Building and Instrument to Measure Gender Stereotype Threat in Intercollegiate Athletic Administration

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Stereotype threat has been defined by Aronson, Quinn, & Spencer as the discomfort individuals may feel “when they are at risk of fulfilling a negative stereotype about their group; the apprehension that they could behave in such a way as to conform the stereotype – in the eyes of others, in their own eyes, or both at the same time” (p. 85-86, 1998). When individuals are made aware of a negative stereotype threat regarding their ability, those individuals actively monitor their environment for cues suggesting the stereotype threat will be confirmed while mentally working overtime to suppress the negative thoughts and anxiety associated with the stereotype (Aramovich, 2014). This disruptive state may ultimately undermine performance and damper the aspirations of group members in the domain (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016).

Originating in academia, the study of stereotype threat as a social psychological threat has expanded to the workplace and used to evaluate women’s performance in leadership roles and their experiences in male dominated fields such as science and finance. Hoyt and Murphy (2016) posit that exposure to masculine environments can produce threatening effects for women: “female leaders can experience increased threat when attempting leadership in industries and organizations where women are scarce… or in organizational cultures extolling the virtues of competition” (p. 390). Sports organizations are such a domain, rich in hegemonic masculinity (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) and lacking significant female representation. In 2014, women held only 36.2% of positions within college athletics and only 22.3% of athletic director seats were held by women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Understanding how, and if, gender stereotype threat exists in intercollegiate athletics may provide a new insight into this underrepresentation.

Davies, Spencer and Steele (2005) found that women may utilize preemptive strategies to avoid stereotype threat by avoiding leadership positions in favor of supportive roles that are subordinate and therefore less threatening. In the context of sport, Burton (2015) suggested that because of the established masculine stereotypes of leaders, women are less likely to be considered for leadership positions, particularly the role of athletic director. Considering this understanding of stereotype threat, the landscape of collegiate athletic administration and barriers women face in this field, we hypothesize that gender stereotype threat is present for women in intercollegiate athletic administration and as such sought to develop an instrument to measure its existence. Steele (1997) proposed that in order for stereotype threat to exist individuals would not only need to be aware of the stereotype but also identify with the affected group. Therefore, using exploratory factor analysis, we evaluated whether this instrument measured two constructs: belonging uncertainty and gender identification. Female and male (n = 208) athletic administrators at the NCAA Division I level completed the survey. We believe this research can provide important insights into the presence of gender stereotype threat in intercollegiate athletic administration and, if present, how this threat may impact the experiences of women in collegiate athletic administration.