Sexism and Microaggressions: Experiences of Female Managers in Professional Sports

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Management - Diversity (Professional Sport) Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 3:30 PM
Abstract 2017-056 Room: Harvard

The 2016 U.S. presidential election shone a national spotlight on the sexist microaggressions that women encounter in the workplace, with the country’s first female major party presidential candidate on the receiving end of gendered comments about her smile (Valenti, 2016), appearance (Gold & Johnson, 2016), temperament (Merelli, 2016), and fitness for the job (Ball, 2016), among others. The election sparked a national conversation about sexism, and many women saw a reflection of their own experiences playing out on the debate stage, cable network news, and social media feeds (Bennett, 2016).

In sport, sexism remains a challenge facing women that could affect both their ability to rise within the organization and their desire to remain in the industry. As Fink (2016) wrote, “sexism radiates a forceful effect” on the low numbers of women in sport leadership positions (Fink, 2016, p. 3). While evidence suggests the number of women working in sport has increased in recent years, much of this gain has come at entry-level and mid-level management positions, with much smaller gains at senior leadership and executive levels (Ackerman, 2015). In the NBA for instance, considered a leader amongst professional sport leagues for diversity hiring practices, women hold 36.1% of professional administration positions with teams, but the percentages fall as the corporate ladder is climbed: 23.6% of senior administrators, 21% of vice presidents, and seven percent of team presidents are women (Lapchick & Bullock, 2016). In college athletics, women are underrepresented in NCAA governance and upper leadership levels at the NCAA national office (Yiamouyiannis & Osborne, 2012). In fact, Acosta and Carpenter (2014) reported that while the number of women holding athletic administration positions increased between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of positions held by women fell from 41 percent to 36.2 percent during the same period.

The purpose of this study is to understand the types and impact of gendered microaggressions experienced by women in the sport workplace, and begin a conversation about the awareness, attitudes, and potential consequences surrounding this particular form of sexism. Sport represents a unique vessel in which to study this topic, as its institutionalized culture of gender inequality (Cunningham, 2008) and hyper-masculinity (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013) has created an environment in which sexism thrives. While management literature shows that sexism is generally becoming subtler in the workplace, taking the form of benevolent sexism, microaggressions, and selective incivility (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014), in sport, overt and hostile sexism is still common (Fink, 2016). Sport management literature to date has often focused more on the easier to identify sexism of the latter variety rather than the former.

This study bridges that gap by taking a particular interest in one of sexism’s subtler forms, microaggressions. Microaggressions are brief and common verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion and can be either intentional or unintentional (Sue et al., 2007). While subtle sexism is often more difficult to identify and less likely to be noticed, microaggressions are still detected more by women than men (Basford et al., 2014). To date, limited management studies exist examining gendered microaggressions, with even less literature conducted within the context of sport. In one such article, Kaskan and Ho (2016) reviewed microaggressions involving female athletes and discussed the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of this type of sexism, including negative effects on athletic performance, self-esteem, body image, and physical and mental health. While these consequences may manifest differently in the office than on the field, they underscore the importance of research on the topic.

The study uses institutional theory to contextualize the environment in which gendered microaggressions occur. Institutionalized gender inequality has engrained the practices of marginalization and discrimination against women within the sport industry (Cunningham, 2008). Female sportscasters, for instance, face gender stereotypes and bias, sexism, appearance standards, and an overall unfriendly work environment (Arnold, Chen, & Hey, 2015). Men and
women hold sexist views about women’s role in sport (Fink, 2016), as evident in Koca, Arslan, and Asci’s (2011) finding that both genders displayed more negative attitudes toward women’s work roles and female managers overall compared to men in a sport organization in Turkey. Institutionalized norms have led to an acceptance of these sexist views by both genders, with males and females viewing their workplaces as gender neutral (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012). Consequently, many sport employees, both men and women, are not cognizant of the sexist culture of their sport workplace. Therefore, we expect sexism and gendered microaggressions directed toward female sport managers to impact the experiences of women in sports.

Study participants are all female business managers working in men’s professional sports. This context was chosen in order to explore the potentially unique dynamics that exist for women in the environment of professional sports. Specifically, all participants work for minor league hockey teams in the American Hockey League. The league was selected due to the researchers’ connection to the industry, which allowed for access to participants. While the women all work for teams in the same league, their position, department, and tenure both with their team and within the sport industry vary. Data collection begins with a pre-test survey to measure participants’ awareness and perceptions of microaggressions experienced in the workplace. Following the pre-test, participants will be briefed on the definition of microaggressions and asked to keep a journal of observed microaggressions to avoid issues with recall as well as to establish trustworthiness and authenticity (i.e. reliability and validity). Weekly for one month, participants will submit their journals and participate in semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences. Participants will then be administered a post-test to measure changes in perceptions about microaggressions. In addition, small focus groups will be held to allow for discussion amongst participants and to build consensus, as well as support the authenticity of results. Instrumentation for the surveys, interviews, and focus groups were developed from Sue (2010) taxonomy of microaggressions as well as existing literature on sexism (Fink, 2016), microaggressions (Kaskan & Ho, 2016), and institutionalized culture (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). The Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012) will be used to analyze the data.

This research has several implications for both academics and practitioners. First, it will add to the currently limited literature about gendered microaggressions in sport management while also providing insights for general management. Second, it will provide direction for future research about both the consequences of microaggressions and the effects that this type of sexism has on the development and retention of female employees. Finally, it will create an awareness among sport professionals about the prevalence and potential negative consequences of microaggressions in the workplace, providing a starting point for recognition of and conversation about subtler forms of sexism in sport offices.