An Examination of Workplace Social Support for African American Women in Sport

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Workplace social support (i.e., general or specific supportive behaviors that contribute to a person’s physical and mental well-being) is a core dimension of organizational climate that may affect many organizational outcomes, including increased job satisfaction and job tenure (Harris, Winskowski, & Engdahl, 2007), reduced absenteeism and turnover (Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995), lower burnout (Myung-Yong & Harrison, 1998), and decreased depression and anxiety (El-Bassel, Guterman, Bargal, & Su, 1998; Olson & Shultz, 1994). Workplace social support has been categorized into four primary forms: task support (sharing and exchanging work assignments and ideas), career mentoring, coaching (teaching organizational rules and norms), and collegial social support (i.e., instrumental and emotional support; Hill, Bahniuk, Dobos & Rouner, 1989).

Given the importance of workplace social support in enhancing beneficial organizational outcomes, providing this support should be of paramount importance for all employees; however, minorities (e.g., African Americans, Latinos, women) in many professional settings tend to receive less social support in the workplace than majority (e.g., White, male) members (Ibarra, 1995; Thomas & Alderfer, 1989). Reasons advanced for these disparities have focused on structural constraints, such as the limited number of same-race or same-sex social ties, which have been found to be stronger, more intimate and provide more psychosocial support than cross-race or sex ties (Brass, 1985; Ibarra, 1995). Social exclusion has likewise been identified as a constraint to social support (Kanter, 1977; Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998). For example, Sanchez – Hucles (1997), posited that some African American women, in particular, have been excluded from beneficial mentoring and social network relationships. This exclusion has been attributed to them exhibiting attributes such as assertiveness, dominance, and androgyny, which are valued leadership attributes within the dominant culture, but deemed as negative attributes when exhibited by African American women (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997; Thomas, 1989). Additionally, the myth that African American women are doubly advantaged (e.g., hiring process) in the workplace promotes a system where individuals minimize the importance of mentorship and social support for this population (Sanchez-Hucles, 1997). However, the opposite is true, as African American women’s experiences traverse gender and racial issues resulting in experiences of “double jeopardy”.

Therefore, social support may aid African American women in dealing with the realities of double jeopardy experiences, such as racism, sexism, hostile work environments, negative stereotypes, alienation and isolation, lack of minority role models, and cultural insensitivity (Collins, 2000; Giddings, 1984; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998).

Thus, if workplace social support is associated with positive organizational outcomes and is believed to be a highly effective coping mechanism for African American women dealing with negative occupational realities, then research which investigates the actual role and benefits of workplace social support for this population is imperative and must be expanded. Using data collected from an online qualitative questionnaire, the purpose of this paper was to highlight the role and prevalence of workplace social support among African American women in Division I, II, and III intercollegiate athletic departments. Questionnaire items were adapted from Hill et al’s (1989) Mentoring and Communication Support Scale, which measures individual’s levels of career mentoring, coaching, collegial social support, and task support. Results will be discussed relative to the current related literature in order to a) help substantiate the reported benefits and importance of workplace social support for African American women and b) to establish the need for mentors and/or social network groups, which address the needs, interests, and challenges of women of color in sport professions. Suggestions for future research will also be discussed.