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Underrepresentation of Women in Sports Leadership: Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Race

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Abstract

Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the number of women playing sports has significantly increased; however, the percentage of women in coaching positions has strikingly declined. Before the passage of Title IX, women occupied more than 90% of the coaching positions in women's sports. In 2009, women held 21% of all head coaching positions in intercollegiate sports for both men and women's teams and 43% of the head coaching positions for women's teams (Miller & Flores, 2011). Between 2000 and 2014, 2,080 new head coaching jobs in women's athletics have opened up and one-third have been filled by women with men obtaining the remaining two-thirds (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). It is important to note that these statistics are primarily regarding white women—for black women, coaching opportunities, especially head coaching opportunities, are much more dire. For the women's basketball Division I 2007-2008 season, black women occupied 10.7% of the head coaching positions (Borland & Bruening, 2010). At the assistant coach level, black women compromise 16.1% of the positions while white women hold 47.9%.

Keywords

Sports leadership, race, women, underrepresentation

Disciplines

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Comments

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Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the number of women playing sports has significantly increased; however, the percentage of women in coaching positions has strikingly declined. Before the passage of Title IX, women occupied more than 90% of the coaching positions in women's sports. In 2009, women held 21% of all head coaching positions in intercollegiate sports for both men and women's teams and 43% of the head coaching positions for women's teams (Miller & Flores, 2011). Between 2000 and 2014, 2,080 new head coaching jobs in women's athletics have opened up and one-third have been filled by women with men obtaining the remaining two-thirds (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). It is important to note that these statistics are primarily regarding white women—for black women, coaching opportunities, especially head coaching opportunities, are much more dire. For the women's basketball Division I 2007-2008 season, black women occupied 10.7% of the head coaching positions (Borland & Bruening, 2010). At the assistant coach level, black women compromise 16.1% of the positions while white women hold 47.9%.

Coaching represents an important opportunity for the perception of the sport and its athletes. A good coach can make a great athlete, and the greater the coaching staff of a team, the better the environment for the athletes. Coaching also functions as an extension of the career of a well-rounded athlete. Athletes' first exposure to a coaching career is through their very own coach. Additionally, the coach serves as a role model in the sport and usually for life in general. The female coach is necessary for both female and male athletes, because it normalizes the existence of women in sports and creates more diverse spaces. The complex, dynamic relationship between the athlete and the coach is crucial to the development of an athlete's athletic ability and greater character. Holes in a program's coaching staff not only hurt that program but also hinder the

advancement of their athletes. The underrepresentation of women in coaching positions within all sports is caused by societal perceptions of sports and gender, homologous reproduction theory, and networking and access discrimination; the underrepresentation of black women especially can be explained through social cognitive career theory. This underrepresentation hinders the future athletic success of women and further enforces power hierarchies among men and women.

A primary reason that women are underrepresented in sports leadership is the societal perception of sports as a masculine space. Sports work as a societal institution to "actively construct boys and men to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity," and reproduce certain forms of masculinity as acceptable (Burton, 2014). Because Western society perceives masculinity and femininity as two opposing ways of being, women's existence in the realm of sports is under constant scrutiny. West, Green, Brackenridge, and Woodward (2001) found that female coaches "believed that their suitability as coaches was questioned because of women's imputed lack of physical and mental strength, qualities deemed essential for a coach" (p. 87). One female gymnastics coach described how her ability to provide adequate physical support for her gymnasts when performing difficult moves was questioned by her colleagues; similarly, another female swim coach explained how her "mental strength" was called into question when evaluating her effectiveness as a coach by a male colleague (West et al 2001). For women coaching men's teams especially, there is an underlying, heavily gendered assumption that because women have not competed in the realm of men's sports, they lack the toughness, both mentally and physically, to be a competent coach for a men's team. This perception stems from the ways in which Western society and the media discuss and internalize women's sports. Walker and Bopp (2010) suggest the following:

The media have played a dominant role in marginalizing and trivializing women through

an overemphasis on their physical characteristics, as opposed to their performance, and

through the underrepresentation of women in media outlets in comparison with their male

counterparts. (p. 53)

When women in sports, even at the highest level, are reduced to their manly figure or the attire

they are wearing, their true athletic ability and understanding will never be understood in the

greater society. The media's portrayal of tennis star Serena Williams perfectly exemplifies this

issue. Williams is one of the greatest tennis stars of this century, and yet commentators, sports

magazines, and the like will often comment on her "manly figure" or "Black Panther bodysuit"

rather than her tremendous play of the game. The perception of her body as "manly" alone signifies

that only men can have a muscular body type. We, as a Western society, do not recognize a

muscular build as something that exists within all bodies; therefore, a muscular woman is a

masculine woman and the dynamics of sports and all of its components remains masculine. As

long as the inferior role of women in sports remains dominant in society, women will continue to

be excluded, underrepresented, and discriminated against in men's sports especially and sports

leadership as a whole (Walker & Bopp, 2010). Another major gendered societal perception is

hegemonic masculinity.

As proposed by Whisenant, Pederson, and Obenour (2002), masculine hegemony is the

acceptance that men have rights to authority, and therefore, it is only natural that men are

overrepresented in positions of leadership. In the realm of sports, this principle justifies the current

statistics on sports leadership. In fact, masculine hegemony works to justify the

underrepresentation of women in sports and sports leadership by suggesting that it is the "natural

state of sports" (Walker & Bopp, 2010). The results of hegemonic masculinity can be seen at the

highest level of sports organizations. Whisenant (2008) found that women held less than 15% of the athletic director positions at the interscholastic level. Similar to our perceptions of the female athlete as inferior, the impression of the woman as a non-authoritative figure simply does not allow for women's success in authoritative positions. The lack of women in power can be seen across all realms of Western society, not only in sports. The presence of women at the highest levels of sports organizations is crucial for the advancement of women in sports. Women at elite levels within sports organizations are able to facilitate change like the hiring of more women into the organization. The general composition and power structure of sports organizations can be explained by homologous reproduction theory.

Another causation of the underrepresentation of women in coaching positions involves the homologous reproduction theory. The theory, conceptualized by Kanter (1977, p.48), predicts that, "a dominant group within an organization will strive to carefully guard power and privilege by systematically reproducing themselves in their own image." We see this theory at work in the composition of nearly all men's sports organizations and most women's sports organizations. There are more men in higher positions of power in nearly all sports organizations, and these men tend to hire and promote other men into similar positions of power. Women are generally hired into lower power positions such as assistant coach and/or administrative assistants. Sagas, Cunningham, and Ashley (2006, p. 506) found that, "40.4% of the teams with a male head coach had a male assistant coach," and "63.7% of the teams led by a female head coach had a female assistant coach" across nearly 3,000 NCAA women's basketball, soccer, softball, and volleyball teams. This finding supports homologous reproduction theory, because male head coaches are more likely to hire a woman into a lower power position, the assistant coach, rather than the head coach position. Furthermore, Sagas, Cunningham, and Ashley (2006) suggests the following:

Male head coaches may benefit from having a male athletic director and thus feel no need to reproduce themselves through their assistant coaching staffs. Female head coaches, however, may feel more threatened in that they are the minority in most athletic departments, and thus they reproduce themselves as a strategy to feel safe. (p. 508).

Since 85% of the athletic directors are male, homologous reproduction theory explains why these directors are more likely to hire male head coaches across all sports teams to keep men in power and privilege within sports leadership. Homologous reproduction works to exclude women from the hiring process.

Additionally, homologous reproduction within sports leadership works to create and sustain an old boy's network, or club, in which coaches and athletic directors have a higher tendency to hire individuals who look most like them (Lovett and Lowry, 1994). This principle means that since the dominant group in sports leadership is the white male, other groups of peoples—white women, black men, black women, etc.—have to work much harder to gain opportunities within sports leadership. The old boy's network is especially powerful in the realm of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball. Walker and Bopp (2010, p.56) found that, "most women are unable to establish a network in men's college basketball because the old boys' club is too exclusive and too influential." When job opportunities are available in men's college basketball, athletic directors usually already have an individual—who is a white man like him—in mind for the position; because of this pre-determination, many other qualified individuals are often not thoroughly considered for the position. The old boys' network is particularly troublesome for women, because they face discrimination in sports leadership opportunities that hinder the possibility of a counter old girls' network. Women are already seen outside of sports because of gender stereotypes and perceptions, and the old boys' network works to keep women outside of

sports leadership by not considering women for positions. Walker and Bopp (2010) found the following issue among female coaches:

> It could be two-sided. It could be that they [women's coaches] don't think they're going to get it, so they don't apply. Or it could be that in reality they're not available, because men might make them feel that they don't have the proper experience. But how do you get the experience? Again, it's the chicken and the egg. Si, it becomes a tremendous excuse. They say she's not qualified. Guys don't come out their moms' bellies knowing how to coach; someone has mentor them, teach them, and give them an opportunity. Women need that too. (p. 57)

Women simply lack the opportunity to excel in sports leadership as men have been in the past continue to today. Kara Lawson, a former player for the Sacramento Monarchs of the WNBA, shared her story of coaching discrimination while she was broadcasting with the NBA Kings' regional network. Lawson asked then head coach Rick Adelman if she could come and observe practice to get to know the team better, and she was repeatedly told no because she would "be a distraction to the players" (Jacobs, 2017). Lawson was only 23 at the time and still an active player whose broadcasting career had only just started. She could have had the opportunity to begin learning how to coach, but instead was consistently turned down because she was a woman. This narrative completely contradicts the perception that women simply do not want to coach as University of Connecticut women's basketball head coach Geno Auriemma has said (Jenkins, 2017). The old boys' network works deny women access to opportunities in sports leadership.

Along with networking and access discrimination, women in sports leadership also face treatment discrimination in the form of "denied access to rewards, resources, or opportunities on the job that they legitimately deserve" (Burton, 2014, p.161). Tiell, Dixon, and Lin (2012) found

that women in the Senior Woman Administrator position were denied opportunities to engage in important oversight roles in budgeting and leading men's sports programs which hindered the development of skills essential for the athletic director position. Not only are women excluded from the hiring process and denied access into coaching, they are kept within a lower power position through treatment discrimination that hinders their advancement of necessary skill sets.

Despite all of the discrimination women face in sports, there are women who are hired into sports leadership positions. However, the hiring of more women and other gender equity policies are often implemented to secure organizational funding rather than address inequitable operational processes. Shaw & Frisby (2006, p. 496) found that the adoption of gender equity policies is seen as, "a chore to implement, a funding hoop, a constantly changing imposition from a funding body, or a politically correct way to create positive public relation." Essentially, women are hired into sports organizations as a way to secure more money or to create a public image that supports gender diversity and equity. This trend is further exemplified by the role of the female assistant coach. For men coaching women's teams, the presence of the female head coach can work to make the female athletes more comfortable. A male head coach can use the female assistant coach not only as a colleague but also a way to indirectly relate more to his players. Additionally, a more gender-diverse coaching staff creates the impression—whether true or not—that the head coach is keen to and values gender equity. This impression increases the probability of the female athletes connecting with the head coach and the athletic program. Women experience networking, access, and treatment discrimination and continually maintain lower power position where their presence improves the overall perception of the athletic program. For black women, however, they face a layered type of discrimination where they are not only underrepresented in sports leadership but also often erased from gender analyses of sports.

Black women experience all of the discrimination that white women in sports leadership face, but on top of that they must manage with the perceptions of black women that already exist in Western society. Black women face the double burden of sexism and racism which has worked to keep black women in marginal positions. Alexander (1978) described this double burden as a double jeopardy as a hindrance to black women in gaining access to formal networks such as educational training and informal networks such as social relationships that can enhance career advancement and help black women break through the glass ceiling (Abney, 2000). As described previously, homologous reproduction in sports leadership maintains that the white male majority continues to be the majority through hiring practices and old boys' networks. Black women are even more outside of the old boys' network because of the double burden of racism and sexism. A tenet of critical race theory is that racism is a fundamental part of American society (Wing, 1997); therefore, it is impossible to deny the fact that the same systems that are sexist are racist. This principle means that the discrimination that black women face in sports leadership is layered in both sexism and racism. Borland and Bruening (2010, p. 407) found that, "discrimination, lack of support, and prevalent stereotypes" act as barriers contributing to the underrepresentation of black women in head coaching jobs in Division I women's basketball in the United States. Lack of diversity in the upper levels of athletic department management has been cited as one of the major causations of access discrimination (Borland and Bruening, 2010). Following homologous reproduction theory, this lack of diversity means that only the majority will be replicated throughout the organization. For black women, this means that white men especially and white women will be hired over them even if they are the best candidate. Borland and Bruening (2010) found that some black women in the sports industry believed the head coach hiring process to be a sham in which the goal is not necessarily to hire the best candidate, but to instead hire the most

popular or convenient choice. Because of this lack of diversity in the sports organization staff, there was also a lack of support for the minorities in these organizations. Within the culture of Division I athletic departments, there is little time to convene and collectively think about the development of the department at the administrative level, because all effort and time is devoted to recruiting players, developing said players, and complying with NCAA rules. However, the success and influence of an athletic program cannot be measured by the talent of their players alone. The key to a successful athletic program is connectivity amongst all ranks of the department.

Another major source of underrepresentation of black women in sports leadership is stereotypes. Black women exist as many tropes in Western society including the maternal mammy, the sexually promiscuous jezebel, and the independent strong black women. These tropes influence the ways in which society allows black women to exist. Black women outside of these tropes are excluded further from society, because they do not fit nicely into the boxes they are supposed to go into—they are a threat to the power structures and dynamics of society. In sports leadership, these tropes work to constrict the kinds of black women allowed into athletic organizations and departments. An example of the mammy trope in sports leadership is Coach Bernadette Locke-Mattox, former assistant coach of the University of Kentucky's men's basketball team. Coach Bernie was brought onto the staff by head coach Rick Pitino in the early 1990's. The U of Kentucky's men's basketball team had just been put on probation for violating NCAA recruiting violations. Coach Pitino wanted a coach that would change the image of the team but also was not just a gimmick—he wanted someone who had the potential to be a coach (ESPN, 2015). Coach Bernie was hired as an unpaid volunteer coach in 1990 and helped the program regained its class. Former players and colleagues describe Locke-Mattox's coaching style as demanding, encouraging, and tough making sure to mention how she helped players stay on top of their school

work. Additionally, Coach Bernie helped U of Kentucky with recruiting by connecting with recruits' families, especially the mothers. A majority of NCAA men's basketball have been black men, so Coach Bernie was relatable to black mothers who would have otherwise felt excluded from the recruiting process. Coach Bernie was perceived as the mammy trope by her athletic department. She functioned as a coach but also a mother for the men's basketball team. This occurrence is not inherently a bad thing, but because all women—and especially black women— lack representation in sports leadership, they should not be included only to fulfill a stereotype. Coach Bernie possessed superb coaching skills that were taken advantage of, but she was also brought in to ameliorate the image of U of Kentucky. Additionally, she went from a paid position to an unpaid volunteer position just to get some coaching experience; her presence was so necessary for the program she should not have been unpaid.

Similar to Coach Bernie, Borland and Bruening (2010) found that many black female assistant coaches in Division I women's basketball felt that they were the designated recruiter for the team. Because the majority of Division I women's basketball players were black, these assistant coaches "worried about being seen as 'designated recruiters' to help convince the burgeoning crop of talented Black female basketball players to come to PWI's so their basketball teams have a better chance of winning" (Borland and Bruening, 2010, p. 413). These coaches did not feel as though their true coaching potential was being realized; instead, they were pawns in the game of generating talent—and therefore revenue—for PWI's in which they had little power in the overall athletic department. Additionally, because the majority of talented women's basketball players were black, black women are perceived to be only good basketball players, not basketball coaches. This stereotype follows the general trend of perceiving black athletes as talented but not strategic and/or smart.

The underrepresentation of black women in sports leadership is especially important for sports in which the composition is primarily black women athletes. This is the case for NCAA Division I women's basketball where 10.7% of the head coaches and 16.1% of the assistant coaches were black women while 50.1% of the student-athletes were black women (NCAA, 2009a; NCAA 2009b). Such a disparity in representation does not exist for white women at the same level within the same sport; 53.7% of head coaches and 47.9% of assistant coaches were white women while 42.6% of the student-athletes were white (NCAA, 2009a; NCAA 2009b). This underrepresentation will continually limit the power dynamics of black women in sports leadership following social cognitive career theory. Moran-Miller and Flores (2011, p. 109) state that, "individuals are more likely to consider a particular career when they view themselves as competent in that domain and anticipate positive outcomes in the chosen career." Black women are less likely to pursue a career in coaching because black women, statistically, have not been successful in coaching. A lack of role models exists for black women in sports leadership.

The underrepresentation of women in coaching positions within all sports is caused by societal perceptions of sports and gender, homologous reproduction theory, and networking and access discrimination; the underrepresentation of black women especially can be explained through social cognitive career theory. This underrepresentation hinders the future athletic success of women and further enforces power hierarchies among men and women. Women in sports leadership are consistently working against many institutional oppressions to achieve success in their careers. Women are denied access to sports leadership opportunities, persistently reduced to the margins through lower power positions, and used as pawns to create impressions of gender equity and relatability. Black women in sports leadership must combat layered discrimination in racism and sexism. The underrepresentation of black women in sports leadership is especially

pertinent for sports in which the majority of players are black, because of policing of black bodies that already exists in Western society. While sports are commonly seen as simply a source of entertainment in Western society, their gender structures and compositions are telling of the greater society's gender dynamics. What does it mean for a society in which the greatest female athletes are coached by men? Certainly, women are not incapable of coaching and existing at the same sports leadership positions as men—they are simply denied the access and opportunity.

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