



# Basketball officiating as a gendered arena: An autoethnography



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## ABSTRACT

In this study, an autoethnographic methodological approach was used to examine my basketball officiating experience as a female. Autoethnography involves situating the self's experiences in the context of the setting and the culture at-large. My experiences as a female basketball official over the course of 250 games are examined. The details of the officiating autoethnography will simultaneously be compared to sport-specific feminist autoethnographies. Further, I argue that the merits of autoethnography combined with the general underrepresentation of females in sports officiating make it such that the autoethnographic approach undertaken in this examination provides support for continued varied qualitative approaches in sport management research.

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## 1. Introduction

The saying goes that in sport, the best officials go unnoticed. In this examination, I will detail my time as a youth sports official where I was very much part of the public discourse surrounding the contests. However, it was not for missed calls or technical fouls. Instead, my place as a young, college-age, female in a typically male-dominated position led to a number of unique and informative experiences that build on the previous examinations of officials and gendered spaces in sport.

An array of research exists on varying aspects of sport officiating. Specifically, the role of officiating has been examined from a philosophical angle (Alker, Straub, & Leary, 1973; Askins, Carter, & Wood, 1981; Berman, 2011; Rains, 1984), from a physiological and fitness lens (Bizzini, Junge, Bahr, & Dvorak, 2009; Castagna, 2001), from a judgment perspective (Brand, Schmidt, & Schneeloch, 2006; Lehman & Reifman, 1987; MacMahon & Mildenhall, 2012; Taberner & Marquez, 1999), from a psychological stressor viewpoint (Burke, Joyner, Pim, & Czech, 2000; Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007; Stewart, Ellery, Ellery, & Maher, 2004; Gencay, 2009; Rainey, 1994; Rainey & Hardy, 1997; Stewart & Ellery, 1996), and from a gender, organizational, career approach (Casey, 1992; Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Furst, 1991; Jungebrand, 2006; Tingle, Warner, & Sartore-Baldwin, 2014; Titlebaum, Haberlin, & Titlebaum, 2009; VanYperen, 1998; Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2012). Of the aforementioned research studies, several of the examinations focus on the specific basketball setting (Alker et al., 1973; Askins et al., 1981; Brand et al., 2006; Burke et al., 2000; Stewart et al., 2004; Jungebrand, 2006; Lehman & Reifman, 1987; MacMahon & Mildenhall, 2012; Tingle et al., 2014).

Furthermore, numerous research articles have indicated that females are dramatically underrepresented across a multitude of fields within the sport industry (Burton, 2015; Galloway, 2012; Menaker & Walker, 2013; Moore & Konrad,

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2010; Moore, Parkhouse, & Konrad, 2010; Rhode & Walker, 2008; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Theberge, 1985; Walker & Melton, 2015; Whisenant, Pedersen, & Clavio, 2010; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). In her review examining the research regarding the lack of females in leadership positions in the sport industry, Burton (2015) implored for scholars and practitioners alike to “situate sport as a gendered space. . . Therefore, any discussion of women’s leadership experiences in sport must include positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social process” (p. 156). Furthering this notion, Burton (2015) asserted that hegemonic masculinity is an inherent characteristic to the gendered space of sport leadership. Such a concept of hegemony details that one group has power over another group (Menaker & Walker, 2013).

In discussing the specific topics in the literature related to sport and gender, Chafetz (2006) emphasized, “the work of most scholars in the field falls into two branches: (1) sport as a means for constructing masculinity and femininity and (2) discrimination against and limited opportunities for women” (p. 584). Tying the review to the employment arena in particular, females have less access to sport employment and sport administration positions (Chafetz, 2006). In research exploring the existence of a “glass ceiling” in athletic administration, Galloway (2012) further argued for a “glass cliff” that “occurs when women are promoted to high positions, but these positions involve greater risk and a greater chance of failure” (p. 55). Thus, women realistically either face the “glass ceiling” obstacle in which they cannot reach their goals because of misperceptions about their abilities based on their gender or they face the “glass cliff” in which they are placed in positions that set them up for failure (Galloway, 2012). The purpose of this study is to use an autoethnographic approach to examine working as a female basketball official and its relation to female (under)representation in the sport management industry.

## 2. Review of literature

A thorough review of the literature is important in order to have a detailed background knowledge for examining the autoethnographic results in this study. The review of literature is organized into two distinct parts: officiating literature and literature of female representation in the workplace. Because of the wide range of literature on varying aspects of officiating, there are four subsections on officiating literature.

### 2.1. Officiating

#### 2.1.1. Philosophical research

In their study observing basketball officials from eighteen different officiating organizations, ranging in level from high school to professional, Askins et al. (1981) found that “officiating involves both a technical and social character. . . While the technical character of officiating is reactive, the social character of officiating involves an active participation by the official in defining the situation for others” (p. 91). The authors emphasized the importance of an official legitimizing his or her call by understanding the game, having good techniques and mechanics, and having an objective stance. Noting the intricacies of working in a public setting, “officials are aware of the significance of audience judgments for evaluation of their competency. . . It is a source of considerable irritation to all officials that important evaluations of their work are performed by individuals whom they deem unqualified” (p. 89). Results of their observations indicated that the following serve as characteristics of good officiating: making a correct (albeit controversial) call, experience, and concentration. Other research has indicated that a person must have high self-acceptance because one of the major stresses associated with officiating is the notion that others question the worth of the official’s judgments (Alker et al., 1973). Furthermore, a sign of a good official is that he or she should be substitutable for another good official under the assumption that he or she is a good official because officiating should be consistent both with the work of one official from game to game and between officials (Alker et al., 1973).

#### 2.1.2. Judgment standards

Subjectivity in officiating is often called bias, according to MacMahon and Mildenhall (2012). In their article providing an “applied reflection on the factors that have been found to influence decisions” (p. 154), they found that officials combat such potentially biased situations by using formal instruction (e.g. formal evaluations and attending officiating clinics) and accumulating experience (MacMahon & Mildenhall, 2012). They also stressed the importance of pre-match and during-competition communication with the other officials regarding anticipated style of play and its resultant impact on positioning and decision-making (MacMahon & Mildenhall, 2012). While the aforementioned research delineated the impact that bias and the public-social setting can have on an official’s calls, Taberero and Marquez (1999) specifically examined how officials focused on relevant stimuli and attempted to make calls objectively. Using the Groups Hidden Figures Test with basketball officials, non-athletes, individual sport athletes, and team sport athletes, data indicated that while basketball officials should have been able to block out external stimuli when officiating, they took information both inside and outside the field of play into account when making judgment calls (Taberero & Marquez, 1999).

#### 2.1.3. Psychological stressors and officiating

Several research studies have explored the amount of psychological stress officials experience, with some results indicating a high level of stress experienced and others indicating otherwise. Officials must be able to deal with possible

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