locked In

In order to *Stay Locked In*, participants alluded to faith, mental fortitude, and empowerment as tools to navigate highs and lows of college athletics. For instance, when assuming her role as the first Black person to hold a senior position within her institution, Anita said she had to rely on her faith: "I literally had to run the show and had never been at [this level of an institution] before. I'm like, what am I doing but Lord, Ima faith it till I make it."

Additionally, several of the participants celebrated the mental fortitude developed from life and career experiences. For instance, Jennifer spoke about how she is now able to encourage her student-athletes – "I tell our student athletes all the time, it's not how you start. It's how you finish and you can be disciplined enough to get to where you need to be, regardless of what the circumstances present." Mary's

description of her determined nature can be attributed to the desire to prove people wrong from an early age:

I feel like the experiences I had growing up...being told by my parents that I couldn't do certain things because I was a girl have fueled me my whole life... People are not going to tell me what I can't do.

This inexorable attitude was common amongst other participants too. Such as Whitney who declared, "...I can definitely think through the course of my career where being a woman of color has not always been accepted or appreciated. But I don't let it stop me."

By empowering themselves and others, participants were able to overcome challenges that are common for women broadly and Black women in college sport and beyond. For instance, Anita spoke to her efforts to empower other women within the industry:

As women, we don't always get the credit that we deserve. And I think that's why you see me on social media as much as you do. Now granted, I'm a former SID so I love telling other people's stories, but I love highlighting women and highlighting Black women and the work that we're doing because we don't do it enough for each other. So if I can be the one voice that puts it out there then that's what I'm going to do.

Furthermore, she added, "When you're having bad days, recognize that we have a responsibility particularly as Black women to help each other out." For Jill, empowerment involved a different approach. Specifically, she expounded on the important of self-empowerment:

I think far too often as women, and then far too often as Black women, we are conditioned to like, minimize our light for others, or over accommodate, autocorrect for somebody else - because they don't know how to handle us. It's not a 'me' problem. And I hate to see us in this, I'm also probably talking to myself in this instance, to like dimming my light because it's shining in somebody else's life. They need to put sunglasses on.

Staying Locked In held an integral role for the participants as they navigate their personal and professional paths. Whether presented as faith, mental fortitude, or empowerment – each of these elements speak to processes that amplify the effects of the aforementioned themes.

Ain't No Half-Steppin'

Much like the 1988 golden age hip-hop classic, *Ain't no Half-Steppin'*, the participants navigated their professional and personal lives with a clear and concerted effort to operate at maximum capacity. Throughout their narratives, the participants spoke to personally and professionally navigating with strategic intentionality and leveraging opportunities as it related to self-care, professional opportunities, and expanding professional networks.

The necessity and intentionality of self-care was evident in Erykah and Whitney's narratives. While Erykah highlighted the importance of devotionals, meditations, and inspirational readings to combat stress and anxiety stemming from their

work environment; Whitney explained how she works to prevent burnout and advocates for others to find their means of remaining centered through flexibility and self-prioritization. Both participants understood the importance of using self-care as a way to persist and perform within their respective roles.

Building on this, Erykah spoke to her network diversification strategies. Rooted in confidence, consistency, and authenticity her approach focuses on cultivating meaningful relationships with leaders and administrators at different institutions. Similarly, Whitney argued, that seeking out opportunities to connect with people outside of your circle (i.e., different disciplines, divisions, associations) can be beneficial – personally and professionally. As highlighted within existing scholarship (Burton et al., 2009; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008) college sport is still a ‘male dominated industry.’ In turn, Anita advised:

“You have to have people that are able to speak for you when you’re not in that room. And sometimes it’s going to be people that don’t look like you and I don’t mean just in terms of race, but also in gender.”

This speaks directly to the importance of professional allyship that extends into the broader social sphere. Colleagues who can serve as power brokers and challenge existing structures and norms are essential to creating safe and equitable spaces for Black women within sport.

Participants provided countless examples of strategic work-related decisions that have helped them persist and find success working in college athletics; Like Ari, who noted the importance of critically assessing the organization one is pursuing – particularly operations and workplace culture. Alignment of values and ability to be oneself is not always taken for granted, and therefore, something Ari felt Black women should be cognizant of. Jennifer provided a slightly different, but equally important strategy:

So I will say it is possibly better for folks in our industry to rock the boat but not fallout...In my opinion, you can be radical about this thing of race and be in this profession. But you have to be tempered with it from the standpoint of understanding your surroundings in a way where you know how much you can push.

Several of the participants made reference to how they leverage opportunities by utilizing national organizations, taking on tasks outside of their expertise, and maximizing opportunities when presented. For Jill, this began before she actually worked in college athletics. “It comes from just being my authentic self, being an active participant in the world around me, where that opened up so many doors for me that I didn’t even know.” She explained. For Jill, participating in WLCS and Women’s Leaders Symposium as a college athlete helped her get connected within athletics administration at her institution and beyond.

Other participants recalled times when they took on tasks that were not a part of their sole duties as a means to grow and advance within the industry. For instance, Monica talked about a time in graduate school where she enrolled in a class taught by the AD and utilized this opportunity to highlight her professional competencies to an industry leader who would eventually become a considerable point of contact in her career.

In sum, *Ain't No Half-Steppin'* is a broad and complex theme that the participants encourage future professionals to implement early and often in their career. The emphasis on intentionality and concerted effort assists with persisting and overcoming the inherent challenges of working with a dynamic professional field. When considering the importance of avoiding burnout, professional development, and expanding professional networks - integrating a lifestyle devoid of half-steppin' is essential.

Discussion

As displayed throughout the manuscript, maintaining the anti-deficit and liberatory framing of the discussion is paramount. In alignment with these guiding frames, the central discussion highlights a foundation of liberation and uplift that celebrates the progression, contributions, and experiences of Black women within college sport leadership. The findings from this study support the literature related to structural intersectionality (Melton & Bryant, 2017), which considers the ways in which marginalized individuals are impacted by the meeting of certain power structures and social categorizations. This serves as a barrier for many Black women who attempt to enter and advance within the industry, as the overwhelmingly majority of power holders within athletics are not typically within the same social categories as these women (Cunningham et al., 2019). While the aforementioned scholarship notes the inequity of power and representation within college sport leadership this study works to expand this perspective.

The anti-deficit framing directly challenges long-held scholarly perspectives regarding historically excluded communities. With attention to political intersectionality - as presented by Crenshaw (2013) and contextualized within sport by Melton and Bryant (2017) - predominant perspectives focus on the domineering power of socially dominant and exploitative groups on the operation and navigation of historically excluded communities. The findings challenge this approach being that the participants shared how they proudly and gladly embrace and advocate for not only other Black women, but other individuals with whom they shared identities. Through advocating with and for these communities, participants offer a fresh perspective on how political intersectionality is experienced and addressed.

In alignment with anti-deficit framing, Black Feminist Thought transfers the focus from external, oppressive factors to Black women and their self-determination (Collins, 2000). Several findings provided support of the existing literature relative to Black Feminist Thought and its uses in the sport/athletics realm. Collins' (1986) powerful image of Black women's 'outsider within' status was discussed. Based on the responses from a number of participants, it appears this reality still exists for many Black women within college athletics. For instance, Whitney recalled a time when she was referred to as "girl" while working in a new position. Despite her success that allowed her to step into this particular role, she was still viewed as an outsider. To directly challenge existing racialized and gendered dynamics within the department, Whitney shifted her perspective and considered the role and example that she may set for other student-athletes and colleagues who may have shared similar experiences.

Another concept of this relates to Black women's ethic of caring, or their nature of nurturing. Stemming from the relationship between enslaved African American women who assisted other mothers in caring for their children, Collins' (2000) conceptualization of othermothering was evident in the findings. According to Collins (1986), "Nurturing children in the Black extended family networks stimulated a more generalized ethic of caring and personal accountability among African American women who often feel accountable to all the Black community's children." (p. 129). Within the context of higher education, scholars highlight the ways in which Black educators go above and beyond the call of duty to provide holistic care for students - in regard to their academic needs and more (Case, 1997; Flowers et al., 2015). Furthermore, this was also apparent amongst participants' narratives and gives the impression that this phenomenon also manifests in college athletics. The themes *It Takes a Village* and *All Eyez on Me* supports this area of the literature as each spoke to the ways they have expressed care to those within and outside of their respective organizations. For many, this was a labor of love - ensuring they were intentional about assisting and advocating for others. To note, Erykah proudly shared that although she was the first Black woman to reach a particular leadership role, she would ensure that she was not the last. In another example, Brandy expressed the joy she feels being there and serving as a good role model for one of her Black female staff members. Although two different examples, the underlying message remains clear - (while not without emotional labor) the Black women within this study choose to care for and contribute to the wellbeing of others with joy and a sense of urgency.

An additional area of Black Feminist Thought involves Black women's internal empowerment (i.e., self-definition) rather than from external powers and social institutions (Armstrong, 2007). Guiterrez's (1990) definition of empowerment involves: (a) increasing self-efficacy, (b) developing group consciousness, (c) reducing self-blame, and (d) assuming personal responsibility for change. From the findings that emerged, each of the participants show elements of empowerment. Through various processes, these women rejected the norms of college athletics and created realities for themselves and others. This was apparent in their intentionality and themes *Staying Locked In* and *Ain't No Half-Steppin'*. These aspects were especially vital in the ability to recognize and adapt to workplace barriers and sustain the energy to address them - serving as a catalyst to incite change and make an impact.

College athletics involves "good decisions, tough decisions, and empowering people and teams." said Erykah. For Black women, this provides an opportunity to shape and impact other colleagues and college athletes. Jill said her desire for others to feel valued and seen stems from her not always feeling valued and seen as a Black woman in America. This intentional act of resistance and choice to provide better experiences for others is the essence of empowerment and closely supports Collins (1990) assertion that "[by] making the community stronger, African-American women become empowered, and that same community can serve as a source of support when Black women encounter race, gender, and class oppression" (p. 555). By incorporating this mindset, Black women continue to challenge systems of oppression both in and out of college athletics. While much of the findings and the

nature of empowerment can be considered positive, it is important not to dismiss the emotional labor that many of the women in this study must employ to exist and advance within college athletics. Thus, we must be mindful of the burden that many Black women carry.

Implications for Research and Practice

As a response to Cunningham et al. (2019) and McDowell & Carter-Francique's (2017) requests, this study sought to consider the support and positive experiences of Black women in athletics through an intersectional, anti-deficit, and liberatory lens. One direction for future research is to focus on additional identities for this group such as age, sexual orientation, relationship status, and social class status. Several of the participants made reference to a number of these areas. By concentrating on identities in addition to race and gender, researchers may be able to better understand the holistic identity and experiences of Black women in DI college athletics administration. Next, over half of the participants within this study are members of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO), commonly referred to as the Divine Nine. Throughout the data collection, several of the women made mention of how their sororal connections helped as they navigated college athletics. Future research should focus on Black women in athletics administration and investigate how they may utilize their respective BGLOs as a professional and personal resource throughout their careers. As noted by Ross (2000), the Divine Nine has a longstanding history of dismantling barriers and serving as agents of change for the Black community – in addition to other historically excluded communities.

Another way forward is to continue to draw from the anti-deficit approach, which allows researchers to consider the positive influences that lead to success, rather than focusing solely on negative factors (Howe, 2020). As proposed by Cooper and colleagues (2017), incorporating an anti-deficit lens while exploring the experiences and positions of Black women in college athletics could “identify and create effective holistic supports for this subgroup and more broadly demonstrate a stronger commitment to equity in education and sport” (p. 131). Future research should continue exploring the experiences of Black women in athletics administration from an anti-deficit perspective as a way to disrupt hegemonic systems and ultimately shift the culpability from the victims to the oppressive structures, policies, and practices (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 119).

Regarding practical application, it is our hope that these findings will serve as a framework and navigational resource for Black women and others as they seek entry and advancement opportunities within the industry. Additionally, employers or those in positions of power, should also use this as an informal guide on ways to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) efforts as they work to recruit and/or retain Black women and other marginalized groups. As evident from the findings, the participants shared invaluable examples of next steps and considerations that can be implemented at the individual level.

Additionally, this work provides insights that can be used at the organizational level. For example, employers should consider both explicit and implicit practices

that shape the experiences of employees. Several of the participants credited their involvement with national groups and professional development programming as ways in which they established credibility, expanded their networks, and found communities of support. Institutions should consider ways to financially and structurally support individuals within their organizations by providing them with opportunities to engage with groups such as the NCAA, National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) and subgroups such as MOAA and WLCS. Employers should also consider local and institutional groups that they can connect their employees with to gain vital professional development (i.e., local leadership teams and institutional fellows' programs).

In addition to assessing their current practices, those who possess the decision-making powers within athletics can make intentional efforts to organically expand and diversify their networks to include individuals outside of their normal social groups. This could happen by agreeing to serve as mentors, joining professional organizations outside of the generally utilized groups, or simply engaging with a member within the athletic department that they normally would not. If power holders continue to engage with only those who possess similar identities and social statuses as them, it will make DEIB efforts purposeless.

Conclusion

Overall, this study offers a meaningful contribution to the existing literature. By centering attention to the voices of these women while utilizing an anti-deficit approach – this work extends scholarship and provides a better understanding for the challenges present but also celebrates the success stories and navigational strategies that have helped Black women persist and sustain fruitful careers in college athletic spaces. The hope is that these findings, as well as the recommended implications for research and practice, will serve as a blueprint for Black women in athletics - and also other underrepresented groups - as they seek entry and advancement within college athletics. Furthermore, employers and power holders within athletic departments and organizations can utilize these findings as a tool to assist with improving the recruitment and retention efforts of Black women in college athletics.

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