

Gender Differences in Interpersonal Networks: An Exploration of Sport Leaders

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(including questions)**

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Problem Statement: The use of networks is increasingly being seen as a viable approach to advance women's careers (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Sullivan, 2011). In sport, the steady progress toward gender equality on the field of play has not matched what has occurred in the boardrooms of national and international sport organizations. Despite efforts to increase the numbers of women holding decision-making roles in sport by organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, National Olympic Committees, and International Federations, little progress in this area has been achieved (Henry & Robinson, 2010). Given the gaps in representation of women in leadership roles in sport organizations, understanding the factors that might influence advancement and promotion is an important step towards equity in the workplace. There is evidence that shows the benefits to diverse and strong networks on performance and career success (Dougherty & Forrett, 2004, Hachen & Davern, 2006) and can also be instrumental in helping gain key access to information, resources and opportunities (Nahapiet & Ghosal, 1998). While this increasing academic focus has been placed on networks as they relate to career advancement, much less is known about the differences in network composition, structure and scope of networks and how networks are used by leaders – women in particular. This study aims to address some of those gaps in the literature. In this research, we explore the differences in networks between women and men in leadership positions in sport organizations. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore and examine composition and structure of networks, relationship characteristics and organizational context of use of those in leadership positions in non-profit sport. We also seek to better understand how networks are perceived and developed and the expected benefits offered by them.

Literature / Theoretical Framing: Given the importance of informal networks in achieving career success (Burt, 1992; Ibarra, 1995), investigating them may help to shed light on the nature of the obstacles and challenges leaders – especially women – face in advancement in the workplace. In the sport management literature, the issue of gender, career advancement, and leadership has been investigated from varying perspectives. Research in the field has focused on wide ranging issues in various sport contexts. For example some have explored how discourses of masculinity and femininity were associated with different roles and perceptions of influence in coaching (Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). Others have focused on the work-family conflict of head coaches with children (Dixon & Bruening, 2007) or the role of motherhood on sport leaders (Leberman & Palmer, 2009). These authors suggest that strong support networks helped these leaders cope with their personal and professional responsibilities. Similarly, Sagas and Cunningham (2004) found that women are more likely to receive fewer returns for their human and social capital investments in the workplace which includes factors such as education and training, and connections with people who have information towards career advancement opportunities respectively. While these critical issues have been investigated in the sport setting, we know little about the role social networks play in leadership and career advancement in sport organizations. Understanding networks is important because they can influence broader organizationally relevant variables such as commitment, satisfaction, and integration.

Social network theories explore how the social structure of relationships around a person influence behavior and beliefs (Metz & Tharenou, 2001). Networking is the development and nurturing of personal and professional relationships to “create a system of information, contact, and support and altogether this is thought to be crucial for career and personal success” (van Emmerik, Euwema, Geschiere, & Schouten, 2006; p. 55). Interconnected networks of individuals have relationship properties that embody causal pressures, and characterizing the type, magnitude and scope of these pressures uncovers dynamics involved in organizational processes such as job satisfaction, attitude toward work, access to information and power. To explain the composition and use of networks among sport leaders, we framed this research on the pillars of Ibarra's Theory of Interpersonal Networks (Ibarra, 1993, 1995; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993). This approach explores how networks (comprised of mentors and supporters) have instrumental value (i.e., job performance and career advancement) as well as expressive value (i.e., psychosocial support (Rothstein & Davey, 1995)) and can be both formal and informal (Ibarra, 1993). Ibarra (1993) also posited the nature and scope of network composition is comprised of a number of variables including homophily or the

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extent to which networking pairs or groups are similar in identity or organizational affiliation, range or the degree to which diversity exists in an interpersonal network (Burt, 1992), strength of ties (Granovetter, 1973) considers the closeness, stability, emotional investment and connection of the relationship, and density or the extensiveness of contact between people. Ibarra (1993) hypothesized that organizational context (numbers of women and minorities employed, hierarchical distribution, turnover and mobility) will constrain or foster network interactions. We explore these dimensions in this study.

Methods: Data was collected via 34 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders in U.S. National Sport Governing Bodies. In total 18 male leaders and 16 female leaders were interviewed. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour and a half and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews focused on three key themes consistent with the framework described above: composition and structure of networks, relationship characteristics, and organizational context. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo which organized the data, facilitated retrieval of coded data, and helped identify emerging patterns in the data.

Initial Results: All interviewees indicated the important role networks have played in their career advancement. Interestingly, male leaders indicated that they felt more comfortable and at ease networking with other males in their organizations and in other sport organizations. Female leaders in sport organizations reported having more heterogeneous networks and shared that this was necessary as there were fewer women to network with at the senior levels. Male leaders also reported developing their relationships by engaging in sport related bonding activities (such as golf). Women described receiving more support and encouragement (emotionally, socially, and psychologically) from their networks than men did. They shared that they relied on a few close confidantes rather than a broader array of connections. Interestingly, for all interviewees, the role networking plays did not seem to be deliberate or strategic for these leaders, but rather an unplanned practice in which they engaged.

Conclusions: This study uncovered the role and importance of the use of social networks as a tool for career development in sport organizations. Given the barriers to diversity and equity demonstrated at the administrative levels in national and international sport governing bodies, uncovering strategies to foster advancement opportunities is essential. In the presentation we will discuss questions for further exploration in this area as well as offer practical recommendations.

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2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

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