Psychological Safety among Women in Sport: The Influence of Status, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

Nicole Melton, Texas Tech University
Nefertiti A. Walker, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Diversity Thursday, June 4, 2015 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Richelieu)

Abstract 2015-068 4:15 PM

Though female participation rates in high school and college sport has increased considerably since the passage of Title IX, there has been a continual decline in the number of women who hold administrative or leadership roles within sport organizations. For instance, women only represent 10.6% of athletic directors in Division I athletics, and the percentage of women in all administrative positions dropped from 41% in 2004, to 36.2% in 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The situation for women does not improve in professional sport, as the recent Racial and Gender Report Card shows a decrease in the number of women administrators in the NBA, NFL, and MLB (Lapchick et al., 2014). It is interesting to note that while hiring practices now encourage more women to enter the sport industry—resulting in an increase in the number of women at lower-level positions, these women are still not ascending to the top ranks of their departments.

Such unsettling trends have spurred many scholars and practitioners to examine the reasons why so few women occupy high-ranking positions within sport. Specifically, they have used a myriad of theoretical frameworks to explore the macro-level (e.g., institutional practices of gender in sport), meso-level (e.g., organizational practices, structure, governance, and policy) and micro-level (e.g., how women make meaning of their experiences within sport organizations) factors related to the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership (for an overview of this literature see Burton, in press). While much scholarly work has provided important insights into institutional structures and organizational practices that limit women's leadership potential in sport, less attention has examined the micro-level factors, or as Sartore and Cunningham (2007) emphasize, the majority of past research does “not address the emotional and cognitive processes of women as they encounter disparate acceptance and treatment within the male-dominated sport domain” (p. 245). In addition, Burton (in press) contends that researchers need to explore how the intersection of other marginalized social identities might impact women’s experiences in sport. The current research therefore attempts to investigate how one’s position in an athletic department, biological sex, and sexual orientation may impact her or his work experiences.

The perceived psychological safety of women working within sport is one micro-level factor that may shed light on why women are underrepresented in leadership positions. According to Kahn (1990), psychological safety refers to “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (p. 708). Within the team or work group setting, Edmondson (1999) extended the conceptualization of psychological safety to describe the degree to which group members feel (a) they can take risks, (b) others value their opinions, and (c) other group members respect their contributions. Both researchers and practitioners suggest psychological safety is essential to enhance employee satisfaction and performance (Ferdman, 2014; Kelly & Kelly, 2013). In fact, in the book Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, Sheryl Sandberg explains that companies do not benefit from having female executives unless the firm creates an environment in which women feel psychologically safe to perform their jobs. Furthermore, Ragins (2004) contends psychologically safe climates (termed safe havens), are particularly important for sexual minorities, as these work environments enable lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) employees to bring their whole self to the workplace without fear of discrimination.

The purpose of this study was therefore to examine the perceptions of psychological safety among administrators and staff members working within intercollegiate athletics. Drawing from the literature on women in sport leadership and psychological safety, we sought to gain a better understanding of how one’s position within a sport organization, gender, and sexual orientation influenced how valued, or psychological safe, one felt in her or his job. Based on the past literature, we anticipate that:
H1: Sex will relate to psychological safety, such that males will experience greater psychological safety than females working within intercollegiate athletics.

H2: Sexual orientation will relate to psychological safety, such that heterosexuals will experience greater psychological safety than those who identify as LGB.

H3: Position will relate to psychological safety, such that those in high-ranking positions will experience greater psychological safety than those who hold low-ranking positions.

Thus far, we have hypothesized that, based on past literature examining sport employees, those with underrepresented identities (i.e., women, sexual minorities), and individuals who occupy low status jobs, will experience lower levels of psychological safety in the work context. In all of these hypotheses, we suspect that one group will have a higher mean score than another. It is also possible, however, that the relationships among variables might interact. Considering the identification of boundary conditions is key to building theory and enhancing managerial decisions (Bacharach, 1989; Cunningham, 2011; Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007), we also explored the interaction effects among the variables.

The current research is part of a larger study with espnW to examine the experiences of women and minorities working in intercollegiate athletics. Using stratified sampling techniques, we sampled 2,000 administrators, coaches, and staff working at NCAA Division I institutions across the United States. The participants were sent an email introducing them to the study and asked to voluntarily complete the questionnaire by accessing the Qualtrics link provided within the email. Of the initial sample, 214 responded by October 15, 2014.

Our sample consist of 111 (51.9 %) men and 103 (48.1 %) women and is comprised of 17 African Americans (8.4 %), 2 Asian Americans (1.0 %), 179 Caucasians (88.6 %), 4 sport employees who listed other (2.0 %), and 12 did not provide information related to their race. The average age was 42.12 years (SD = 10.01), and had worked in their athletic department an average of 9.44 years (SD = 8.74). In terms of sexual orientation, participants identified as lesbian (30, 15.0 %), gay (3, 1.5%), bisexual (3, 1.5%), heterosexual, (162, 81.0%), “other” (2, 1.0%), and 14 did not respond. In addition, 46 (23.1 %) are top management, 99 (49.7 %) are middle management, and 54 (27.1 %) do not hold managerial positions.

We measured psychological safety using Edmondson’s (1999) 7-item scale (α = .86), and sexual orientation was measured by categorizing participants as heterosexual or sexual minority. We also wanted to control for other factors that may impact employee’s perceptions of psychological safety, including the department’s climate for diversity and inclusion (Avery, 2008; α = .94), the race of the participant, and how long the participant had worked in the athletic department.

Results from and ANCOVA indicate the sex was not significant, F (1, 154) = 1.03, p = .311, sexual orientation (SO) did not have a significant effect on psychological safety, F (1, 154) = 1.11, p = .29, and position did not have a significant impact, F (2, 154) = 0.82, p = .441. However, when examining the interaction effects, the SO x Position interaction was significant, F (2, 154) = 8.37, p < .001. The Sex x Position interaction was significant, F (2, 154) = 3.05, p = .05, and the Sex x SO interaction was significant, F (1, 154) = 4.22, p = .042.

The findings suggest that sexual minorities and heterosexual sport employees experience similar levels of psychological safety when they hold lower positions of power; however, sexual minorities report drastically lower levels of psychological safety when they attain high-status positions when compared to their heterosexual peers. In addition, administrators who are lesbian report lower levels of psychological safety than heterosexual women. During the presentation we will discuss theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future directions.