While great strides have been made relative to women’s participation opportunities in sport since the implementation of Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2009), sport continues to thrive as an institution that constructs and reinforces hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 1988; Fink, 2008). Sport, as seen in most participation opportunities and presented by most media outlets, provides “daily commonsense, apparent, physical proof that men are naturally superior to women” (Kane, 1995, p. 192). As Willis (1982, p. 117) stated, “running faster, jumping higher, throwing further can be seen – not interpreted. Thus, men’s dominant status in sport is continually reinforced while female athletes and women’s sports are viewed as (naturally) inferior and less exciting (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2009).

However, Kane (1995) took issue with this “binary gender logic” in which sport is viewed as a hierarchy with men always superior to women relative to performance. Instead, she argued, sport should be viewed as a continuum because, in reality, many women can outperform many men in a variety of physical tasks, not just in “naturally feminine” tasks like grace and flexibility. She argues many women can compete with and/or outperform many men in more traditional “male” sports like basketball or baseball. However, because such sports are typically segregated, glimpses of this athletic continuum are rarely seen. If sport were more often shown as a continuum, she argues, it would serve as a powerful mechanism of transformation relative to views of female athletes and women’s sport.

Theberge (1998) used Kane’s “sport as a continuum” idea to analyze elite ice hockey. She interviewed elite female ice hockey players about their experiences playing competitively against an elite men’s team. She found most women viewed playing with the elite men, “not as competition, but as a training session, and in this respect, beneficial” (Theberge, 1998, p. 196). However, a few of the women considered the play “useless” as they were overpowered and frustrated. Yet, the context of the competition was incredibly important. Most of these same elite women also played ice hockey recreationally with men and found their experiences to be enjoyable.

Theberge’s work provides a glimpse of the operation of sport as a continuum and explored women’s experiences of competing in integrated sport settings. However, to date, no research has been undertaken to determine how men are influenced by these integrated settings. In 2006, the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s Committee on Women’s Athletics issued a position statement calling for a ban on the use of male practice players in women’s intercollegiate athletics. They felt this widely used practice took away from female athlete participation opportunities. The ban never came to fruition, however, the controversy surrounding the stand provided anecdotal evidence that male practice players are positively influenced by the experience. Mechelle Voepel, a columnist for ESPN, received emails from male practice players and published portions of eight letters in a column in December 2006 (Voepel, 2006). Each of the players noted how their appreciation of women’s basketball and female athletes increased as a result of their participation. And, perhaps even more importantly, they indicated how their experiences influenced their respect for women outside of the sport context. For example, one player said, “I know that it thoroughly enhanced my college experience and allowed me to appreciate women’s athletics so much more than I had before”. Another indicated, “We male players learned to control our voices, control our anger and control our attitude – but it went further than the gym floor. It affected the way we treat females in general”.

We propose to extend Voepel’s (2006) anecdotal evidence by conducting an empirical examination of the effects of extended integrated playing experiences on male practice players’ attitudes towards female athletes and women’s sports. We have obtained permission to conduct interviews with male practice players (N = 26) for two women’s basketball teams in the Big East conference. A 14-item interview guide will direct the discussions. Questions are designed to elicit the players’ basketball experiences, their attitudes towards women’s basketball and female basketball players, and any changes in their attitudes as a result of their experiences. Semi-structured dyad interviews will be utilized in order to elicit a more meaningful discussion of the interview topics. The interviews will be audio-taped and a second observer will record observations during the interviews. Constant comparative analysis will be utilized to develop, organize, and refine the themes derived from the data. Trustworthiness and
Credibility of the data will be established through individual member checks, the maintenance of a reflective journal, and outside researcher review. For comparison purposes, we will also interview male college students at the same schools who have high school basketball playing experience, but no integrated playing experiences. The 14-item interview guide will be modified to exclude questions regarding the integrated playing experiences; however, all other study methods will be carried out in the same manner with these subjects.

Results will be discussed relative to appropriate theoretical underpinnings and current related literature in order to propose extensions to current theory. Further, practical implications relative to enhancing women's sport derived from the results and imparted from relevant theory will be developed and forwarded. Suggestions for future research will also be discussed.