Employees are central to the existence of any organization. As such, their experiences within the work setting carry important implications for establishing and maintaining a satisfied and committed workforce. Within the intercollegiate athletics setting, a great deal of research has examined the experiences of sport coaches, administrators, and athletes, as they relate to personal and professional outcomes (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2003; Inglis et al., 2000; Schrack-Walters et al., 2009). Absent from this literature, however, is any examination of the multi-faceted experiences of intercollegiate strength and conditioning professionals: a population that, according to the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Association, has had a profound impact on college sport over the past three decades. Intercollegiate strength coaches occupy the roles of both coach and administrator and, as such, dedicate anywhere from 10 to 12 hours per day performing their numerous duties (Bruening, 2004; Kitsos & Sell, 2009; Massey et al., 2004). Perhaps most importantly, their fundamental responsibility is to establish and maintain the physical well-being of the entire student-athlete population. Despite this integral role, intercollegiate strength and conditioning coaches have received very little research attention. Thus, despite their dedication to athletes and their vital importance to an athletic department’s sport programs, strength coaches are a silent mystery. The purpose of this query is to provide a voice to these coaches so that they may be better understood by entities both within and outside the athletic department.

An examination of the literature reveals that with few exceptions (e.g., Martinez, 2004; Massey et al., 2004) the majority of investigations within the strength and conditioning field have focused on the athletes who are being trained and the methods employed to train them (e.g., Waldron & Troupe, 2008). While several of these works have addressed the topic of the potential differences between male and female athletes (e.g., Poiss et al., 2004), the limited number of inquiries geared toward the strength coaches themselves have failed to acknowledge the presence of women within the profession (Massey et al.). While a strong majority of strength and conditioning positions are indeed occupied by men (e.g., 84.8% of Division I strength coaches are men; see Lapchick, 2008), there exists a sizable female population that is overlooked. For instance, a recent survey of intercollegiate athletes revealed that male athletes preferred to work with male strength coaches even in the presence of a highly qualified female coach (Magnussen & Rhea, 2009). Findings such as these offer insight into the atmosphere of an intercollegiate weight room as well as suggest that male and female strength coaches may experience their work and work settings differently. Further, they clearly identify the oft overlooked strength and conditioning department as a component of larger, gendered intercollegiate athletic departments (Cunningham, 2008; Hoeber, 2007; Knoppers et al., 1990). As such, the intention of this study is to incorporate the strength and conditioning domain into the sport management literature by investigating the experiences of male and female strength and conditioning professionals within intercollegiate athletic departments, as related to psychological, personal, and professional outcomes.

van Knippenberg et al., (2007) recently noted that the psychological relationship between an individual and the organization in which he or she works is of profound theoretical and practical importance. Indeed, this relationship has been found to influence a variety of job-related and organizational behaviors such as satisfaction, commitment, absenteeism, and the like (e.g., Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Ricetta, 2005). The significance of these findings is twofold. First, outcomes such as these are essential for an organization’s survival. Second, these outcomes have been uniformly identified through the use of two different perspectives and processes; the social exchange perspective and the social identity perspective (van Knippenberg et al., 2007). From the social exchange perspective, the relationships that an employee has with an organization and his or her supervisor(s) (i.e., conduits of the organization; see Levinson, 1965) inform a variety of work-related, psychological, and personal outcomes (Eisenberger et al., 1984). For instance, perceptions of fairness in the distribution of rewards relative to work input would presumably result in positive outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). From the standpoint of social identity theory, the extent to which an individual’s self-concept is constructed of or by an organization’s meanings and interests may also influence behaviors and experiences (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Turner et al., 1987). A positive organizational image therefore has the ability to strengthen an individual’s identification, as he or she will view the
van Kippenberg et al. (2007) noted that the greatest understanding of organizational behavior can be gained by integrating the social exchange and social identity perspectives. In line with this, and in an effort to provide a more complete picture, this inquiry adopts both frameworks. Specifically, a mixed-methods approach, the direction of which has been determined by the literature, will be employed. Hypothesizing that male strength coaches will have more positive experiences than their female counterparts, I will first survey 1000 Division I NCAA male and female head and assistant strength and conditioning coaches via an electronic questionnaire. The males surveyed will be randomly selected, whereas the females, due to their limited number in the field, will be purposefully selected. An initial email will be sent to alert strength and conditioning staff members to alert them to this study. This email will be a detailed account of my research questions, will assure confidentiality, and stress the voluntary nature of participation. One week later, a follow-up email containing a link to the survey instrument. Follow up notifications will be sent out to maximize the response rate. This initial questionnaire will assess demographic information, work relationships, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences related to their individual experiences and strength and conditioning duties. Specifically, items assessing constructs such as organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), job satisfaction (Cammann et al., 1983), life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985), and organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1996) will be assessed. Once an acceptable response rate has been attained (presumably 2 months from initial contact), I will evaluate my data findings using SPSS and follow up on any gender differences (i.e., support for my hypothesis) by conducting semi-structured interviews with an equal number of male and female Division I intercollegiate strength and conditioning professionals. These interviews will allow me to contextualize and delve deeper into the findings obtained in the original survey instrument. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim by me alone. The interview data will undergo several techniques to ensure its credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The implications of these expected findings will provide athletic administrators with a better understanding of these integral, yet often recluse, athletic department members. To the extent that differences emerge between male and female strength coaches, athletic administrators will also have the information needed to apply the various frameworks that suggest ways in which gender inequality within sport organizations can be challenged and changed. Finally, these results will fill a gap in the literature and provide a viable avenue for future inquiries.