"My Identity Drives Me in This Space"
A Qualitative Examination of Racially Minoritized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Professionals' Experiences in U.S. Intercollegiate Sport

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Abstract: This study examined the experiences of 16 racially minoritized diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professionals working in U.S. intercollegiate sport. Drawing from semi-structured interviews analyzed via open and axial coding, four overarching themes were developed to get a better understanding of why and how racially minoritized individuals navigate their engagement in DEI work: (a) desire to make college athletics more equitable and inclusive, (b) minoritized identities central to DEI work, (c) navigating tensions within the organization, and (d) looking to the future with both optimism and skepticism. Findings reveal that DEI work in athletics is complex and requires a cautious, strategic approach to transform an industry that has historically been homogenous and resistant to change. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: DEI professionals, college athletics, social justice, racial identity, equity & inclusion

Setting the Context

During the summer of 2020, greater attention was paid to the racial inequities that exist in the United States (U.S.). According to Chavez (2020), "America was the epicenter of a racial reckoning" (para. 2). The lead-in to the summer of 2020 included national outrage and protests over the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. Chavez highlighted the events of the summer using a timeline starting in May 2020 with the murder of George Floyd,

shortly after which protests began in Minneapolis and quickly spread across the country. The aforementioned incidents led to an increase in discourse surrounding racial and social justice in U.S. intercollegiate sports. In a *New York Times* article, Blinder and Witz (2020) noted, "Over a matter of weeks, players and coaches seized their influence for a display of political action that historians and executives say recalls the 1960s, another era when people took to the streets to protest racial inequality" (para 4). Not only was there an increase in athlete activism, but athletics administrators and coaches veered away from traditional notions that athletes should be apolitical and, instead, supported their players who used their voices to speak out against social injustices (Blinder & Witz, 2020; Hale, 2020).

In 2020, a nationwide social justice movement coupled with a global health crisis impacted the business and finances of collegiate sport. These two events serve as an important backdrop to this study, as our data collection timeframe occurred while the nation and collegiate sport were experiencing multiple crises. As Keaton (2020) has argued, the increasing pressure on athletic departments to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) due to a sociocultural climate that centered conversations on social justice has led to the emergence of DEI-specific positions in intercollegiate athletics. While extensive research on these positions is non-existent, given it remains an emerging job field, the little research that has been done on the topic shows that these positions are often held by members of minoritized communities, e.g., Black women (Keaton, 2022; Kluch et al., 2023).

To learn about individuals driving DEI efforts within their athletics departments, this study examined the experiences of racially minoritized[1] DEI professionals in intercollegiate sport. These participants occupy the unique position of identifying with the racialized group that was at the forefront of the nation's re-energized discourses surrounding racial equity. Many had to focus on their DEI-related job tasks while navigating the trauma that they, their families, their friends, and their communities were experiencing. To that end, this study explores the experiences of DEI professionals in college athletics who are racially minoritized, most notably those identifying as Black. Previous research in this same context has explored the expanding landscape of DEI efforts, such as in mission and vision statements – or the lack thereof (Rockhill et al., 2021) – and in hiring DEI professionals within athletics departments (Keaton, 2020). To extend this emerging area of research, this study focuses specifically on racially minoritized DEI professionals to understand how they experience advancing DEI work while navigating hostile institutional climates.

Literature Review

Racially minoritized DEI professionals in intercollegiate sport exist in a historically homogenous industry that favors older, white, cisgender, straight men. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport's 2020 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) College Leadership Racial and Gender Report Card rated racial hiring practices as a 'B-' for U.S. college sport, gender hiring practices as an 'F', and overall hiring as a 'D+' (Lapchick, 2021). Given that research has

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[1] Critical scholars have recently called on DEI scholars to pay closer attention to the ways in which language reinforces inequities. To follow this call, we chose to use the term *racially minoritized* rather than "Person of Color" or "racial minority" to acknowledge the role power plays in naming groups that have historically been excluded and marginalized. Furthermore, the term "minoritized" acknowledges that groups are often intentionally marginalized by those holding power (Benitez, 2010; Stewart, 2013).

supported the numerous benefits for athletic departments to be more demographically diverse (Cunningham, 2008), it is surprising that this gap still continues to exist today. To ground our study in the literature, we first present collegiate sport as a culturally hegemonic space to contextualize the necessity for DEI work in this field. Next, we outline the current landscape of DEI research in higher education and the work specific to collegiate sport. This literature review contextualizes the historical and social contexts of both intercollegiate sports as well as DEI professional work in higher education, thus laying the groundwork for the need to explore the experiences of racially minoritized DEI professionals in this rapidly shifting environment. Building on Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, intercollegiate sports has historically been a space that perpetuates gender and racial hierarchies via ideological means, which will be outlined in the following section.

Intercollegiate Sport Management as a Hegemonic Space

This study draws from hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1971) to capture how racially minoritized DEI professionals experience institutional contexts in which their work is framed as non-normative and counter-hegemonic. Gramsci (1971) believed that, within civil society, hegemony is established once the dominant classes are able to gain the consent of the subordinate classes, who then view their rule as legitimate and natural. In the context of sport, Eitzen (2014) contended that society reflects the hegemony of the powerful and privileged, and that sport at every level is organized in such a way that subordinate groups are discouraged from questioning their rule by the dominant groups. One expression of the hegemonic order, as Brassil and Lutz (2020) pointed out, is that "despite a handful of initiatives meant to increase diversity in the leadership of sports organizations, coaching and management roles have mostly comprised of white candidates in the past 30 years" (p. 10). Cunningham et al. (2021) elaborated on that point stating, "… most of professional sport in the United States remains mired in the decades-long pattern of similarity and exclusion where white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual men hold key leadership roles" (p. 1). Although individuals hold multiple identities, the three most commonly discussed and researched in sport tend to be race, gender, and sexuality.

Racism has long manifested in the supposedly apolitical institution of sport, as demonstrated by the storied histories of racial and ethnic discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation targeted toward racially minoritized individuals (Edwards, 2010). Harper (2012) defined racism as:

> … individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain white privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons. (p. 10)

In addition to historically perpetuating racism and other systemic injustices, sport organizations have failed to nurture a racially and ethnically diverse workforce (Fink et al., 2001).

Furthermore, despite increased opportunities in sport, women continue to be systematically excluded from leadership positions at all levels of sport (Burton, 2015). Connell (1995) discussed how sport operates as a space to define and reproduce hegemonic masculinity, in which one form

of masculinity, i.e., exclusively heterosexual and masculine presenting, maintains dominance by suppressing all other forms of masculinity and subordinating women. This leads to men experiencing sport as a separate domain or a *male preserve* (Dunning, 1986).

Women who enter into the gendered sport space are viewed as violating hegemonic gender norms. They are typically identified with a gender signifier in their new role, e.g., female athlete, female coach, female official, WNBA, LPGA, etc., as opposed to being an athlete, coach, or official. Sport organizations have undoubtedly institutionalized masculinity as the normative operating principle and reinforced masculinity/masculine behavior as the appropriate leadership qualities required in sport (Hindman & Walker, 2020; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). For example, Hindman and Walker (2020) found that organizational climates in sport often perpetuate sexist cultures, hindering women in their ability to advance into leadership positions. In fact, scholars have repeatedly shown the stark institutionalized barriers women have to overcome to succeed in the industry (Taylor & Wells, 2017). This includes: a lack of belonging due to systemic discrimination that starts in the sport management classroom (Kluch et al., 2023); the invisible labor associated with being a woman in sport (Sveinson et al., 2022); repeated instances of harassment (Taylor et al., 2018); and increased (unjustified) scrutiny of their ability to lead in the sport space (Taylor & Hardin, 2016). As Walker and Satore-Baldwin (2013) have shown, the resulting norms in collegiate sport have become so socially accepted and embedded within the institution of sport organizations that the thought of change is often unfathomable.

Although there have been advances in athletics broadly, discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other sexually minoritized individuals (LGBTQ+) continues to persist in many areas of sport, including intercollegiate athletics (Cunningham, 2015). One of the many challenges facing members of the LGBTQ+ community is employment. Since sport organizations have traditionally been comprised of white heterosexual men (Fink et al., 2001), those who are LGBTQ+ are likely to (and historically have) experience trouble obtaining employment and positions of power in sports. Denison et al.'s (2021) scoping research on LGBTQ+ athletes and coaches found that sport organizations, even with some positive changes, "continue to place a low priority on addressing the exclusion and discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people" (p. 1). When it comes to the experiences of sexually minoritized groups participating in sport, around two-fifths of LGB youth that come out to their teammates become targets of homophobic behavior (Denison et al., 2020), while the use of homophobic language in sport has become normalized in sport (Denison et al., 2021).

This recent literature on race, gender, and sexuality in sport reflects intercollegiate athletics' position as a culturally hegemonic space (Eitzen, 2014; Gramsci 1971) that not only perpetuates inequity and marginalization but is also resistant to the very change DEI professionals seek to achieve. Because research shows the persistent barriers that members of minoritized groups face, intercollegiate athletics has recently come under more scrutiny to address the social ills manifesting within its domains.

DEI in Intercollegiate Athletics

In recent years, higher education institutions have increased their focus on DEI initiatives (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017; Dover et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2016) in order to

develop a campus culture and the support systems necessary for students from diverse backgrounds (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Museus, 2014; Patton, 2016). Despite the advantages of prioritizing DEI, most DEI efforts occur as reactions to external circumstances and pressures rather than as a proactive agenda (Fink et al., 2003; Keaton, 2020). For example, Keaton (2020) has argued that the emergence of DEI positions in athletic departments, which she titled *athletics diversity and inclusion officers* (ADIO),[2] was a result of a broader sociocultural climate that put increasing pressure on organizations to advance DEI. Interestingly, scholars have frequently noted that despite missions centered on DEI principles, the professional work that occurs in DEI offices is either exclusionary and/or does not adequately address the systemic issues they set out to overcome (Ahmed, 2007; Brayboy, 2003; De Welde, 2017; Museus, 2014; Ray, 2019; Williams, 2006). Schindler (2022), for example, argued that DEI spaces have been colonized by "white, Eurocentric ideas, norms, and values" (p. 68), reflecting what Heilig et al. (2012) labeled "the illusion of inclusion" in social justice policy decisions (p. 403).

This research highlights the DEI efforts and the experiences of DEI professionals in higher education administration; however, the application of these findings in an intercollegiate athletic context is relatively recent. For example, proactive approaches to valuing DEI in sport might involve examining a unit's mission statements to make sure DEI is a core component (Rockhill et al., 2021), ensuring that any monuments/structures operated by the unit do not honor individuals with racist pasts (Turick et al., 2020), and consistently evaluating the implementation of DEI programs (Cooper et al., 2020). Singer and Cunningham (2012) highlighted how valuing diversity in a unit's organizational structure is one way to attain a strong DEI culture in intercollegiate sports. The lack of diversity among college sport leadership, however, leaves the few minoritized individuals that assume these leadership positions in vulnerable positions, as they might fear challenging status quos or may not believe that their opinions will be valued (Howe & Rockhill, 2020).

Similar to DEI work in other administrative areas, past responses to social injustices from athletics departments have been categorized as merely reactionary and not focused on implementing structural changes (Bimper & Harrison, 2017). Spaaij et al. (2018) expressed a similar concern when discussing community sport organizations, arguing that most DEI work in sport occurs as a reaction to societal pressures rather than in proactive ways. The heinous murders of Black Americans that occurred during the year 2020 combined with the COVID-19 pandemic have forced sport organizations to place a greater priority on DEI work. This has also coincided with the passing of NCAA association-wide legislation requiring each school in the association to appoint an Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee to serve as a point of contact for DEI-related matters on campus (Dent, 2020). According to Griffin (2019), DEI professionals in collegiate sport serve as crucial guides to their athletic departments on what DEI initiatives might be necessary for their athletes, coaches, and administrators. Following this need for DEI professionals in collegiate sport, Keaton and Cooper (2022) have highlighted the importance of moving beyond "symbolic" DEI initiatives in order to make actionable change (p. 189).

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[2] A key difference between this study and the work of Keaton (2020; 2022) is the extent to which participants were charged with DEI efforts within their athletic departments. Advancing DEI was the main responsibility of Keaton's ADIOs, yet for some of our participants DEI was part of a larger set of responsibilities. For instance, participants at the Division II and III level (and non-major Division I level) often had multiple responsibilities, with DEI being one of them. We use the term *DEI professionals* instead of ADIO to accurately capture this nuance.

If DEI professionals believe their unit has ever issued statements due to public pressure, not because those statements match the department's values, the performative nature of such acts may negatively impact the work experiences of DEI professionals (Khilji, 2020). Unfortunately, DEI professionals in collegiate sport are likely to experience several of the same challenges that their DEI peers who work in higher education face. Wilson (2013) discussed how DEI professionals in higher education typically lack the power to make structural changes, receive little institutional support, and often have vague job descriptions. Additionally, in alignment with the results of Kaplan (2020), DEI professionals may struggle to create programs that champion transformative change within a department that does not want to change ideologically – but rather participates in DEI programs to check that proverbial box. While research on DEI professionals in sport is in its infancy, Wright-Mair et al. (2021) studied the experiences of athletics DEI professionals and identified a series of high-impact practices for transformative change, including hiring and retaining diverse talent, providing structural support for DEI efforts, engaging athletics department stakeholders in culturally responsive programming, and creating the infrastructure for transformational change. Similarly, in Ofoegbu and Ekpe's (2022) analysis of how athletic departments responded to the murder of George Floyd, the authors found that the most effective, yet least common responses, were direct calls to action by their department.

However, since DEI professionals exist in a space that tends to be fairly homogenous (Lapchick, 2021), it is most likely that their departmental leaders are not members of minoritized groups. For those engaged in DEI, especially if they are members of a minoritized group, they may feel as if it is their responsibility alone to advocate for DEI programming and serve as the voice for all minoritized groups (Howe & Rockhill, 2020), particularly considering the body of literature that suggests many DEI initiatives and responses are inadequate or still center whiteness (Schindler, 2022). There is a gap in intercollegiate athletics scholarship on the experiences of people with minoritized identities who drive DEI efforts. In one of the few studies on the topic, Keaton (2022) found that Black woman ADIOs often felt isolated within their athletic departments and depended on their "outsider within" status to make sense of organizational inclusivity (p. 6). Drawing from their intersectional identities as Black women, participants in Keaton's study found that they were uniquely positioned to advance DEI efforts within their respective departments. Extending Keaton's work, the current study sought to understand how being a member of a racially minoritized group has impacted the experiences of DEI professionals working in intercollegiate sport. As a result, the following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are racially minoritized DEI professionals' motivations for doing DEI work in intercollegiate sport?

RQ2: How do racially minoritized DEI professionals experience their engagement with DEI work in intercollegiate sport?

Method

Utilizing an interpretive constructivist methodology, the data presented here are part of a larger study with a primary focus on examining the experiences of DEI professionals who work in collegiate sport. While the larger study included 23 DEI professionals working in college athletic departments, our data analysis revealed unique aspects of the experiences of the 16

racially minorized DEI professionals in the sample. In an effort to highlight their experiences, this paper focuses on the experiences of these 16 racially and ethnically minoritized DEI professionals ($n = 16$), all of whom completed semi-structured interviews with the researchers. The majority ($n = 12$) worked at the Division I level, while Division II ($n = 1$) and Division III ($n = 3$) were also represented in the sample. There were more men ($n = 10$) than women ($n = 6$) in the sample. In terms of their racial identities, all but one participant (i.e., Latino; $n = 1$) identified as Black or African American ($n = 15$). In alignment with the suggestions of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the data collection process organically evolved as responses from participants influenced the questions posed to subsequent interviewees.

As mentioned previously, the data presented here is part of a larger study looking at the experiences of DEI professionals in NCAA athletics. The larger study was open to all NCAA professionals with DEI as part of their staff responsibilities. The sample included 23 DEI professionals, 16 of whom identified as members of racially minoritized groups (i.e., the sample presented here). Participants were sent a demographic form to complete upon completion of the interview. Out of the 16 racially minoritized participants included in this paper, three did not fill out the form yet revealed during their interview that they identified as a member of a racially or ethnically minoritized community (e.g., "As a Black woman in college athletics, …"). As a result, we included their data in this manuscript. Research results from the larger study are published in Kluch et al. (2022), Swim et al. (2022), and Wright-Mair et al. (2021). Per APA guidelines regarding the publication of research from the same data set, we ensured that each of the four papers had a distinct research question, hence providing a unique insight into the overall experiences of DEI professionals in the contemporary cultural climate.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, an important criterion for rigor is a continuous process of reflexivity of the researchers involved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research team comprised of four scholars who individually and collectively are committed to advancing issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion. The lead author of this manuscript identifies as a Black, South Asian, immigrant woman who works as a faculty member in higher education. Her research agenda focuses on examining the experiences of racially minoritized populations across higher education. She has extensive experience consulting on issues of social justice, equity, and inclusion both inside and outside of higher education, and is steadfast in her commitment to leading research that pushes boundaries and advances theory and practice. Specifically, her scholarship interrogates racial injustice and seeks to dismantle existing structures that uphold white heteronormativity. The second author is a white, queer, immigrant, cisgender man working as a faculty member in sport management. His research agenda focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion in sports, athlete activism, and inclusive sport policy and governance. He does extensive DEI consulting in higher education and in the sports industry, with a focus on building coalitions between the academy and the industry to disrupt policies, practices, and structures that maintain white hegemony.

The third author is a white, cisgender man with a research agenda focused on intercollegiate sports, specifically on women in sport. The fourth author is a white, cisgender man working with a national governing sport association. He has research experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion in college sport and student athlete well-being. Our individual and collective identities,

lived experiences, interests, research expertise, and commitments to steering equity and inclusion work serve as an important impetus and driving force for this work. We acknowledge problematic systemic structures that exist in higher education, intercollegiate athletics, and society more broadly. We are committed to disrupting these structures by investing in scholarship, service, and practical resources that illuminate these issues and propose solutions.

Epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically, our work operates within the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that multiple truths can co-exist in any given context. It also draws from a method that allows us to document and *enter into* the lives of the population under analysis. As such, we were less interested in generalizing the experiences of the participants and instead invested in providing an in-depth account of the unique lived experiences of the racially minoritized DEI professionals in this study. For example, this approach allowed for the use of questions in our interview guide meant to solicit detailed responses to produce rich data (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, a qualitative, interpretive-constructivist approach allowed us to honor, listen to, and further explore the stories shared by each participant. Thus, our individual and collective identities, disciplinary backgrounds, and practitioner experiences anchored in DEI work allowed us to critically analyze the data and credibly identify common themes across the experiences participants shared in the results of this study.

Procedure

To understand the experiences of DEI professionals in intercollegiate athletics, the research team utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit athletic administrators with DEI responsibilities. Prospective interviewees were classified as *DEI Professionals* if their actual job title at their institution included DEI language/terminology, e.g., Director of Inclusion, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Inclusion Coordinator, etc. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics and background. It is important to note here that the time of data collection coincided with the NCAA's passing of legislation that required each intercollegiate athletic department to appoint an athletics diversity and inclusion designee (ADID). As a result, some of the DEI professionals in this study held the ADID designation, but it was not a criterion for inclusion in the study. Participants were selected because they were "able to provide information that is particularly relevant to [our] research questions and goals" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). After contact was made with prospective interviewees, phone or Zoom interviews were scheduled. Before each interview, participants were asked to confirm that they had read and understood the informed consent document that had been sent via email. Next, participants were asked if they had any questions about the study and to provide verbal consent, which was audio-recorded.

Table 1

Participant demographics and background

Name	Gender Identity	Racial Identity	ADIO*	Division
Antonio	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Carter	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Clara	Female	Black or African American	X	I
Clark	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Frank	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Jabari	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Paulson	Male	Black or African American	X	I
Pete	Male	Black or African American		I
Peyton	Female	Black or African American	X	I
Rachel**	Female	Black or African American	X	I
Rico	Male	Black or African American		I
Stephanie	Non-Binary	Black or African American		I
MJ	Male	Black or African American		II
Juan	Male	Hispanic or Latino	X	III
Alice	Female	Black or African American	X	III
Betsy	Female	Black or African American	X	III

Note: *ADIO indicates Assistant or Associate AD with Diversity, Equity, and/or Inclusion title (Keaton, 2020). **Indicated the only official Chief Diversity Officer amongst the sample population

To protect the confidentiality of the participants, interviewers asked individuals to pick a pseudonym that was used at the conclusion of the interview. In some cases, participants asked researchers to choose a pseudonym on their behalf. Participants were reminded that the interview would be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription and, later, data analysis. The participant pool was diverse in regard to division level of competition, gender, job titles, DEI responsibilities, and other job responsibilities (several participants had other roles outside of their DEI responsibilities). A semi-structured interview guide was created using input from all members of the research team. The four-member research team was comprised of three faculty and a doctoral student, all of whom specialize in studying diversity, equity, and inclusion in sport (two research team members), higher education (one research team member), or both (one research team member).

Data Analysis

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. Data were transcribed and analyzed via Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data analysis software. The data were analyzed in a manner

consistent with Patton's (2015) strategy for qualitative data analysis: transcription, data organization, initial coding, inductive analysis, and development of themes. The data were coded inductively via open and axial coding (Patton, 2015). Procedurally, each researcher independently read the interview transcript from an interview they conducted and then did open coding of the raw data. After each research team member had coded one interview, the research team met to discuss the codes and evaluate their accuracy. Examples of open codes included "Admin Understanding of DEI Work," "Being Reduced to the DEI Person," "Career Trajectory," "Emotional Toll," and "Getting Buy-In" for a total of 87. All open codes were discussed amongst the research team and were grouped into categories and themes via axial coding. For example, we grouped codes such as "assisting marginalized student-athletes," "creating change in college athletics," and "empowering/elevating the student athlete voice" into the category "Motivations for Doing DEI Work," which later was included in the higher-order theme of "Desire to Make College Athletics More Equitable and Inclusive." The axial coding process yielded four higher-order themes, as outlined in the results section below. As noted by Guest et al. (2006), when conducting in-depth interviews, the basic elements of themes are generally present as early as the sixth interview. To that end, our participant group significantly exceeds the minimum needed for thematic development and data saturation.

The trustworthiness of this qualitative study was achieved via Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four concepts for conducting competent qualitative research (later refined by Korstjens & Moser, 2018): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. As such, the participants and setting for our study have been adequately described, our results have the potential to be transferred to other settings, our interview guide was continually adapted based on previous conversations, and findings in each transcript were re-affirmed through a collaborative coding process. Additionally, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement with the material, and rich and thick descriptions were incorporated to support the trustworthiness of our findings (Thomas et al., 2011).

Results

Once the coding process was completed, four overarching themes were developed based on the data to capture the experiences of racially minoritized DEI professionals working in intercollegiate athletics: (a) desire to make college athletics more equitable and inclusive, (b) minoritized identities central to DEI work, (c) navigating tensions within the organization, and (d) looking to the future with both optimism and skepticism. Consistent throughout these themes is that the realities for racially minoritized DEI professionals in college sport have dramatically changed over the past few years as it has been re-shaped by external factors (Cooper et al., 2020; Keaton & Cooper, 2022; Ofoegbu & Epke, 2022; Weems et al., 2017).

Theme #1: Desire to Make College Athletics More Equitable and Inclusive

Our first theme speaks to participants' powerful stories that motivated them to do DEI work. The professionals interviewed shared that they pursued a DEI-related career in collegiate sport for a variety of reasons – with the ultimate intention of dismantling barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as enacting change within collegiate athletics. Most participants noted that they chose this career because they find it fulfilling, see its importance and urgency, and are passionate about creating positive social change in the industry. Of note, most participants

discussed that they have been doing DEI work their entire lives – just not in the official capacity they occupy now. Juan shared that he initially arrived at his institution to serve in one role and was recruited into his current position with a DEI focus, which allowed him to have an even bigger impact on the department. Similarly, Paulson explained that a desire to have an impact was a driving factor for him:

> Honestly, what drew me to this position was just being recruited here. This wasn't where I thought I would be…It wasn't for me to leave my other institution to come here but then just some of the things they offered and the impact I felt I could make here, helped me with that decision to live here.

Frank, like the majority of participants, discussed how "every day is different" and that he enjoys serving in a DEI capacity because it affords him the opportunity to have meaningful dialogue with collegiate athletes. He stated that when he is engaging in what he termed "real talk," he sees "great work being done … [it] consistently builds trust and then you can get to a place of vulnerability. Once there, you can make real change. That's the space that I seek." Frank recalled how those 'real talk' conversations typically happen: "… it's when a student-athlete walks in my office, it's when the co-worker stops by saying, 'Can I talk to you?', and they close the door. It's those areas where a lot of the work is being done to make change." Being able to have meaningful interactions with students was an important tool to achieve change for Alice as well. She remarked: "What drew me to it was just the ability to connect with different students, whether that be student-athletes or just students, period." Clark added that "a lot of the conversations or a lot of the work that I do is really around advancing the conversation as an institution." For these participants, engaging in conversations was a way to draw people into their sphere of influence and gradually push for change.

Peyton, a former collegiate athlete herself, shared how her athlete experience influenced her career choice: "I've always wanted to do inclusion work … I was the only Woman of Color on my college team for four years. That presented some very unique and interesting challenges." Peyton explained how she has used her own experiences to guide her journey, one she noted has been filled with many challenges, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> That started to fuel the fire. I was like, "Okay, this is really interesting. There's clearly a need. All these feelings that I'm feeling, all these other Women of Color are feeling. No one's talking about it. No one's even mentioning it. What do I need to do?" I was like, "Okay, maybe I could potentially get into an area like this."

Peyton's words reflect her desire to be a mentor to assist others in advocating for change. Pete and Jabari discussed mentorship as well. For instance, Pete shared: "If it wasn't for the relationships I developed outside the bubble of athletics, I don't think I would have been as successful. I've met some great mentors and professors who challenged me to think critically." Similarly, Jabari made a powerful statement related to mentorship, as he wanted to be "someone that people can count on to help break down some walls for them."

Underlying the articulations of the importance of mentorship was the participants' passion for personal growth and desire to learn more about others. Frank aptly captured this desire:

> No matter how much you read, how much you listen, or how much you experience, you never have it all. … You don't arrive and know how a person or group feels or thinks…There's so many different lived experiences, even within the Black community, even within the white community and Hispanic, Latino [communities].

Peyton's reflections on working in a DEI role also highlight how much learning occurs. She stated, "I feel like one year of DEI work is like dog years. It equates to seven years of experience based on the amount of things that you're exposed to, what you learn, interactions that you have, the things you see." She concluded, "Even though I've only been at [institution redacted] for [redacted] years, it feels like I've been there for 20,000 years." As such, for the participants, continuous learning was an important component to seeking change within the department.

Despite the stressors associated with DEI work, as alluded to by the participants above, working in a DEI-related role was quite fulfilling for participants. Rachel recalled having created an impactful DEI initiative: "I will say to this point in terms of DEI, [is] the most fulfilling thing I've done." Indeed, participants found fulfillment in the ability to make change and noted how their DEI positions gave them a chance to make a difference. Jabari discussed how experiencing racism and microaggressions throughout childhood to his college years led him to his current role. He shared that that "my why for doing diversity and inclusion work is to give back to People of Color, and to be that resource for People of Color who may be reaching these obstacles and they just can't get over them." Likewise, Frank noted that "I'm in a unique position because I'm part of the executive senior staff … I know the experiences and some needs of our student-athletes and I'm able to champion and navigate through some of that." Clark found even more drastic words to describe why he enjoys making a difference: "I care about dismantling systems, burning it down." Ultimately, participants' main motivations to engage in DEI work centered on their individual and collective commitments to dismantling barriers within collegiate athletics and spearheading the (re)creation of athletics departments that are committed to advancing diversity, equity, inclusion and justice comprehensively.

Theme #2: Minoritized Identities Central to DEI Work

The second theme from our data relates to how the identities of participants, specifically their ethnic or racial identity (i.e., Black and/or Latino) and its intersection with gender (e.g., Black woman), were central to the DEI work they engage in. The participants discussed the ways in which their racialized identities were an important part of who they are, the importance of their presence in the DEI space, how being members of a minoritized group can sometimes lead to them being reduced to the "DEI Person," and the emotional toll that doing DEI work as a member of a minoritized group can have. Stephanie summarized the importance of her being a Black woman and the impact her identity has on doing DEI work. She stated, "For me, my identity drives me in this space." Peyton shared a similar sentiment when she said that as a biracial woman, "my entire life is inclusion … I view myself as the walking, breathing definition of inclusion." Betsy echoed those sentiments by discussing how her identity as a Black woman informs her engagement in DEI work because it makes her more aware of the importance of diversity. She commented:

> I've always made it a point to keep my circle of friends or my network pretty diverse in opinions and any other demographic. I try to keep it pretty diverse for the purpose of allowing myself to have perspective. When I'm intentional about that in my personal life, it helps me in my professional life with perspective, so I apply the same concept in my professional life.

Juan, who identifies as a Hispanic gay man, argued that his work was about providing representation for others who share similar identities. He explained: "I don't want any student, any student, regardless of how they identify to feel as though they're alone, that they don't belong, that they're not wanted, that they're not being heard or listened to."

Participants' racialized identities did not just inform the actual work once they assumed their role, but also affected the hiring into the role itself. The fact that these DEI professionals come from racially and ethnically minoritized backgrounds is not a coincidence; some participants pointed out that there might be intentionality in the hiring process due to a common belief that people from minoritized backgrounds are best suited for DEI jobs. Several participants discussed that athletic departments, in an effort to look diverse and appear inclusive, often reserve the DEI role for a Black individual – which can potentially be problematic. For example, Clara stated, "In the work of diversity and inclusion where we go wrong from a staffing administrative perspective, is your department is so pressed to have visual diversity and ethnic diversity that you're hiring people that aren't ready?" While the readiness of the new hire can be subjective, her point about making a hire to *appear* diverse deserves critical examination. The centrality of individuals' identities to DEI work can be taken advantage of by hiring committees in pursuit of diversity optics, which can potentially happen at the expense of the person hired. Rico discussed how he "thinks athletic departments see DEI work as a checklist – not very vested in it and depend so heavily on People of Color, specifically Black people, to advance social justice." Interestingly, Clara commented how she has observed racially minoritized individuals being hired into roles with limited career advancement – specifically to the role of athletic director. She shared that "a lot of people in senior staff roles, if they are People of Color, they are still sitting in that compliance or student services role. Statistically, those people aren't necessarily rising up to AD roles."

Jabari also shared that holding one or more minoritized identities is crucial to his job, yet he was clear that DEI roles "aren't the only roles that Black folk and folks of Color are qualified to do in athletics." Jabari was one of the participants who was problematizing an over-emphasis on his identity alone. He concluded by sharing, "We need to show People of Color that college athletics appreciates them in roles other than just diversity and inclusion." Pete, echoing Jabari's frustration, shared that someone's race should not mean that they are automatically assigned to work on DEI-related tasks. Viewing those from racially minoritized backgrounds as the ideal individuals responsible for DEI work can lead to identity-based exhaustion for those professionals otherwise referred to in the literature as *cultural taxation* (Padilla, 1994). This sense of exhaustion emerging from navigating predominantly white spaces was also mirrored by Peyton's experience. When discussing how her athletic department treats her, she shared:

> … how they treat me as a Black woman is just asinine. It's ironic that here we are, pushing all these things and putting all these programs out and all these things but it's like, "You haven't taken a step back to talk to me about how I experience this place as a Black woman

under your leadership and it has been far from pleasant." This work can take people out. It's been a lot.

Her words clearly reflect frustration with how her athletics department is moving ahead with several initiatives – which she is expected to spearhead – without first attempting to understand her experience working there. Despite these frustrations, participants knew the power their presence held in their respective departments. Although the work can be draining, this 'if not me, then who' mentality is at the forefront of why several participants have decided to engage in DEI-related work. For instance, Juan commented, "Well, because if you don't do it, who else is going to do it, right? That's the reality and the importance of it." Statements such as this demonstrate the immense value participants saw in the identities they held, which then became central to their engagement in DEI work.

Theme #3: Navigating Tensions Within the Organization

Whereas Clark stated that he wanted to dismantle the system by "burning it down," the majority of participants spoke to the tensions they experienced within their respective organizations, especially when it came to pushing boundaries while operating *within* an inequitable and inherently racist society The participants noted how they stressed to their colleagues that their athletic departments have the ability to serve as spaces where DEI conversations can and should take place – rather than viewing sport as an apolitical environment where one just 'plays ball' and separates themselves from the ongoing national dialogue. Pointing to tension emerging from polarization within the political sphere, Clara shared that DEI work is typically viewed as a "liberal" activity, so DEI professionals must prepare themselves for possible pushback, especially from conservative voices. In a politically combative culture, liberals and conservatives are often at odds with one another, which means that DEI work has been heavily politicized. Clara echoed this when she said, "It's like you're either liberal or you're the enemy" for some, which can make DEI a politicized topic rather than one that is rooted in dignity and fundamental human rights. Clark added, "I'm in a very conservative place and I know that. If I do step on the gas a little bit too much, I might lose a lot of the momentum." As such, he aptly captured the tension that could arise between his progressive work and the more conservative surroundings he was in, i.e., both the physical community and the institutional context itself.

Further tension became evident when participants questioned the sincerity of the department's investment in DEI work, as leadership's (performative) commitment to DEI was sometimes jeopardized by their limited understanding of what action needed to happen for DEI to be embraced. Several participants highlighted how they exist in roles that were created to look good on paper, but a sincere commitment from their athletic departments to changing the inequitable systems they exist in is still needed. Peyton shared, "I almost view myself as like an honorary pop star … They want to show we're doing all these great things, but they're not willing to make the changes that need to be made." Alice believes that two potential reasons for the lack of commitment to change are that "the value of DEI" and "what valuing DEI means to an athletic department" are still unknown to some. Even if there is support, truly understanding what DEI work involves (and requires) may be missing. Clark explained:

> I think that they [the administration] have been supportive. I don't think that they know how the role operates … Like if I were to ask all of my senior staff what my day-to-day looks like, the vast majority cannot tell me.

Clearly, DEI professionals are responsible for both their athletic department's DEI initiatives *and* educating their colleagues on how changing systems via such initiatives benefits the organization.

Of course, even if the administration provides DEI professionals with the necessary resources, it is still important for every coach and administrator to support DEI programming. This reflects another potential source of friction for the racially minoritized staff, given the rest of their athletics departments tended to be overwhelmingly white. Pete stated, "You always have to get it [support]." Paulson added, "It's pretty easy now, but it took a while." In recognizing the importance of support from white (or otherwise privileged) peers, Clark articulated, "I think there needs to be a stronger emphasis on communicating with our coaches and staff, but I also think that there needs to be a shift in the culture of departments and institutions in order to do that." If the culture is one that does not engage with the DEI staff member, Juan might know why. He bluntly stated, "To tell you the truth, I think they're frightened. I think they're frightened of what I'm going to tell them, but that's the reality." Here, Juan points to the fact that pushing boundaries often makes privileged people uncomfortable – yet it was a necessary component in the work of the racially minoritized participants.

Finally, Betsy highlighted the importance of allies in helping relieve some of the tensions created by intentionally disruptive DEI work. She noted that "it's important for people in diversity and inclusion roles to not just be [minoritized] or women, but also for them to have support of [non-minoritized] individuals, especially for white men specifically to be allies." One advantage to having allies, at least in Betsy's case, is that they can provide support and help call out harmful stereotypes should they occur: "I used to get afraid when I was giving presentations that I would have come off as an angry Black woman. … It's definitely helpful to have those allies support you." Betsy reinforced that having allies in the room, namely those who are outspoken, affirmed her as a DEI professional, especially when that work put her in a position where others may have projected racist stereotypes, such as the "angry Black woman" stereotype that scholars have found Black women face in the context of intercollegiate athletics (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017; Keaton, 2022). Participants indicated that they are constantly left to navigate tensions in and across college athletics because of the systemic underpinnings of racist institutions that perpetuate stereotypes of racially minoritized individuals and silo them accordingly.

Theme #4: Looking to the Future with Both Optimism and Skepticism

The fourth and final theme that we identified in the data was one of cautious optimism and healthy skepticism that participants had when it came to discussing the future of their profession and DEI work in college athletics. Some of the sub-themes within this overarching theme included references to the increases in the number of DEI positions that have opened within the past couple of years and how national events have led to greater interest in DEI work. Regarding the increase in job postings, Peyton remarked that DEI positions "are popping up like daisies." Stephanie echoed that at her institution "We are in the process of hiring a chief diversity officer for athletics … it's great that we're creating these positions." While Stephanie points to the importance of the

creation of these positions, it is important to make a steadfast commitment beyond hiring DEI professionals in order for meaningful transformation to occur in this space. Pete underlined that while he was cautiously optimistic, he also recalled that there had been moments before where DEI was centered, yet some of that momentum was lost:

> This is cyclical, too, because I remember when I was at [institution redacted], that's the time when Obama was the president. It was cool to have more people, more diversity, diversity was the buzzword … everybody wanted to be diverse, and everybody wanted to have different people at the table.

In terms of how institutional environments may advance to promote DEI, Frank hoped that "by 2025 … there is not only evolution but evidence that real change has happened on major college campuses because of where we are right now with the pandemic and the state of the nation." Of note, similar to Pete, he extensively discussed how the 2020 election would likely impact whether real change would be realized by 2025. Examples like these demonstrate cautious optimism among the participants; however, that optimism was often paired with healthy skepticism, as the quotes by Pete and Frank demonstrate.

For some of the racially minoritized participants, the sense of optimism manifested in the ways they articulated how the field may evolve in the future. Clark, for example, hoped DEI would be used as a tool to evaluate teams in order to assess successes and shortcomings. He stated, "I would hope that in the next 5 to 10 years, you see a shift in how we're using [DEI] to more critically look at how our teams are being run or how our departments are being run." However, participants pointed out that athletics departments must be critical of their motivations. Betsy, for example, observed that "a lot of people are doing diversity and inclusion because it's trendy and without stopping to think, 'Why are we actually doing this and what does it mean for our specific institution?'" For the participants, this "trend" was an opportunity for systemic change, yet they were skeptical about whether that trend was sustainable enough to lead to transformative change. As Peyton remarked, the new commitment to DEI was a "real great opportunity to make what we do meaningful and actionable and not just leave it at words." Stephanie added that there is power in performative support because "in some ways they've [athletic departments] been pushed to be supportive." This has led to a shift in athletics culture where, as Juan emphasized, "you can no longer be a bystander in today's society. Colleges/universities, athletics, and athletic directors cannot be the same old bystander. I see tons of people, lots of training, lots of hiring, and lots of opportunities for people."

Subsequently, the increased interest in DEI work has led to a greater understanding of the work from athletics stakeholders, e.g., players, coaches, and administrators. Stephanie noted:

> I think there is a lot of room to do some new things. I've had some students say, "Well, how do we connect with more Black businesses as our sponsors?" I think we'll start to see that grow across the country. I'm actually excited about where we can go but I also feel like we need to be cautious and do it in a strategic way so that it doesn't get out of hand and that we don't lose the focus of why this has all started.

Pete, in addition, explained that "you're going to see a lot more intentionality, because you can't justify having basically an all-Black football or basketball team, and not have people advocating for them." As Peyton put it, he was optimistic that he was able to push athletics stakeholders to "utilize this momentum to not just say what they want to do but put action to it." The racially minoritized participants' insights show that they experience DEI work as a complex endeavor, one that requires one to shift between moments of optimism and skepticism, depending on institutional context and broader socio-cultural climate (Keaton, 2020).

Discussion

The social justice movement during the summer of 2020 impacted virtually all aspects of the sports industry, including intercollegiate athletics departments (Swim et al., 2022). The participants in this study spoke extensively on how their experience as members of racially or ethnically minoritized groups influenced how they navigated their professional lives as staff members charged with driving DEI efforts. Whether athletics departments were embracing DEI work "because it was trendy" (Betsy) or "because they've been pushed to be supportive" (Stephanie), many departments issued press releases and developed DEI statements to show their support for, and commitment to, improving racial justice (McKenzie, 2020). This was largely due to external pressures emerging in a socio-cultural climate that increasingly centered considerations of DEI in public discourse (Keaton, 2020). The current study adds to the emerging research on how DEI professionals with minoritized identities navigate collegiate athletics spaces (Keaton, 2022; Kluch et al., 2022; Wright-Mair et al., 2021; Swim et al., 2022). It provides further empirical understanding of how such sport professionals make meaning of a hegemonic order that marginalizes them as they push for systemic change in an industry that continues to perpetuate persistent barriers to DEI.

In line with Keaton's (2022) findings on Black women diversity leaders in college sport, our study shows that racially minoritized staff charged with DEI action draw heavily from their own lived experience in white spaces to inform their work as DEI professionals. Participants spoke passionately about how their racial identities drive their work within the space, which is a finding similar to Keaton's (2022) examination. Given the majority of our participants were men, our findings show that the racially minoritized men in this study drew from their identities to make sense of their experiences, similar to the Black women diversity leaders in Keaton's study. Interestingly, participants in this study also mentioned ways in which their racial identities informed their hiring in the first place, which calls attention to racialized hiring practices within college sport. Research continues to show the historical exclusion of racially minoritized groups in sport leadership due to whiteness as the hegemonic norm (Lapchick, 2021), so the fact that participants recalled examples of being recruited (and hired) into their positions may be viewed by some as positive progress – especially if the hire resides structurally on the senior leadership team of the department. However, such hiring cannot take away from the need to diversify leadership beyond DEI positions. In other words, racially minoritized individuals must not be limited to senior leadership positions focused on DEI; instead, athletic departments must be intentional and sincere in their commitment to increasing racial diversity across the leadership team.

Furthermore, the increased interest in DEI work became an opportunity for participants to have conversations with individuals within their athletic departments and on their campus. It is

worth mentioning that the 2020 presidential election and political ideologies, e.g., conservative versus liberal, were brought up by at least one-third of the interviewees. In his discussion of racial issues in sport, Cunningham (2019) described how political climate is a macro-level (i.e., societal) factor that can contribute to DEI barriers and opportunities at the meso-level (i.e., organizational) or micro-level (i.e., individual). He wrote that "prevailing political attitudes and the related policies can influence a number of sport and health outcomes, such as funding for sport activities" (p. 101). Additionally, several studies have reinforced how political attitudes are associated with a host of diversity-related attitudes and behaviors, including those toward affirmative action, educational opportunities, and social justice activities (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Leath & Chavous, 2017; Sidanius et al., 1996). The results of this study provide further insight into the role political climates can play when it comes to their impact on DEI work. For example, participants spoke about how DEI work is sometimes heavily politicized, which may impact the perceptions others have of DEI professionals, e.g., as 'troublemakers' rather than change agents. This is particularly important in times when multiple states, such as Texas and Florida, have launched legislative attacks on DEI work. Given participants' motivations were often rooted in a desire to push for change, those wanting to help these individuals need to be aware that their support is going to be even more crucial in spaces where DEI work is heavily politicized.

The sudden increase in professional positions for DEI in intercollegiate athletics suggests a move in a positive direction, hence the optimistic tones in participants' insights. But, participants highlighted several struggles that should be addressed in order for them to engage in meaningful work and promote transformative change. Bimper and Harrison (2017) found that most college athletic departments are reactionary in their approach to social injustices and have therefore avoided making significant structural changes to prioritize and embed DEI into their departments – a sentiment that was shared by the participants in this study. The participants navigated multiple tensions, and an at times hostile climates, within their work environments by pushing the boundaries from within the system. These tensions were often informed by the fact that their departments were putting the burden of pushing for change on the DEI professionals alone. While this makes participants' optimism and overall resilience all the more impressive, athletic administrators must prioritize working DEI into the core of their units by "…invest[ing] energies, such as departmental think tanks or visioning retreats with department leadership, to constructively problematize, reconstruct and reposition departmental directives to effectively communicate the salience and priority of their organization–stakeholder relationships" (Bimper & Harrison, 2017, p. 14). Only when DEI becomes part of everyone's agenda, especially that of departmental leadership, can athletic departments move beyond the symbolic and performative nature of most DEI work (Keaton & Cooper, 2022) to meaningfully advance systemic change. Indeed, the fact that participants looked to the future with both optimism and skepticism points to increasing perceptions of DEI work as performative rather than substantiative.

A key question, then, remains to what extent athletic departments can move beyond "the illusion of inclusion" (Heilig et al., 2012, p. 403), the performative DEI work often found in sport (Spaaij et al., 2018), and higher education at large (Ahmed, 2007; Brayboy, 2003; De Welde, 2017; Museus, 2014; Ray, 2019; Williams, 2006). For one, athletic administrators should – as part of making DEI a core practice of their athletic department – mandate that athletes, coaches, and administrators incorporate DEI-related efforts into their daily operations, organizational practices, and performance management goals. Informed by a comprehensive DEI strategy, such efforts

could counteract the development of a *check the box mentality* and provide DEI professional with supporters committed to transformational allyship (Jolly et al., 2021). Finally, it could lessen the tendency of those holding privileged identities to tokenize racially minoritized individuals by viewing them as representatives of an entire minoritized group (Howe & Rockhill, 2020).

Conclusion

Several intriguing future research areas emerge from the limitations of this study. First, the majority of our sample worked at NCAA Division I institutions, but there may be unique challenges faced by racially minoritized DEI professionals at the Division II and III levels. Second, this examination focused on racially minoritized individuals – the majority of whom were men. Subsequent analyses could benefit from an intentional focus to examine how the intersection of specific identities (and how the individuals holding such identities navigate the interlocking systems of oppression) affects DEI work in intercollegiate athletics. Their experiences need to be highlighted and elevated, especially in an industry as homogenous as intercollegiate sport. Third, as athletic departments move towards embracing DEI programming, surveying members of the athletics community, e.g., athletes and coaches, to understand their unique needs is important for DEI professionals to utilize as a launching pad for new initiatives. Finally, this study is tied to a specific context in sport, i.e., intercollegiate athletics, but there are other sporting spaces that will benefit from strategic DEI work, such as professional sport, interscholastic sport, or Olympic and Paralympic sport. Future research should examine the experiences in those spaces to advance DEI in sport on a variety of levels.

To close, this study aimed to understand the experiences of 16 racially minoritized DEI professionals in intercollegiate sports. The participants shared that their motivations for working as DEI professionals in collegiate sport include wanting to mentor athletes and serve as agents of change for diversity, equity, and inclusion work. The racial identity of the interviewees significantly influenced what they do and how they are perceived. Despite the many struggles they face, participants continuously show up and dedicate themselves to advancing DEI across their respective athletic departments and institutions. They recognize that in order to continue in their current roles and be successful, they need resources and support from leadership. Leadership must do their part to remove barriers to DEI so that all stakeholders in athletics – from athletes to coaches and administrators – can assist DEI professionals in leaving legacies centering DEI across intercollegiate athletics.

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