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Abstract: The National Basketball Association (NBA) is a high-performance environment characterized by global visibility and a demanding culture that often leads to significant professional and personal stress for its coaching staff. While the league is celebrated for its player diversity, leadership roles in coaching and management remain disproportionately held by White males. Guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, this study employed semi-structured interviews to investigate the career advancement experiences and perceived barriers faced by 11 minority assistant coaches in the NBA. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis and four primary themes were developed: (a) Inequity and the "Moving Goalpost" of Career Advancement, where social capital and new gatekeeping mechanisms such as analytics-based language often hinder upward mobility; (b) Being Stereotyped and Emotional Suppression, requiring coaches to engage in hyper-vigilance and suppress frustration to avoid labels such as the "angry Black man"; (c) Role Entrapment and the "Watchdog" Narrative, where participants felt pigeonholed into relational or player-management roles rather than tactical leadership positions; and (d) The Burden of Representation ("Healthy Pressure"), which was characterized by an internalized responsibility to succeed as a trailblazer for other minority coaches. These findings highlight the ongoing impact of race on individuals' experiences and the scarcity of legitimate leadership roles within the NBA. Recommendations include structural changes, such as transparent hiring criteria and intentional mentorship, that foster more equitable leadership pathways in professional sport.

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NBA Minority Coach

Abstract

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The National Basketball Association (NBA) represents the pinnacle of professional basketball, characterized by global visibility, immense financial stakes, and a demanding performance-oriented culture. Within this competitive environment, coaches operate under precarious conditions defined by job insecurity, extensive travel, and long work hours that blur boundaries between professional obligations and personal life [1]. Recent scholarship has documented the psychological toll of these demands, noting how the high-performance ecosystem fosters stress, burnout, and significant work-family conflict [2,3]. Family systems may buffer these stressors, but can also become sources of tension as coaches attempt to maintain domestic stability amidst the league's chaotic rhythms [1].

To date, much of the existing research on coaching stress has adopted a perspective that overlooks racialized differences in how coaches experience job performance pressures, perhaps because the field has historically prioritized generalized stress models and failed to integrate critical considerations of race and culture into analyses of professional coaching environments. This assumption ignores the specific sociocultural realities of the NBA, a league in which approximately seventy-five percent of players are Black. However, head coaching and executive leadership roles have historically been predominantly held by White individuals [4]. Studies indicate that racial minority coaches (i.e., those who are not White/Caucasian from the United States) face distinct systemic barriers not encountered by their White counterparts, including stricter hiring criteria, shorter tenures, and a lower likelihood of reemployment following dismissal [5]. Research also suggests that implicit bias continues to influence decision-making in

professional basketball, affecting evaluations of coaching competence and performance [6].

Racial Inequity in Sport Leadership

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that leadership in sport remains disproportionately White despite demographic shifts among athletes [7-9]. Scholars have documented persistent racial inequities across sports organizations, even when athlete demographics suggest greater diversity in coaching and administrative roles [10, 11]. Singer [12] reported that minority coaches are often clustered in roles associated with relational or on-court labor rather than positions that confer strategic influence or organizational authority. These patterns reinforce the perception that minority coaches are better suited to relationship-focused tasks. At the same time, head coaching roles remain aligned with attributes historically associated with whiteness, such as intellectual leadership and executive decision-making [13].

Hiring and promotion processes frequently rely on informal networks that reproduce racial homogeneity. Cunningham [10] demonstrated that decision makers often rely on personal connections and trust-based professional relationships. The historical dominance of White coaches and executives has resulted in racially homogenous networks that systematically restrict access to opportunity for others. Recent research suggests that promotion to higher coaching levels is influenced by birth country; those born outside the United States are less likely to be promoted [14]. Turick and colleagues [15] found that minority coaches receive less transparent feedback from supervisors, have reduced access to influential networks, and encounter ambiguous or inconsistent advancement pathways. These conditions contribute to perceptions that promotion-based decisions are shaped not only by competence but also by racialized evaluations of trust, leadership potential, and cultural fit.

Experiences of Minority Coaches in the NBA

Being a minority coach can bring perspectives shaped by lived experience and cultural context that may contribute to more inclusive practices, potentially strengthening cohesion, communication, and relational trust within teams, and supporting holistic athlete development and overall organizational effectiveness [16]. However, these benefits may not be passed on to the coach. For minority assistant coaches, the universal stressors associated with NBA coaching [2] are compounded by the fatigue of navigating a professional landscape in which their legitimacy is often questioned and their access to leadership opportunities is constrained by gatekeeping networks [17]. Research indicates that minority coaches frequently feel pressure to exceed expectations to counter stereotypes about their readiness for leadership or strategic expertise [16].

Isolation is a recurring theme in this literature. Not only do international athletes report feeling isolated or less included [14], but Singer and Cunningham [18] found that minority coaches often work in environments with few colleagues of similar backgrounds, resulting in limited access to mentorship and supportive professional relationships. This isolation can lead to job dissatisfaction and reinforce the perception that advancement is less attainable. Ambiguity surrounding promotion criteria further complicates these experiences. Turick et al. [15] noted that minority coaches regularly receive inconsistent or limited guidance related to advancement, placing them at a disadvantage in competitive promotion processes.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

To make our analytical approach transparent, we briefly outline the principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT) applied in this study. CRT challenges the notion that organizations are race-neutral and emphasizes that racism is often embedded in structural and cultural practices [19,20].

Specifically, we focus on two tenets: (1) counter-storytelling, which centers the lived experiences of minority coaches as evidence of systemic inequity, and (2) interest convergence, which helps interpret organizational policies that appear neutral or progressive but maintain existing power hierarchies [19-21]. For conceptual clarity, we adopt Ward et al.'s [39] definition of expertise as adaptive, context-specific decision-making and distinguish it from related constructs such as competence, knowledge, or relational capacity, which are used more precisely throughout the manuscript. While we retain the term "expertise," it is important to acknowledge a conceptual tension between its use and Critical Race Theory's critiques of meritocracy, as what is recognized as expertise may be shaped by dominant norms and power structures rather than being entirely neutral or objective.

In this study, the analytic evidence included participants' narratives, which were interpreted as counter-stories that illustrated how routine organizational processes may reproduce racial inequities. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns and meanings to be generated from the data. Critical Race Theory functioned as a sensitizing lens during the interpretation and development of themes, informing how patterns were understood within the broader sociopolitical context of professional sport. This approach ensures that conceptual claims remain grounded in the data while being interpreted through a theoretically informed perspective, allowing readers to evaluate how analytic interpretations were developed.

Understanding the lived experiences of minority coaches necessitates an analytical approach that centers on race and interrogates the structures of power. Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers such a framework. Originating in legal scholarship, CRT challenges meritocratic assumptions by exposing how racism is embedded in institutional structures, shaping opportunities and outcomes even in spaces that claim neutrality [20]. In sport contexts, CRT

provides tools for examining how racial hierarchies persist even in organizations that publicly celebrate diversity [19].

This study draws specifically on the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is not merely illustrative but functions as a critical analytic tool that interrogates how power, race, and ideology operate within organizational structures. Dominant narratives in sport often portray hiring, firing, and promotion as objective and race-neutral. In contrast, counter-storytelling values the experiential knowledge of people of color and seeks to reveal the subtle mechanisms that sustain inequity [21]. Situating coaches' narratives within broader institutional and historical contexts, counter-storytelling exposes how policies presented as neutral and objective, as well as practices (i.e., actions), are embedded within racialized power relations. By centering the narratives of minority coaches, this study challenges assumptions about fairness and highlights how routine organizational processes may sustain racial disparities in coaching leadership [12].

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

Using CRT as the driving theoretical framework, this study examined the experiences of eleven minority assistant coaches in the NBA. The purpose of this study was to explore coaches' experiences of organizational stress, with a particular focus on how race may influence professional expectations, identity negotiation, and career trajectories. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do minority assistant coaches perceive and experience barriers to career advancement within the NBA?

RQ2. How do minority NBA assistant coaches cope with and navigate these barriers and expectations in their professional lives?

Method

This study is situated within an interpretivist philosophical position, which assumes that social reality is multiple, contextual, and constructed through individuals' meanings and interactions [22]. From an interpretivist standpoint, knowledge is generated by exploring how participants understand and interpret their lived experiences, rather than by seeking objective or generalizable truths [23]. This position aligns with CRT in that both prioritize the experiential knowledge of marginalized groups and challenge claims of neutrality within social and organizational processes. By centering the narratives of minority NBA assistant coaches, the study acknowledges that experiences of stress, opportunity, and career advancement are interpreted through racialized contexts that shape meaning-making. The use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis align methodologically, as both approaches recognize the researcher's active role in interpreting participants' accounts and emphasize reflexivity in the construction of knowledge.

Participants

Participants ($N = 11$) were selected using purposeful sampling to include minority NBA assistant coaches (i.e., non-White). Participants were selected from those who had worked for at least one season and were under contract with an NBA team at the time of data collection. All participants were male and identified as African American or Black ($n = 8$), International ($n = 2$), or Hispanic ($n = 1$). Participants were, on average, 37.25 years of age ($SD = 3.2$, Range = 31-48) and had been assistant coaches in the NBA for an average of 5.08 years ($SD = 2.81$, Range = 2-9). Concerning education, one was a high school graduate, seven had a bachelor's degree, two had a master's degree, and one did not report their education level. For the two international

participants, we considered how their racialized experiences intersected with their nationality, acknowledging that working in the NBA involved both race- and culture-specific dynamics.

Instruments

As part of a larger study on stress and burnout in coaching (see [2]), data were collected through one-on-one online semi-structured interviews using Zoom, employing open-ended questions to elicit in-depth responses that reflected participants' experiences and perceptions [24]. Open-ended questions explored a range of topics related to stress, burnout, and coping strategies. For example, questions included "*Do your aspirations for promotion or advancement add to your stress? If so, how do they cause stress?*" "*Does being a minority add to your stress? If so, how?*", and "*Does the organization you work for provide any specific methods for helping you deal with stressors that occur as part of your job?*" The interviewer was a member of the research team with extensive experience as a player and coach in the NBA.

Procedure

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and a pilot study with an assistant coach, 21 prospective participants were contacted via email or phone, and 20 agreed to participate. Of these, 11 self-identified as non-White or non-USA born.

Before data collection commenced, participants submitted signed informed consent forms electronically via email. To ensure a high response rate among the specialized population of NBA assistant coaches, recruitment was conducted via email and telephone, depending on each participant's accessibility and convenience. This diversified recruitment strategy is supported in qualitative methodology as a means of reaching purposive samples with varying communication preferences and demanding professional schedules [25].

The interviewer, who was also part of the research team, was a former NBA player and,

at the time of data collection, a male NBA assistant coach. His familiarity with the profession allowed him to help recruit the convenience sample, establish rapport quickly, and provide a sense of ease during the interviews. To encourage depth and clarity in the data, the interviewer provided participants with the primary interview questions at least 48 hours before the scheduled meeting. Sharing questions in advance is a recognized technique in sports-based qualitative research for allowing participants sufficient time for reflection [26]. All interviews were held virtually on Zoom and audio-recorded for analysis. The interviews lasted an average of 67.76 minutes (SD = 9.01) with durations ranging from 45 to 120 minutes.

The data collection phase lasted five months. A secure service (Rev) professionally transcribed all recordings. Prior to transcription, all identifying information was removed or replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity. To ensure data integrity, the researcher audited all transcripts against the original audio files, both before and after professional transcription, to confirm the accuracy of the responses.

Data Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to construct meaningful patterns and themes, following the updated values-based framework and reporting guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke [27]. This methodology was selected for its theoretical flexibility and for recognizing the researcher's subjectivity as a primary tool for meaning-making (i.e., generating themes), rather than a potential source of bias to be eliminated. Reporting of the analytic process was guided by recent values-based qualitative reporting recommendations emphasizing methodological congruence and reflexive transparency [28].

The first phase involved recursive data immersion and familiarization, where we engaged with the transcripts to move beyond surface-level descriptions and begin identifying latent

meanings alongside semantic patterns. In the second phase, we developed initial latent codes through an organic, researcher-led process, identifying significant keywords and data extracts that captured the participants' racialized experiences and CRT-relevant patterns. Coding was primarily inductive, but CRT tenets served as sensitizing concepts to inform the identification of patterns related to systemic inequity, racialized leadership expectations, and relational hierarchies. Specific codes identified and actively constructed during this stage included "minority," "Black," "stress," "money," and “culture." Throughout coding, CRT constructs such as interest convergence, epistemological racism, and normalized whiteness were explicitly considered to foreground power dynamics.

During the third phase, we moved from coding to the active construction of themes, looking for shared cores of meaning across the data [27]. This stage involved collaborative interpretive sessions within the research team, not to achieve consensus but to enhance reflexive engagement, explicitly interrogating how each researcher’s identity, positionality, and professional experiences shaped their interpretations of the data. For instance, while references to "minority" appeared at varying frequencies, the team worked iteratively to develop a theme that captured the systemic and structural nature of these experiences in line with CRT principles, rather than treating them as isolated incidents.

In the fourth phase, we engaged in an iterative process to develop and refine the themes, ensuring they offered a rich and complex story of the data. The lead researcher first produced preliminary themes, which were then discussed by the whole team as a reflexive exercise to deepen interpretation rather than to verify or standardize the findings. During refinement, themes were explicitly assessed for alignment with CRT constructs, ensuring they highlighted racialized mechanisms of exclusion, relational hierarchies, and the operation of power within professional

sport.

The fifth phase focused on assigning evocative labels to these themes to capture their conceptual and interpretive essence. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing the integrated Analysis and Discussion section, in which participant voices are woven together with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and existing literature to provide a reflexive account of their lived experiences. Consistent with contemporary qualitative reporting guidance, analytic decisions were documented reflexively to ensure transparency regarding how themes were constructed and interpreted [28].

Quality and Methodological Integrity

In terms of methodological integrity within this study, we wish it to be evaluated using Tracy's [29] "big-tent" criteria. First, the study addresses a worthy topic: the scarcity of academic literature exploring the intersection of race and professional sports coaching. Second, evidence of sincerity is provided through the transparent documentation of our subjective roles in the analytic process. Third, to establish resonance and credibility, we incorporated a high volume of direct quotations, not as "proof" of a single truth, but to provide a rich, multi-layered representation of the coaches' realities. Fourth, meaningful coherence was maintained by ensuring the analysis remained strictly congruent with our CRT philosophical framework and by treating the researchers as "knowing" participants in the study.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team consisted of a professor of coaching, an assistant professor of coaching, and an NBA assistant coach. In accordance with the values of reflexive thematic analysis, we did not seek to "mitigate" our personal experiences; instead, we leveraged them as an interpretive resource. Our "insider" and "outsider" statuses enabled us to navigate the NBA's

unique vernacular and cultural nuances while maintaining a critical academic lens. We explicitly reflected on how our racial identities, career experiences, and professional assumptions shaped what we could see in the data, which patterns we deemed meaningful, and how we constructed interpretations. Through continuous collaborative reflection, we interrogated how our positionalities influenced theme construction, ensuring that the final analysis reflects a transparent, deeply reflexive engagement with the data. CRT served as a guiding framework in these reflexive discussions, informing both the focus of analysis and the interpretation of patterns of inequity and relational dynamics.

Analysis and Discussion

Rather than a traditional "Results" and "Discussion" section, we provide an integrated "Analysis and Discussion" section. This shift reflects the "Big Q" qualitative paradigm [27], which rejects the post-positivist notion that data can be "reported" objectively before being "interpreted." In RTA, the researcher is an active storyteller; meaning is constructed at the intersection of participant narratives, the researcher's professional subjectivities (e.g., as NBA coaches and scholars), and theoretical frameworks like Critical Race Theory (CRT). By weaving data and theory together, we provide the "interpretive depth" required to move beyond surface-level description and toward a critical interrogation of the racialized power structures within the NBA.

The purpose of this study was to examine how minority assistant coaches in the NBA perceived barriers to career advancement and how they navigated these barriers within a racialized professional environment. The analysis illustrated that race continued to shape organizational experiences, emotional labor, and career trajectories despite the league's public commitment to diversity. Collectively, the themes generated through analysis indicated that

minority assistant coaches experienced systemic inequities embedded within institutional norms, informal networks, and racialized expectations of leadership.

Theme 1: Inequity and the "Moving Goalpost" of Career Advancement

Participants characterized the NBA as a stratified environment in which upward mobility is often determined by social capital rather than merit. This "country club" culture served as a significant barrier for minority coaches. Coach 6 explained the difficulty of breaking into these social networks:

> The country club is still the country club, and we ain't invited necessarily. So it makes it even tougher, as things filter from the top governor through the rest of the organization, as to how you get that advancement… We trying to get those positions and get those opportunities as well. And it gets tougher and tougher… my thought was, someone more similar to me, maybe we want someone in charge that is kind of in our likeness.

This quotation was coded under "social network exclusion" and "racialized advancement barriers" because it highlighted both the structural inaccessibility of informal networks and the implicit preference for leaders who resemble the dominant group. During team discussions, we considered alternative readings, including personality fit or coaching philosophy. However, consistent emphasis on race across participants highlighted the explanatory significance of social capital as a racialized mechanism.

Interpreted through CRT, the "country club" metaphor represents epistemological racism, where gatekeeping preserves the legitimacy and authority of the dominant racial group [12].

Consistent with previous scholarship, participants described career advancement as contingent upon access to social capital rather than objective merit [10, 11, 15]. The "moving

goalpost" described by participants mirrored Hill and Remer's [5] findings that minority coaches faced stricter performance thresholds and shorter tenures than their White counterparts. Within the NBA context, this inequity was further intensified by the reliance on informal hiring networks that served as exclusionary gatekeepers. The pattern of repeated references to these networks in the transcripts indicated that participants did not perceive isolated incidents but a systemic barrier. This iterative coding process enabled us to move from descriptive accounts to the conceptual claim that social capital is a site of racialized power within NBA organizations.

The data also suggested that the analytics movement has created a new form of gatekeeping, where tactical expertise is framed in a language that excludes those with traditional playing backgrounds. Coach 4 described this shift: "I think it's because of the analytics world, right? ... And us as experts, a lot of times we don't speak that analytic language as well as some of these other guys who didn't play, who haven't been in that locker room."

This quotation was initially coded as "analytics as coded expertise." The team engaged in a reflexive discussion about alternative interpretations, including generational differences or prior playing experience. However, the pattern of racialized exclusion across multiple participants led us to interpret the statement as a mechanism of interest convergence, where organizational innovations appear neutral but maintain existing power hierarchies favoring White coaches. The pronoun "us" was particularly informative, reflecting a self-identified minority rather than a dominant group, and reinforcing the idea that access to tacit cultural and educational capital mediates career progression. Coach 10 expressed the resulting frustration:

> I mean, you see it every day, guys that should be head coaches in this league and don't get a sniff. You're like, 'But this guy has never coached before.' I mean, when you see that, as a Black coach, that's frustrating and could be a little stressful at times.

This expression of frustration was coded as "emotional response to racialized exclusion." The team noted that this was not simply about personal disappointment but reflected the structural inequity in merit evaluation. By comparing the treatment of minority and White candidates, the participants illuminated a pattern of asymmetrical expectations. CRT framing interprets this as evidence of interest convergence and epistemological racism, where systemic structures define competence in ways that disadvantage minority coaches.

The emergence of analytics as a new marker of intellectual credibility represented an interesting and contemporary extension of these exclusionary practices. We loosely label the term as the use of big data to inform coaching decisions, such as playing time, strategy, and injury predictions. Although analytics was framed as an advancement of the profession, participants perceived it as a coded mechanism that privileged White coaches with access to elite educational pathways and protected entry into leadership roles. This perception was coded as "analytics as coded expertise," reflecting both structural exclusion and the privileging of specific educational/cultural capital. The team discussed alternative explanations, such as generational familiarity or prior playing experience, but the repeated racialized framing across participants indicated that this was not purely individual or idiosyncratic. This finding aligned with CRT's rejection of race neutrality, highlighting how seemingly objective standards may reproduce inequity when embedded in unequal structures [5,20].

From the data, the pronoun "us" and the repeated references to being overlooked despite expertise enabled us to move from descriptive accounts to the conceptual claim that analytics function as a coded mechanism that maintains racial hierarchies. From a CRT perspective, these shifting criteria can be understood as manifestations of interest convergence, whereby organizational change is tolerated only to the extent that it preserves existing power structures

while appearing progressive. Consequently, innovation discourses such as analytics may function less as pathways to equity and more as mechanisms for reconstituting racial hierarchies under the guise of modernization and professionalization.

Ultimately, participants felt that the standards for their advancement are more stringent than those for their White counterparts. Coach 4 pointed to specific hiring examples as evidence of this disparity, noting,

> You see [coach] gets fired in [Team Name]. And then they hire a younger White boy… We don't get that job… They make [White coach with no coaching experience] look like a great coach… Your time may not come as much as 'the White boys do.'

This account was coded as "differential opportunity structures." The team discussed whether this could be interpreted as idiosyncratic organizational behavior, but the repetition of similar accounts across participants indicated a systemic pattern. CRT analysis situates this as a clear example of interest convergence: structural policies and informal practices reward White candidates, reproducing racial hierarchies under the guise of meritocracy.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate that inequity is embedded not merely in isolated hiring decisions but in institutional norms that shape how competence, readiness, and leadership potential are defined. The analytic path from participant words to conceptual claims was guided by recursive coding, pattern recognition across participants, and reflexive discussions of alternative interpretations. This approach ensures that CRT constructs are not merely applied post hoc but emerge from systematic engagement with the data.

Theme 2: Being Stereotyped and Emotional Suppression

The second theme reflected our interpretive understanding of the substantial emotional

labor experienced by minority assistant coaches as they navigated White-dominant organizational spaces. Participants detailed a constant state of hyper-vigilance, often described as "walking on eggshells," to avoid triggering racialized microaggressions. Coach 8 noted:

> I give the example of, you got to be careful expressing your frustrations, or you will be deemed to be an angry Black man automatically. Where our White counterparts get a little bit more latitude when they are frustrated... it took me a long time to realize that in this context, particularly in the Western world, that's deemed too aggressive, too direct... almost appearing rude.

This account was coded as "emotional regulation in response to racialized perception." The team recognized that this was not merely individual self-control but reflected broader organizational norms in which minority coaches must suppress authentic affect to maintain legitimacy. Multiple participants highlighted similar experiences, suggesting a shared structural expectation rather than idiosyncratic coping.

These findings extend earlier work on racialized leadership expectations [16] by illustrating how emotional expression itself has become a site of surveillance and risk. While White coaches were perceived as being afforded latitude to express frustration or assertiveness, minority coaches reported needing to carefully regulate their tone, demeanor, and emotional displays to maintain professional legitimacy [30]. Through coding and pattern comparison, the repeated framing of emotional restraint as a necessary professional strategy allowed us to move from descriptive accounts to the conceptual claim that emotional suppression is a mechanism of racialized organizational control. From a CRT perspective, this reflects the normalization of whiteness as the standard for professionalism and reinforces asymmetrical power dynamics within NBA organizations, contributing to chronic stress and identity dissonance. Over time,

such conditions may exacerbate burnout, particularly when combined with the already demanding nature of professional coaching [1,2].

This forced adaptation creates a profound dissonance between the coaches' authentic selves and their professional personas. This illustrates how racialized norms within professional sport create a socially restrictive environment, in which Black coaches must self-police emotional expression to avoid being read through deficit-based stereotypes that are not equally applied to their White counterparts. Coach 6 provided a stark comparison of the racialized nature of these professional spaces:

> A Black college-educated graduate, even with a master's degree or a doctorate, will always need to know and understand how to navigate in a White man's space, while a White high school dropout will never even have to worry about operating in a Black man's space ever.

This statement was coded as "navigation of racialized professional norms" and exemplifies how the structural expectation to conform emotionally operates asymmetrically across racial groups. In analyzing the data, we observed that participants consistently paired descriptions of restraint with accounts of negative career consequences, suggesting a clear link between emotion management and professional survival.

To maintain their professional standing, many coaches reported internalizing these stressors. Coach 2 shared, "I think that I kind of suppress those feelings, thoughts, emotions, kind of push those to the back so that I can kind of stay in the moment… You don't know how to let that frustration out, because you don't want to come off in a negative light."

The research team interpreted this as evidence that emotional regulation is not merely adaptive but structurally imposed. By comparing these narratives across participants, we

conceptualized emotional suppression as both an interpersonal adaptation and a mechanism through which racialized organizational control is maintained. CRT framing situates these experiences within systemic inequities, highlighting how professional norms are implicitly coded to favor White affective expressions. Emotional regulation, therefore, operates not only as an individual coping strategy but as a structural mechanism that perpetuates racialized hierarchies, reinforcing CRT's emphasis on the institutional embedding of racial inequity [19,20].

Theme 3: Role Entrapment and the "Watchdog" Narrative

Participants reported experiencing role entrapment, in which their value was limited to "player relations" rather than tactical leadership. Coach 8 described this pigeonholing as "suffocating" and being "a Black coach whose role is basically at times to be the watchman, or watchdog for Black players." Interestingly, the ability to connect deeply with players, a skill often expected of them, could simultaneously become a source of professional friction. Coach 8 noted a "jealousy among staff members. When you have the ability to connect with players at a deeper level, but then that ability becomes a threat to your colleagues," and Coach 6 found that:

> Being yourself, being a person, is what the younger players find it easier to talk to and communicate with becomes stressful. Again, because of the threat. Now, all of a sudden, it's threatening, and it's a negative when it should be something that's positive.

This relational focus was coded as "emotional labor as professional currency," reflecting a pattern in which minority coaches were valued for their interpersonal skills but marginalized from strategic decision-making. Importantly, discussions across transcripts revealed that participants perceived this relational competence as a potential threat when it challenged existing staff hierarchies. Rather than being recognized solely as a leadership asset, strong player

connections were sometimes interpreted by colleagues as a liability, highlighting the paradoxical nature of these skills. We noted that relational competence could paradoxically serve both as a source of professional recognition and as a site of structural constraint. From a CRT lens, this demonstrates occupational containment: inclusion in relational domains coexists with exclusion from formal authority, perpetuating racialized assumptions about leadership competence [19,20,31].

This finding aligned with more recent research demonstrating that racialized minority coaches were frequently steered toward roles emphasizing emotional and relational labor, while being marginalized from decision-making authority and pathways to senior leadership [30]. The patterning across interviews suggested a consistent organizational logic: relational closeness with players is expected of minority coaches, yet this same closeness can trigger perceptions of threat among colleagues, reinforcing racialized hierarchies.

Participants also identified a lack of diverse representation in support roles that could mitigate this isolation. Coach 9 suggested that having

> an African American woman... someone that can relate, almost be like a mother figure to some of these young Black athletes... I've been a part of a lot of different organizations and always felt there was a lack of that connection.

This statement was coded as “absence of racially congruent support,” highlighting structural gaps in mentorship and relational resources. Analytically, the lack of such support functions to reinforce the containment of minority coaches within relational roles is consistent with CRT’s focus on institutionalized racial disadvantage. By foregrounding this absence, participants’ accounts serve as counter-storytelling, challenging dominant organizational narratives that portray existing support structures as sufficient or neutral [19,20].

From a CRT standpoint, role entrapment reflects occupational containment, whereby inclusion within relational functions coexists with exclusion from strategic authority. This duality illustrates how racialized expectations shape which leadership domains are considered legitimate for minority coaches, producing both visible and subtle barriers to advancement.

Theme 4: The Burden of Representation ("Healthy Pressure")

The final theme reflects an internalized responsibility to succeed for the collective's benefit. Coach 1 described this as "healthy pressure," stating, “I don't think it's stress that's coming from me. I think for me it's a healthy pressure to like do a good job, because again, I'm the first [name of country] ever to coach on the bench in the NBA.” This trailblazer mentality serves as a powerful motivator, where success is viewed as a way to validate the competency of all minority coaches. Coach 1 continued: “I just represent my family, represent myself to the best of my ability. And if I do that, I think it's just going to open up more doors, hopefully for others.”

Despite the positive framing of this pressure, it was perceived that White coaches do not carry this same burden. Coaches felt they must remain perfectly prepared to ensure they do not close doors for those who follow. Coach 9 noted that the pressure “comes more so from being prepared when an opportunity comes... for me to get a head coaching interview... or being on the front of a bench.” This sense of duty ultimately informs their long-term career goals. As Coach 10 concluded, the best way to handle the environment is to “try to be a cog in someone else's advancement, I think, because you know how hard it is.” Coach 4 stated that “You got to pay your dues before you get what you deserve... Your time will come... keep grinding.”

This sense of representation was coded as “collective responsibility as professional motivation.” The research team interpreted these narratives not only as individual resilience but

also as evidence of systemic inequities that impose heightened expectations on minority coaches. The coding process involved iteratively comparing accounts across participants, highlighting how "healthy pressure" is simultaneously a source of empowerment and an additional burden not experienced by White coaches. CRT framing situates this burden within the logic of interest convergence, where minority success is celebrated only to the extent that it upholds the league's image of inclusivity while maintaining existing racial hierarchies.

These narratives were interpreted as counter-stories that illustrate how meritocratic ideals in coaching are unevenly experienced, with minority coaches internalizing a collective responsibility to perform in ways that extend beyond individual career advancement. These findings align with recent empirical evidence indicating that Black coaches often experience heightened emotional and psychological burdens associated with maintaining leadership roles and challenging prevailing assumptions about competence in sport contexts [32]. Although framed as "healthy pressure," this burden represented an additional psychological demand not shared equally by White coaches. Alternative readings were considered, including the possibility that some participants might internalize pressure as a personal ethic rather than a structurally imposed one. However, the consistency of narratives across participants supported the interpretation that these experiences reflect systemic expectations imposed on minority coaches.

It also shaped coping strategies, with participants emphasizing preparation, persistence, and service to others as mechanisms for survival and personal growth. While such strategies reflected resilience, they also underscored the structural inequities that necessitated exceptional effort for equitable recognition. By linking the participants' descriptions to CRT, the team highlighted how these internalized pressures are not merely personal but socially constructed, operating as both a motivator and a mechanism through which racialized professional norms are

reproduced.

Organizational Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's [27] guidance, implications are treated as extensions of the analytic interpretation rather than as detached recommendations. If racialized inequities are embedded within institutional norms, then structural intervention rather than symbolic diversity initiatives is required.

The findings of this study carry important implications for NBA organizations and the broader sport industry. First, the systemic barriers observed among minority assistant coaches in the NBA align with patterns of racialized exclusion documented in other elite sporting contexts. In professional football (soccer) across England, France, and the Netherlands, minority coaches reported limited access to high-level coaching opportunities, continued experiences of racial stereotyping, and an over-reliance on informal networks for advancement, themes consistent with institutionalized racism and whiteness as a normative standard in coaching workplaces [32]. Similarly, contemporary research in men's professional football club academies in England revealed that racialization shapes assessments, representations, and career outcomes for racialized minority coaches, linking these experiences to broader processes of ideological and discursive power embedded in elite sport coaching [33].

In the National Football League (NFL), recent scholarship underscores that race remains a fundamental determinant of opportunities for head coaching and leadership positions, with analyses of hiring since 2013 demonstrating persistent racial homogeneity in leadership despite formal diversity initiatives, challenging narratives of meritocracy in elite league coaching pathways [34,35]. Research also suggests that coaches of color in the NFL face inequitable

advancement opportunities relative to White peers, pointing to racial bias in promotions that constrain access to pathways most directly connected to head coaching roles [34,35].

These comparative insights reinforce the argument that racialized occupational containment, restrictive informal networks, and inequitable professional norms are not unique to the NBA but are systemic features of elite sport environments. At the same time, sport-specific mechanisms, including how tactical expertise is valued and operationalized, shape the particular forms these inequities take across contexts. Situating the NBA findings within the broader elite sport literature deepens the study's interpretive depth. It underscores the utility of CRT for understanding and addressing structural inequities in high-performance coaching.

Second, teams should critically examine hiring and promotion processes to reduce reliance on informal networks that perpetuate racial homogeneity. Transparent criteria for advancement, coupled with documented feedback pathways, may help mitigate the ambiguity described by participants [10,15].

Third, organizations should invest in leadership development programs that formally recognize diverse forms of expertise, including relational competence, cultural knowledge, and experiential insight. In practice, this could include structured mentorship programs pairing emerging coaches with experienced leaders who demonstrate strong interpersonal and culturally responsive skills; workshops or courses on cultural competence and communication strategies; and simulation- or scenario-based training that addresses real-world challenges, such as working effectively within diverse team environments or navigating high-pressure decision-making. These programs should also incorporate 360-degree feedback and reflective practice to help coaches understand how their interpersonal and cultural skills influence team cohesion and performance. By intentionally integrating these competencies into succession planning and

promotion pathways, franchises signal that leadership extends beyond technical or tactical expertise, valuing the relational and cultural dimensions essential to success in the NBA's diverse professional context.

Fourth, mentoring structures should extend beyond informal sponsorship and include intentional cross-race and same-race mentorship opportunities. Prior research has demonstrated that access to mentorship plays a critical role in career advancement for minorities [36] and minority coaches [18]. Providing protected spaces for professional development may also reduce isolation and emotional strain. Griffin et al. [2] recently called on the NBA and the National Basketball Coaches Association (NBCA) to develop minority-based support organizations or mentorship programs.

Finally, organizations should acknowledge emotional labor as a legitimate and enduring occupational requirement within high-performance coaching environments. Recent work by Quick and colleagues [38] has demonstrated that elite-level coaches frequently experience significant emotional strain alongside high-performance expectations. In this context, the development of psychologically safe environments, defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, involves creating organizational conditions in which minority coaches can raise concerns, provide feedback, or challenge decisions without fear of racialized judgment or professional repercussions, even within the inherently high-pressure environment of elite sport [3,14,37,38]. Given the limited evidence on how such environments are created, this should be interpreted cautiously.

That said, establishing such conditions may meaningfully reduce stress and enhance retention by supporting coaches' agency and professional voice. Diversity initiatives that emphasize numerical representation without addressing underlying power relations, voice, and

organizational culture risk reproducing the very inequities they intend to disrupt [15]. To address these structural shortcomings, Baghurst et al. [37] recommended establishing an "athletic consul" within large sports organizations to provide independent support and advocacy. Similarly, the intentional integration of a coach developer role may offer sustained professional and emotional support, contributing to healthier organizational climates and more equitable career pathways for coaches [38].

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged, providing opportunities for future research. Given the specialized and elite nature of NBA assistant coaches, the sample was intentionally small, but this allowed for in-depth, contextually rich exploration rather than broad generalizability. All participants were male, limiting insight into how race intersects with gender in professional basketball coaching.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how minority coaches' experiences evolve, particularly during career transitions, mentorship, and attrition. Comparative studies across professional leagues or between assistant and head coaches may also deepen understanding of how racialized barriers operated at different organizational levels.

Further research should investigate the experiences of women and international coaches of color in professional sport, as well as the perspectives of organizational decision-makers, to interrogate how implicit bias and structural power dynamics influence hiring, promotion, and access to leadership opportunities. Such work would extend the interpretive insights generated here and inform more equitable organizational practices, rather than seeking statistically generalizable outcomes.

Conclusion

This study provided an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of minority assistant coaches in the NBA. Through a CRT lens, findings revealed that race continues to shape access to opportunity, emotional expression, and leadership legitimacy within a league often celebrated for its diversity. Participants navigated systemic barriers that extended beyond individual performance and reflected broader patterns of racialized power and exclusion in sport organizations.

By foregrounding the voices of minority coaches, this study challenged dominant narratives of meritocracy and neutrality within professional basketball. Addressing inequity in coaching leadership requires more than symbolic representation. It demands structural change, intentional accountability, and a willingness to confront how race continues to operate within high-performance sport. Both the NBA and the National Basketball Coaches Association (NBCA) should actively support coaches, especially minority coaches, with greater professional development, networking opportunities, and mentoring schemes.

Statements and Declarations

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Chicago - Concordia (IRB Study #1696697-1)

Consent to participate

Participants signed consent forms prior to participation

Consent for publication

As part of the informed consent process, participants gave consent for publication.

Declaration of conflicting interests

There were no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available by request from the corresponding author.

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