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The Career Advancement Experiences of Female Faculty of Color in Athletic Training Education Programs

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Abstract: We examined experiences of female faculty of color in athletic training education programs in terms of microaggressions in the workplace and the role mentors play in providing career advancement supports.

Keywords: female faculty of color, microaggressions, career development, mentoring

Background and Purpose

Career development is a multidimensional topic that has experienced resurgent investigation due to increased employee diversity (Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013). Healthcare professions, such as athletic training, are experiencing increased professional member diversity. The number of athletic training education programs has grown in recent years, but the number of female faculty of color has not been consistent with the increased diversity in athletic training membership (NATA, 2013). Little is known about the career experiences of female faculty of color in athletic training education, a profession established by White males in predominately White institutions of higher education athletic locker rooms in the 1950's (Ebel, 1999). Given increases in the diversity among members of this profession, recruitment and retention of female faculty of color is imperative, necessitating an investigation of the career advancement experiences of female faculty of color in athletic training education programs

The traditional career path for many athletic training faculty is to pursue leadership positions such as program director and/or department chair, which require successful career progress to meet tenure and promotion expectations. In 2013, 398 certified athletic trainers served as program directors and/or department chairs; yet women of color held only 10 (2.5%) of these positions, a disproportionately low representation give that 15% of certified athletic training professionals identify as women of color (NATA, 2013).

Although research on career advancement of faculty in athletic training is limited, research in higher education (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), nursing (Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2010), and liberal arts (Griffin et al., 2013) provide evidence that female faculty of color are likely to experience marginalizing barriers to career advancement. Other researchers have identified that mentors can provide supports that mitigate marginalization and facilitate career advancement for female faculty of color (Nicholas & Tanksley, 2004), and that not having access to mentors can be a disadvantage (Kameny et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study is to explore the career advancement and mentoring experiences of female faculty of color in athletic training education programs. A better understanding of their experiences may assist university administrators and department chairs to establish programs to recruit, retain, promote, and support professional development of female faculty of color in athletic training education.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on a synthesis of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and mentoring research. CRT posits that racial discrimination is embedded in the

structure of society and culture, influencing practices that negatively impact women and people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Researchers (e.g., Sue et al., 2007) have used CRT to investigate the workplace experiences of underrepresented faculty in higher education and found underrepresented racially and ethnically diverse faculty incur marginalizing behavior from White colleagues. This behavior is classified as microaggressions, and includes microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007).

A qualitative study by Burden et al. (2005) found that African American kinesiology faculty at a predominantly White institution of higher education regularly experienced microinvalidations that they perceived as barriers to their career advancement. A more recent study by Griffin et al. (2013) sheds light on the types of microinvalidations that can impact career advancement for faculty of color, particularly women. In this study, both male and female African American faculty reported receiving ambiguous, inconsistent, and/or unrealistic expectations for tenure and promotion. Their scholarship and research was not valued as contributing to the field, and their teaching evaluations were weighed more unfavorably compared to White colleagues. The female faculty, especially, struggled with microinvalidations as a result of being women and racially diverse.

Other researchers have shown that mentoring can mitigate the negative effects of microaggressions on career advancement for female faculty of color. In a study of underrepresented female faculty in liberal arts, STEM, and education, Zambrana et al. (2015) reported that mentors facilitated access to opportunities vital to career progress. Faculty appreciated mentors who acknowledged the existence of “systematic oppression” (p. 47), guided understanding of how to navigate institutional norms, and found alternative ways to facilitate access to opportunities. Additionally, mentors helped protégés understand tenure expectations and sponsorship, which facilitated scholarship recognition and visibility to influential colleagues. Studies by Alfred (2001) and Truong et al. (2014) also demonstrate the positive role that mentors can play in mitigating the microaggressions experienced by female faculty of color and promoting career advancement. They were particularly sensitive to the impact that negative student evaluations of their teaching could have on their advancement and felt greater pressures to engage in service than their male counterparts.

Research Design

We used a basic interpretive qualitative methodology (Merriam, 2009) to investigate two research questions: *What are the career advancement experiences of female faculty of color working in athletic training education programs? And, how do female faculty of color use mentors to support their career advancement?* Using national association data (NATA, 2013), we estimated that approximately 34 women of color held faculty positions in athletic training education programs at colleges and universities nationwide, establishing the target population for the study. All women were contacted via email and invited to participate. As of March 2016, the study sample ($N = 8$) comprised female certified athletic trainers who self-identified as African American ($n = 1$), Black/Hispanic ($n = 1$), Cuban ($n = 1$), Filipina/White ($n = 1$), Mexican ($n = 1$), Japanese American ($n = 1$), Japanese ($n = 1$), and biracial, specifically Black/White ($n = 1$). A majority of participants ($n = 6$) were between the ages of 30-45, with one participant in her late 20's and another in her early 60's. The participants were Assistant Professors ($n = 7$), except one who recently transferred her Associate rank from another institution to a non-tenure/clinical track. Most participants ($n = 6$) had 2-3 mentors with whom they were currently working, formally or informally. Of the two participants not currently in mentoring relationships, one

spoke of her Associate rank and preparation based on past formal and informal mentoring relationships. The other participant reported never having a mentor within her institution and minimal access to informal mentors of color within athletic training education nationally.

We collected data in two phases. In Phase One, participants completed an online survey of demographic information, workplace experiences, and mentoring relationships. Workplace experiences were assessed two ways. First, participants responded to three open-ended statements about their career advancement experiences, addressing satisfaction, supports, and barriers. Second, participants responded to items for the Microinvalidations factor and Workplace Microaggressions factor from the *Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale* (Nadal, 2011), and to items for the Silenced and Marginalized factor from the *Gender and Racial Microaggressions Scale* (Lewis, 2013). Mentoring relationships were assessed using items for the Career Functions and Psychosocial Functions factors in Noe's (1988) *Mentoring Function Scale*.

At the end of the survey, individuals indicated if they would like to participate in Phase Two of the study, a semi-structured interview conducted via telephone by the primary researcher. The primary researcher used responses to the survey to customize the interview for each participant. The semi-structured interviews provided a deeper understanding of experiences in terms of career advancement goals, workplace marginalization, mentoring, and professional development.

A transcriber not affiliated with the study transcribed the interview audiotapes. The primary researcher used inductive analysis to identify patterns and broad themes across the data (Creswell, 2014). Each transcription was first open-coded to generate conceptual labels and categories. A constant comparative analysis allowed for refinement of codes and categories and identification of themes across the interviews. To ensure credibility and reliability during theme development, the primary researcher and a secondary researcher separately coded a subset of transcript excerpts and then engaged in a comparative process to confirm that the preliminary codes and themes were present in the data. In addition, we calculated frequency distributions of responses to survey items for the whole sample. We used the numerical findings to describe the frequency and strength of participants' perceptions to specific items, serving as a source of data triangulation.

Findings and Conclusions

The researchers identified three themes as a result of preliminary data analysis. First, variability exists in the frequency with which female faculty of color in athletic training education programs experience microinvalidations in their workplaces. Second, female faculty of color perceive that environmental microaggressions are due to multiple factors; however, the microaggressions are not perceived as explicit barriers to career advancement. Third, female faculty of color are likely to work with mentors and the mentors provide a variety of career advancement supports.

Theme One. Variability exists in the frequency with which female faculty of color in athletic training education programs experience microinvalidations and microaggressions in their workplaces.

In the survey, participants reported experiencing microinvalidations an average of 1.38 times and workplace microaggressions an average of 1.33 times in the past 6 months. They reported experiencing silencing and marginalizing behaviors from colleagues an average of 1.53

times in the past 6 months. However in the interview, participants tended to indicate they had experienced microinvalidations, microaggressions, and silencing and marginalizing behaviors from colleagues more frequently than they initially reported on the survey.

The survey and interview data indicated that the participants who identified as Black, Latina, or Black and Latina were more likely to incur microinvalidations, microaggressions, and silencing and marginalizing than other participants. For example, Janice (Latina-Cuban) stated, “I know people...have these feelings that the quality of my work might be inferior.” Robin (Black-African American) described an instance in which one older White male “questioned some of the publications that were on my resume...the automatic assumption was they didn't exist.”

Interestingly, during interviews, women with an Asian aspect to their racial or ethnic identity reported no direct experiences of colleague microaggressions, although they explained witnessing microaggressions directed toward colleagues of other racial groups. Tracy (Filipina/White) shared, “I definitely feel like there is racial tension...but I don't ever particularly feel like it's specifically directed toward myself.” When explaining that she does not typically experience racism, Sandy (Japanese) stated “I can kind of blend myself...or you know I have blended myself into the culture.”

In sum, female faculty of color in athletic training education incurred microinvalidations and microaggressions similar to female faculty of color in other fields in higher education, and variability exists with regard to the frequency of their experiences.

Theme Two: Female faculty of color perceive that environmental microaggressions are due to multiple factors; however, they do not identify microaggressions as explicit barriers to career advancement.

Participants explained that environmental microaggressions were due to multiple factors, such as an age gap between themselves and colleagues, the political history of the department, and interactions with older White men. Despite her institution having a large international student population, Janice (Cuban) stated, “...other people in the department that would not act politically correct, so it was almost on a regular basis you would hear some kind of ethnic or racial joke—that kind of culture.” Similarly, Cecilia (Mexican) shared, “People sometimes make little jokes because they think we're buddies so they can make a joke about Hispanic culture. In the workplace... if we're in a committee meeting and you think we're all buds and you want to make a little joke about Hispanic culture, you're really in an environment where you're making it hard for me to call you on it with other people around.”

With one exception, participants did not explicitly state that their experiences of microaggressions in the workplace posed a barrier to their career advancement. For example, Janice (Cuban) stated, “I don't feel it [microaggressions]. If I'm completely oblivious to it and it has, then that's on me, but I haven't really felt that it's affected me one way or another, positively or negatively.” In addition, Cecilia (Mexican) discussed her success despite difficulty balancing numerous additional responsibilities. “I think culturally I was taught to be accommodating and to say yes and to please, and so I've always personally struggled with setting those boundaries.”

Robin (African America) recounted an experience during her recent promotion review in which she experienced unfounded criticism from an individual (White male) reviewing her portfolio. Robin did not explicitly remark that this experience posed a barrier to her review. She did, however, take additional steps to clarify the criticism and proudly explained she felt a sense of accomplishment in putting her promotional materials together stating, “I did do a lot of it

myself.”

In contrast to the experiences of other participants, the most seasoned participant, Xiomara (Black/Hispanic) spoke at length about her experiences as a faculty member in departments at two institutions that were hostile and isolating, and impeded her career advancement. Xiomara explained how she alone had to restructure the athletic training program for accreditation, without the assistance of another colleague on the program. And, “... for my review for tenure I was denied tenure, and they said that there was no evidence for scholarship. I said, ‘Well, look at all these things that have been done.’”

For most participants, although they experienced microaggressions in their workplaces, these instances did not explicitly impede their career advancement.

Theme Three: Female faculty of color are likely to work with mentors, and the mentors provide a variety of career advancement supports.

Seven participants had mentors who demonstrated behaviors that were supportive and valuable to female faculty of color career advancement. Consistently, survey responses showed that mentors demonstrated good listening skills (83.3%), concern for individual competence (66.7%), and conveyed respect for the individual (66.6%). Participant interviews provided a more nuanced explanation of how mentors provided supports, indicating that mentors provided task specific advice and feedback as a way to address concerns about competence.

A negative outcome of not engaging in mentoring was shown by Xiomara, who did not have a mentor as a faculty member, “...it probably would have been beneficial to have had someone in my corner in this department.” Preliminary analysis of Xiomara’s detailed narrative revealed that lack of mentoring negatively impacted parts of her career that others reported as being positively impacted by mentors, such as facilitating opportunities for networking and collaboration and providing clear guidance on how to navigate promotion and tenure expectations.

Overall, participants benefited in numerous ways from mentoring relationships. Mentors helped identify participants’ career advancement needs and tasks, advised how to complete and meet identified needs, and acknowledged experiences and achievements.

Limitations

There are two key limitations of this study. First, a notable difference existed between quantitative and qualitative assessments of the frequency in which participants experienced microinvalidations, microaggressions, and being silenced and marginalized by colleagues. Overall, in the interviews, participants described experiencing these types of behaviors more frequently than they indicated in their survey responses. One explanation may be that, per author recommendations, we calculated the score for each of the three factors in the survey [Microinvalidations factor and Workplace Microaggressions factor from Nadal (2011), and Silenced and Marginalized factor from Lewis (2013)] using the average frequency across a variety of behaviors, which masked summative experiences for these types of behaviors from colleagues. Additionally, through the interviews we came to appreciate that the frequency of experiences serving to invalidate, silence, and marginalize female faculty of color may be less informative than the quality and memorability of experiences in terms of understanding the impact these experiences have on career advancement.

Challenges to recruitment and participation also posed limitations to the study. Access to members of the target population was impaired due to shortcomings in national association

databases. Additionally, some individuals completed the survey but were reluctant to participate in the interview. One individual explained that she was afraid of participating because of potential retaliation for sharing details of her workplace experiences. This individual's lack of participation may reflect other underrepresented individuals who worry about revealing their marginalized experiences in their workplace. Thus, our findings are limited to accessible individuals who consented to both the survey and the interview.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study explored the career advancement and mentoring experiences of female faculty of color in athletic training education programs. Similar to studies of female faculty of color in other fields, participants experienced microinvalidations, microaggressions, and silencing and marginalizing behaviors from colleagues in their workplaces. Overall, however, they did not explicitly perceive that the behaviors posed a barrier to their career advancement. Mentors offered a variety of career advancement supports, including feedback and guidance in completing job and career tasks, yet supports were not specifically directed towards helping participants manage microaggressions and marginalizing behaviors from colleagues.

Findings enhance understanding of the valuable role both formal and informal mentoring relationships play in meeting the advancement needs of female faculty of color in athletic training education. University administrators, department chairs, mentors, and faculty can interpret findings to identify and reduce barriers to advancement in their own organizations. Findings also highlight instances of microaggressions and marginalization endured by female faculty of color experience in athletic training education. We recommend workplace incivility and culture competency training within athletic training departments and all academic departments in higher education.

This study furthers application of mentoring theory and practice to athletic training faculty development. While athletic training is a small but growing profession, findings from this study may be applicable to other health care fields in higher education where female faculty of color are an underrepresented group and can benefit from mentoring relationships. Additional studies are warranted to identify what mentoring supports are most effective at different stages of career development among female faculty of color. Retention of female faculty of color in athletic training education and other health care professional education can help ensure that the needs of an increasing diverse student population are met.

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