Experience and Construction of Mental Health among Female Sports Officials

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In sporting communities mental illness continues to be stigmatized. For an athlete, mental toughness is celebrated, and weakness is often admonished (Bauman, 2016). Nevertheless, athletes, similarly to one in five U.S. adults (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2018), experience mental health problems, and women are especially at risk (Storch et al., 2005). Female athletes are nearly twice as likely as their male counterparts to experience mental health issues (Breslin et al., 2017; Gorczynski et al., 2017). Several sport organizations, including the NCAA and National Association of Athletic Trainers, have identified addressing mental health issues among athletes as a priority (Brown et al., 2014). While a greater focus on improving and destigmatizing athlete mental health issues is a necessary step, it is also pertinent to understand how other members of the sporting community are impacted. Sports officials are key stakeholders, who, due to fan abuse and stress, routinely face mental health risk factors as part of their role. As with athletes, research indicates that referees experience high levels of role-related stress (e.g., Anshel & Weinberg, 1999; Rainey, 1995; 1999).

Despite the calls to address mental health issues in the athlete population, referees have been categorically excluded from this narrative. Indeed, there is a dearth of literature examining the well-being of these individuals. Further, to date, no research has specifically examined female sports officials’ mental health. Given the shortage of referees (Jacobs et al., 2019; Ridinger et al., 2017; Warner et al., 2013) and staggering statistics related to the need for more female officials (e.g., Nordstrom et al., 2016; Schaeperkoetter, 2016; Tingle et al., 2014), it is vital to explore the mental health of female sports officials. In order to improve the sport experience for all, it is important to better understand experiences of female officials and learn how best to address mental health concerns of this overlooked group. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine mental health as experienced and understood by female referees.

Twenty female basketball referees participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researchers. Interview questions focused on knowledge, perceptions, and experiences associated with mental health issues in the context of sports officiating. Participants were asked about both the mental health challenges and benefits of officiating. After all interviews were recorded and transcribed, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was completed by the researchers. The initial analysis suggests: mental health resources are needed; access to resources are limited or not available; and that mental health issues continue to be stigmatized within the officiating community. While officiating is rife with stressors, many participants saw their on-court officiating role as a means to cope with stress. The physical activity and mental acuity necessary to officiate required the referees to block out other mental stimuli. Thus, the participants were able to ‘quiét their mind’ and many found the court to be a place of reprieve.

Further analysis and practical applications for sport managers to address the shortage of female sporting officials and to improve the overall officiating experience will be discussed.