Understanding Work-Life Synthesis for Women Working in Collegiate Athletics

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Conceptualization
The notion of work-life balance has long been a barrier for women in the workplace. The dual role of being the primary family caregiver and pursuing professional advancement can create many conflicts for women. Women may experience a sense of fulfillment from their professional role but also feel guilt and anxiety being away from their family and children (Dixon & Bruening, 2007). A greater burden has been found to be placed on women as opposed to men if organizations do not foster a healthy work-life balance (Burton, 2015). Women often face the added barrier of work-life conflict, where involvement in one role makes it difficult to fully participate in the other (e.g., work responsibilities interfere with wife/mothering responsibilities and vice-versa; Linehan & Scullion, 2008). Men may experience this work-life conflict, however it is often more pronounced in the lives of women. Traditionally, men and fathers are asked to provide financially for their family and to provide the discipline for children (Coakley, 2006; Graham & Dixon, 2014; Rohner & Venziano, 2001) whereas women are expected to provide extensive childcare as well as completion of most household duties (e.g., cooking, cleaning; Goldberg, Tan, & Thorson, 2009). This work-life conflict is one of many barriers that can create difficulties in career progression and mobility for women in collegiate athletic administration. Research has found individuals who experienced high work-family conflict felt distress and dissatisfaction (Frone, Yardley, & Markel. 1997; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996; Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk, & Beutell, 1996), physical and emotional exhaustion (Duxbury, Lyons, & Higgins, 2011), and burnout (Netemeyer et al., 1996). Lack of time and organizational support have been found to be a common reason for women working in collegiate athletics departments to leave the profession at an early age (Kamphoff, 2010). In contrast, individuals who have successfully managed work-life conflict have felt a sense of enrichment, security, and an overall higher sense of well-being (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002). Women have been found to stay in positions longer when they receive organizational support that aids in managing work and family obligations in a healthy way (Bruening & Dixon, 2008).

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to examine how women working in collegiate athletics navigate decisions surrounding work-life balance as they progress through their career.

Methods
This study synthesizes research focusing on women working in various career levels in collegiate athletics. A total of 40 women participated in the study. Four separate studies were the impetus for the findings. Interviews were held with graduate assistants, early-career professionals, athletic directors, and conference commissioners working within the collegiate environment. Each study had a slightly different focus but all were seeking to understand the experiences of women pursuing careers in collegiate athletics. Work-life balance challenges continually emerged during the interviews.

Findings
It is important to note foremost the participants agree work-life balance is not achievable in the profession of collegiate athletics. The graduate assistants struggled with attempting to maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives juggling the demands of working in collegiate athletics, academics, and their personal life. They openly admitted their graduate assistant responsibilities were the primary focus of their lives and took priority over other aspects. The early-career professionals had achieved more of a sense of normalcy but work responsibilities most often took priority over their personal obligations. This is also the stage were the idea that working in a college athletics is a lifestyle, not just a job, comes into focus. There is no clear divide between professional and personal obligations. Several of the participants discussed potential future decisions to leave the industry if having a family became...
possible; since the study was completed three of the 10 have shifted careers. The athletic directors ascended to the top of the profession by making personal sacrifices to devote time to their career progression. This is where the synthesizing of professional and personal lives has come full circle. There is no clear distinction between the two aspects. An athletic director is simply the athletic director and that includes all relationships both professional and personally. The same is true for conference commissioners. There is no distinction. The commissioners were all in agreement that their role was more about work-life integration, and it is somewhat unrealistic to achieve work-life balance. However, it is in these administrative roles that the participants had control over their schedule. Conference commissioners can schedule or reschedule meetings in order to come into the office late or leave early if they desire.

An interesting facet of this synthesizing of both professional and personal lives is that the blending becomes more prevalent as the level of authority and autonomy increases. That is, as an administrator has more authority and more autonomy, she is able to have her family attend events with her or travel to competitions with her. She also has the ability to travel separately from the official athletic department travel party and extend the trip to spend time with her family or visit friends and family.

A model of work-life synthesis for women working in collegiate athletics will be introduced during the presentation. This model posits as a female administrator’s position level increases so does her level of authority and autonomy. This leads to the work-life synthesis and the idea of work-life balance is no longer a viable option. The findings hold useful implications both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the culmination of this research extends the work-family conflict and career mobility literature. Practically, this illustrates the importance of increased autonomy for lower level employees. Work-life (im)balance can lead to workplace disengagement, decrease work satisfaction, burnout, and premature departure from the profession. Increasing autonomy and decision-making power will allow lower-level employees to be able to better negotiate the professional requirements of a demanding profession while still engaging in positive self-care through interaction with family, friends, and outside interests.