Basketball Officiating as a Gendered Arena: An Autoethnography

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The purpose of this study is to examine officiating from an autoethnographic lens. Results and discussion will focus on officiating as a gendered arena and why females may be underrepresented in this particular realm of the sport industry. An array of research exists on varying aspects of sport officiating. Specifically, the role of officiating has been examined from a philosophical angle (Berman, 2011; Rains, 1984), from a physiological and fitness lens (Bizzini, Junge, Bahr, & Dvorak, 2009; Castagna, 2001), from a judgment perspective (Brand, Schmidt, & Schneeloch, 2006; MacMahon & Mildenhall, 2012), from a psychological stressor viewpoint (Burke, Joyner, Pim, & Czech, 2000; Dorsch & Paskevich; Gencay, 2009; Ellery & Maher, 2004), and from a gender, organizational, career approach (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2012).

Examinations of officials’ experiences of stress and gender representation in officiating are of particular importance to this research. Several studies have been conducted exploring the amount of psychological stress officials experience, with some results indicating a high level of stress experienced and others indicating otherwise. Officials must be able to cope with possible psychological stressors, such as dealing with unhappy fans, coaches, and/or players (Burke et al., 2000). Related to the lack of female officials, results from Tingle et al. (2014) indicated that the interviewed former female officials left the officiating field because workplace incivility made them feel less a part of the officiating community. Specifically, four themes emerged from the data indicating the trend to leave: Lack of Mutual Respect, Perceived Inequity of Policies, Lack of Role Modeling and Mentoring, and Gendered Abuse, all compared to their male officiating counterparts (Tingle et al., 2014).

In her review examining the research regarding the lack of females in leadership positions in the sport industry, Burton (2015) implored for scholars and practitioners alike to “situate sport as a gendered space... Therefore, any discussion of women’s leadership experiences in sport must include positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social process” (p. 156). The symbolic interactionist perspective (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) serves as a viable and extremely relevant conceptual framework for my autoethnographic examination of working as a female basketball official. The purpose of Sartore and Cunningham’s (2007) research was to use the symbolic interactionist perspective as a framework to help examine the under-representation of female employees in sport leadership positions. Importantly, “the proposed model also suggests that one’s self concept – i.e., general self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability – may provide a protective mechanism to the potential detrimental effects of ideological meanings, identity formation, and subsequent behaviors” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007, p. 261).

According to Ellis (2004), “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (p. 38); it is a self-narrative, a form of autobiography, that situates the self in a particular setting (Spry, 2001). Autoethnographic works are usually written in the first person (Holt, 2008; Ellis, 2004) and include discerning patterns through the use of field notes, systematic introspection, vulnerable details of the self in the context of the setting, and thick description regarding personal and interpersonal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011; Boechner & Ellis, 2002). As stressed by Spry (2001), “In autoethnographic methods, the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns” (p. 710).

Results

Over the course of one year, the author officiated more than 250 basketball games within a 300-mile radius of the author’s current location, with age groups of games officiated ranging from Kindergarten through 19-and-over men’s tournaments. Data was compiled via field notes based on in-game experiences, discussions with other officials, athletes, coaches, and game assignors, and through personal reflections. Throughout each of those 250 games,
several distinct themes emerged: (1) officiating is not easy and (2) people noticed that I was a female. In every game I officiated, I always felt the need to assert that I knew how to play and officiate basketball. That idea held true for feeling the need to prove myself to other officials as well as the players, coaches, and spectators. I also experienced players or coaches not knowing how to address me. I was called “baby girl” by coaches several times. I also frequently dealt with a “Come on sir… uh, ma’am” scenario when a player would dispute a call before actually looking at me. On numerous occasions, players and officiating partners winked at me throughout games. Players have jokingly accused their teammates of flirting with me. In a specific game in which my parents were in attendance, the other referee walked up to my parents and told them, “I’ll protect your daughter if any fights break out on the court.” Although grateful for his protective nature, I was offended that he felt he needed to protect me because I was a female.

While there certainly were not such glaring issues throughout each and every single one of the games I have officiated, my “female-ness” was a factor in how I was perceived. Such experiences align with Sartore and Cunningham’s (2007) model that uses the symbolic interactionist perspective to delineate reasons for female underrepresentation in sport leadership positions. The model focuses on the idea that a female may engage in self-limiting behaviors as a result of negatively impacted self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability. Those females that attain success and advance in the sport management work environment do so because they have coping mechanisms (e.g. high self-confidence as a result of hard work, skill level, and knowledge base) to avoid such self-limiting behaviors. Through a thorough self-examination of my officiating experiences, I believe that, throughout my time officiating, I at times engaged in self-limiting behavior. I have frequently felt lower levels of self-efficacy as a result of feeling like I constantly had to prove myself as a female official before I could even be evaluated simply as an official. I considered quitting after games in which I was called “baby girl”, games where obscenities were directed at me, and where males questioned whether or not I had ever played basketball. However, I have also developed coping strategies for dealing with such stressors: I have female role models in the officiating community with officiating experience at the professional and Olympic levels that I have reached out to and have encouraged me to continue honing my skills. I also have developed a very strong mentor-mentee relationship with a male official who has experience at the collegiate level, both of which counteract the reasons females may leave the officiating field (Tingle et al., 2014). I believe my experiences further the conceptual framework of Sartore and Cunningham (2007) because they provide evidence that a single person may engage in both self-limiting behaviors and utilize positive coping strategies. Findings are relevant to the broader academic community because they indicate that while a female may engage in self-limiting behaviors, having effective coping mechanisms that outweigh any temporary decreased levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem can still lead to increased opportunities for employment advancement within the realm of sport management.