"I Don't Feel Like I'm Up Against a *Wall* of Men": Negotiating Difference, Identity and the Glass Ceiling in Sports Information

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This research explores how women in college sports public relations cope with their minority status and the related notion of a glass ceiling in the workplace. Drawing from a socialist feminist perspective and Wrigley's (2002) "negotiated resignation" model, we explore how these women negotiate the tension of working in an industry with a glass ceiling, arguing that many may deny a gender identity altogether, instead blaming discrimination on exterior factors or women themselves.

In many ways, public relations is a hospitable profession to women. As Grunig, Toth and Hon (2000) note, the values in effective public relations practices are compatible with those associated with mainstream notions of femininity. Demographic trends certainly suggest the profession's attractiveness to women, who constitute about 70% of the workforce (Toth & Cline, 2007). Women have reported that the profession's flexible hours and the perceived lack of sexist barriers also provide a particularly appealing workplace (Toth & Cline).

The allure of public relations does not translate to sports PR work, however. Sports information directors (individuals who promote college athletics) complete tasks typical of public relations technicians, including writing press releases and other media-oriented publications, setting up news conferences, providing media services, handling internal communication and maintaining organizational Web sites (Connors, 2007; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007; Stoldt, 2000; Stoldt, Miller & Comfort, 2001). Yet, instead of the "feminized" culture often described in public relations literature, female sports information directors (SIDs) make up a minority of the profession. Further, women do not see sports information as particularly amenable to their time schedules and cite sexual harassment as a problematic issue (Whiteside & Hardin, in press).

However, some similarities exist, most notably with women's lack of power in both professions. In (nonsports related) public relations, although women make up the large majority of the industry, they hold 36% of management positions (Toth & Cline, 2007). Similarly, women in sports information compose about 14% of director positions (Whiteside & Hardin, 2010). Thus, women in both professions deal with a classic glass ceiling, which has been defined as an invisible barrier that prevents qualified individuals from reaching management positions (U. S. Department of Labor, 1991).

This research explores how women in sports information cope with their minority status and the related notion of a glass ceiling at their workplace. It follows the work of Wrigley (2002), who argues that women in public relations use several strategies, which together form a concept she calls "negotiated resignation," to cope with the existence of a glass ceiling. We explore this concept through conversations with female SIDs and theorize about the implications of those characterizations.

Literature Review

Sports are a powerful cultural institution in terms of organizing behavior in a way that appears natural to members of society (Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007). For instance, prevailing value systems in sports privilege behavior and traits associated with mainstream notions of masculinity, such as physicality and unrestrained competition, thus making women's participation appear unnatural (Duncan, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994). The notion of sports as the domain of men is normalized through a variety of discursive frameworks and practices. For example, despite the existence of Title IX, a law that affords equal opportunity and funding to male and female athletes at government-funded institutions, most schools are not in compliance and continue to either underfund girls and women's sports or deny those athletes the opportunity to compete (Priest, 2003; Suggs, 2005). Media messages also help reproduce prevailing sports-are-for-men ideology through the trivialization of female athletes to their marginalization in the sports sections of newspapers and television programming (Duncan, 2006).

Women in Sports Media

Sports communication environments also normalize sporting spaces as those where male authority is automatically presumed. For example, female sports journalists have reported feeling pigeonholed into covering women's sports and are routinely excluded from covering high profile men's sports such as football or men's basketball (Cramer, 1994; Miloch, Pedersen, Smucker, & Whisenant, 2005). A similar process happens in athletic departments where female sports information directors routinely work with what Suggs (2005) calls lower-tier sports, including women's teams. The hyper-commercialized "big-time" sports of football and men's basketball are reserved nearly exclusively for men, which is particularly problematic given such valuable experience is often parlayed into advancement opportunities (Whiteside & Hardin, 2010).

Those who do enter sports media do not often stay for the long haul (Etling, 2002; Hardin & Shain, 2005). In a survey of female sports journalists, about three-quarters said they had considered leaving their careers, giving hours, pay and lack

of advancement opportunities as the foremost reasons (Hardin & Shain, 2005). The unforgiving hours that seem incompatible with life as a wife and/or mother are themes that have also emerged in qualitative research (Claringbould, Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Hardin, Shain, & Shultz-Poniatowski, 2008).

It is impossible to evaluate women's experiences in sports media without thinking about the culture of the sports newsroom, which members have described as "a profession built on macho behavior which is reinforced by traditions of misogynist and racist jokes" (Claringbould et al., 2004, p. 715; also, Hardin & Shain, 2005; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002). The unwelcoming environment may create a situation where women feel like second-class citizens. In interviews, women often talk about the need to prove their competency in a way that is not required of men, who are presumed to be apt at covering sports by way of their gender (Hardin & Shain, 2006; Miloch et al., 2005; Staurowsky & DiManno, 2002).

Still, female sports journalists generally resist blaming a culture that is unfriendly to them for their collective lack of power and often explain ways in which their gender is an advantage (Claringbould, Knoppers, & Elling, 2004; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Miloch et al., 2005). However, as Hardin and Shain (2005) note, the masculine value system of sports may be so culturally entrenched that women may see sexual harassment and discrimination as "routine" and expected (p. 814). Further, Claringbould et al. (2004) say accepting such behavior is part of the overall sports workplace socialization process, which is to women's own detriment.

Women in Sports Information.   The lack of women working in sports information is compounded by research suggesting that female SIDs may not be getting the chances they deserve when it comes to promotion. One recent study found that women may be excluded from management through the phenomenon of homologous reproduction, or the practice of hiring staffers that match the physical attributes of the interviewer, which, in the case of athletic directors, is largely white and male (Whisenant & Mullane, 2007). Hardin and Whiteside (2009) argue that in negotiating the masculine culture of sports, female SIDs fall into what Frohlich (2004) calls the "friendliness trap," a two part-process explaining women's underrepresentation in management. In the first step, women gain access to media professions based on perceived natural (read: feminine) traits, such as being a good listener, for instance. When they are later evaluated for leadership positions, these same skills work to women's detriment as feminine characteristics are often seen as antithetical to effective leadership.

Public Relations and Gender

In some ways, women's experiences in public relations are markedly different from those working in sports information, largely because women make up the majority of the profession. As a recent survey showed, about 70% of PR practitioners are women (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Further, interest in the field begins in college, and women compose the majority of PR undergraduates (Bruner & Fitch-Hauser, 2006). Like sports information, however, women in public relations are largely shut out from managerial positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Hon, 1995). Public relations is so concentrated with women in technician (lower-level) roles that it has become known as the "velvet ghetto" (Cline et al., 1986; Scollard, 1995; Toth & Cline, 1989). In their research exploring hiring practices, Aldoory and Toth (2002)

argue that the industry has become focused on male recruitment and retention that, combined with a general cultural sense that men may be better suited for leadership roles, leave public relations as a "feminized field where a predominant number of women remain ghettoized in technical positions with lowered salaries" (p. 124). Although men in the profession are seen as having minority status, they still earn more money than women, stay in the profession longer and have an easier time making it into management (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Dozier, 1988; Grunig et al., 2001; Smith, 2006). The lack of women in management may continue to make even a female-dominated workplace problematic for women, who see furthering their career and starting a family as antithetical (Krider & Ross, 1997).

The Glass Ceiling

The idea of the glass ceiling is clearly manifest in public relations, a female-dominated industry with few women managers (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). In general, the term refers to invisible barriers impeding women's advancement to positions of authority (Frohlich, 2004; Wrigley, 2002). The term has gained widespread (negative) notoriety in the United States, where individuals are deeply invested in narratives of equal opportunity. In a report submitted to the Department of Labor, the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission noted that the glass ceiling is a "concept that hinders not only individuals but society as a whole" (Report of the Glass Ceiling Initiative, 1991, p. 2).

Maintaining a Glass Ceiling.   Attitudinal or organizational bias against women certainly accounts for some discrimination and the maintenance of a glass ceiling (Robinson, 2005). However, such reasons only explain part of the ceiling's existence. The very structure of the workday may reify women's underrepresentation in management because it is women who are often responsible for the majority of domestic responsibilities and face higher social consequences for staying late at work (Robinson; Williams, 2000). The inability to put in excessive "face time" leaves women outside of informal networks that are often critical in gaining favor for promotion (McGuire, 2002; Robinson; Yancey-Martin, 2001). These invisible structural demands are part of what Acker (1990) calls the gendered workplace, a concept that considers gender not as an additive to an organization but reproduced through it in the forms of the division of labor and interactions between individuals, for example. Drawing from focus group interviews with a variety of female public relations practitioners discussing their work experiences, Wrigley (2002) proposed several factors that contribute to the maintenance of a glass ceiling in public relations, ranging from outright denial of the glass ceiling, to explaining its existence as a byproduct of historical sexism.

Coping With the Glass Ceiling.   According to Wrigley (2002), when women work in a gendered industry where they experience discrimination, they are faced with a dilemma: If they acknowledge a glass ceiling in their workplace and desire to continue in their profession, they must resolve that tension in some way. Wrigley offers a model she calls "negotiated resignation" to explain how women resolve that dissonance. Her research suggests that women are aware of a glass ceiling; the coping, or process of negotiated resignation, then, comes through both conciliatory and empowerment strategies including: denying the glass ceiling outright;

employing strategies to fit in; working to "prove" oneself; focusing on women's ability to problem-solve; maintaining that older, more conservative men will soon leave the workforce and make way for a younger, more progressive cohort that is more amenable to women's issues; and changing the workplace culture. In terms of the last strategy, women in public relations may be able to meet such a goal. Scholars suggest that when a minority group eclipses 15% of the workforce, it achieves a "critical mass" and may be more likely to form a collective identity that challenges the status quo in ways that will benefit the group collectively (Grey, 2002; Saint-Germain, 1989; Thomas, 1991; 1994).

Integrating a Socialist Feminist Perspective

It is important to acknowledge that when assessing women's coping mechanisms the idea that meeting (male-defined) standards of success may not be in the interest of every woman, and that researchers should avoid attaching a false consciousness label on women who either do not identify with glass ceiling issues, or do not feel compelled to address them (Caven, 2006). In other words, personal preferences toward work should be taken into account, an idea championed by Hakim (2000), who generally argues that women have different desires toward work and life, ranging from dedication to career to dedication to family. This perspective dovetails with a socialist feminist focus on gender and labor–a theoretical approach seeking to understand how capitalism and its inherent rules and norms interact with patriarchy to oppress women. The general socialist feminist position is that an individual's material conditions, including their relative power in the workplace, cannot change until patriarchal and capitalistic ideologies change (Steeves, 2004; Tong, 1998). For example, capitalism places a high value on professions that produce large amounts of money. Research suggests, however, that some women may value their jobs for reasons beyond the bottom line, as in the case of female doctors who valued their ability to perform care work in the workplace over their status and opportunity to earn high salaries (Boulis, 2004). In public relations, Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (1997) found that women reported high levels of job satisfaction when they felt they were also achieving a balance of family and work life.

Such a perspective is reflective of the socialist feminist goal of collectively moving toward the increased valuation of domestic responsibilities. From this perspective the low value placed on such labor is considered a major impediment toward women's liberation (Carinci & Wong, 2009). Yet valuing childcare is but one element in the socialist feminist projects; as Caven (2006) showed in her interviews with female architects, socialist feminism must also consider what she calls "the attraction of non standard working," or the notion that individuals may gain satisfaction from endeavors other than rising to the top of the corporate ladder and breaking the proverbial glass ceiling in the process (p. 48). Thus, making time for hobbies, personal health/fitness or local politics are all part of deconstructing a male-defined notion that "success" stems from success in the workplace.

Method

We conducted focus group interviews with women in sports information to assess the glass ceiling in this unique subset of public relations. Our interpretations of the

discussions were guided by Wrigley's (2002) factors that contribute to the glass ceiling, and which also provide the basis for our conclusions about the existence of a glass ceiling in sports information and its potential to be broken.

Participants

We recruited members of a group called Female Athletic Media Executives (FAME) to participate in focus groups. FAME is an informal networking group within the large, formal organization of sports information directors called the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA). We conducted the groups at the 2007 annual CoSIDA convention. We did not pay participants directly but made a donation to FAME for each individual member. Overall, 30 women participated in seven groups. The women ranged in age, from 24 to 57, and in experience, from two years to 31. Most (23) worked at Division I institutions (the highest level in collegiate athletics), with the rest working at Division II, III, NAIA or Canadian universities. Three identified as African-American, and one each as Hispanic and Asian and the rest as Caucasian. Eight participants reported being the head of their department, five said they were associate SIDs, and 11 worked at the assistant level. Others reported various titles including director of web development and director of publications.

During the recruitment process, we also offered the option of a solo interview, which two women chose. We used the same basic list of questions in the interviews. One group member, Shelby, returned on her own after her session, and we asked her to elaborate on any topics she chose from her focus group session. In accordance with our university's human-subject guidelines, we promised all participants confidentiality. Thus, we have used pseudonyms in place of real names.

Procedure

Each group lasted about 90 min. We began the discussion by asking participants to introduce themselves and describe their job responsibilities. We then moved on to a series of nondirective questions related to their work in sports information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We started by asking them to fill in the blank on the following question: "As a woman in sports information, I _____." If group members did not raise the concept of a glass ceiling on their own in the session, we invited the issue into discussion with a general question: "Does the notion of a glass ceiling ring true to you?" We used the same list of basic questions for each group but asked unique follow-up questions depending on responses (Potter 1996). One of us led the focus group while the other took notes during the conversation; most interviews were done the same way. (One interview was conducted by only one researcher.)

Analysis

It is difficult to define discrete steps in qualitative analysis; we define ours as a theoretical thematic analysis that "is driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytical interest in the area" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Through the course of our interpretations, however, we were faced with the challenge of bridging the gap between listening to the women's stories, interpreting them, then drawing conclusions here (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). We have thus tried to represent

the experiences of the women we interviewed by staying close to their words and mindful of avoiding "false consciousness" labels (Caven, 2006). At the same time, we recognize the interpretive nature of this work and that we have entered into this research with assumptions, most notably that sports and organizational labor are sites where gender discrimination and sexual difference are reproduced in ways that are problematic for women.

Findings

Few of the women we interviewed used the term glass ceiling on their own volition, and most did not see gender discrimination as a part of their everyday work experience. Furthermore, none saw herself as a victim, but rather as an active, empowered woman. Still, all acknowledged the lack of women in the industry, and most were pessimistic about staying in the profession in the long term. The gap between this acknowledgment and the resistance to labeling women's exclusion as a gender-specific problem, and thus collectively organizing to change the work structure, is the focus of this study. In doing so, we follow Wrigley's (2002) model by first exploring the factors that contribute to the glass ceiling in sports information, calling these 1) Denial; 2) Historical Precedence; 3) Women as the Problem; and 4) Different Status Workplaces. In discussing these factors, we also examine the coping strategies the women in this study employ to negotiate through the tension of acknowledging a problematic workplace. In our interpretations, we attempt to stay mindful of women's personal preferences that may not include management aspirations but emphasize other areas of life over career.

Denial

When asked what the term glass ceiling meant to them, most participants said they could not identify with the concept. Some went to great lengths to separate themselves from that notion. Nell, a 28-year-old SID from a Division I university adamantly explained:

> I don't feel like I'm treated differently. I eat lunch with our football coach. I don't notice! I don't *feel* different. I don't *feel* like I'm a leper. I don't *feel* like I'm treated differently. Our football players treat me with the same respect they treat anybody else. I don't feel that whole like—I don't feel *coddled.* I don't feel like I'm up against a *wall* of men.

Although most said they had not experienced gender discrimination, many still offered numerous stories to illustrate just that. Resistance to the notion of a "glass ceiling" combined with stories that describe such a barrier fail to acknowledge that women face a steeper climb to management than do men. Refusing to acknowledge discrimination — and subsequently leaving the marginalization of women in sports information unchallenged may contribute to the glass ceiling's maintenance.

Hard Work and Passion Is Enough.   Several women had reached management at major athletic institutions and saw themselves as illustrative of the potential for women in sports information. They cited a strong work ethic that included wearing a "thick skin" and a love for sports information that trumped all potential

challenges. Our second focus group included one such woman named Shelby, a 38-year-old head SID at a major Division I institution who said she generally does not think about her gender and has never experienced a glass ceiling. The other women in her group, however, told several painful stories that painted an alternative picture. A day later Shelby returned to the interview room and told us she was troubled by the previous day's session. The follow-up interview allowed us to explore how she was resolving this tension. Shelby insisted:

> You can do it. And I mean that's what I think drove me back here this morning. You can do it. And it's not impossible. And if you love what you do, why wouldn't you want to make it work? So that's troubling.

Other SIDs who had reached prestigious levels, like director status or top-tier sport assignments like football, articulated similar views.

> You've got to love what you do in this job...that's the way you're going to be better in this profession, the only way you're going to survive. So I just think you just know that and meet it head on, and I feel like that's driven me everyday. 'Ok, I'm a woman, I've got to get more credibility.' Yeah, you've got to work a little bit harder to establish that, but once you establish your reputation, you'll be fine (Betsy, 49, Assistant athletics director of media relations).

True Victims Are White Men.   Some suggested it was not women who face a barrier but rather white men who struggle to find positions in the midst of diversity initiatives. Dani (52, associate athletics director for media relations, Division I) discussed the trend:

> Dani: I've got a lot of guys in my office and I told them, you suffer from white-man-disease. Now, you know, if we could get a sex change on board or – I mean, it's really hard to place those guys, and [the] reverse is happening to them.
>
> Interviewer: White-man-disease?
>
> Dani: White-man-disease. They've become the minority because females and women of color and ethnicity are what's setting the quota nowadays.

Male bosses and colleagues were also positioned as victims for having to adapt to working with additional women. Molly, a 26-year old Division I athletic communications assistant explained her situation:

> [In] our office, there's four of us. We're three women and one man. So, I mean we severely outnumber him. Sometimes I think he suffers for that.
>
> Interviewer: What do you mean?
>
> Molly: Just that sometimes it's overwhelming, like, because we have a secretary, so there's four women and one man out of five people. I just think it's different.

It's Not Gender but Age.   Many, even two women in their 40s, blamed their age or youthful appearance for any discrimination they may have experienced. Participants described myriad ways in which their age harmed their credibility or

contributed to unfair treatment in the workplace. One SID said her boss "hovered" over her at the convention like a parent; others described paternalistic behavior from journalists as well as their own athletes. Noreen, a 31-year-old Division I assistant SID, said:

> My issue with respect and trying to gain respect is that I look so young and I think people automatically think I'm a student or an intern and so they treat me a certain way. And once they find out I'm full-time, they treat me differently. It's media. It's other SIDs. It's not a gender thing.

Like Noreen, most of the women who described discrimination were quick to label it as ageism rather than sexism, thus resisting using gender as a barrier.

Historical Precedence

When participants acknowledged the glass ceiling or gender discrimination, most directly attributed it to historical precedence and the traditional partnership of sports and men. Group members saw the entry of women into sports as fairly recent, and thus saw gender discrimination as an unfortunate byproduct of earlier misguided assumptions. The perception that women either do not understand or do not belong in sports was a challenge many participants said they faced on an everyday basis. For instance, Molly rationalized her difficulties earning credibility with journalists:

> A male reporter certainly isn't going to walk up to a man and be shocked if he knows [sports]. His assumption is 'Oh, he knows everything about the sport he is handling and more.' Whereas males still today walk up to a female — regardless that we've been in the profession for how many years — and they are still surprised if we rattle off stats.

When we asked directly about notions of a glass ceiling, participants saw the problem as not unique to sports information but as a worldwide reality. Amy, a 31-year-old Division II sports information director, said, "I feel like you are always going to experience that to an extent. Not just at the, um—I mean, any woman can deal with that in their job regardless what it is that you do."

The women expressed optimism toward the prospect of change, however, and they believed younger, more enlightened men were entering the profession who would be open to the idea of women working in sports. Furthermore, they saw this new generation of men as also representing a different form of masculinity. Instead of a man focusing only on his career, the participants saw this "new man" as allowing more time for his family, thus making it easier for *everyone* to balance work and home responsibilities. Indeed, the prospect of being unable to work in sports information while caring for a family was the primary reason many suspected they would leave the profession. Alexa, a 42-year-old SID at a Division III institution, said:

> I think an older group in sports information in general probably would assume that everything needs to be done now, and 'why isn't this up [online],' but I think there's a lot of new parents out there, new SIDs, that realize this can wait.

Shelby, in her follow-up interview, also argued that times were changing in ways that would help women.

> Some men, I get the perception that they are the traditional breadwinners and their wives have stayed at home to raise the kids. But that's the old guard of men, and today's husband-spouse-significant other-whatever, well, there are just different rules today.

Women as the Problem

Although they often denied experiencing overt workplace gender discrimination, many women did say they faced negative stereotypes, including being uninformed about sports and working in the profession as a means to find romantic relationships with men. They did not blame sexism for these stereotypes but rather unqualified women, who participants believed were unfairly hired to fill a quota. Alexa said, "It's frustrating to see sometimes 'women and minorities encouraged to apply.' What about the best person regardless of gender or race?" When asked if there should be more women in sports information, most hedged their answers. Jill, a 40-year-old Division I SID, in response to the question said, "As long as they are competent. That is my biggest pet peeve is that you are brought along just because you are a female. You better know what you're doing."

Group members saw these "other" women as failing to advance because of their own ineptitude and as creating a problem for all women, who must battle negative perceptions in their own pursuits for advancement. One woman explained the problem:

> I don't do the low-cut shirt thing. I don't do any of that because it's not me. But I see, I see women giving the sideline reporting for NFL games in a tank top. And I'm thinking 'I wouldn't listen to her.' And that's my fear—that that's how people perceive female SIDs or females in general in sports. That the reason we're here is that we're something to look at, not because we know what the hell is going on.

Some women were positioned as emotional and difficult to work with. In citing these problems, many women said they preferred working with men. Comments like the following from Dana, a 37-year-old Division I associate media director, were common:

> This is the first time I've ever had a female boss. I don't know. I feel more comfortable around men. I'm not a gruff person, but I'm very direct and still that fits a man better.

Sexism as the Woman's Responsibility.   At times, participants described sexist behavior — but did not see it as detrimental. Rather, they put the burden on women to move past it. Carla, a 34-year-old associate SID who oversaw a major football program, said she refused to see herself as different. She added later, "You've just got to let things roll off your back." Many of the women agreed with Carla's assessment. Acknowledging sexism was seen as being "too sensitive" and an

inhibitor to success. Said one, "I think a lot of that might have to do with your basic insecurity as a person."

Several women made comments about being hesitant to "play the female card" and acknowledging one's difference. As Justine cautioned, "Don't use it as a crutch." One exchange illustrated this resistance. After describing how she found out that she was earning less than a male counterpart, Melody's group members followed up:

Shelby: You have been there the same amount of time?

Melody (29, assistant director, Division I): Yes

Interviewer: Wow.

Melody: Yeah, who knows, you're left kind of wondering. I left kind of wondering — and I hate to play the female card and say it's because I'm a woman—maybe it's not because of that. But it makes you think about it and wonder about it.

Interviewer: Why do you hate to play the female card?

Melody: Because I've seen so many women play it, and I think they shouldn't.

Alexa: I agree on that.

Although many agreed that "playing the female card" was problematic, other comments suggested that failing to acknowledge their gender brought with it a cost. In discussing her frustration with a lack of advancement in her career, Nell—who so adamantly explained how she does not feel "up against a wall of men"—lamented the low numbers of women working in high status positions.

I wish there were more of us doing football. I mean, Paula and I have worked together for a long time, have known each other for a long time, and she is now working for football and I'm like, 'I would kill to do that.' But I can't because of, you know, you have to get through—there's so many people that are so much more qualified than me in that sense because they've gotten the chance to work with football.

Different Status Workplaces

In various ways, some women alluded to the culture of sports information as privileging top-tier men's sports and SIDs who work at institutions with major athletic programs. These narratives suggested that it was easier for women to advance if they worked in lower profile environments. Some women who worked in management at smaller institutions described difficulties in bridging the gap to higher-profile schools. Alexa described an instance of being excluded from the CoSIDA executive board because she represents a small school. She even described the group as an "old boys network" — not because of a sexist culture but because of an elitist mindset that looks down upon SIDs from small schools. She said, "There are people from the old guard that are just — they just don't think that a college-division [small school] SID can do it." Jill discussed her recent struggles in trying to move from a small Division I institution to a major athletic university,

using the term "ceiling" but blaming her lack of advancement on the low status of her university in athletic circles:

> I was getting very frustrated because I am at a I-A school[1]. I am the head person. I handle football. But by football rankings, we're terrible. I applied for a head position at a [major conference] school. Didn't even get a phone call to be considered. Called a bunch of people I knew who could call for me and they would call and wouldn't get calls returned. I thought, 'Have I hit the ceiling?'

Discussion

Although most sports scholars would agree that sports media workplaces are generally problematic for women, these focus group discussions provided a more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to the glass ceiling in sports information and how women cope with their understanding of them. The groups further allowed us to explore Wrigley's (2002) concept of negotiated resignation. In describing their experiences, group members referenced various strategies to negotiate the unsettling idea that they may be in a somewhat futile effort to succeed at their (gendered) jobs.

Coping with the Glass Ceiling

The general denial of gender barriers, the blaming of other women and the attribution of other factors like age when faced with discrimination too obvious to ignore suggest that women in sports information may feel the only way to get ahead is to deny the existence of gender altogether. In their descriptions, many ascribed to dominant workplace norms about advancement, including hard work and passion for the job, and suggested that to succeed and advance, one simply needs to embody such attributes. The "anyone-can-achieve" discourse, however, cloaks the gendered problems embedded in those concepts. When "passion" and "drive" mean long hours, overnight travel and weekend work, then these attributes require meeting an "ideal" worker standard, which is based upon men's traditional everyday lives and responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000). Thus, a female SID's unwillingness (or inability) to work a Saturday football game because of familial responsibilities, for example, becomes her lack of "drive." This discursive framework, then, operates on two levels: 1) to deny the glass ceiling, and 2) to blame women for their own shortcomings. This line of discourse is especially problematic from a socialist feminist point of view. Until responsibilities in the home become valued and considered when establishing workplace expectations, most women with families will simply not be able to meet those standards. Continuing to couch women's inability to meet ideal worker standards as a lack of "drive," for instance, puts the responsibility for any lack of success squarely on the shoulders of women. This is not to suggest that one can succeed without hard work, but those terms must be explicated in a gendered context.

Acknowledging a Gender Identity

In many ways, women blamed other women for their collective problems. We see this "blame game" as reflecting a lack of unity among all women in sports

information and as part of what Claringbould et al. (2003) refer to as women's internalization of dominant workplace values. Networking among women requires acknowledgment of one's gender identity, something most seemed unwilling to do. Thus, the need to organize or support each other because of their gender becomes illogical or not needed. After all, if gender doesn't matter, then why would anyone need to align based on a gender identity?

Still, we think it is reasonable to expect that women entering sports information are aware of the masculine environment. Yet most seemed unwilling to challenge the taken-for-granted structure. It is important to consider that these SIDs may not be blind to such processes but may be taking that position consciously as a strategic survival strategy. Because they constitute such a small number of women in the business and an even smaller number of women in positions of power, they may not be in a position to take a more radical approach to challenging their workplace structure.

Hiring more women to achieve what many workplace scholars call a critical mass might be the first step in giving female SIDs the opportunity to challenge some of the taken-for-granted norms in the workplace (Grey, 2002; Saint-Germain, 1989; Thomas, 1991, 1994). However, as long as they represent such a small minority, we wonder if asking women to develop a broader gender consciousness is a reasonable request.

Personal Preferences

Although we have positioned these factors as contributing to the maintenance of the glass ceiling and providing women as a way to rationalize away its existence, we must also acknowledge the idea that some women may not have a preference for management positions. A desire to break a glass ceiling and rise to management presupposes a high individual priority on career. Thus, comments from some women may not necessarily reflect a psychological process for coming to terms with a glass ceiling but rather may be illustrative of life choices that do not require the mental labor of acknowledging and then breaking through any workplace barriers. For example, many of our participants identified with the nurturing, care-taking element of the profession. This element may be lost in high-profile positions where responsibilities include less day-to-day contact with the athletes. And although many also speculated they would leave once they had children, given their strong connection to their "kids" on the playing field, we must consider that desire to leave may not stem from a frustration with hitting a glass ceiling but rather to find a profession where they can dedicate more time to their own children. Said Molly:

> I think long and hard about having a family and not being able to be–like I want to see my kids play soccer. I want to go to their games. I want to coach them. You think about that when you get off the bus at 2 o'clock in the morning.

In discussing children, group members also articulated a view that there is more to life than work. Carla, who throughout the session expressed no sense of gender identity but also described ways in which she had experienced discrimination at work, told us late in the session that she was considering leaving. Her reason, however, was not because of any on-the-job difficulties but a desire to find personal satisfaction at work that does not stem from executive power.

I've been feeling a higher calling. I've always been somewhat of a philosophic person, but I think the one thing that—or the things that I enjoy so much about especially working with football—is there are so many kids that come through that have had some really, really rough lives. And I feel really drawn to those kids and my thoughts have been a lot now towards them–like trying to work with inner-city kids and foster care system. Things like that. So it's had nothing to do with this business.

On one hand, such sentiments can be interpreted as a sign of defeat. Perhaps the mental labor of being a minority is weighing on these women, and rather than acknowledge the gender inequities in the workplace, they express a desire to move elsewhere, and in doing so, deny the inequity altogether. On the other hand, integrating Caven's (2006) perspective on the the benefit of nonstandard work may be useful. It is important not to attach a false consciousness label to women who may not want to meet the dominant cultural standards of career success. We suspect sentiments about leaving the business may be a reflection of both. Comments articulated throughout the sessions indicated women face an uphill battle in sports information to prove themselves and earn respect from male colleagues who seem to automatically receive it by way of their gender. The constant struggle for acceptance must be tiring and expressing the desire to leave is understandable. However, as Caven (2006) points out, the cultural devaluation of domestic labor and other forms of nonstandard work reinforces dominant cultural assumptions about "achievement." The ideal worker places career as life's top priority. These women may also be resisting dominant cultural assumptions by expressing the desire to spend time with children or find a job with a higher personal calling, as alluded to by Carla. When more workers articulate similar ideas, we might see a cultural shift that would ultimately restructure the standards and norms workers are required to meet in the workplace — a shift that would benefit all women.

Note

1.   The designation 1-A, which has now been renamed Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) refers to a set of Division I schools that sponsor football. The participant here was referring to her school, which is part of this division.

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