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“Feelings That Others Won’t Necessarily Have”: Experiences of Black Athletic Administrators Navigating the Collegiate Athletic Setting

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The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Black senior-level athletic administrators within the context of Division I athletic departments. Within this qualitative study, we had a sample consisting of 13 Black identifying individuals in high ranking positions within athletic departments at Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions. During this study, data collection included interviews, document analysis, and field notes. We highlight emergent themes from our data analysis, including Black administrators experiencing feelings of being an outsider to carrying the responsibility of being the Black voice. We conclude the study by offering recommendations for athletic departments to improve their environments, which will result in improved experiences for Black administrators.

Keywords: Critical race theory, college athletics, diversity, experiences, athletic directors

The annual report card from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) gave Division I - Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions a grade of “C+” for racial hiring and an “F” for gender hiring for athletic director positions during the 2018 season (Lapchick et al., 2019). This grade indicates that White males continue to dominate the highest levels of college sport. Considering the prolonged underrepresentation of Black athletic directors and administrators, utilizing a critical lens may help create more substantive progress addressing the dearth of Black administrators. This research needs to focus on predominantly White institutions (PWI’s) who compete within the FBS, which is widely considered the pinnacle of college football (Roy et al., 2008). These institutions often operate by fostering an environment based on White hegemonic practices and institutional racism, which perpetuates this issue by insinuating the stereotypes of Whites being “natural leaders” while persons of Color are considered “others” (Cunningham, 2012).

Black athletic administrators are leaders within businesses (athletic departments); however, the lack of representation from racially-similar individuals as well as culturally accepting colleagues creates a problematic workplace environment. Livers and Caver (2003) utilized the word *miasma* to describe the state of unease Black people experience within the workplace as they carry extra burdens. These scholars highlighted the term as encompassing all of the unique dynamics that impact the everyday experience of Black workers operating in environments dominated by White males (Livers & Caver, 2003). The White-dominated operation of collegiate athletics is no exception to this phenomenon; and, athletic departments prove to be reluctant to become more diverse (Lapchick et al., 2019). Black leaders are found to encounter situations that are both challenging and unexpected, requiring them to place increased effort into learning to navigate the system (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Black administrators and athletic directors may be working in an unhealthy environment, which forces them to alter their identity because they feel the need to fit in with a predominantly White athletic department (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009). Additionally, as Livers and Caver (2003) noted, *miasma* impacts Black workers in three significant ways: 1) it reduces their trust in others, 2) it fosters the belief that they must work twice as hard as others, and 3) it means that they can never let down their guard. Therefore, operating within these athletic departments can negatively impact Black athletic administrators in multiple respects.

With the identification of these problems, it is essential to hear the perspectives of Black administrators in order to understand their experiences while exposing inequities that exist. Thus, the purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences of Black athletic administrators at PWIs through a critical lens. We build off existing literature to understand further the experiences of Black athletic administrators by centralizing race. This study answers the general question: What are the experiences of Black senior-level administrators operating within White-dominated environments?

Review of Literature

Networks

Black athletic administrators may be placed at a disadvantage in their networks when compared to their peers. The networks of Black professionals contain more heterophily, or connections with members of different races, than their White counterparts (Ibarra, 1995). Black coaches and administrators in athletics have frequently been members of the “out-group,” excluded from the “in-group” consisting of Whites, which has led to a lack of social capital (Kelly et al., 2015). This is consistent with previous findings which illustrate that Black professionals, especially Black women, are required to more frequently partake in biculturalism, which is the formation of relationships with members of their race, primarily for social support, and members of the dominant culture for the sake of obtaining job-related resources (Bell, 1990). Minority employees generally have less access to network connections, which can be utilized to help leverage them into a leadership position (Khattab et al., 2020).

Building strong networks is essential since employee commitment to an organization or job is likely derived from their commitment to workgroups, or networks, and that employee network groups can be useful with the retention of managerial-level minority employees (Friedman & Holtom, 2002). More contemporary research (Olsen & Martins, 2016) highlights the rapid growth in minority Employee Professional Network (EPN) groups in business-professional settings, which are created to establish diverse and inclusive environments for employees who are members of any racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation minority group (Segal, 2013). These EPNs assist in creating work environments that are more inclusive and supportive of diversity, which helps the organization remain competitive in the eyes of many stakeholders in the marketplace (Gutiérrez & Saint Clair, 2018).

This variance in the formation of homo- and heterophilous relationships amongst different racial groups also explains the formation of the “old boys’ network” and mobility issues. The old boys’ network refers to the informal networks created by society, which typically benefit high-status White men as they are provided rich and valuable connections to individuals capable of landing them a high-profile opportunity (McDonald, 2011). The homologous reproduction of White men is an indicator of an exclusionary network (Walker & Bopp, 2011; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), which results in access discrimination. This form of discrimination occurs through the process of filling a vacant position. Upholding the prominence of the old boys’ network, access discrimination in athletics leads to an underrepresentation of Black coaches and administrators (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Fink et al., 2001). This access discrimination is the result of institutional practices which in effect maintain a caste system, where players of Color are deemed good enough to play but are not good enough to coach (Agyemang & Delorme, 2010) or in this instance, serve as administrators in an institution’s athletic department.

Black administrators are less likely to be a member of critical networks and in-group than White administrators (Lin, 2001). Because of the lack of access to in-groups and limited mobility, these administrators have disadvantages when trying to position themselves into managerial positions (Cappelli, 2008; Smith, 2005). There are two critical issues related to this lack of access to the in-group, the first being that minority coaches and administrators are likely to become discouraged and leave the profession because of the lack of social mobility (Coakley, 2009) and the second being that Black coaches and administrators are statistically less likely to

achieve one of these premier positions (Day & McDonald, 2010; Mirabito, 2012), which leads to much more pressure and stress to succeed and be perfect. Adding to this pressure is the fact that athletic departments resemble extremely bureaucratic organizations, where having strong relationships may help maneuver people through the political processes of obtaining a position or engaging in work-related projects (Carbado & Gulati, 2009). In other words, Black administrators may be placed in situations where they perceive that their network needs to be amended so that they build relationships with the “right” superiors in order to place themselves in a position where they can be promoted to an influential, senior-level position (Carbado & Gulati, 2009).

Workplace Identity

Two contrasting aspects of cultural identity are behavioral confirmation and self-verification (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009). Behavioral confirmation is the concept that people will act and behave in the manner they are expected to, based on societal stereotypes (Ellemers & Barreto, 2008). Stereotypes and prejudiced behaviors are perpetuated through behavioral confirmation (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009). Self-verification is the opposite effect, where an individual with a minority status will behave in a manner that demonstrates their authentic self-identity and forces the dominant group to accept this identity (Swann, 1987). Examples of self-verification include seeking out members from the same identifying group in off-campus situations, as well as members from a minority group demonstrating different identity cues via hairstyle, clothing, or other identifying features (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009; Swann et al., 2004). Self-verification may be effectively accomplished in work settings which value diversity (McDowell & Cunningham, 2009).

Establishing salience in a work environment may be difficult for Black administrators if they are the token hire in their department, which means they are part of a population that consists of less than 15% of the group’s total when compared to the majority group (Kanter, 1977). Recent literature builds off of the original concepts of tokenism to discuss how organizations work through the philosophy of “two-kenism,” which is the practice of organizations hiring two members of a minoritized group, or enough members to satisfy the descriptive social norms (Chang et al., 2019). This leads to pressure on organizations to hire enough minority employees to match the numbers of their peers and to avoid negative scrutiny (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011). While this is beneficial for increasing the number of employees in a professional organization, it does not consider the environment these employees are immersed in, and whether it is an altruistically welcoming environment. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that even in athletic departments with multiple minority employees, these individuals may still be the victims of microaggressions and other discrimination.

Workplace Culture

The culture of an organization is essential, as work environments led by managers and executives who believe in the benefits of diversity experience high levels of diversity management practice in organizations (Fink et al., 2001). In the case of athletic departments, characteristics of their university and the amount of integration within the university impact the culture of valuing diversity. Singer and Cunningham (2012) found that an athletic department situated within a university that has historically valued diversity is more likely to institute those

same cultures and values within athletics. Scholars in both business and sport industries have highlighted the multiple benefits of diversity (e.g., increased performance and creativity, better problem solving, and enhanced decision-making; Cunningham & Fink, 2006; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Singer & Cunningham, 2012). However, two problems arise when considering diversity in the workplace. One, organizations may be led by managers who view diversity as a liability and simply desire to accommodate legislation (Cunningham, 2009; Fink et al., 2001). Two, organizations that attempt to transition to a culture that values diversity are often met with resistance (Cunningham, 2009; Robbins, 2003). People from the dominant culture resist change because of their prejudice, fear that the status quo is being threatened, and ignorance towards the benefits diversity may bring to an organization (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010). This becomes problematic, as Black workers and administrators who are hired into these two situations are going to have unfavorable and unwelcoming experiences. Organizations should value diversity solely because it is a social responsibility and moral obligation to treat people fairly (Mai-Dalton, 1993), thus pressure must be applied to these institutions to foster a climate of diversity as it will benefit their organization (Hunt et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool for disseminating data. With its centralization of race, CRT provides an appropriate framework for analyzing White-dominated spaces, such as athletic departments. These White-dominated institutions have created and perpetuated the inequity within college athletics, resulting in minuscule changes to that status quo. In critically examining college athletics and the inequities which exist, we utilize five tenets set forth by Delgado and Stefancic (2017). The tenets are (a) racism as ordinary, not aberrational, (b) interest convergence or material determinism, (c) race as a product of social construction, (d) intersectionality and antiessentialism, and (e) unique voice of color.

CRT revolves around the endemic nature of racism in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor, 2006). *Racism as ordinary, not aberrational* highlights the notion that racism is a normal occurrence for People of Color (PoC) living within the U.S. and does not exist as an isolated action (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Instead, it is heavily rooted in society and is rarely acknowledged, making it difficult to address (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This nature of racism exists as a way to advance the interests of Whites, which is the foundation of *interest convergence or material determinism*. This tenet holds that the majority (Whites) will act in their own interests unless an alternative option greatly benefits them (Croom & Marsh, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Interest convergence holds that even if the dominant party acts according to the interests of the marginalized group that it is not done so out of care or altruism; instead, it is done out of self-interest.

Race as a product of social construction emphasizes the lack of biological evidence that corresponds to racial categorizations. Instead, “races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9). Race is a social construction that has been historically used to create and maintain a hierarchical system (Winant, 2000). Regarding social identities, race is one of many unique identities that individuals have and thereby subjected to discrimination. *Intersectionality and antiessentialism* is the acknowledgment that racism exists in addition to other forms of oppression based upon gender, class, and other social identities. Therefore, the experiences of PoC cannot be essentialized into a

monolithic category (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, Crenshaw (1989) attributed intersectionality to the experiences of Black women who not only had to experience racial oppression but had to battle how dominant powers viewed their identities, which often included sexism.

The last tenet is the *unique voice of color*, which values the experiences of PoC. The utilization of experiential knowledge of racialized populations provides a context in which to challenge ahistoricism and to examine society (Tate, 1997). Experiential knowledge often comes in the form of counterstories (Bergerson, 2003), which are used “as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told,” which exposes and challenges dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). This is a method that not only challenges dominant ideologies, but it builds community among marginalized people, provides necessary context, and can empower marginalized people by presenting realities beyond that in which they live (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Utilizing CRT as a framework for this study creates the opportunity to examine intercollegiate athletic departments critically. Singer (2005) emphasized the need to incorporate this method of critical thinking in sport-focused research. Likewise, we argue that this should be the case when examining athletic departments. In particular, Singer et al. (2010) highlighted CRT as a useful analytical tool in studying college athletics by positing that the framework “allows scholars to critically examine and scrutinize those organizations that supposedly operate in cultures that value diversity in efforts to better understand the extent to which they actually do” (Singer et al., 2010, pp. 288–289). We apply CRT similarly as we examine multiple issues concerning Black athletic administrators as they operate in a field that is dominated by White males, which can inherently have an impact on the Black administrator’s experience.

Methodology

In order to examine the experiences of Black senior-level athletic administrators, we engaged in what Merriam and Tisdell (2015) termed a basic qualitative study. Researchers utilizing qualitative methodology are “interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning their attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 24). Therefore, we are interested in the experiences of Black senior-level athletic administrators who work in Division I, FBS collegiate athletic programs and the meaning they give to these experiences. We define senior-level administrators as holding a title such as athletic director, senior associate athletic director, assistant athletic director, or senior woman administrator. Examining a sample across multiple institutions creates ambiguity with position titles; however, the participants in this study held titles with job descriptions that fit into our categorization of senior-level administration.

Data Collection

There are few Black athletic directors at the FBS level (Lapchick et al., 2019); thus, we needed to be able to select the participants for this study. Therefore, we employed a purposeful sampling strategy, which ensures that specific and unique cases are represented (Robinson, 2014). More specifically, as described by Patton (2015), key informants, key knowledgeable, and reputational sampling was used as we identified individuals based on their experience and perceived influence in the industry. To locate our target population, we utilized resources such as

the *Race and Gender Report Card* produced by Lapchick et al. (2019) and online athletic directories to identify potential participants who met our criteria of holding a senior-level athletic administrator title as well as identifying as Black. Initial contact was made with potential participants via email requesting their participation in the study. From there, the targeted population had the opportunity to accept or decline our request. After participants accepted the invitation and preliminary data collection commenced, we utilized a second purposeful sampling strategy, snowball sampling. This sampling method occurs when researchers gain access to additional participants in a study from current participants in the study (Noy, 2008; Patton, 2015). In total, our sample included 13 senior-level administrators (see Table 1). All participants were given the opportunity to select alternate identities (pseudonyms), highlighted in Table 1. Many participants provided pseudonyms; however, in multiple cases, participants asked the researchers to generate pseudonyms, for which we did.

Table 1
Summary of Participants

Participant	Title
Jupiter Luther	Deputy Director of Athletics
Pi Norman	Athletic Director
Wayne Vandross	Deputy Director of Athletics
Craig Lewis	Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director
Q Klein	Athletic Director
Natalie Crews	Assistant Athletic Director
Malcolm Bridges	Executive Senior Associate Athletic Director
Terry Johnson	Senior Associate Athletic Director
Jesse Filmore	Associate Athletic Director
Bishop Gordon	Senior Associate Athletic Director
Ryanne Owens	Senior Associate Athletic Director/SWA
Mary Harden	Senior Associate Athletic Director/SWA
Colin Wiley	Senior Associate Athletic Director

We drew from multiple data sources such as interviews, documents (annual reports), and departmental information found on individual institutions' websites in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data and subsequent analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These documents contributed to our analysis in addition to the one round of semi-structured interviews for each participant. Both in-person and phone interviews were utilized as we were unable to meet with some participants face-to-face, all of which were conducted by the first author. Within this format, a semi-structured approach gave us the flexibility to probe when needed during the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview times varied, ranging from 35 – 90 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants so that transcripts could be

analyzed. During each interview, the first author also took detailed notes to assist with the analysis process. Interview questions followed three broader premises regarding the environment in which these administrators work (e.g., What are your feelings towards your support network within the university?), identity in relation to existing in a White-dominated space (e.g., Explain your position being a Black administrator in a predominantly White environment.), and challenging situations faced on the job (e.g., Describe any instances where you faced racial discrimination.).

Analysis

We utilized coding of interview transcripts and other pertinent documents. Since two researchers contributed to this study, we collaborated to develop a preliminary codebook based on the initial reads of the transcripts. We proceeded to conduct a pilot test of the codebook and accomplished this by having each researcher independently code the first two interviews. Upon completion, we met to analyze the congruency of codes. This matches the six-phase method for collaborative qualitative data analysis as described by Richards and Hemphill (2018). We proceeded to modify the codebook that guided the rest of the data analysis as we continued independent coding of all 13 transcripts. In this process of data analysis, we conducted multiple rounds of coding before discussing findings such as Saldaña (2015) suggests. The initial coding cycle incorporated “In Vivo” coding, which codes data using the words of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2015). This method of coding helps to eliminate some of the researchers’ biases by taking codes directly from the data. At the conclusion of the initial “In Vivo” coding cycle, the transcripts were reviewed again to condense data into more specific categories, known as pattern coding which place the first cycle codes into relating emerging concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). After the second round of coding, data were analyzed for the emergence of major themes.

Positionality

First author. As a Black man with a keen interest in collegiate athletics, I see myself within the various parties influenced by the representation of Black people in this industry. My previous experiences working in college athletics guide my understanding that issues of diversity impact people at every level of involvement within the athletic department. Reflecting upon my experiences within college athletics, I also had the opportunity to acknowledge potential biases and understand how these experiences may influence this research. For example, operating within collegiate athletics as a Black man, I experienced and noticed many racial inequities. I realized that racism was not apparent solely at the individual level; instead, it was a systemic problem related to broader social, political, economic, and cultural injustices. Subsequently, I noticed that the conversations surrounding these problems were limited to those who are directly impacted by these inequities. I see these experiences and understandings of college athletics as a strength for this study as it assisted with conducting interviews and asking important probing questions. Engaging in reflective practices throughout the research process allowed me to understand that although I am racially similar to the participants, we share different experiences that shape our understanding.

Second author. As a White man, I recognize that my educational and professional experiences are not shared experiences with the participants of this study. Because of the privileges I have in most spaces, it is essential to conduct research that focuses on the experiential knowledge that comes from PoC. What I view as “normal” experiences in settings of higher education (PWI’s) will be different from what the participants view as “normal.” Through analysis of the data, I grew to appreciate how much of a burden and hindrance the networks which create such strong in-groups and out-groups can be to the experiences and development of racial minorities. It is important to not take a color-blind approach in addressing this issue, but rather recognize how these hegemonic structures and networks have historically produced unwelcoming environments for our participants where they have a distinct disadvantage in obtaining a high-ranking position. Once they obtain these positions, they also experience unfair assessments and expectations. In order to disrupt these historically impenetrable networks, it will require important stakeholders (regardless of their race) to act with intentionality when making hiring decisions.

Findings and Discussion

Themes within this section highlight the realities of existing as a Black administrator in a predominantly White space, with each theme being represented with a quote from our participants. Overall, our participants emphasized experiences such as existing outside of influential social networks, being placed in jobs with limited upward mobility, and the existence of multiple realities due to their race. The following section examines these themes in further detail.

“We’ve reached for what is so convenient”

This statement from Bishop corresponds to the recurring theme that Black administrators exist outside of influential social networks. Bishop characterized the actions of athletic departments that continue to overlook Black administrators for senior-level positions. A struggle which the administrators discussed is the difficulty they face in disrupting the status quo maintained by athletic departments through the old boys’ network. Bishop explained, “Instead of looking to plunk the apple from the tree that’s a little higher up, we’ve reached for what is so convenient, and this does appear and has always been stated in the past as the old boys’ network.” The administrators alluded to the fact that institutions like to hire based on comfort, which typically means tapping into the old boys’ network. Natalie added, “Things like only hiring people that went to [a certain university], [or] only hiring people that are from around here just breeds more of that. And you don’t get better that way, because that’s not what other places are doing.” Additionally, Craig referenced an interaction he had with a donor about the open athletic director position, in which the donor insisted, “I would rather have someone with our blood.” Despite Craig having over ten years of experience as a high-ranking administrator, he still did not meet the image the donor desired to lead the department. These findings reinforce that many of these PWIs and their athletic departments do not value creating a diverse and inclusive environment, as indicated through the authors’ analysis of the mission statements which lack mentioning diversity.

This supports the notion of miasma from Livers and Caver (2003) as Black administrators, even if they have more merit, face a more difficult path to becoming an athletic

director because they are not a part of the in-group. These individuals can exert extraordinary amounts of time, effort, and resources to becoming an athletic director, but decision-makers are more likely going to hire someone they are comfortable with from their network. It also aligns with the social construction of race, which is used to maintain a hierarchical system that favors the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Natalie discussed this hierarchy at her institution:

And the kind of school that this is [PWI], is the place where that is quite prevalent...our AD left, and they hired someone who doesn't work in athletics...and it's really frustrating when the system is run like that, but none of the student-athletes look like that. So, they are making decisions and deciding on policies and procedures with no input from anybody that actually understands what the impact of that policy or procedure might be... and that's when you have incidents that are insensitive, or inappropriate, or might be racist but you don't know that because they don't talk to anybody. And you don't have anybody in the room that isn't a White man.

Thus, this practice of institutions hiring based on familiarity leaves both Black administrators and Black student-athletes feeling frustrated and uncomfortable.

In order to disrupt the status quo, institutions must begin hiring members from outside of their socially exclusive networks. However, according to extant literature, we understand that creating diverse environments comes with pushback (Cunningham, 2009). For many people in positions of power, they do not understand that increasing diversity involves going against the grain. For example, Craig posited:

They [White administrators] might say, "yeah, I'm down with inclusivity, but I didn't realize that means we're going to have to end up firing these people over here, or we're going to have to get rid of this program." And my question is, "well, what do you think it meant?"

Increasing diversity involves more than simply statements and must accompany the required actions, which will help in making unprecedented decisions. If administrators are not serious about change, those actions are less likely to come to fruition. This reinforces interest convergence, where Whites are acting on their own interests rather than considering the interest and benefits of non-Whites (Croom & Marsh, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, administrators in the athletic departments at PWI's will continue to hire individuals whom they are comfortable with or who are a part of their network, instead of considering the need to have diverse backgrounds, ideas, and opinions represented in their institution. Implementing diversity-related change is influenced by power and politicality, whereby change is created by those who hold power and done so in a way that pleases prominent stakeholders (Cunningham, 2009). The quote from Craig reinforces this notion as those in power remain reluctant to truly value and increase diversity out of fear of upsetting influential stakeholders.

"Most of them ran the academics, compliance, and sometimes the administrative parts"

This quote highlights the overarching theme that Black administrators are placed in jobs with limited upward mobility. In this excerpt, Jesse references the initial opportunities and likely

pathways that Black administrators must take in route to becoming an athletic director. Jesse continued by posing the question “why they are so comfortable allowing this to be the entrance [for Black people] versus other opportunities,” such as development (fundraising) positions? Natalie felt that the practice of hiring Black administrators into these positions was a hindrance and references how they are most likely going to get their start in college athletics by working in academic support positions rather than athletic development positions. Development and fundraising have been identified as critical positions and skillsets for senior-level athletic administrators because of the ability to raise money for the institution as well as interact with those prominent stakeholders, the donors (Hoffman, 2011). Unfortunately, as Natalie emphasized, “Those people in development mostly look just like the donors,” meaning that the development officers were predominantly White. Consistent with the notion of occupational segregation (McDowell et al., 2009), Natalie felt that it was difficult for Black administrators to matriculate into development positions, as they are continuously funneled into other support roles. Within the McDowell et al. (2009) study, there was an understanding from many Black individuals in support roles that their upward mobility was limited as a result of occupying these positions.

Athletic departments that operate from a diversity mindset are more likely going to offer opportunities for Black administrators to grow and develop within the business (Cunningham, 2009; Singer & Cunningham, 2012), especially in critical positions such as development. Unfortunately, as the administrators have indicated throughout these findings, there is still a mix of athletic departments that are not operating from a diversity mindset, which limits their opportunities. The lack of diversity and diversity initiatives likely represents the lack of value they hold with administration and external stakeholders. Likewise, it is not a part of their mission. The lack of action by athletic departments to increase diversity and diversity initiatives, particularly in these critical positions such as development, reinforces the ordinariness of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) within athletic departments where they seek to maintain a hegemonic structure favoring the members of the old boys’ network, while Black administrators are forced into support roles. This can also be interpreted as the athletic department viewing diversity as a liability rather than an opportunity (Cunningham, 2009; Fink et al., 2001).

“Feelings that others won’t necessarily have”

This quote from Craig was reflective of the theme that embodied the multiple realities of Black administrators as a result of existing within a White-dominated space. While each of the quotes provided in this study represents the experiences of Black athletic administrators, we utilized this quote for the title of this article as it best reflected the overall sentiment of the administrators. Craig highlighted the unique position of Black athletic administrators as they face feelings and situations that their White counterparts do not experience. They were often the sole representation regarding race, which could, at times, come as a burden. Also, there were multiple instances of racism and prejudicial practices occurring within their working environment.

Due to the underrepresentation of Black administrators, those in these positions are often viewed as the Black voice. Natalie noted that it was frustrating and infuriating at times as she spoke of an instance where she defended a Black student-athletes who wanted to protest racial injustices. Defending this athlete amid other administrators and coaches, she ended by stating, “And again I was the only Black person in the room.” Aligning with Delgado and Stefancic (2017), Natalie has a unique voice of color where her experiences as a Black woman allow her to

communicate to her non-Black counterparts about issues of which they are unfamiliar. Regardless of the reception of Natalie's words, there is value in her experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). However, this situation emphasizes the additional responsibility placed upon these administrators to educate those lacking racial consciousness and understanding while also advocating for other Black people who are not in the room.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) discussed the tension within CRT from the co-existence of voice of color and anti-essentialism, and this became evident as Malcolm also highlighted circumstances surrounding athlete protests. He explained that "when these things are discussed, then you [Black administrators] are front and center, and your opinion obviously is the opinion of all the Black people on the planet and things like that." Critical race theorists refute claims that a single narrative embodies the entire Black experience as these experiences are shaped by more than their racial identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Singer, 2005). There exist a uniqueness and an opportunity as a Black individual to speak on those things concerning this population; however, their experience could be different from other Black people. Meanwhile, collegiate athletic departments continue engaging in problematic practices by essentializing Black people based on a single story.

In addition to being the unique voice of color within the department, Black athletic administrators also become aware of the atmosphere at their respective institutions. In other words, they understood that they operated within a White-dominated space. This was evident by Bishop expressing, "There is never not a time where I am not cognizant of the fact that I am Black, I always know that." Additionally, Malcolm described being cognizant of his presence around campus due to situations arising because of his race stating, "I'm on guard constantly with how I present myself, even how I dress." Miasma, as referenced in the outset of this manuscript, impacts Black workers in numerous ways, with one coming from the understanding that they can never let down their guard (Livers & Caver, 2003). Within the historical uses of race as a social construct, physical features have been associated with connotations used to place Black people at a lower end of the social hierarchy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Winant, 2000). Therefore, merely existing in this predominantly White environment, causes Bishop and other Black athletic administrators to be cautious of any negative implications that may arise. As Craig discussed, one of these implications comes with "feelings of isolation and loneliness" when "you recognize the times when you are just the only one. Feelings that others won't necessarily have."

Keeping a guard up was a consistent message across the participants; however, existing in these spaces was something these administrators held in high regard. Q explained, "I understand as an African American, I have a different situation, but it's an honor and a privilege." These administrators exhibit self-verification as they placed value in their identity and position as a Black administrator. Most of the administrators noted that their departments valued diversity; however, the racial make-up of those departments did not always align with those sentiments. McDowell and Cunningham (2009) argued that self-verification is more likely to occur in environments that value diversity. As a slight departure from this argument, these administrators appeared to exhibit effective self-verification behaviors within all environments. Along with perceiving these positions as a privilege, holding these positions became important to the participants. Jesse described the responsibility and potential impact of holding his position:

We have been tasked with huge responsibilities within the athletic department as minorities and we have to do a really good job, and it's not only for us to do a really good job, but it's also for others behind us to do a really good job, and what does that look like,

and that looks like ultimately for me I would say I have to do it two times better.

The feeling of having to perform at a higher level to reach similar positions such as their White counterparts is perceived as a reality for Black workers, especially within the sport setting (Champagne, 2017; Livers & Caver, 2003; McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). Therefore, holding the position of a Black administrator is a privilege and simultaneously something that places an extra burden on these individuals as they seek to pave the way for future Black athletic administrators.

Consistent with the theme of feelings that their White counterparts do not experience, Black administrators face racism in varying forms while on the job, whether it comes from interacting with coworkers and colleagues, talking to donors, and even public scrutiny that White administrators do not face. Racism was something that occurred daily, Bishop noted, “You know where it’s certain things like, ‘can I touch your hair.’” Malcolm also recounted a situation where he was told, “oh man, in that meeting you were talking like a football player.” This quote, in conjunction with his earlier note of thinking about the way he dresses, illustrates how colleagues and other university officials perceive him. These occurrences are the product of racism being normal within U.S. society. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argued that while the dominant perception is that racism is dwindling in society holds some truth (as extreme racist actions such as lynching are no longer prominent), racism is, by large, still present in more covert ways such as within laws, policies, and even coded language as noted above.

Not only is social competency lacking, but Black administrators are placed with the burden of proving they belong in situations associated with their position. In discussing being a Black administrator, Colin stated, “You have to answer all of those exploratory questions, but not everybody has to.” Bishop went on to detail frustrating situations that he deals with on his campus, noting, “At different times being in our own venues and I get questioned about who I am.” Despite having an “all-access” badge, he questioned, “I don’t know why sometimes I’m getting stopped.” These situations also extend to interactions with donors and other prominent figures within the athletic structure. Natalie reiterated these frustrations by recounting her experiences. She explained, “It’s me reintroducing myself like we haven’t met ten times, each time... I am the only one that looks like me in this department, and I’ve been here for five years.” Black administrators having to consistently prove that they belong counters the ideology that college athletics is a race-neutral environment void of prejudice and subjectivity. Prejudices and racism, often in the form of microaggressions, are too frequently camouflaged as a mistake by dominant parties whenever Black administrators are denied entry into a facility, addressed as a student-athlete, or even having to reintroduce themselves to other stakeholders continually. As a result of these harmful behaviors by stakeholders of the athletic department, these administrators are forced to validate their presence by displaying credentials or explaining their position(s) to which stakeholders are too often surprised to see them occupying. Thus, Black administrators have the burden of proving that they belong in these positions, whereas White administrators do not carry the same burden. This finding aligns with the work of DiAngelo (2011), which stated, “Because race is constructed as residing in people of color, whites don’t bear the social burden of race” (p. 62). Without this burden, their White counterparts experience “physic freedom.”

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of the present study was to critically examine and highlight the experiences of Black athletic administrators within Division I athletics. This study sought to answer the general question: What are the experiences of Black senior-level administrators operating within White-dominated environments? Through an analysis of the first-hand accounts of the participants in this study, which was developed through the use of CRT, we are able to come to multiple conclusions. First, the institutions and athletic departments which comprise the FBS are still dominated by White males. This is evident from both secondary sources (Lapchick et al., 2019) and through the experiences discussed by the athletic administrators. Because the institutions are still dominated by White males, Black athletic administrators maintain the pressure to be perfect. They recognize that their opportunities are limited and that they are less likely to receive a second chance when compared to their White counterparts. This increased pressure to be perfect creates a unique situation where Black administrators must negotiate how they will navigate the field.

Based on these findings, we implore institutions to both be more intentional in filling central, senior-level positions with Black candidates and that they also include more than one minority administrator on committees or in positions that have a significant presence in decision-making. This will help in having their voice, as well as the voice of Black student-athletes, be heard in making critical decisions. It will also eliminate any fear Black administrators have of enacting change or challenging the status quo. Athletic directors, proven to be champions of diversity, have taken aggressive approaches to ensure that both racial and gender minorities are hired in senior-level positions (Singer & Cunningham, 2018). Through the intentionality of hiring more Black administrators, thus giving them the ability to speak on behalf of change, the underrepresentation of Black administrators in prominent positions has the potential to decrease, which will likely impact the power of the old boys' network. It is important for this network to be disrupted, as institutions have become too comfortable with maintaining these hegemonic in-groups, as noted by the administration in this study. These networks have dramatically impacted the experiences of Black administrators at these institutions. In addition to hiring diverse candidates, athletic departments benefit from self-analyses of their organization and collaborations with external groups to facilitate dialogue regarding diversity (Singer & Cunningham, 2018). Organizational directives, such as mission statements or departmental philosophies, also communicate the intentions to value diversity and create an inclusive environment (Bimper & Harrison, 2017).

Another method of maintaining an inclusive environment that values diversity is by addressing racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Findings revealed that Black administrators experience prejudices and racism from critical stakeholders invested in the institution. The stakeholders who are guilty of exhibiting these prejudices may be internal such as White coaches, administrators, student-athletes, or other members of the institution. External stakeholders, such as prominent athletic donors or members of the surrounding community, are also guilty of exhibiting these prejudices. The racism and microaggressions which occur are often camouflaged as simple mistakes, or covert racism, by the guilty parties. These aggressions play a vital role in whether the administrator feels welcomed in their environment and in validating their presence within the institution. Therefore, it is necessary for staff and members of the athletic department to play a vital role in establishing an inclusive environment that is free of any racial aggressions. Additionally, when discussing discrimination on the basis of race and

gender, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) called for the increase of cultural sensitivity within athletic departments that would allow others to understand the unique experiences of Black women athletic administrators.

The present study also demonstrated that athletic departments generally fail to make diversity and inclusivity a crucial part of their mission statement or value set. While scholars, such as Bernhard (2016), have found that university and athletic department mission statements generally address diversity, when the message of diversity is not conveyed explicitly, it can cause confusion. Therefore, athletic departments need not to only include diversity in their mission statements, but be explicitly clear as they convey their valuing of racial and gender diversity. It is the responsibility of leaders in the athletic department to establish this culture and address any instances of racism which occur while also being intentional with their hiring processes. If key administrators adopt these values, donors may follow suit, and the universal adoption of values of diversity may help eliminate the microaggressions.

Results also confirmed that administrators were either the only representative or one of a few representatives of their race within the athletic department. The participants are placed into vulnerable positions where they may be the token minority within their athletic department, which places them in danger of bearing the burden of representation for their race. This could also be the result of the administrator being the first or only administrator in their field. It places them in an unhealthy situation where they may not feel comfortable expressing their identity and their genuine selves (Rolle et al., 2000). This may inhibit their professional growth if they struggle to adapt to their environment, or if they struggle to develop an adequate network which will help them grow professionally. Combining this finding with previous findings, the authors recommend that athletic departments take the initiative in fostering a much more diverse environment of diversity and inclusion. For example, the two African American athletic directors highlighted in Singer and Cunningham's (2018) study took extra steps to ensure that racial and gender minority administrators had a strong network by creating avenues for mentorship. Creating spaces for support networks for Black administrators both within the institution and externally will help administrators in creating both formal and informal networks for professional development and social purposes.

This article extends the work of McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) as well as Singer and Cunningham (2018), which were two studies that challenged systematic injustice through the voices of Black athletic administrators. Continued research incorporating the experiences of Black athletic administrators will serve as counternarratives to dominant ideology and hegemonic structures prevalent in collegiate athletic settings. The incorporation of critical perspectives, practical implications, and narratives from Black athletic administrators assists in connecting theory to practice in an effort to increase the representation of Black senior-level administrators as well as improve their experiences as they exist in White-dominated spaces.

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