

## Behind the Stripes: Female Football Officials' Experiences

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### Author Bios

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**Abstract:**

This study focused on the work-related experiences of eight female American football officials. The purpose was to gain a holistic perspective of women's experiences working in the male-dominated career of sport officiating. Previous literature has examined sports officials in regards to retention, recruitment, and safety, but relatively little research has focused specifically on female football officials. Using a phenomenological approach, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. After thoroughly analysing the data using open, axial, and selective coding methods, the following four themes emerged: 1) Gendered Experiences; 2) Sense of Community; 3) Mentoring; and 4) Passion for Officiating and Football. The findings lend practical insight that can be used to assist officiating associations with their recruitment and retention, as well as add to the literature on gender equity in sport and on females working in male-dominated careers.

**Keywords:** sport officiating, American football, gender roles, male-dominated, gender equity, referees, community, mentoring

## **1 Introduction**

Historically, sport has been played predominantly by men, but women's quest for equality in society has had its counterpart in the sports world (Messner, 2007). The role of women in sport has been evolving in the United States ever since the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972. Title IX was written to prohibit sex discrimination in any educational program or activity receiving federal financial aid. It later fundamentally and forever changed the characteristics of women's sports as more equality was sought for sport programmes in schools.

Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, sport participation rates for females have risen each year. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that in 1971, before Title IX was passed, there were 3,666,917 boys and only 294,015 girls participating in high school athletics in the United States (Acosta and Carpenter, 2012). In 2011, there were 4,494,406 boys and a dramatic increase to 3,173,549 girls participating. The increase in sport participation by women was also seen throughout college athletics. In 2012, there were over 200,000 female athletes competing on 9,274 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) teams, which is the highest number to date (Wolverton, 2012).

While sport participation rates have steadily increased for females, not every area of sport has prospered in terms of increased participation for women. Sport officials (also known as referees) are an integral part of all sporting competitions, yet this is one area still dominated by males. With sports being played by millions of people including youth, recreational, club, college, and professional, it is easy to see why the position of an official is instrumental to sport. However, what is harder to understand is why this role has not followed the sport participation trends observed among women since the passage of Title IX in the United States.

In the 1970's, when American colleges and universities began establishing women's basketball programs, officiating was done by mostly men (American Sport Education Program, 2011). It is still considered out of the ordinary for a female to officiate a male contest (Casey, 1992) and it is a particularly rare occurrence to see females officiating an American football game. Historically, football in America is a sport that has been played predominately by males and viewed as a means to turn a boy into a man and to define manhood (Coakley, 2004). Sternberg, Stern, Moore, and Korth (2011) surveyed state high school athletic associations and found that there were approximately 281,000 high school sports officials nationwide<sup>1</sup>. Based on this work, it was estimated that 89% of high school sport officials were male and merely 11% were female. The disproportionate number of female officials is especially true in sports that are played primarily by male athletes (e.g., football, baseball, and wrestling). For example, in New Mexico, there were only five female high school football officials, two wrestling officials, and one female baseball umpire during the 2011-2012 school year (interview with D. Sanchez, Commissioner of Officials, New Mexico Activities Association, 28 July 2012).

As of 2012, there were five reported female football officials in NCAA Division I and a small number of women officials in the lower collegiate divisions (Associated Press, 2009). At the professional level, there have been three female officials in the National Basketball Association, but there have not been any in Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL). In spring of 2015, headlines were made when Sarah Thomas was hired as the first full-time female official in the NFL for the 2015 season (Fox, 2015). The 2015 Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) roster of officials included 10 women out of 30 total referees. Professional tennis is an exception, having

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<sup>1</sup> Officials were only counted once, even if they were a multi-sport official.

employed female officials since the 1800's. At the 2010 U.S. Open tennis tournament, 33% of the chair umpires in the men's competitions were women (McManus, 2011). Even with the recent strides that have been made, there are still many others struggling to have equal opportunities in the profession of officiating. Consequently, research needs to explore the experiences of this unique population so that more advances can be made.

Thus far most of the current officiating research has centered on recruitment, retention, and safety of sport officials (e.g., Graf and Konsense, 1999; Kellett and Warner, 2011; Titlebaum, Haberlin, and Titlebaum, 2009). A few studies have looked at females in officiating, but to the researcher's knowledge none of these studies have concerned female football officials. Tingle, Warner, and Sartore-Baldwin's (2014) investigated the workplace experience of eight former female basketball officials. The participants of this study described basketball officiating as "being comprised of uncivil gendered abuse and indicated that, in their experiences, the workplace atmosphere of the officiating community was filled with low levels of respect, unequal policies, and a dearth of female role models and mentors" (Tingle, Warner, and Sartore-Baldwin, 2014, p. 23). Recently Serkan (2014) considered the hostile, threats, violence, and unethical behavior towards indoor sport referees/officials. The results indicated that female referees reported more of a tendency for these behaviors to be directed towards them than their male counterparts (Serkan, 2014). Forbes, Edwards, and Fleming (2015) explored the experience of women who officiate soccer in the United Kingdom. The female officials in this study "downplayed or ignored sexist abuse by accepting gender stereotypes as a fundamental part of the game" (p. 534).

While these studies represent the little work that has been done on female officials, no research exists on specifically American female football officials or officials in a predominately

male sport. It is important to understand the involvement of these participants, as key insights can be gleaned from their unique experiences. Given the lack of research on female football officials, the guiding research questions for this study are:

- 1) What are the experiences of female football officials within the masculine football culture?
- 2) What is the workplace atmosphere within the football officiating community for female officials?

Answering these research questions will likely aid in the recruitment and retention of more female officials, while also calling attention to potential gender equity issues in regards to attitudes, perceptions, and practices. Considering there is a shortage of officials worldwide (Warner, Tingle, and Kellett, 2013), it is important to explore the experiences of female officials and understand their workplace atmosphere, as very few females are entering into the profession.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

Sport is considered a social institution that maintains and reproduces male dominance and female subordination as well as supports beliefs around biological and physical superiority of males in sport (Birrell and Theberge, 1989; Ross and Shiner, 2008). Social role theory proposes that there are societal expectations regarding the roles and behaviours of men and women in society (Eagly, 1997). When gender roles are applied to men and women, certain jobs can be viewed as more appropriate for each gender. This includes women taking on roles that are more often associated with being in the home and men's roles as being in the workplace. "The gender roles that emerge from a society's division of labour by sex are thus not arbitrary cultural constructions, but are socially constructed sets of ideas that are firmly grounded in the requirements of a society's productive activity" (Eagly, 1997, p. 1381). Gender roles and

stereotypes held in society are embedded in society's culture and division of labour between the sexes. An example of this socialization of gender roles and stereotypes can be seen in those that choose to play high school football. During the 2012-2013 school year, there were 1,088,158 athletes who played American high school football; of these, 1,531 of the athletes were girls (Jeffrey, 2014). Because girls see very few other females playing football, the socialization becomes the norm to choose other sports that girls normally participate in such as volleyball or softball.

Gender role beliefs are created via societal and cultural ideologies, stereotypes, and perceived physical and emotional differences in men and women. The distributions of women and men into occupations are usually correlated with their gender stereotypes. Women are seen in smaller percentages in occupations such as police officers, fire fighters, and soldiers due to these positions being associated with protecting others or more agentic dimensions. Whereas, men are seen in smaller percentages in the careers of social workers, nurses, and kindergarten teachers, as these positions emphasize caring for others or more communal dimensions (Eagly, 2009; U.S. Department of Labor, 2008). Androcentrism also appear within officiating fields. Androcentrism is where male-centered norms operate throughout the social institution and become the standard that all adhere (Lindsey, 2011). Since officiating is a male dominated vocation and American football is a highly masculine sport, the beliefs, rules, and norms of males exist throughout the officiating role, which can make it challenging for women working in this field.

Thus, the implication of social role theory is that men and women may be choosing careers because of social stereotypes that surround them. Officiating is portrayed as requiring someone to be physically fit, have knowledge of the game, effectively manage others, be firm

and assertive, have accurate judgments, deal with criticism, and be observant (American Sport Education Program, 2011). These characteristics appear to go along with more masculine agentic features that are considered as more assertive and dominant (Eagly, 2009; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Football is also played by predominantly male athletes, which may lead more males into this vocation because of their familiarity with the game.

Therefore, females officiating football go against the traditional social norms that are in place within American society. In order to change these gender stereotypes, it will take women demonstrating that they can be successful working in a non-traditional vocation for women. McCallister, Blinde, and Phillips (2003) stated that further liberation for women in sport will only occur with freer access to move in between different activities without regard to gender. Being both a female and an athlete is still an area being negotiated by girls and women in today's society (Cunningham, 2007; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer, 2004; Warner and Dixon, 2013a). "Combine this with the fact that 'negative evaluations of women's capacities are implicit in the masculine hegemony in which sport is embedded' (Bryon 1987, p. 350) it is no wonder that change in sport has been slow" (Fink, 2007, p. 147).

The current study utilizes social role theory to help frame and situate the study, as it is clear that females that chose a vocation such as officiating the masculine sport of football go against the societal norm. Such individuals are challenging gender stereotypes in an effort to help change the norm; consequently, social role theory is an ideal theoretical framework utilized to better understand the experiences of female football officials and the workplace atmosphere that they encounter.



### **3 Method**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand how people make sense out of their own lives, delineate the process, and describe how people interpret what they experienced (Merriam, 2009). A phenomenological approach was specifically chosen because the central focus was to understand the personal and social experiences of the participants who share a common experience (Moustakas, 1994). Further, this methodology allowed researchers to understand an insider's perspective by exploring the participant's personal world (Smith, 2008).

#### **3.1 Participants**

Consistent with other phenomenological studies and given the small population of female football officials, eight participants met the study criteria and schedule and were willing to take part in the study. The criteria for participation included being of the female gender and employed as a football official with at least three years' experience at the high school or college level. See *Table 1* for participant's profiles along with pseudonyms. Purposive sampling was used to identify eight participants, who represented a combined total of 144 years of officiating experiences. Patton (2002) argues that the power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for *in-depth* study, which will best inform the researcher about the phenomena. Having a smaller number of participants allowed for "sufficient in-depth engagement with each individual case, but also allowed a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence" (Smith, 2008, p. 57).

#### **3.2 Procedures**

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited via email and phone. Potential participants' contact information was obtained from high school officiating association websites, as well as through snowball sampling. The researcher made

contact with 25 potential high school female football officials and eight met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study, which would include taking part in three separate 1-2 hour interviews. The participants signed an informed consent after reviewing details of the study and the interview guide. The multiple interviews allowed the participants' sufficient time to think about the topics that were discussed (Moustakas, 1994). Participants that were close in geographical location to the primary researcher were interviewed in-person (n=5) and the remaining participants were interviewed via phone (n=3).

The interviews followed the progression developed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Schuman, 1982) that recommended: the first interview includes discussion around focused life history; the second interview asks questions on the details of experience; and the third interview asks the participant to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. All of the interviews used a semi-structure interview format and followed an interview guide developed from the research questions and the literature (e.g., Casey, 1992; Sternberg et al., 2011). The semi-structured interview format allowed for greater flexibility of coverage, facilitated rapport/empathy, and allowed the interview to go into new areas (Smith, 2008).

The interviews were conducted at least five to seven days apart with each participant, which allowed for the researcher and participants to reflect on the questions that were asked. The participants were emailed transcriptions of the interviews in order for them to complete a member-check and to make any clarifications on what was covered throughout the interviews.

### ***3.3 Data Analysis***

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between 60 and 130 minutes. Following the protocol of qualitative research, the primary

researcher was immersed in the data by listening to audio recordings, reviewing the interview transcripts, and referring to interview notes multiple times.

The researcher then used open coding to analyse the data. With the aid of Dedoose computer software, codes or “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2013, p. 3) were determined. After conducting open coding on the data with the Dedoose software, approximately 41 codes emerged (e.g., athletic background, community support, gender role beliefs, family, relationships, barriers, and passion). Next, axial coding was conducted. This allowed the researcher to start to make sense of the data. Using axial coding, the 41-open codes were then narrowed down to three categories: 1) experiences being a female officiating football; 2) community, support, and mentoring; and 3) enjoyment of football and love for officiating.

After axial coding, selective coding took place. During selective coding, Dedoose software was used in order to systematically identify core categories. Previously identified concepts and categories were further investigated and refined and then brought together to develop a clear analytical story from the data (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). The final themes captured recurring patterns that incorporated all of the data. After coding and analysing the data, the information was organised into four major themes, these included: 1) Gendered Experiences; 2) Sense of Community; 3) Mentoring; and 4) Passion for Officiating and Football. To ensure that the findings were credible and that the data were accurate, validation strategies included: with-in subject triangulation, member checks, using rich/thick descriptions, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007). The themes or structural description of the data (Moustakas, 1994) will be presented in the results section.

## **4 Results**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the work-related experiences of female football officials. The study explored the participants' perceptions of what it is like to be one of the few women working in this type of vocation. Analysis of the data revealed that four themes are indicative of the lived experiences of the participating football officials: 1) Gendered Experiences; 2) Sense of Community; 3) Mentoring; and 4) Passion for Officiating and Football. Represented participant quotations that provide examples and illustrations of the female football officiating experience are provided. Pseudonyms were used in place of participant names.

### ***4.1 Gendered Experiences***

Overall, the participants all understood that since football is a male-dominated sport, there would be very few other women officiating. They expected some challenges or resistance while working in this male-dominated vocation. The participants all agreed that they did not want to be known as the “woman football official,” but rather just an officiating counterpart. Nonetheless, all the participants noted that their officiating experiences were different than their male counterparts. These collective experiences were defined as Gendered Experiences, which encompassed the challenges, resistance, and stereotypes that the participants faced because of their gender. It should be noted that while Gendered Experiences was the most salient theme, the data did not indicate a highly volatile or abusive environment in terms of the Gendered Experiences existed. Rather, the participants and data highlighted that the challenges, resistance and stereotypes were more subtle but nonetheless impactful on their experience.

Laura summarized, “Like it or not, I do think that the initial reaction to me on the sideline is different because I'm a woman.” Peggy described the resistance she faced, “a coach will look at me with a very specific look like ‘what are you doing out here?’” Several participants

specifically referenced the ‘good ol’ boys network’ (Beth, Hilary, Karla, Robyn, Peggy, Jill), the stereotypes, and the extra effort needed to develop their legitimacy as football officials. Karla explained:

I think one of the toughest things about being a female in football is that you know it is still a good ol’ boys network. It is one of the last good ol’ boys thing that is left. It is a challenge and a fight.

Robyn added, “The good ol’ boys network will always be there ...you have to figure out how to navigate the good ol’ boys network to be successful.”

Many of the officials also discussed being perceived as incompetent because of their gender and working in football, a sport in which many women do not play. Mary explained:

All I want is to be judged by my ability, not on my gender. Obviously when you walk out onto the field and until you prove yourself, that is how they look at you, they [coaches, players, fans] are very critical and they are going to challenge you.

All the participants, at some point, felt that other officials or coaches looked at them differently because of their gender and the fact that women are not usually associated with football. This is aligned with social role theory, in that the perception is how can women know the sport football if they do not play the game. Karla felt that other officials with playing experience may have an advantage, but noted there were male football officials without playing experience in her association, yet they did not have to overcome the “not playing football belief.”

Peggy explained:

I would like to think we are past that [gender roles bias], but I suppose we are still fighting, sports are the last place where manhood is preserved. There are just not many

women that want to officiate men's sports; they are more accepted in sports they have played.

The data suggested that all the participants had constant and consistent experiences that made them aware of their gender, and that they were working in a male-dominated profession. Although, all of the participants persisted in the football officiating role, it was clear these Gendered Experiences were a significant part of the overall female football officiating experience. For our participants, the Gendered Experience were subtle and this may explain why they continued in the role.

#### **4.2 *Sense of Community***

Despite the gendered experiences, all the participants discussed that they felt like they were in a family or a special group while working as a football official. This theme, Sense of Community, was fundamental to their experience. The participants felt that they shared unique experiences with their fellow officials and this fostered a strong sense of togetherness or as Jill called it, "a fellowship of officials." All the participants agreed that this Sense of Community was necessary in order to be successful.

Laura explained:

I don't know what I'd do without them. The other officials that I work with, we are like a family. We take care of each other on and off the field. We hang out together and talk and watch football, I really enjoy the support I have gotten. Without this support I know personally I would have quit. Officiating is a tough job and you have to have people around you that will help you through the bad days. You can't do it by yourself.

Beth, who is both a football player in a women's American tackle football league as well as an official, has felt support both on and off the field from her fellow officials. She said, "The

sense of comradery is important, being able to back each other up is needed. You are gone long hours and you have to trust each other.” Beth was able to lean on her fellow officials to help her get through the tough games, when game calls may not have gone right or where she had to make some tough calls that went against what a coach wanted. She was able to learn from these experiences and talk about the situations with her fellow officials.

When Hilary joined her local football officiating association she was one of 25 new officials at the time (she was the only woman in the group). Learning alongside other new officials really helped her understand the intricacies of the game. Hilary said, “The officiating culture was very good to me, my fellow officials seemed very accepting and I kind of just jumped right in to become the best official I could be.” Jill was able to learn officiating techniques by attending officiating camps. At these camps, she was able to meet experts in the field and she felt most accepted her into the group. She recalled:

I went to these camps and just soaked it all in. They would help me with techniques and placement, and oh my, I was in heaven. It was the best experience because it was a community of people all working together to get better at their job.

A strong sense of community was built by having the support of the other officials and knowing that they all belonged to a special and unique group of individuals. The Sense of Community was salient and fundamental to the female football officiating experience, as the participants noted that this is what helped keep them involved in the role.

### ***4.3 Mentoring***

The participants all described in their interviews the importance of having a mentor and how it helped them maintain employment in the challenging vocation of football officiating. The experiences with this one-on-one relationship with a more season official comprised the theme

entitled Mentoring. Five of the participants had a formal mentoring programme that was managed within their officiating association. This included required monthly meetings with their given mentor, many informal meetings during the season, and opportunities to attend professional development trainings together. The three other participants found a seasoned official that become their mentor informally. Two of the participants had female football officials as mentors and the other six had male mentors. Four of the participants are now mentors themselves to new football officials (both male and female). Beth explained her experience with having a formal mentor:

Your mentor is really the one responsible to help you. A lot of it is you have somebody you feel comfortable to ask the silly questions to. I could go to her and say I should know this, but explain to me what does “this” mean.

Hilary found a mentor in an informal manner while attending an officiating conference. She explained how her mentor was key to helping her advance in the profession. She stated:

At that time, he [mentor] was starting to notice women officials at these officiating camps. Prior to the early/mid 2000’s there was no help for us, we [women] were getting stuck at the high school level, we were getting left there, and we weren’t getting invited up. To get to the next level, you have to be invited and they [officiating associations] overlooked women. So my mentor spotted me and it really helped me get to that next level. I was fortunate to have a mentor.

Robyn took part in a formal mentor programme when she first started as a football official. She did mention that through the years, she also created a mentor relationship with many of her co-workers as well. Many of Robyn’s mentors in her high school association had college football officiating experience as well. She recalled:



The mentors that I had I was able to go to and ask them questions. ‘Hey explain this rule to me, or this happened in my game how would you have made the call? You [also] need somebody else to say ‘look, I know you are upset but you have the skills you can do this, don’t listen to everybody else, you are fine.’

Laura, Hilary, Mary, and Jill all were mentees and then moved into the mentor role. Laura explained:

You have to have a mentor system to get through it all. Without this support I know personally I would have quit. I am now a mentor myself to new officials and I love helping them along in their careers.

Karla also had a formal mentor who would spend the off-season helping her learn the game.

My mentor and I would go out to lunch or dinner and there was this one time where we had out the sugar packets on the table showing what a line should look like and various other football formations. I knew the rules, but needed help with the little things. So thankfully, I was able to get that help from my mentor.

Mentoring was an important part of the female officiating experience. The mentor-mentee relationship stood out to all the participants as a fundamental part of their success being an official.

#### ***4.4 Passion for Officiating and Football***

Another salient theme that emerged from the data was the passion the individuals had for the vocation of officiating and for the sport of football. Passion, in its general sense, is defined as a strong inclination and desire toward an activity that one likes, finds important, and in which one invests time and energy (Vallerand and Houliort, 2003). There are two elements that underlie the basics of “work passion.” The first element is affective in nature, capturing the

strong, intense liking for and enjoyment of the job; the second element is a cognitive one capturing the perceived importance or significance of the job to the individual, such that the job becomes internalized to the self and defines the individual (Vallerand and Houliort, 2003).

Consequently, all the participants described that they possess this type of passion for officiating and football.

Beth explained:

I loved football and I always wanted to play football and then I got the chance to play in the women's professional league. Football, in general has provided me some experiences that I never ever would have had otherwise. You have the potential to help young kids realise that it's not all about winning; there is sportsmanship, attitude, all which matter. I mean you officiate because you love the sport; you do it because you want to have an impact.

Mary and Peggy recalled that their passion for officiating also stems from watching players grow and develop. Hilary added, "I love football officiating and I love being on the field, I really enjoy the high of getting in the zone and calling a game." Similarly, Laura explained, "I will keep officiating as long as my body holds up and I can stay in shape, and as long as I add value and can help the game...It is very rewarding and I really love being an official."

Jill loves the adrenaline she gets from officiating a football game. She is able to keep up her love and passion for sports even though her playing days are long gone. She explained her rush of emotions, "driving up to the field, big lights on, stadium packed, fans cheering...walk in with your uniform on and you realise you get to be a part of all this...it's a high just like when I used to play." Peggy also loves the atmosphere of a game. She recalled, "I love the sounds of the

marching band, the environment, excitement about the game, helping kids on the field play a game they love, there is something about football that is unique.”

Hilary, Mary, Jill, and Karla also enjoyed the travel and experiences working with other officials. Mary explained:

I got to go to [officiating] camps all over the place, I learned new skills, and met great people and created connections. I worked in big and small stadiums and had fun on the road trips to all the different games. I have loved all the great experiences officiating has given me over the years.

Karla’s passion for the vocation stems from working with the players out on the field. She recalled, “Especially in Pop Warner games, the kids are still learning and I get to help them learn football and develop their love for the game.”

It was evident that the participants all possessed a passion for officiating and football and this too was fundamental to their experience. It is more than just a job for these women; they truly all emanated a sincere Passion for Officiating and Football.

## **5 Discussion**

In an effort to gain insight into the female football officiating experience, the experiences of eight female football officials were explored. In doing so, four salient themes emerged: 1) Gendered Experiences, 2) Sense of Community, 3) Mentoring and 4) Passion for Officiating and Football. Each of these will be discussed.

### ***5.1 Gendered Experiences***

Sport, in general, is a male-dominated field. Masculine experiences have structured institutions including sport officiating, and have provided the basis for the traditional conception of power (Hartsock, 1985). Navigating this masculine domain can be challenging for women, as

seen in the current study of female football officials. Football is seen in American society as one of the last sports that is traditionally designated as a masculine activity (McDowell and Schaffner, 2011). While many gender beliefs have diminished over the years, football has maintained that atmosphere that seems to limit female involvement (Fields, 2005). As demonstrated in this study, this still holds true for our participants as they provided evidence of their gendered experiences.

The data demonstrated that a female officiating football is challenging the general social order or gender norm. All of the participants, at one point or another felt they were viewed as incompetent because they were a female working in the masculine sport of American football. Similar findings were found within research on women sport coaches. Theberge (1990), stated that “most women working in sport were aware of their minority status...problems posed included negative stereotypes and prejudices against women coaches held by some athletes, coaches, and officials” (p.69).

Comparable experiences were also highlighted in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary “Sexism in Football”. This film told the stories of women working in European soccer leagues. “Any women working in [European soccer] football will have had their share of crude and lewd things said to them that just wouldn't happen in any other industry” (Logan, 2012). Thus, the sexism and stereotypical behaviour that exists with women in sport, is clearly a global issue that is not confined to the United States.

It is important to note that while each participant experienced negative comments and challenging times due to their gender while officiating, they also had many positive experiences. The participants felt if they put in the time and effort, they could start to help change the current gender norms regarding women in American football.

Rudman and Phelan (2010) explained that, “People form implicit gender stereotypes, which automatically associate men and women with stereotypic traits, abilities, and roles.” (p. 193). Traditional American culture portrays football as a sport that uses male characteristics such as brute strength, violence, and aggression. Participation or employment in sports that require what are considered “male characteristics,” such as speed, strength, and agility can present an “image problem” for females (Knight and Giuliano, 2003).

The participants did their best to discredit those beliefs and stereotypes by training hard and learning all they could about the game and displaying that knowledge while officiating. The participants tried to not let their gender become an issue when officiating, but all experienced some sort of “Gendered Experiences” while working as a football official. It should be again noted that our participants all continued in the role and the data reflected that the Gendered Experiences were subtle in nature. It is likely that individuals that experienced more overt gendered issues or experiences may not have continued in the officiating role. In fact, Tingle and colleagues (2014) work highlighted that the *former* referees in their study experienced “gendered abuse”. This more volatile and abusive environment was surprisingly not present in for the female officials in the current study. This could be due to the fact that there are so few female football officials that they are not viewed as a threat, but rather protected more so by their male counterparts. It will take gaining exposure to individuals working in non-typical careers for these gender beliefs and stereotypes to diminish completely. This includes talking about and encouraging other women to try officiating, or at least to realise that it is a viable option for women. The more the topic is discussed, the more likely it will help change societal beliefs on gender roles in various careers.

## **5.2 *Sense of Community***

It is well documented that officiating is a vocation in which individuals can endure verbal abuse (Graf and Kanske, 1999). This type of work setting can lead to officials feeling stressed, burned out, and cause many to leave the profession all together (Anshel and Weinberg, 1995). One way to help with the stress of officiating is by having a strong support system. Thus, it was not surprising that Sense of Community emerged as being fundamental to the female football officiating experience.

Creating a sense of community has also been called a community of practice. In this case, a “community” can be defined as a process of social learning that occurs when people get together to share similar interests, come up with strategies, develop solutions, and help each other develop and grow collectively. A community of practice helps an organisation through a variety of methods including: problem solving, requests for information, seeking experiences with others, discussing developments, looking at the future, and identifying gaps (Wenger, 1998). All of these characteristics were seen in the participant’s respective officiating communities.

Previous research on Australia Rules Football (Kellett and Shilbury, 2007; Kellett and Warner, 2011) and basketball officiating (Warner, Tingle, and Kellett, 2013; Tingle, Warner, and Sartore-Baldwin, 2014) has indicated that the social worlds and creation of community is key to officials’ retention. This current work further supports that notion, as the female football officials indicated that the sense of community that developed around officiating was fundamental to their experiences.

The importance of sense of community is also supported by the more general sport literature, which posits sport as one of the few remaining settings that fosters a sense of

community for individuals (Warner and Dixon, 2011, 2013b; Warner, Kerwin, and Walker, 2013). This combined with Phillips and Fairley's (2014) findings that suggest that umpires view their work as a serious leisure pursuit, lends further insight into this theme. Female football officials may be entering into officiating as a way to stay connected to the sport and to the support and sense of community that is often found surrounding sport. Thus, fostering and understanding a sense of community is key to making the experience positive for female football officials' as well as assisting in retaining more individuals in the profession.

### **5.3 *Mentoring***

The literature on women in male-dominated careers provides numerous examples of the importance of women having mentors in the workplace (e.g., Kellett and Warner, 2011; Weaver and Chelladurai, 1999). In fact it has also been shown that women in male-dominated occupations need a mentor, just as much if not more than their male counterparts (Scandura and Ragins, 1993). This was also true for the participants in this current study. The data points to all of the participants having had a mentor and this as being fundamental to their continuation as a football official. A recent study by Knapp (2011) investigated women's American football players and found that players created relationship with coaches and fellow veteran players to form a mentorship or role-model relationship, which helped the women navigate the sport of football.

Warner, Tingle, and Kellett (2013) found similar results amongst basketball officials while the importance of role model and mentor has also been noted specifically for female coaches (e.g., Dixon, Warner, and Bruening, 2009; Pastore, 2003). Thus, it is not surprising this was so salient for female football officials.

In order to be a successful official, individuals have to continually learn the ever-changing rules and nuances of the game. The officials in this study noted that a lot of learning takes place when they gather together with other officials often after games. Past research also indicates that having a mentor is an important factor in organisational advancement, salary, and career satisfaction (Dreher and Ash, 1990; Scandura and Ragins, 1993). The participants in the current study all described the importance of having a mentor and how it helped them enter into and maintain their employment as football officials.

#### ***5.4 Passion for Officiating and Football***

Previous literature suggests organisations can benefit from having passionate employees (e.g., Boyatzis, McKee, and Goleman, 2002; Moses, 2001). “One way to develop passion is to increase employees’ interest in and valuation of their jobs, which in turn can be accomplished by fostering conditions that make workers feel that their contributions matter” (Ho, Wong, and Lee, 2011, p. 42). Considering there are a dwindling number of sport officials, sport managers may benefit from understanding the “passion” officials often have. Most officials have other fulltime careers and often only officiate for the “love of the sport.” Therefore, developing and fostering passion for the profession will assist in keeping officials in the vocation and help them deal with the at times, volatile work environment.

Knapp (2011) found similar results when she interviewed ten females that played on an American tackle football team. One of the themes from that study was “Love of Football” and it also showed the great passion the female players had for the sport itself. It was clear from the current study that the participants felt a sense of pride when they were officiating football. They were able to continue to be a part of the game and appreciate a similar feeling of excitement and adrenalin that they once had felt as an athlete. The participants explained that they would not be



in the officiating profession if they did not enjoy and experience personal satisfaction from officiating. Even with the challenges, including threat of injury and verbal abuse, the participants had a passion for their vocation.

## **6 Implications**

The findings of this study offer numerous implications for various individuals including: current and aspiring female officials, coaches, players, athletic directors, and officiating supervisors and administrators. By sharing the stories of the participants, the information provides insight into the salient experiences of being a female football official. The information from the study will hopefully bring a greater awareness to the fact that female football officials are still experiencing a “gendered experience” despite their persistence in the vocation. It is likely there are many cases where females have dropped out of the vocation because they were not able to overcome the stereotypes, challenges, and resistances they met due to their gender.

Implementing diversity programmes would likely help address many of the issues related to gendered experience (Bruening and Dixon, 2008; Cunningham, 2007). These programmes may help change some of the preconceived ideas that women cannot work in such a masculine sport. Having current coaches and players talk positively about having a woman officiate their game may also change the opinions of others. The more the topic is discussed, the more it will assist in changing the social and gender role beliefs in regards to what sport occupation matches certain genders.

The findings also indicate that administrators need to be aware of the importance of sense of community and mentoring. An emerging line of work has indicated the factors necessary for fostering a sense of community within sport settings (Kerwin, Warner, Walker, and Stevens, 2015; Warner, Dixon, and Chalip, 2012) and even amongst referees (Kellett and Warner, 2011).

Sport administrators should not take for granted the sense of community created within their officiating associations. Given that the data highlighted the importance of this community and mentoring, steps should be taken to ensure that this important social interaction is happening amongst officials. Steps such as providing areas for officials to meet after games and outlets for discussions, along with creating more formal mentoring programmes would all positively contribute to the officiating experience. It was obvious within the data that a sense of community and mentoring were vital to female football officials' experiences, and more importantly their retention.

The findings related to passion for officiating and football also provide key insights for administrators. The passion to officiate in the sport football should not be overlooked and can be quite strong for men *and* women. Thus, in recruiting and potentially marketing the vocation, more efforts should be made to ensure both males and females are featured and profiled in officiating recruiting materials. Women do not see many other women officiating football, so they may not realize it is an option for them. By bringing awareness to aspiring officials, they will recognise that both men and women can officiate any sport; it does not have to be one that matches their gender roles or abilities.

Currently, within the vocation, there is a problem with retaining officials. Part of this is due to the abuse that officials endure from players, coaches, and spectators. Literature has reported instances where there have been threats of cancelling games and leagues because of the lack of officials (Kellett and Warner, 2011; Titlebaum et al., 2009). Since officiating is a male-dominated vocation and American football is viewed as a hyper-masculine sport, females who officiate football seem to be more likely to receive abuse from players, coaches and spectators due to those societal beliefs. Ways to help deter this is to encourage women to play or work in

football and provide support to those considering the sport. This could include marketing promotions with coaches, players and/or fans that demonstrate the training and testing the officials go through regardless of gender and ensuring that these promotions highlight not just the male officials but also the female officials.

The participants felt if there was more exposure and information available to women, more may consider officiating football. The societal belief is still that football is a masculine sport that is played by predominately men. Due to these views, many women do not think football officiating is an option for them. This current research will also add to literature within the sociology field that discusses women working in male-dominated career fields.

## **7 Recommendations for Future Research**

While considering the information garnered from this study, there are several opportunities for future research to continue exploring the lives of officials, including female American football officials. It would be valuable to conduct a similar study with women that officiate in other male-dominated sports such as baseball, wrestling, or ice hockey. Researchers would be able to see if the experiences of these women were similar or different than the experiences of female football officials. Interviewing male officials who work in male-dominated sports alongside female officials would also be a good follow-up study. It would also be beneficial to interview female officials who have left the vocation of football officiating to see why they left and to analyse their experiences (e.g. Tingle et al., 2014; Warner, Tingle, and Kellett, 2013). The last suggestion is to explore the experiences of female football officials through a different lens or viewpoint such as the post-structuralist feminism framework. This theory could explore the complex relationship between knowledge, power, and gender and would likely be suitable for a study on former officials (Weedon, 1997).

The implications of this study may also have an impact on various officiating associations; therefore, it would be helpful to interview the administrators in officiating associations to see how they are currently recruiting and retaining male and female sports officials. It would also be beneficial to conduct more nationwide research in order to create discourse between the various associations.

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**Table 1. Participant Profiles**

Pseudonyms	Age	Ethnicity	Total Years Officiating	Sports Officiated/Levels	Day Job
Beth	33	Caucasian	5	Football- Youth, Junior High, High School	Clinical Services Coordinator (Non-Profit Organization)
Hilary	52	Caucasian	13	Football- Youth, Junior High, High School, Junior College, NCAA Div. I/II/III, Italian League, Arena Professional League	Stay-at-home mom
Laura	52	Caucasian	13	Football- Youth, Junior High, High School International Federation of American Football (IFAF) Women's World Championship	Engineer & Manager
Mary	61	Native- American	30	Football- Youth, Junior High, High School, College, Semi-Pro Volleyball- Youth, Junior High, High School Baseball- Youth, High School, Semi-Pro Basketball- Youth, Junior High, High School	Retired-Health Care Profession
Karla	48	No Response	18	Baseball- Youth Football- Junior High, High School	Teacher
Robyn	34	Caucasian	12	Football- College Intramurals, Junior High, High School Basketball- College Intramurals	Sports Reporter
Jill	54	Caucasian	23	Football- Youth, Junior High, High School, College Division I/II/III	Business Owner

				Basketball- Youth, Junior High, High School, Junior College	
Peggy	58	Caucasian	30	Ice Hockey- Youth	Teacher and Writer
				Baseball- Youth, Junior High, High School, College, semi-pro	
				Basketball- Youth	
				Soccer- Youth	
				Football- Youth, Junior High, High School, Men's League	
			144	Total Years of Officiating Experience among Participants	

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