Understanding the Role of Athletic Participation in Managerial Career Progression: An Evaluation Using Role Congruity Theory

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Social role theory and role congruity theory indicate that women may be subjected to stereotypes that contribute to their under-representation in senior level positions. As a result of gender role stereotyping, female gender roles are perceived as incongruent with the requirements perceived necessary for successful managers and leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In other words, successful managers and leaders are perceived as requiring masculine gender role characteristics. Simultaneously, there is another area of research that indicates girls and women participating in sport are perceived as possessing characteristics outside of their prescriptive and descriptive gender roles; such that female athletes are perceived as possessing more masculine stereotypical gender roles over more feminine stereotypical gender roles (Harrison & Lynch, 2005). Thus, it may be suggested that, as a result of participation in sports, women are able to benefit from the perception of more masculine gender roles and are therefore perceived as having the necessary characteristics to be successful managers and leaders. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to better understand the role of athletic participation in the career progression of women in upper level managerial positions.

Schein (2007) contends that a major barrier to women’s progress within management positions is the result of continued gender stereotyping of the managerial position. Social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000) posits that not only are there expectations regarding the roles men and women occupy, but also that there are qualities and behavioral tendencies believed to be desirable for each gender (Eagly, 1987). Based on gender role expectations, women are ascribed more communal attributes such as being affectionate, helpful, and nurturing, traits that women are believed to possess (i.e., descriptive) and also traits women ‘should’ demonstrate (i.e., prescriptive). Men are ascribed more agentic attributes including being aggressive, dominant, and self-confident, traits men are believed to possess and ‘should’ demonstrate (Eagly, 1987, Eagly & Karau, 2002, Heilman, 2001). In agreement with social role theory, characteristics described as important to managers were perceived to be those same characteristics often associated with men. Leadership ability, desires, responsibility and objectivity were perceived as characteristics important to management and much more likely to be associated with men rather than women (Schein, 2007).

Role congruity theory has been proposed as a framework to explain why women continue to be underrepresented in senior management and leadership positions. As a result of descriptive gender role stereotyping, women are perceived as lacking agentic characteristics that are stereotyped as necessary for successful management and leadership. In addition, when women do engage in leadership behavior and demonstrate agentic characteristics, they suffer the consequences of violating female prescriptive gender roles, and are punished for such violations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Alternatively, within the context of sports participation, research has demonstrated that female athletes were perceived as having both masculine (e.g., active, aggressive) and feminine characteristics (e.g., tactful, sensitive), and more masculine or androgynous gender role orientations (DeWall, Altematt, & Thompson, 2005; Die & Holt, 1989; Harrison & Lynch, 2005). Lantz & Schroeder, 1999).

Previous research has indicated that males receive the benefits of congruent agentic roles; specifically male athletes benefit most from the agentic role of athlete, as male athletes were evaluated as more competent for managerial positions when compared to male non-athletes, female athletes, and female non-athletes with identical educational qualifications (Burton, Grappendorf, Field, Henderson, & Dennis, 2008). However, though female athletes were provided some advantage based on athletic participation, they did not receive the same advantage in competence and hiring preference as male athletes.

Thus, the purpose of the current study was to understand how women who have achieved success in management (i.e., have obtained senior level management positions) perceive their athletic participation to have influenced their career success.

Qualitative research design procedures were followed using semi-structured interviews. This method is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ perceptions of the role of athletic participation on their...
career development (Patton, 1990). Eight women (n = 8) have participated in face-to-face interviews lasting between 45 – 90 minutes. Using a snowball sampling technique additional participants have been identified and will be interviewed for this project.

Initial analysis of the interview data has begun using open coding procedures (Patton, 1990). Two preliminary themes that have emerged from this analysis include: an understanding of the explicit benefits of being an athlete, including working well in a team environment, time management skills, and overcoming adversity. In addition, there is acknowledgment of an implicit benefit to being an athlete, manifest in a different comfort level with male employees (and male senior leaders) and male customers fostered through mutual appreciation of athletics and comfort level in a predominantly male environment.