Shrouded by Stigma: Mental Health Among Female Basketball Officials

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Socio-Cultural - Sexuality (Other)
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Despite efforts to raise awareness about mental health issues in sport, officiating lags behind other sectors. Previous research indicated that the pressures faced by referees can lead to psychological stressors (Taylor et al., 1990; Webb & Hill, 2020), including fear of failure (Johansen & Hausen, 2013), role conflict (Voight, 2009), travel demands (Warner et al., 2013), and work-life balance issues (Tingle et al., 2014). Working in a high-pressure environment which demands perfection might lead referees to hide or mask mental health concerns (Mellick, 2020). Very few studies explored how those stressors impact mental health outcomes (Webb & Hill, 2020) and none have explored mental health concerns among female sports officials.

According to Hancock et al. (2020) of 386 publications on officials in the last 50 years, “only five studies (1.3%) revolved around understanding the experiences of female sport officials” (p. 6). Not only are female referees understudied (Nordstrom et al., 2016), but the intersection of their gender and athletic identities appears to lead to drastically different mental health experiences than male counterparts (Guzel, 2020). Thus, this research builds upon the foundational referee literature (Forbes & Livingston, 2013; Kellett & Warner, 2011; Rainey, 1999; Ridinger et al., 2017; Tingle et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2013; Webb et al., 2018) and begins utilizing mental health and wellness frameworks to better understand how to address referee attrition. Twenty U.S. female basketball referees took part in semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring both the mental health challenges and benefits of officiating.

Results indicated that for female basketball officials, mental health concerns are generally ignored or obfuscated by the associated stigma. The stigmatization of mental health issues and the fear of reprisal within the officiating context points to a “lack of administrative concern” for referees (Tingle et al., 2014). Instead of facilitating open dialogue about mental health, administrators tend to promote the expectation that one must "officiate through the pain." Such a system exacerbates the need to hide mental health issues and all but guarantees the under-reporting of mental health problems (c.f. Swenk, 2000). In detailing a system that normalizes its stigmatization, officials in this study noted a significant need to rewrite the narrative regarding mental health outcomes and literacy (Webb et al., in press). Because mental health was seen as a construct shrouded by stigma, the necessary resources to manage it appeared to be non-existent. Despite the myriad concerns regarding mental health, study participants indicated that if provided a supportive and safe environment, officiating can be cathartic. In this way, officiating basketball allowed participants to block out negative stimuli and find escape.

From a practical standpoint, the need to normalize the conversation around mental health within the referee community (Morgan et al., 2018) and clearly establish the role of our sport systems to provide a healthy outlet (Warner, 2019; Warner & Martin, 2020) is important - perhaps now more than ever. Future research implications and specific managerial suggestions will also be presented.