

A Phenomenological Study of Female Former Team-Sport Athletes' Nonathletic Career Navigation

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ABSTRACT

Explored in the phenomenological study was how 11 female former team sport collegiate student athletes described their current nonathletic employment experiences and the meanings held to the current experience in order to determine if athletic teaming had any influence. Participants resided or worked in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, or Pennsylvania. The focus of the study was based on providing accounts on how the female participants described nonathletic employment experiences, the meaning ascribed to the experiences, and how navigating nonathletic careers affected the female participants' to determine if athletic teaming had any influence. Seven themes were identified in the data analysis. The dominant themes were (a) Theme 3: Participation in college team sports demonstrated an improved appreciation for the community both educationally and professionally and (b) Theme 7: Participation in college team sports helped to develop and enhance teamwork skills and goal orientation.

Keywords: former student-athletes, female studies, female athletes, teaming, business teams, women leaders, girls in sports

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The 2013 Job Outlook Survey identified that effective teamwork skills were among the top four qualifications employers sought in recent graduates who were prospective candidates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013). Williams and Anderson (2008) reported that nonathletic college students lacked effective teamwork skills inside and outside of the classroom, resulting in an underprepared candidate in the job market. Efforts were made to improve the deficiency by encouraging implementation of teambuilding training in academic curricula (Williams & Anderson, 2008).

Although numerous applicants in the job market qualified for positions by demonstrating ideal qualifications, such as teamwork skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013), very little knowledge is available on the differentiating factors that influenced teamwork skill attainment in college (Kaifi & Noori, 2011). Kaifi and Noori (2011) stated that individuals identified athletics as an opportunity to gain first experiences of learning how to participate effectively on a team from adolescents to adulthood.

Gayles and Hu (2009) posited that experiences from adolescents to adulthood had a substantial effect on the cognitive mobility and confidence levels of females. However, team interactive experiences attained from sports are unique for both genders (Sturm, Feltz, & Gilson, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of the qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how 11 female former team sport collegiate student athletes described their current nonathletic employment experiences and the meanings held to the current experience in order to determine if athletic teaming had any influence.

LITERATURE

The models used to guide the research project included Josselson's women's identity student development theory and the teaming theories and models. Josselson (1987) identified concepts that differentiated the behaviors of females following specific life experiences. McIntyre and Salas (1995) identified in the teaming models that there are seven critical team behaviors required for successful goal achievement in teams. The theories were relevant to the research study because the theories provided a foundation of understanding as to why females had

specific developmental experiences. The teaming theories and models demonstrate the importance of understanding the involvement of leadership in teaming environments, knowledge of participants, and characteristics of participants.

According to Robles (2012), teamwork was a level of cooperation and cohesion between multiple individuals to achieve specific goals. Some of the specific characteristics identified by Robles (2012) included agreeableness, supportive and helpful nature, and the ability to work with others. Robles (2012) identified essential soft skills perceived by business executives included integrity, social skills, courtesy, positive attitude, responsibility, professionalism, teamwork, flexibility, communication, and work ethic. For successful teamwork to take place in the workplace, managers must boost employee morale to improve its competitive edge (Aghazadeh & Kyei, 2009).

Numerous benefits are sought from teaming in the workplace. Paterson (2012) reported that teaming in the workplace allowed organizational leaders to generate innovative ideas and generate an improved level of intrinsic motivation among employees. Adams (2009) stated that teamwork within organizations was a necessity for success. Leadership skills proved to extend beyond top management. Top management officials often seek assistance in enhancing decision making through team formation inclusive of middle managers and employees with different roles in the organization (Bush, 2012). Bush and Glover (2012) supported the concept that teaming enhanced leadership and productivity within an organization through task delegation. Bush and Glover (2012) also believed the teams were more influential than an individual regardless of knowledge or talent.

Former student-athletes experienced positive and negative experiences following completion of college, however, the skills obtained from participation in team sports were found to be beneficial for many pursuing nonathletic careers. Weigand, Cohen, and Merenstein (2013) found that the loss of intense team interaction and dedication to a team upon the completion of college sports was a challenge for former student-athletes. According to Hook (2012), student-athletes devoted a substantial amount of time to teaming skill development in comparison to non-athletes. Hook (2012) also noted that female student-athletes demonstrated a stronger perspective on occupational engagement to male athletes. Occupational engagement is a devotion or concern for one's development, engagement in a life experiences, and career decisions (Hook, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how 11 female former team sport collegiate student athletes described their current nonathletic employment experiences and the meanings held to the current experience in order to determine if athletic teaming had any influence. Participants resided or worked in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, or Pennsylvania. The participants were only eligible based on the following criteria: (a) Two years following the completion of a baccalaureate degree and (b) participated in competitive team sports at a Division I, II, or III institution for a minimum of one academic year. Voluntary participants engaged in up to three interview sessions consisting of 30 to 60 minutes semi-structured open-ended interviews. Data were transcribed verbatim, compiled, and then analyzed using NVivo 10.0 software. The qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was appropriate for the study because the goal remains to explore a central phenomenon and to understand and interpret reflections of individuals who experienced the event.

The central research question was what are the lived experiences of female former team-sport college athletes who navigated nonathletic career endeavors? The research subordinate questions included the following: R1: How do female former team-sport college athletes who have navigated nonathletic career endeavors describe their experience in a nonathletic teaming environment?, R2: What are the meanings female former team-sport college athletes who have navigated nonathletic career endeavors ascribe to that experience?, and R3: How do female former team-sport college athletes describe the influence of past teaming experience on navigating nonathletic career endeavors?

DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through data analysis, seven themes emerged (see Table 1) identifying the meanings held to the experience of the 11 female former student-athletes in the study. Indicated in the data was that female former student-athletes found collegiate athletics as beneficial to their skill development, career navigation, career success, confidence, competitiveness, the community, education, professional development, and social development. Numerous contraindications were highlighted throughout the theme analysis as identified in Theme 5 was the primary negative perceptions of sports participation related to ego and behaviors. The percentage of participants per division sport identified that Division III was the dominating sport among the participants at 58% or seven of the 12 sports teams listed. Field hockey was the most common sport played among the 11 participants resulting in five participants or 42% of the sports teams identified in the study. The division level and team sport did not appear to influence participants' responses in this study as common themes were found among the participants.

Table 1- *Themes*

Theme and Description
1- Participation in college team sports improved mental preparedness, strengthened maturity, and heightened networking for successful career navigation.
2- Participation in college team sports increased confidence and motivation in the workplace.
3- Participation in college team sports demonstrated an improved appreciation for the community both educationally and professionally.
4- Participation in college team sports enhanced overall social and physical development.
5- Participation in college team sports exposed the successes and failures of the ego and the challenges of competitiveness.
6- Participation in college team sports helped to strengthen the ability to be mentored and the development of leadership skills.
7- Participation in college team sports helped to develop and enhance teamwork skills and goal orientation.

Implications of Findings on Leadership Practice

One of the seven themes identified in the study had a focus on leadership skill development was a dominant theme for two participants (Theme 6). The dominant themes (Theme 3 and 7) identified how appreciation for the greater good of a team and the community strengthens relationships and teaming experiences. The study's findings contributed to practice and knowledge on the influence leadership has on teaming experiences and skill development. In order to improve educational leaders strategies in developing and encouraging teaming opportunities for female students, these leaders must revisit their paradigm of the importance of teaming in leadership and career development. The results support the idea that the development of teaming skills of women during adolescence is essential to leadership success. Higher educational leaders can use the findings of this study to assist in understanding the student population's development needs to navigate the female former student-athletes' careers.

Theme 6 indicated how the participants in the current study identified the acceptance of: advice, mentoring, or criticism from others. An individual's morale, attitude, and willingness to learn are the leading factors to team success, which 10 of the 11 participants expressed throughout the interview process. The theme can help guide educational leaders in developing mentoring programs for both student-athletes and non-athletes. Theme 3 indicated how the participants demonstrated an improved appreciation for the community educationally and professionally. The theme can help guide educational and professional leaders in developing philanthropic opportunities to improve teaming and learning outcomes. Theme 7 indicated how the participants believed participation in college team sports strengthened their teaming skills and ability to achieve goals as a team. The theme can help guide educational and professional leaders in developing improved programs and strategic plans to achieve organizational goals through heightened team interactive experiences focused on recreational and/or professional goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should analyze how teamwork skills and goal orientation of female former student-athletes was developed and/or enhanced in a college setting through a longitudinal study of female student-athletes and non-athletes beginning during the participants' first year of college and ending two or more years following graduation from college with a bachelor's degree. Researchers may also examine the variations between female former student-athletes per division team sport as this information can distinguish if the level of competition influences the level of commitment to career preparedness. An investigation into cultural differences between groups may bring knowledge to the field as this study was limited to only Caucasian female former student-athletes. Researchers who focus on the benefits and drawbacks of teaming experiences in college may offer higher education institutions more data solidifying the influence athletic or teaming experiences have on future success of female former student-athlete.

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