Am I a Fraud?: Impostor Syndrome in Sport Management

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Management - Diversity (Other)
60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop
Abstract 2018-058

Thursday, June 7, 2018
2:10 PM
Room: Acadia C

Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership is well documented (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, 2014; Lapchick, 2014). Barriers to women’s entrance into leadership positions include: hegemonic masculinity (Grappendorf and Lough, 2006; Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002), stereotyping (Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002), treatment discrimination (Claussen & Lehr, 2002; Hoffman, 2010), and self-limiting behaviors (Sartore, 2006). Burton (2014) points out “the depth and breadth of scholarship examining the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport organizations illustrates the complexity of the issue” (p. 163).

Sport management is an academic degree offered at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral level that prepares students to enter a career in the sport industry. At the undergraduate level, Hums (1994) found women comprised 25% of sport management students. Jones, Brooks, & Mak (2008) found 40% of sport management programs reported a female student population of 20% or less. A few studies have looked at examinations for the underrepresentation of women in sport management degrees. Harris, Grappendorf, Aicher, & Veraldo (2015) found that female undergraduate students perceive job discrimination in the sport industry due to gender discrimination and gender stereotyping. Harris, Grappendorf, Veraldo, and Aicher (2014) found that women were receiving negative feedback about their choice of a sport management degree from their family, friends, and other college peers. Previous research (Caldera, Robitschek, Frame, & Pannel, 2003) found a lack of social support weakened the self-confidence of college-aged women to pursue a particular occupation. Further, Harris et al. (2014) found female sport management students experienced a challenging environment “due to the underrepresentation of women within the program” and specific situations and/or environments as ‘challenging,’ ‘stressful,’ ‘hard,’ or ‘frustrating’” (p. 39).

In addition to the underrepresentation of women in sport management programs, women are also underrepresented in higher education faculty positions. Jones et al., (2008) found that 29% of sport management programs had no women faculty and in 66% of the programs, women represented fewer than 40% of the faculty members. Women who teach in the sport management curriculum often have their expertise and knowledge of sport questioned and their qualifications challenged by students (Taylor, Rode, & Hardin, 2015; Taylor, Smith, Rode, & Hardin, 2016). Women faculty members may not be seen as capable of teaching in a male dominated field like sport management, and they may often have to prove they are qualified to teach in the curriculum (Taylor et al., 2015).

As noted above, multiple barriers are associated with the underrepresentation of women in the sport industry, as well as in sport management higher education. One explanation that has not been researched in the field of sport management is the impostor syndrome or phenomenon. Clance and Imes (1978) worked with over 150 high achieving women who were well respected Ph.Ds, professionals, and students. Despite their intellectual achievements, these women “maintained a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise” (p.1). Pervasive feelings of a lack of confidence, fraudulence, self-doubt, and insecurity plague those with the impostor syndrome. Further, individuals (both men and women) who experience impostor syndrome attribute their success to external factors such as charm, luck, and hard work and they are unable to internalize success (Clance and Imes, 1978).

The presence of impostor syndrome or phenomenon has been heavily researched in other male dominated fields such as the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields. Further, Henning, Ey, and Shaw (1998) found large percentages of all students in medical, dental, nursing, and pharmacy, reported impostor feelings, and women indicated more feelings of the impostor phenomenon than men did. Hutchins (2015) found that faculty with higher education experience impostor phenomenon, with untenured faculty experiencing the highest levels. In their study of undergraduate psychology students, Kumar and Jagacinski (2005) found women report greater impostor
fears which is related to higher ability-avoid goals (avoidance of failure), lower confidence in their intelligence, and greater test anxiety.

Results of this research have implications for those who experience imposter syndrome. In his study of emerging adults ages 18-25, Lane (2015) found imposter phenomenon negatively affected performance and participants found ways to avoid performance such as procrastination or even “making major life decisions based on assumptions of limited capability” (p. 123). His participants also commonly experienced fear, worry, or anxiety (Lane, 2015). Ultimately, faculty who experience impostor syndrome display maladaptive coping mechanisms, are at higher risk for emotional exhaustion, and may experience job burnout (Hutchins, 2015). Clance and O'Toole (1988) claim those who suffer from impostor phenomenon “may turn down opportunities to advance. They may simply not attempt to meet their dreams, settling instead for what seems certain” (p. 2).

Impostor syndrome may, in fact, be a barrier to advancement in the field of sport management for students as well as faculty. The 60-minute symposium will explore impostor syndrome with a panel of women in sport management who have self-disclosed feelings of the phenomenon. Panel members will include at least one individual representing undergraduate students, graduate students, untenured faculty, and tenured faculty. Panelists will discuss feelings of impostor syndrome, how it has impacted their experiences in sport management, how they have coped, and suggestions for others who experience impostor syndrome. Intervention strategies like mentoring and advising practices will also be discussed.