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# The Experience of Former Women Officials and the Impact on the Sporting Community

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The experience of former women officials and the impact on the sporting community

## Abstract

In an effort to explore the shortage of female sport officials, the authors examined the experience of eight *former* female basketball officials from five geographically diverse states in the U.S. who voluntarily left the role. Specifically, the authors asked former female basketball officials to describe their workplace experiences. Utilizing a phenomenological approach and workplace incivility framework, the results indicated that the felt social inequity for female officials detracted from the participants experiencing a sense of community in the workplace, which ultimately led to their discontinuation in the role. Results indicate four key factors that created this uncivil work environment. An examination of the data revealed four major themes. Specifically the female basketball officials reported experiencing a *Lack of Mutual Respect* from male counterparts; *Perceived Inequity of Policies*; a *Lack of Role Modeling and Mentoring* for and from female officials; and experiencing more *Gendered Abuse* than did their male counterparts. The combination of these four factors exacerbated the female officials' inability to connect to the officiating community and led to their withdrawal from the role. The results further indicate that women officials likely threatened the hegemonic characteristics of a sport setting. Although females have made great strides in terms of sport participation, the practical implications of this research suggest that understanding females in workplace roles, such as officiating, is vital if social equity is to be achieved in the sporting community.

**Key Words:** Sport officiating, workplace incivility, gender equity, retention, community, phenomenology

### **Introduction**

Despite advancement in terms of increased diversity within sport organizations, the interpersonal mistreatment of women in the workplace continues to be a noteworthy endeavor to better comprehend the challenges for women working in highly competitive, male-dominated professions (e.g. Burton et al. 2011; Sartore and Sagas 2006). Using a phenomenological method and perspective, the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of former female basketball officials from the United States. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight former female officials, much knowledge can be gained regarding the professional experiences and mistreatment of women in the workplace. Further, sport is a powerful social and cultural institution. Recruiting and retaining more females into the highly visible and authoritative role can have sweeping implications on the broader sporting community and gender equity research while advancing research and theory on the mistreatment of women in the workplace.

### **Gender Equity in the Sport Context**

Gender equity in sport has been a topic of consideration for some time (e.g., Cunningham, 2008). Although equity has not been reached in all sport settings, there is clear legislation, organizational policy, program development, and social pressures that indicate women are increasingly recognized as important stakeholders in increasing participation, spectatorship, managerial expertise, and diversity in the field. However, sport is acknowledged as a powerful cultural institution linked to the construction and reinforcement of gender inequities (Messner 1988). While progress has been made in providing sport opportunities for women, women are still significantly under-represented in its management and research affirms the suggestion that men continue to dominate the field (Burton et al. 2009; Walker and Bopp

2010). In fact, sport has been widely criticized for the lack of women in roles of power (e.g., Cunningham 2008; Sartore and Cunningham 2007).

Despite the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport, females do hold some positions of authority. One of the roles in sport that exercises power is the game official. As applied here, the term “official” describes those responsible for maintaining order and adjudicating sports contests on the field, court, or pitch. In basketball, the official is on the court, in close proximity with the players, and interacts with players and coaches regularly. Herein, the authors use the generic descriptor “official” unless the cited literature different term (e.g. umpire or referee). Some female officials have made remarkable progress in overcoming barriers and advancing gender equity in a male-dominated sport occupation (Rainey 1995). There are, however, many other women struggling to have equal opportunities in the officiating community. Due to the struggles and their highly visibility in the sporting community it is important to study the experiences of female officials in a male-dominated work context. Such research will advance understanding of key issues regarding mistreatment of women in the workplace. To date, though, the majority of the research in the officiating context has examined only male officials (e.g., Kellett and Warner 2011; Rainey 1999). As the global shortage of officials persists (e.g., American Sport Education Program 2011; Kendall et al. 2009), the survival of sports remains dependent upon strategies to recruit and retain officials (Titlebaum et al. 2009; Warner et al. 2013). Further, addressing the lack of women in officiating roles would both help alleviate the shortage while simultaneously promoting greater workplace gender equity. In the following sections, we present foundational literature in the study of sport officials and workplace inequity. Unless specifically noted, the populations for the cited studies were drawn from the United States. The highlighted research, though not generalizable about Western

culture, provides an in-depth overview of how the topic has been previously explored and as such, is relevant to understanding the perceptions of the female officials in our study.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Lack of Mutual Respect***

Researchers have established that officials endure abuse from players, coaches, and spectators (Chiafullo 1998; Rainey 1999). As a result, the environment can lead to stress, burnout, and conflict (Anshel and Weinberg 1995; Rainey and Hardy 1997). Both Cavallero (1988), who explored Italian baseball umpires, and Folkesson et al. (2002) who examined Swedish soccer referees attempted to understand how various coping skills and personality types assist individuals to persevere in the activity despite the negative experiences. Although these efforts are commendable and provide a starting point for sport managers, almost all of the data were based on samples of only male officials.

One of the largest series of studies included 782 baseball and softball umpires in the U.S., of which only 19 were female (Rainey 1994, 1995). Rainey did not analyze the responses of these 19 women separately and the issue of gender was not considered. Gender has been examined in some officiating research, but the focus of these studies have been primarily on male officials' calls in relation to the gender of athletes they are officiating. For example, in two studies on elite level French handball players, Souchon et al. (2004) found that while male handball players were more aggressive than their female counterparts, the male referees in the sample penalized females more than males. A follow-up study using French soccer referees as the population, yielded similar results (Coulomb-Cabagno et al. 2005). Further, when Mean (2001) recorded the speech of male soccer referees in England during men's and women's soccer matches, he found the highly gendered discourse from the male referees. The referees in his

study dismissed challenges from female athletes more frequently than from male athletes. Mean further suggested that this type of official and player communication contributes to the structures that maintain power and reproduce masculine hegemony.

In one of the few studies focused on women in the officiating profession, Todey (2011) found that while all the U.S. basketball officials in her sample experienced abuse and criticism, women were targeted more often specifically because of their gender. In a multi-sport study of French officials, Philippe et al. (2009) determined that when compared to male officials, female officials experienced a lower sense of control and more often felt a lower work-life balance. Kunkel and Godino's (1995) examination of intramural sports officials' in the Midwestern U.S. found while officiating games involving male participants female officials felt the need to exhibit male-like qualities in order to gain acceptance and legitimacy.

Overall, the scant research on officials has focused mainly on males in the role and on the psychological impact of on-the-court fan abuse (Anshel and Weinberg 1995; Rainey 1999). Thus, it is assumed that such on-court experiences lead to turnover and, as a result, research has been geared towards understanding coping mechanisms and personality characteristics that enable an official to thrive on-the-court (e.g., Balch and Scott 2007; Philippe et al. 2009). In light of this, a nascent line of research has begun to explore the on-the-court *and* off-the-court experiences of officials (e.g., Kellett and Shilbury 2007; Kellett and Warner 2011; Warner et al. 2013).

### ***Inequity of Policies***

In a study of Australian Rules Football umpires, Kellett and Shilbury (2007) identified that umpires found their on-field abuse to be a unifying and enjoyable part of the role that led to the development of social worlds among umpires. Similarly, Kellett and Warner (2011) found

that developing a sense of community among current Australian Rules Football umpires was crucial to their retention. In their investigation of former U.S. based officials, Warner et al. (2013) found that officials dropped out of the profession because of a perceived lack of referee community, managerial decision-making, and a lack of mentoring and continuing education. While making significant contributions to the literature on officiating, it should be noted that neither Kellett and Shilbury (2007) nor Kellett and Warner (2011) studies included any female participants. Although Warner et al. (2013) did include female officials they also excluded any exploration of specific gendered differences.

### ***Role Modeling***

Though problematic, the dearth of female officials should come as no surprise, as many careers in sport have historically been dominated by males, including: coaching (Sartore and Sagas 2006); athletic administration (Burton et al. 2011); athletic training (Acosta and Carpenter 2012); strength and conditioning (Sartore-Baldwin 2013), and sports broadcasting (Miloch et al. 2005). Among these career positions and others, researchers have adopted a myriad of theoretical perspectives to examine the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in sport (cf. Cunningham and Sagas 2008). The summation of these works reaffirms that the power and privilege accorded to men and masculinity in sport continues to marginalize women at nearly every level. As Fink (2008) wrote, “sport is still a powerful mechanism by which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed” (p. 146).

Indeed, White, Protestant, able-bodied, heterosexual males possess most, if not all the power within sport and sport organizations (e.g., Cunningham 2008; Fink et al. 2001). Individuals diverging from this profile are often considered outsiders or of minority status and subsequently suffer differential experiences than do their majority counterparts (Fink et al.

2001). When viewed from a social categorization perspective, there are in-groups and out-groups established with in-group members being afforded more power within the sport context (Turner et al. 1987). Therefore, members of out-groups possess lower status within sport and sport organizations and are consequently potential targets for prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Sartore 2006). The manifestations of prejudice and discrimination are far different than they once were, however, due to various social, legal, and organizational pressures (Cunningham and Fink 2006; Kabat-Farr and Cortina 2012).

### ***Gendered Abuse***

Whereas overt forms of discrimination were once commonplace in workplace settings, social change has drawn more attention to subtle forms of discrimination such as workplace incivility. Based on the theory of selective incivility (Cortina 2008), workplace incivility is defined as, “low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (Andersson and Pearson 1999, p. 457). Examples of uncivil behaviors include ignoring another’s opinion, using a condescending tone in conversation, arriving late to meetings or appointments, and not returning phone calls, and giving dirty looks and glares (Cortina and Magley 2009; Pearson et al. 2001). Targets of behaviors such as these are often those persons who possess very little power within an organization (Cortina 2008). Within sport organizations, this suggests that women, racial minorities, and sexual minorities have a greater likelihood of being subjected to uncivil behaviors, although few studies have substantiated this supposition (for exception, see Cunningham et al. in press). Minorities have been found to be targets of uncivil behaviors in other organizational contexts, however, and

have consequently suffered numerous negative personal and professional outcomes (e.g., Lim et al. 2008; Reio and Ghosh 2009).

Of particular concern is the effect of workplace incivility on female sports officials. Research has been inconsistent in its findings with regard to perceptions and the effects of incivility between men and women in other professional contexts. For example, Cortina et al. (2011) found that female city government employees not only reported more instances of incivility, but these instances of uncivil behaviors led to higher turnover intentions. Among U.S. federal circuit court employees, Lim et al. (2008) found that while women reported greater rates of incivility, men and women had comparable outcomes. Namely, despite suffering a more negative work environment, women had similar turnover intentions and expressed similar levels of satisfaction and stress as their male counterparts. As Cortina (2008) noted, contextual factors may be the explanation for the differences in outcomes demonstrated in the literature, as organizational and workgroup norms can inform employee behavior. Thus, if incivility is the contextual norm, outcomes may not be different between men and women, as all employees suffer in hostile environments (Miner-Rubio and Cortina 2004). However, if the norm of incivility is only directed to certain social groups within a workplace context and other social groups experience norms of privilege (i.e., selective; Cortina 2008), outcome differences may indeed be evident.

### ***Summary and Research Questions***

Taken together the aforementioned review identifies several gaps in the literature. Specifically, research of sports officials has primarily focused on psychological stressors (Anshel and Weinberg 1995; Rainey and Hardy 1997), spectator and on-court abuse (Chiafullo 1998; Rainey 1999), and coping mechanisms (e.g., Balch and Scott 2007; Philippe et al. 2009). While

there is a developing line of study exploring off-court/field experiences (Kellett and Shilbury 2007; Kellett and Warner 2011; Warner et al. 2013) none of it has examined the experiences of females. While the workplace incivility literature has explored uncivil behaviors and actions which run counter to conventional workplace norms and appear to manifest more greatly among female and racial minority workers (Cortina et al. 2008; Lim et al. 2008), there has been very little research exploring the impact of workplace incivility on the sporting community. Given the highly competitive and often male-dominated nature of sport, the experiences of women in “power roles” can offer important insight into the mistreatment of women in the workplace.

Overall, there is a dearth of insight into impact on the experiences of female officials; specifically with respect to understanding how female officials perceive respect, policies, mentoring, and gendered abuse. To date, no study has explored the extent to which women in the officiating profession may have experiences similar to women in other sport-related and non-sport related professions. Given the increasing significance of recruiting and retaining qualified sports officials combined with the need to better understand the experiences of women in a male-dominated workplace it is important to understand why the officiating profession, in terms of gender equity, lags behind other sport-related positions. Thus, the guiding research questions were:

RQ1: Are there commonalities in the experiences of former female basketball officials in the United States related to their perceptions of respect, policies, mentoring, and abuse?

RQ2: How do former female basketball officials describe the workplace atmosphere in the officiating community?

## **Method**

In an effort to better recruit and retain officials and understand the experiences of females in a male-dominated profession, it is vital to understand the phenomena of being a female official from the emic perspective. Consequently, the researchers adopted a phenomenological approach to elucidate the lived experiences of *former* female officials. This approach is valuable when examining an unexplored phenomenon because it attempts to both explicate and critique personal and hidden shared meanings of the human experience (Munhall 2007). As described by Allen-Collinson (2009), “Phenomenology seeks to provide highly textured, evocative descriptions that locate the specifics of individual experience within broader, more general structures of the human experience” (p. 291). Since the objective is to better comprehend the lived experiences of those in a specific setting, such as female basketball officials, the phenomenological approach is ideal (Meisenbach 2010). More importantly, “Results from a phenomenological study can be used for policy development, change in practice, increasing our capacity for care and compassion, and raising our consciousness to what was not known or otherwise erroneous” (Munhall 2007, p.154).

### ***Participants***

Eight former female basketball officials, representing five states (CA, GA, MA, TX, and WI) from across the U.S. took part in the study (see Table 1). The eight officials previously officiated at the high school and/or college level. The average age of the participants was 37.25 years old with a range of 2-17 years of basketball officiating experience. The majority of the participants (6 of 8) also had experience officiating in at least one other sport (e.g., soccer, volleyball). *Former* officials were specifically targeted for this study due to the fact that they could specifically discuss actual behaviors, actions, and reasons for their departure from the role

of officiating. Research supports that this is a more valid and reliable method when compared to exploring self-reported intentions to leave of current employees (see Podsakoff and Organ 1986).

### ***Procedure***

The research team used snowball sampling to obtain study participants. One member of the team sent e-mails to two U.S. electronic officiating listserves seeking the names of former female officials who might be willing to participate in a study. Identified individuals then received a notification and explanation of the study and were asked to participate and for contact information for other individuals fitting the given criteria. The snowball method proved to be an effective way to learn names of potential research participants. The primary researchers then audio recorded interviews with willing participants who had completed and returned a background questionnaire and signed an informed consent form. All interviews were set up at a convenient time for participants and lasted between one hour and 20-minutes and 2 hours. After conducting the interviews, the researchers had them professionally transcribed. At that time, all participants were then asked to review their transcripts for accuracy. The use of such member checks enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Edwards and Skinner 2009). After the member checks, the participants were asked to provide pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### ***Instrument***

Using the current officiating and sport literature as a guide (e.g., Burton et al. 2011; Kellett and Shilbury 2007; Kellett and Warner 2011), a semi-structured interview guide was developed. This guide (see Appendix A) was used to provide some consistency within the participant interviews, yet aligned with the semi-structured interview format by allowing the investigators to follow the conversation so greater depth in the interviews was achieved. Though

it is not entirely possible to consider a phenomenon without some level of researcher involvement (Willing 2007), in keeping with phenomenological guidelines the semi-structured interview guide consisted of broad questions. The emphasis of each interview was dialogic and the interviewers focused on evoking descriptions of the participants' lived experiences rather than conforming to preconceived hypotheses (Pollio et al. 1997).

### *Analysis*

Given the potentially subjective nature of the interview process (Pollio et al. 1997) and that phenomenology acknowledges the active role of the *researcher-as-instrument* (Willig 2007), a pure-Husserlian transcendental phenomenological approach using bracketing is nearly impossible in practice (Ashworth 1996). Nonetheless, the value of the approach is not diminished and in adherence to phenomenological principles, the research team made every effort to avoid collecting and analyzing the data using any prior assumptions or preconceived categories (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009). Further, one of member of the research team had practical experience as a basketball official, which proved beneficial in that experiential knowledge of the phenomenon and jargon used was accessible. Two other members of the research team were not members of the officiating community and thus approached the data with an important level of openness (Giorgi 1985). While this level of experience from the one researcher with the phenomenon being studied could be construed as a negative, having both the *insider and outsider* perspective ensured the research team was able to avoid "imposing their own meanings and constructs upon the accounts of the 'expert' participants" (Allen-Collinson 2009, p. 209). Specifically, the insider-outsider balance on the research team provided a source of alternate perspectives. Furthermore, the balance allowed for a greater likelihood that emergent

themes were true to the subjects' perspective of their experiences (Willig 2007) and for the Hurrellian bracketing ethos to guide the analysis (Ashworth 1996).

Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers identified major passages from each transcript that related to the interviewees experiences as a female official. With the assistance of NVivo 9 software, each member of the research team independently coded the data line by line. The research team also used NVivo 9 to compute interrater reliability analysis scores, which appear later. The scores presented are percentages of agreement between members of the research team. The result was 17 first-level codes generated from 667 passages in the data. Examples of the first level codes include “being a woman”, “old boys network”, “lack of respect”, “support system”, and “outsider.” Next, given the phenomenological approach, the researchers independently reread the data and attempted to discover relationships between the codes and condense them into themes (Munhall 2007). Lastly, the team members compared their findings until they agreed on the emergent themes that best captured the lived experience of former officials (Creswell 2009). The result was the 17 first-level codes combined to form four overarching themes. For example, three first-level codes (Abuse, Being a Women, and Stress) were combined to form the theme of *Gendered Abuse*. See Table 2 for definitions of themes and a complete list of first level codes. Further, after identifying the emergent major themes, the researchers reread all transcripts in an attempt to find other passages that fit into the new themes. As an outcome of this process, four themes emerged which were present in 100% of the interviews.

Every participant (8 of 8) referenced each of the four overarching themes at least twice. In the results sections, however, the themes will be addressed in terms of their saliency (i.e., how frequently each was cited in the interviews). The theme of *Lack of Mutual Respect* (referenced

by eight participants 59 times) had satisfactory interraters' agreement analysis, which ranged between .94 and .99 for all the first level codes. The *Perceived Inequity of Policies* (referenced by eight participants 55 times) theme had a range of interraters' agreement analysis between .86 and .97 for all first level codes. *Lack of Role Models and Mentors* (referenced by eight participants 53 times) also had satisfactory interraters' agreement analysis with scores ranging between .87 and .99 for the first level codes. Lastly, the *Gendered Abuse* (referenced by eight participants 33 times) theme had a satisfactory interraters' agreement analysis that ranged between .80 and .99 for all first level codes. The four themes suggest the common experiences of the former female basketball officials and their descriptions of the workplace environment of the basketball officiating community.

In order to verify the data, post-hoc member checks of the ensuing results were then completed with select and willing participants to provide further credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the results (Munhall, 2007). Creswell (2009) indicated that high-quality qualitative research identifies at least two forms of validation. The authors used thick description as a second method of validation. The results section highlights many in-depth quotes that provide detailed descriptions of the phenomenon in the participants' own words; providing further credibility of the data and results.

## **Results and Discussion**

Willig (2007) indicated the hermeneutic phenomenological method is "not content to simply summarize what participants have said about their experiences, but aims to extract wider meanings from their accounts" (p. 221). As such, the phenomenological analysis revealed four broad themes. The themes express both the experiential commonalities of former United States female basketball officials (RQ1) and described how former female basketball officials

perceived the workplace atmosphere of the officiating community (RQ2). The results indicated that all eight of the former officials experienced a sense of workplace incivility (Cortina 2008) as well as discrimination and prejudice that were more overt. The perceived lack social inequity and little to no sense of community exemplified by the hostile environment played a larger role in their decision to discontinue in the occupation. Thus, the participants expressed frustrations with their workplace experiences that prevented them from wanting to continue to officiate. More specifically the participants indicated that the uncivil behaviors reflected the general feeling of a *Lack of Mutual Respect (100%)*, *Perceived Inequity of Policies (100%)*, *Lack of Role Models and Mentors (100%)*, and facing more *Gendered Abuse (100%)* than did male counterparts in the officiating role. All of these uncivil behaviors exacerbated the participants' inability to experience a deep connection to the officiating community. This environment created a sense that some of their male counterparts did not want them officiating nor did they want to compete with them for officiating appointments. As with other sport professions, the female study participants threatened the hegemonic masculinity and as a result they often felt overlooked for appointments at high-level games based on gender, not on ability (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Krane 2001). The following provides the most representative participant comments and quotes regarding the factors that impacted their discontinuation in the role. We present the factors in order of saliency.

### ***Lack of Mutual Respect***

The unwelcoming social interactions with other officials were defined as *Lack of Mutual Respect*. *Lack of Mutual Respect* mainly took form in cliques and the fostering of an uncomfortable environment. All eight (100%) of the participants indicated *Lack of Mutual Respect* was a major issue in the basketball officiating workplace. The coding results indicated

that this theme was the most salient (59 references); each participant also expressed it at least three times. For example, Katie noted how she always felt on the outside:

All those guys [officials] have probably been working at the Association for years; they all lived at those towns and they all knew each other and I would just walk in and pretty much sit by myself. I totally stuck out like a sore thumb.

Once out on the court Macie noted, “It was intimidating to go out there on the court with them” while Lisa offered that she felt that not everyone “was there to support you or that you were a (officiating) team.” There was “undercurrent of negativity and this competitiveness” (Macie), degrading comments (Cassandra, Jill, Macie, Trina, Katie, Lisa), “openly showing that they were pissed that I got assigned to their game” (Katie), and “negative body language” (Amber, Monica). “An example would be he would never hand me my check; he would hand it to my guy partner” Trina added. Katie described how male co-officials greeted her upon arriving at one officiating assignment. “They asked me if I knew what a travel signal was and I’m like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ It’s like everybody assumed that I didn’t know what I was doing.” The consensus simply was that, “The boys’ basketball referees, coaches, players don’t want a female on the court” (Lisa).

Macie spoke of having her hard work discredited by some co-officials. ““Oh, the reason you’re moving up is because you’re a woman and they don’t have enough female officials.’ It was discounting that I might be working hard.” When asked who made these types of comments, Macie said, “Some of the guys, White guys, were saying [the rude comments] because I guess they didn’t feel they were getting some games.” This feeling of jealousy led to expressions of doubt about the female officials’ abilities and created an antagonistic atmosphere.

The openly expressed *Lack of Mutual Respect* negatively impacted our female participants' sense of belonging. As a result of the antagonistic environment it was difficult, if not impossible, for our participants to feel a part of an officiating community. When speaking of an older male official she met at a job try-out, Amber said, "He had tried to work on the men's side, but now he said he was 'settling' for the women's side. [Comments] like that really diminish that sense of family and community." Jill explained, "Officiating can be so stressful. If you don't have that community, it makes it all the more difficult to feel like you belong. And that's a key thing for retention."

It was clear that an unreceptive environment rather than a welcoming community existed for our participants due to the *Lack of Mutual Respect*. Lisa further elaborated on the role and importance of environment/community on her experience, "There was a community there, but I just never really got to be a part of. I don't know if I ever would have been." In summation, the *Lack of Mutual Respect* our participants described created an unwelcoming atmosphere that did not allow female officials to be a part of the officiating community. Ultimately, the data indicated that this was the most salient recollection of the female officiating experience and ultimately contributed to their discontinuation in the occupation.

### ***Perceived Inequity of Policies***

A *Perceived Inequity of Policies* was identified as another important component that negatively impacted retention. *Perceived Inequity of Policies* comprised the participants' negative feelings and perceptions regarding the procedures and management of work assignments. For all eight (100%) of the participants *Perceived Inequity of Policies* appeared to be a negative element of the basketball officiating workplace. Coding results indicated that this theme was expressed at least twice by each participant for a total of 55 references. Amber,

Cassandra, Monica, Trina, Macie, and Lisa all specifically referred to this as “good old boy network.” Macie explained that the notion that “You’ll never move up because you’re a girl and it’s a good old boy network” was commonplace. She further explained:

B-M-W. Black, man, and White . . . that was the order you would get games. They would change ‘White’ to ‘woman’ sometimes. That was the way you would get good games -- you would [be assigned] them in that order. If you were black you would assigned to the good things first, if you were a man you would get assigned to the good games first and the last one for either White or woman would get the games last.

Trina added:

Politics plays into it. Whomever was the assigner . . . it was somewhat a little boy network. You know, they all knew the assigner and whether or not you got along with them, or didn’t [determined the games assigned]. So it is the politics and who knows who.

It was evident that all of participants had some issues with the *Perceived Inequity of Policies*. A majority of the officials (Lisa, Cassandra, Amber, Katie, and Macie) indicated that specifically a lack of transparency was an issue as it related to game assignments and how crews of officials were put together. Amber voiced explicit frustrations with the process. “The not knowing what their expectations are, how they’re evaluating people, how they’re hiring people – that really frustrated me and that was a little bit of why I [stopped officiating]. It was stressing me out.” Additionally, with few or in some case no women in leadership positions, the officials felt the lack of transparency and concern that women’s issues were not even being considered at the decision-making level. Revealing her frustrations with the assignment process, Monica said, “I was just ready for the bigotry to end.” Amber commented, “You don’t want to complain about a

teacher's pet, 'cause that could hurt your schedule. And I got to that point where I just didn't want to deal with that anymore." In summation, *Perceived Inequity of Policies* was a major component to the former officials' experiences.

### ***Lack of Role Models and Mentoring***

A *Lack of Role Models and Mentoring* was also notable for our former female officials. As with the two previous themes, all eight (100%) of the participants expressed this theme at least two times. There were 53 references to *Lack of Role Models and Mentoring* in the data. Simply, our participants did not see other females in the occupation or role of officiating and in most instances they lacked a mentor to help them navigate the worksite politics on and off the court. For example, in discussing required basketball officials meetings, Macie said: "At the biggest meeting there were a couple of hundred [officials] and I wouldn't even say a third were women." Trina stated:

But you're still kind of looked at as an oddity, particularly, if you do boys games. But still even in our area, most of the officials are men. And you would think like, 'OK, here we are, 2000, whatever. This is the 21 century, we've made progress on that' . . . but, not really in the local areas. If you look at the WNBA or if Women's (NCAA) Division I officiating and the big conferences, you're going to see a ton of women. I mean they've really, really, really worked on that, but not at the small local levels. You don't see much of a change in that. You're still kind of an oddity. When I was officiating I never came across a female official within the southern Wisconsin area. I never had one as an officiating partner. I think it's somewhat, 'Well, women don't do that.' I think most just saw many different men doing it.

Along with not having female role models in the occupation, the majority (Amber, Cassandra, Lisa, Macie, Monica, and Trina) of our participants relayed that they did not have any mentoring. In speaking about the importance of role models/mentors, Lisa said, “I think that it would probably keep people around. It’s an additional time commitment, but creating mentors for people would keep people from just feeling they [the administrators and association] don’t care about me.” Katie, one of the two participants whom received some mentoring, noted though that the gender of the mentor made a difference to her.

There’s only one woman official, I even really remember working with who did kind of tuck me in and take me under her wing. I’m like, ‘Okay, I know you’ve had to overcome some stuff too and you’re way farther than me.’ And so I had a lot of respect for her. My mentors were all men and they can share what they’ve heard from other women that they’ve worked with, but in general, you can never really understand until you’re in their shoes.

The lack of role models and thus, mentors that shared a common experience in terms of overcoming gendered barriers, was another common theme among the former female officials’ experiences. Indicating the importance of a mentor to helping young females navigate the pitfalls, Lisa said: “Connection is what helps people to feel they’re a part of the [officiating] association and part of the team.” Amber also described the importance of this: “We have got to focus more on female-to-female relationships. I really didn’t find a true mentor and maybe another reason why I didn’t stay in officiating because I didn’t have that mentor.” *Lack of Role Models and Mentoring* was a fundamental part of our participants’ experience and clearly a key to retaining more officials in the occupation.

### ***Gendered Abuse***

While fan abuse is somewhat expected in the officiating role, our former female officials felt as though they experienced greater abuse due to their gender. This theme was defined as *Gendered Abuse*. As with the other themes, all eight (100%) of the participants expressed elements of this theme at least twice. There were 33 references to *Gendered Abuse*. Although there were fewer references, the *Gendered Abuse* participant comments were detailed, rich, and vivid. Katie summarized:

I hate to say it, but because I'm a woman some people almost used me as a scapegoat. Like, if the fans were rowdy or the coaches were rowdy or something like that, [I experienced] the whole not necessarily having my back or things like that. A lot of times I was just the first one yelled at, because I was the young girl on the floor. I would walk out onto the court and I could see people looking at me, like, "Oh God, we have a woman officiating our game." I mean, it's tough, especially working men's games; there's a lot of things that have been said to me when I'm either handing the ball in or they're [the players] standing right next to me making inappropriate comments. It's hard to have thick skin and deal with the criticism especially when it's being yelled right in your ear while you're trying to "work". I know that that's part of the coaches job is to stick up for the team, but there are some horrible coaches out there and there are some obnoxious parents out there. It's kind of almost like constantly having your character scrutinized, or your judgment or things like that . . .it's especially hard knowing that you're more experienced than your partners out there, but you're the one getting yelled at, because of your gender.

Jill then relayed, “You can only take so much. The criticism that’s heaped on you . . . the digs from the coaches and the spectators. After a while, that got a little bit old.” Macie then highlight more specifically the abused she faced.

Kind of making a comment specifically about me being a woman. I don’t know how it affected other people or other women, or if it has to do with being emotional or anything like that, but certain things would just sting more than others.

The participants in the study seemed to experience more targeted abuse from coach, players, and fans, which they attributed to their gender. This *Gendered Abuse* detracted from their work experience and ultimately, contributed to their discontinuation in the role.

## **Discussion**

The authors explored the lived experiences of former female basketball officials in the U.S. in an effort to glean a deeper understanding of the implications of females working in a male-dominated sport setting. In relation to their common experiences (RQ1), participants described basketball officiating being comprised of uncivil gendered abuse and indicated that, in their experiences, the workplace atmosphere of the officiating community (RQ2) was filled with low levels of respect, unequal policies, and a dearth of female role models and mentors. Specifically, the data highlighted potential concerns for recruiting and retaining competent female sports officials.

Organized team sports face extinction without the presence of qualified, competent game officials (Titlebaum et al. 2009), yet the results indicate that there is a lack of intentionality and urgency on the part of administrators to promote civility in the officiating profession. The results support previous research that concluded on-court experiences negatively impacted the officials’ experience (c.f., Anshel and Weinberg 1995; Rainey 1999), but it was clear from our participants

the problem was more profound than simply the stress associated with game day officiating. Similarly to the recent findings on the profession (Kellett and Shilbury 2007; Kellett and Warner 2011; Warner et al. 2013), the results indicated that a combination of uncivil behaviors, on *and* off the court, directly contributed to a perceived lack of community, which ultimately led to the decision to leave the role. More specifically, our female participants described that incivility as opposed to a healthy community existed for them.

The results indicated that the incivility and lack of officiating community was a combination of four key factors, which formed against the backdrop of a gendered professional environment: *Lack of Mutual Respect, Perceived Inequity of Policies, Lack of Role Modeling and Mentoring, and Gendered Abuse*. The *Lack of Mutual Respect* from male counterparts was the most troublesome and indeed may be the most difficult to overcome. The data indicate that as in other areas of sport, hierarchical gender norms may foster workplace incivility (see Cunningham 2008). The former female basketball officials interviewed clearly revealed that the persistent instances of incivility played a significant factor in their decision to leave the role. That is, the repetitive, low intensity, ambiguous violations of respectful behaviors, and the lack of regard for emotions and feelings from colleague and supervisors led to their departure from the field of officiating (Cortina 2008).

When combined with the *Perceived Inequity of Policies*, the impact of workplace incivility was further exacerbated. Furthermore, the *Lack of Role Modeling and Mentoring* left many of the women disoriented and thus with a feeling of defenselessness and vulnerability. In particular, the dearth of advocates and confidants led to seemingly insurmountable barrier that prevented our participants from successfully navigating the *Gendered Abuse*. This lack of strong female role models coupled with the gender-specific abuse only served to highlight the lack of

transparency from administrators and the presence of a “good old boys network.” These findings support the presence of workplace incivility, as well as more blatant forms of prejudice and discrimination toward women within the officiating profession. The presence of both forms of prejudice is of great concern, as the joint manifestation of incivility and blatant forms of discrimination (e.g., sexual harassment) can result in increasingly negative work and psychological outcomes amongst employees (Lim and Cortina 2005).

### ***Practical Implications***

It is clear that there is a shortage of people willing to enter the realm of officiating (e.g., Titlebaum et al. 2009; Warner et al. 2012c). The steps to make the profession more appealing have thus far been unclear. Specifically a clear directive to recruit more women, who are participating in significant numbers in high school and intercollegiate sports, to the role has yet to come to fruition. This research highlights the need for more female mentors and for administrators to be cognizant of females’ perception of the work environment and the negative impact of organizational policies. Additionally, it is clear that more education with teams, coaches, and male officials regarding the ramifications of gender-specific abuse is need. An intentional focus on creating a more civil workplace for female officials is overdue, particularly to the extent that civility, or lack thereof, may have a direct or indirect impact on retention.

The current findings also suggest that, similar to previous works (Kellett and Warner 2011), support and community may serve as significant retention factors for officials. Kellett and Warner’s (2011) work highlighted that both lack of administrator consideration and inequity (especially related to remuneration and resources) were some of the main concerns of current male umpires in Australian Rules Football. More importantly, these factors prevented the fostering of a strong sense of community among *current* officials, which was determined to be

fundamental to their future retention. Despite the lack of generalizability based on the sample size, the current study's findings appears to confirms Kellett and Warner's results, but reveals more specifically that the community support necessary to overcome these issues for women officials in our study did *not* exist. Further, the findings identify particular uncivil behaviors that prevent female officials from experiencing a sense of community within the workplace. This is a significant finding when considering the gender differences that may be present in how sense of community is perceived and its association with retention.

While research has found sense of community to be vital to organizational commitment in workplace (Pretty and McCarthy 1991) and athlete retention (Warner and Dixon 2011, 2013b), gender differences may exist. For example, Lambert and Hopkins (1995) suggested that informal support was more significant in explaining sense of community for men, while formal support was more important for women. In the sport realm, Warner and Dixon (2013a) suggested that male athletes tend to view competition differently than female athletes. Further, it is also well accepted that social support is more vital to females in exercise adherence (Dixon 2009; Spink 1995) and sport participation (Warner et al. 2012a). Given the nature of the officiating as a male dominated profession (Todey, 2011), it may not be surprising that our female participants were so negatively impacted by the lack of both civility and support that they chose to leave the profession all together. Thus, it is evident from the results that lack of community, and consequently lack of retention of females, is due to workplace incivility created by *Lack of Mutual Respect, Perceived Inequity of Policies, Lack of Role Models and Mentors, and Gendered Abuse*. Leaders in every workplace realm should take active steps to address the root cause of this workplace incivility, as, for the women we interviewed, it led to the participants ultimately leaving the profession.

For the officiating profession it was clear that addressing the *Lack of Mutual Respect* for females in the profession is of primary concern. Officiating administrators can accomplish this by making a more concerted effort to implement diversity training and creating a culture that values inclusion. Indeed, research has found that employees within sport organizations that value diversity and inclusion experience positive work outcomes (Cunningham 2009, 2011). Administrators must also find ways to ensure that the implementation of policies is transparent. Step-by-step procedures on determining game assignments should be outlined and formal grievance to illuminate discrepancies should be implemented to address *Perceived Inequity of Policies*. Next, utilizing more female officials in recruiting materials (Warner et al. 2012c), encouraging females to consider the role (cf. Dixon et al. 2008), and creating a gender-matched mentoring program (Avery et al. 2008; Weaver and Chelladurai 1999) may help address the *Lack of Role Models and Mentors*. As noted by a participant, although some female officials have made strides at the elite levels, it is not translating into role models who are promoting officiating as an occupation. Consequently, significant strides for females at the lower levels have not manifested. It seems visible role models are not enough to promote change. More deliberate and intentional media promotions and diversity programs (cf. Cunningham 2008, 2012) for officiating are required. Finally, more education, zero-tolerance policies and public service announcements may likely help mitigate the *Gendered Abuse*. These steps could help ensure a healthier workplace community and less workplace incivility for female officials. Future research should also investigate the use of these tactics beyond the realm of officiating. This is specifically the case for the use of public service announcements highlighting gender and gender abuse, as there has been very little research on the topic in sport.

### ***Research Implications***

Our study represents an important first step to understanding the gender-specific reasons why sports officials drop out of the role. While the findings are not generalizable beyond the sample, this work provides an important step in understanding why more females are not retained in the officiating role and sets the groundwork for additional study. It also offers further support to previous studies which found that incivility negatively impacts a myriad of workplace outcomes, such as creativity, cooperation, citizenship, job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover intentions, and reduced retention rates (cf. Cortina 2008; Miner-Rubino and Cortina 2004; Pearson et al. 2001). The relationship between workplace incivility and the disruption of community formation were obviously detrimental to our participants. Future research should explore this phenomenon using different research designs and with female officials from other sports. This would allow for the attainment of a broader sample and permit comparisons and contrasts to be drawn. Specifically, such research could explore whether the experiences in basketball officiating, a male dominated context, are different other sports such as fast-pitch softball and volleyball.

This research demonstrated the benefit of moving beyond the paradigm of studying officials as a homogeneous population. As with other areas of sport, while there are commonalities, women officials experience the workplace very differently than their male colleagues. By applying a workplace incivility framework (Cortina 2008), this research presents a clearer picture as to the impact of those gendered differences. It is infrequent that researchers can unearth the insights and observations of individuals who have left the workplace. Given that sports officials are contract employees, obtaining the emic perspective from those who have dropped out is even more difficult. This perspective, however, is likely to offer the most germane evidence regarding dissatisfaction, incivility, and sense of community (cf., Cunningham et al. in

press; Dixon and Warner 2010; Warner et al. 2013). This research also highlights the importance of seeking to understand the perspective of the disenfranchised and marginalized employees.

The findings add to the applicability of selective incivility theory to the sport setting. Consistent with Cortina's (2008) conceptualization, those possessing low levels of power (i.e., females) within the officiating profession were targets of incivility. Indeed, these uncivil behaviors manifested from gendered traditions within sport, as well as from a lack of proactive diversity strategies within officiating organizations. The current findings interestingly suggest that these uncivil behaviors also impede a sense of community from developing for female officials. While previous research has primarily focused on the mechanisms that create a sense of community (e.g. Pretty and McCarthy 1991; Warner et al. 2012b) it would advantageous to also explore the factors that prevent a sense of community from forming. Thus, studying these destructive factors from a disenfranchised and marginalized perspective offers a broad perspective and is important for future research to consider.

### **Conclusion**

Our examination of eight *former* female basketball officials extends the literature by using a phenomenological approach to consider how administrators can better implement policies and take proactive measures to positively enhance the female officiating experiences and thus, retain more female officials. By viewing the female officiating experiences through a workplace incivility framework, rather than the more common psychological (abuse, burnout, conflict, stress) framework, it is evident that the experiences of female sports officials are distinctive from their male counterparts. Additionally, by using the emic perspective of officials who had actually dropped out, the findings reveal specific uncivil behaviors that ultimately led to

withdrawal from the profession. The findings indicate that both on-court and off-court experiences must be considered when developing retention strategies for female sports officials.

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Appendix A  
**The experience of former women officials**  
**Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

1. Tell me about why you decided to start officiating? What did you expect that you would like about officiating? What expectations, if any, weren't met? Why did you decide not to continue? Is there anything you miss about officiating?
2. Did you make friends with other referees? Do you still keep in contact with anyone who you met through officiating?
3. How did others (family, friends and co-workers) view your involvement in officiating? Were they supportive? What did they think when you decided to stop officiating?
4. Can you tell me if you have ever felt a sense of belonging within the officiating community...What was this like for you? Can you give me a specific example of when you felt a strong connection to the officiating community during your experience?
5. Some have suggested that the sense of community and/or the social worlds that develop within and among referees is important to their retention. What do you think about this?
6. Some people have said there are times when they *didn't* feel a sense of community during their officiating experience. Did you ever feel that way?
7. Do you think that you experienced a stronger or weaker sense of community in comparison to other referees?
8. How do you think the management of officiating (such as their policies and procedures) impacted the sense of community (or lack thereof) that you experienced? How about in comparison to the experiences of referees that you know continued on.
9. Was there anything about the referring experience that surprised you?
10. Can you tell me if others (fellow officials, coaches, or administrators) could have done anything to create an environment that would have led to you staying in officiating?

Probes:

Tell me more about that.

Can you give me an example?

Can you describe how that felt?

I am not sure I understand what you mean.

Can you define that or tell me what that means to you?