



Advancing Women in Leadership

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Full Length Research Paper

The Challenges of Female Executives in the Sport Industry: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study

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The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore how executive women working in the sport industry described their lived experiences navigating challenges to attaining executive positions. The theoretical framework for this study was the Leadership Labyrinth, which is used to identify the unique and specific challenges women may face throughout their professional careers and personal lives. The study was guided by two research questions which asked how do executive women describe their lived experiences pertaining to gender bias while working in the sport industry and how do executive women in the sport industry described their lived experiences of overcoming challenges of gender bias in attaining executive positions? The sample consisted of 12 female executives in the sport industry in the United States. The primary method of data collection was a 60–90-minute open-ended interview, and the analysis method for this research study was Heidegger’s method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The results of this study identify the role gender bias plays in women’s careers. Other career inhibiting factors like work-life balance, double standards, societal gender roles, stereotypes, the need for male sponsors, men as decision makers, and the Queen Bee Syndrome were identified as unique challenges. The findings of this study also outline factors and techniques used to navigate and overcome the challenges associated with gender bias including personality type, a need for confidence, building relationships, and using gender as an advantage. This study provides a unique perspective and contributes to the overall body of work pertaining to the female experience in the sport industry.

Keywords: Gender, bias, sport, Leadership Labyrinth, Queen Bee Syndrome, female, executive, phenomenology

Sport is often described as a microcosm of society, through its images, ideologies, and structures, which emphasizes the differences between men and women, and reinforces a social hierarchy based on gender (Cibibin & Leo, 2022). The sport industry in the United States has always been dominated by men, who are still involved at higher percentage than women (Cibibin & Leo, 2022). The white male patriarchy generally dominates the sports sector and sport business (Pielichaty et al., 2024). Gender inequality in the sport industry has become a normalized practice, with women being underrepresented and marginalized (Hindman & Walker, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore how women working in the sport industry described their lived experiences navigating challenges to attaining executive positions in the United States.

Although there has been an increase in the number of women in working environments, the same trend is not true in management positions, especially in sport (Kowaleska, 2020). For example, in the NCAA, men hold more than 70% of the positions in leadership (Paulson et al., 2023). Gomez (2023) stated that intercollegiate athletics is dominated by males, especially in leadership roles, with only about 24% of the population of

college athletic directors being female (as of the 2021–22 academic year). Despite the more recent need for fairness, equality, and diversity, women are still vastly underrepresented in senior leadership in the sport industry (Gray & Weese, 2023). While the sport industry continues to be male dominated, there are women who have entered the industry and successfully earned positions at the executive level. The scarcity of women in leadership roles is indicative of a gender equity issue, and it also indicates there is a rare set of circumstances that exist for the female leaders who have managed to ascend to the upper echelons of an organization (Imm & Wahid, 2020). While previous studies have been conducted to learn about the experiences of women working in the sport industry, there is a more specific need to explore the experiences of women working in the industry who hold leadership, management, or executive positions (Hindman & Walker, 2020).

Women are at a disadvantage not only within the sport industry, but especially within the executive levels of an organization (Cibbin & Leo, 2022). Research into collegiate athletics has found that sport is often privileged to men, especially White men (Hardin et al., 2022). Women

continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership and in higher administration within the sport industry. (Gray & Weese, 2023). Even though there are opportunities for participation in sport, women have been underrepresented throughout men's sport history (Samad, 2021).

There was a need to explore how women who hold executive roles in the sport industry have navigated challenges of gender bias throughout their careers. Gender bias is the inclination or prejudice towards a specific gender (Smith & McCarthy, 2022). In this study, gender bias referred to the unfair treatment of women simply because their gender is identified as female. For the purpose of this study, the classification of "female" was identified from one's gender at birth or one's identity as a transgender female. Prior researchers have conducted studies involving women working in the sport industry, but not at the executive level (Hindman & Walker, 2020). Hindman and Walker (2020) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study with 11 participants to explore the experiences of sexism that women encountered while working in various roles for teams of the American Hockey League. Hindman and Walker found that all participants faced gender bias at some point in their careers.

Hardin et al. (2022) indicated that gender bias is a significant factor which limits opportunities for female leaders across various industries including sport. They investigated how women who hold senior level positions in collegiate athletics experience gender bias. The results indicated that gender bias is still a factor in collegiate athletics, and they provided an in-depth look at several factors that use gender bias as a construct.

While studies have been conducted pertaining to gender bias in the sport industry, research had not been conducted from the perspective of the female executive (Hindman & Walker, 2020). Hindman and Walker (2020) recommended that further research be conducted to explore how a woman's experiences of bias range in the industry. Examples included evaluating both women's professional sport and college athletics. Gallardo-Perez (2021) suggested that future research explore gender bias as it relates to minorities. Women are considered minorities both in the United States and also within the sport industry (Gill, 2021; Gallardo-Perez, 2021). Diehl (2020) suggested that future studies should be focused on exploring the experiences of women in fields like technology, oil, gas and mining, and other male dominated areas. The sport industry is male dominated, and women face many barriers (both structural and institutional that hinder a woman's career progress (Gray & Weese, 2023). The barriers to advancement are usually seen when women transition to the upper echelons of an organization by earning more financial income and taking on more responsibilities (Apaydin et al., 2021).

Samad (2021) discussed how the NBA should address gender discrimination in sport by implementing a "Hammon" rule for hiring head coaches. This study was inspired by San Antonio Spurs former assistant coach Becky Hammon. Despite having a more than qualified resume, Hammon has yet to hold a head coaching position in the NBA. This study introduced the idea of forcing NBA teams to interview female applicants for head coaching positions (much like the "Rooney" rule in the NFL requires teams to interview minority candidates). Per NFL Operations, "Through hiring best practices, the Rooney Rule

aims to increase the number of minorities hired in head coach, general manager, and executive positions... Following the 2022 Spring League Meeting, the Rooney Rule was expanded to include women as a part of the minority candidate definition and also include the QB coach position" (2022). Samad suggested a multi-faceted approach to promote gender equity to improve the organizational culture by: (a) implementing mentorship programs pairing women with male and female sponsors to provide career advancement opportunities, (b) conducting regular audits of hiring and promotion practices to ensure women are considered for decision-making roles, and (c) fostering a workplace culture that encourages collaboration rather than competition among women to combat the Queen Bee Syndrome.

Phenomenon and Research Questions

It was not known how women working in the sport industry described their lived experiences navigating challenges to attaining executive positions. The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore how women working in the sport industry described their lived experiences navigating these challenges in the United States. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

RQ1: How do executive women describe their lived experiences pertaining to gender bias while working in the sport industry?

RQ2: How do executive women in the sport industry describe their lived experiences of overcoming challenges of gender bias in attaining executive positions?

Theoretical Foundations for Research

While the glass ceiling is used to provide an explanation for the career trajectory of a woman's career is still appropriate because there are still gaps in the pipeline for women at some of the best in practice organizations (Harris & Norlander, 2023), it is not always an accurate analogy. The use of the glass ceiling implies that women ascend to executive positions in the same vertical alignment with similar experiences along the way (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). The barrier was not easy for women to see from a distance (Hancock et al., 2018). The use of the glass ceiling implies that each woman faces the same struggles and challenges on a singular linear ascension to management; however, that assumption is inaccurate and unrealistic. The continued scarcity of women at executive levels of leadership increases gender assumptions which promotes perceptions that women are similar, thus the performance and success of one woman can be generalized to many/all women (Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

Leadership Labyrinth

The Leadership Labyrinth was used as a theoretical framework for this study to describe a woman's journey during her professional career and personal life. While the glass ceiling is represented by a ladder that eventually leads to an invisible impenetrable barrier, the Leadership Labyrinth is depicted as a maze. Within the maze, there are

a variety of factors that a woman may encounter along her career that may affect her ability to earn management positions (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). Examples of barriers in the maze are career demands, inhospitable workplace culture, lack of leadership development, discrimination, work-life balance, aggressive competition, lack of role models, lack of confidence, stereotypes, and thwarted ambition (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). The representation of the Leadership Labyrinth as a maze is a more accurate depiction of a woman's career path (Hancock et al., 2018). This maze is specifically referred to as a labyrinth that women must strategically navigate to advance into leadership and management positions (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). The framework was used to imply that there are boundaries everywhere and the journey for women is complex (Lucia & Padgett, 2021). The Leadership Labyrinth provided a more accurate depiction (as compared to the glass ceiling) of a woman's experiences, and the challenges she has faced both personally and professionally throughout her career. Within each turn and corner of the Leadership Labyrinth, there are a variety of factors that represent a barrier or an inhibiting component that a woman may experience during her career. Examples of these barriers and inhibiting factors include work-life balance, stereotypes, aggressive competition, inhospitable culture and double standards. The maze is a unique representation of the specific and individual nature of each woman's experiences (McDonagh & Paris, 2012). The use of a maze suggests that each woman, on her career journey, will experience a different path in her goal toward earning a position of power. Each woman will encounter barriers on her journey, some that are subtle and some that are much more overt (Hancock et al., 2018). Any combination of the factors listed in the Leadership Labyrinth may affect a woman's journey to management. Women face a variety of obstacles en route to promotion in the workplace, which include inhospitable corporate cultures, lack of leadership development opportunities, lack of confidence, work-life balance, and double standards due to bias or discrimination (McDonagh & Paris, 2012).

Queen Bee Syndrome

Women are connected by the commonality of gender; thus, women would be more likely to support each other's goals and ambitions (N.A., 2021). Because women may encounter similar experiences, it would be logical to assume that women would come together to fight for a common cause. However, this assumed behavior is not always the case. A phenomenon has developed as a result of research among those women who have been able to reach the top levels of an organization. Several studies have shown that women in top positions tend to mistreat other women (Apaydin et al., 2021; Cibbin & Leo, 2022). This phenomenon is known as the "Queen Bee Syndrome". Queen Bee Syndrome occurs among women who are successful in a male-dominated industry and have earned high-level positions. Sometimes these women create obstacles for other women based on societal roles in an attempt to discriminate against or suppress other women (Apaydin et al., 2021). It is also the notion that female executives knowingly or unknowingly view other women as a potential threat; therefore, they ostracize themselves from these other women in an attempt to protect themselves and their successes (Apaydin et al., 2021).

Female executives are likely to have a difficult journey to reaching management and executive positions. According to Apaydin et al. (2021), they understand the struggle for success, and it can be taken away just as quickly as it was earned. Female executives have fears of being outshined or outperformed by younger women who are working to ascend the ranks. As a result, the female executive may tend to hold onto information or opportunities in an attempt for self-preservation to keep other women from becoming more successful and empowered (Apaydin et al., 2021).

Methods

Participants

The target population for this study was identified as women who held leadership, management, or executive positions in the sport industry. These positions can be defined as department heads (like Vice President of Marketing or Vice President of Ticket Sales) or positions within the C-suite (like Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, or Team Owner). This distinction was used to illustrate a specific focus within the sport industry, and it identified the target population as women who held roles in the upper echelons of sport organizations. Purposive sampling by using the participant's job titles, organization and league was used along with snowball and convenience sampling to produce a sample of 12 women who held positions as department heads or as members of the C-suite in the sport industry in the United States. This sampling strategy matches the sample based on meeting the goals and objectives of the research (Campbell et al., 2020). It improves the validity of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020).

Convenience and snowball sampling were used as additional recruiting methods. Convenience sampling is a type of sampling in which participants are chosen because they are convenient sources of data for researcher (Andrade, 2021). The process of snowball sampling is based on referrals (Streeton et al., 2004). This process allowed the researcher to find additional participants by being associated with a particular person (Streeton et al., 2004). Participants who were recruited and committed to the study through purposive sampling knew other female executives that were willing to participate. All communication with the 12 participants was conducted using personal email addresses to ensure identities could be protected and to avoid having to obtain site authorization.

A demographic questionnaire was utilized to collect data on the participants' race, experience within the sport industry, age, level of education, and title within their respective organizations. The demographic questionnaire was obtained as part of a Google form once the participants signed and submitted the informed consent document. Table 1 displays the demographic data as percentages of the overall population.

Table 1
Descriptive Data

Race	Experience	Age	Education	Title
African American: 2%	>5 Years: 8%	25-29: 8%	Bachelor's: 58%	Department Head: 41%
Caucasian: 83%	5-9 Years: 8%	35-39: 25%	Master's: 33%	C-Suite: 25%
	10-14 Years: 8%	40-44: 33%	Doctoral: 8%	Executive Board: 16%
	15-19 Years: 33%	45-49: 8%		Other: 16%
	20+ Years: 41%	50-54: 8%		
		55-59: 8%		
		60+: 8%		

Research Design

Interpretive Phenomenology was the philosophy that was used to guide this study. Smith & Osborn (2008) indicated that Interpretive Phenomenology was developed from psychology as a method to recognize that people view the world differently. These views are often based on personalities, life experiences and motivating factors. Interpretive Phenomenology can be used to explore personal and subjective experiences of individual participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This method is different than other facets of psychology because Interpretive Phenomenology does not attempt to test a hypothesis; it does not seek to generalize results for a group of participants; and it does not try to quantify an objective experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpretive Phenomenology is specifically used to explore the human experience. It considers each participant as a unique entity and allows the researcher to make deeper connections with the data (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

The data were analyzed using Heidegger's method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. This method was chosen over Giorgi's method of analysis because it is used to examine the context of the participant's experiences in relation to factors like culture, gender, or employment (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). In Giorgi's method, "the results reflect a careful description of precisely the features of the experienced phenomenon as they present themselves to the consciousness of the researcher" (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 130-131). Using Giorgi's method of analysis, results are described simply based on the accounts of participants (Giorgi, 2009). Heidegger's method of interpretive phenomenological analysis goes further than just the description of the participants' experiences and seeks meanings that are embedded in the everyday accounts (Pham, 2021). Additionally, interpretive phenomenological analysis has an idiographic approach because it first considers the experiences of each individual participant before attempting to make conclusions about a group or study population (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Once the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was completed, a summary of the results was composed.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this research study was an open-ended interview. The interview questions were developed to answer the research questions and to address the phenomenon and the problem statement. The interview questions and protocol were reviewed by an expert panel and three field tests were conducted to evaluate the interview questions and protocol. As a result of the expert panel review and field tests, adjustments were made to the questions and protocol to improve the interview process.

The participants were asked to describe their lived experiences pertaining to gender bias in the sport industry. They were asked about the factors included in the Leadership Labyrinth. They were also asked about the obstacles and challenges they have faced throughout their careers, and how they have been able to navigate and overcome those challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and consisted of 16 scripted interview questions. Time was allotted for follow up questions and discussion to allow the researchers to fully comprehend the experiences and feelings of each participant. During the interviews, the researchers worked to gain the trust and develop a rapport with each participant. There was not a set number of follow questions. Any additional questions or conversations were unique to each interview to dig deeper about a particular experience or to clarify details, thoughts or feelings of each participant. Interviews were either conducted in-person away from the participant's place of business or via Zoom. All interviews were recorded using a personal recording device. Table 2 displays the specific details of each interview including duration, setting and length of each transcript.

Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained for each participant. Informed consent is required for research studies using human subjects (Yip et al., 2016). Informed consent also addresses the participants' right to leave the interview or the study at any point as they wish (Yip et al., 2016). The data that was collected during the interview process did not use any participant names, organization names or league names.

It was important to protect the identities and careers of the participants. Women who chose to participate in this study were hesitant because they had concerns about jeopardizing their careers. Distinguishing factors were protected because those factors could be used to identify participants. There were also legal implications to consider. Many states in the United States employ right-to-work statutes. North Carolina, where the researcher was based, is a right-to-work state. This means that, excluding a contract stating the contrary, employees can quit or can be fired at any time for any reason or for no reason at all with no notice required to be given by the employer (Varner & Schmidt, 2022). Bracketing was completed for this qualitative phenomenological study. Bracketing is used in qualitative research to mitigate researcher bias that may taint the research process (Dorfler & Stierand, 2021). To minimize bias, the researcher used a reflexive journal. Using a reflexive journal was an important tool in phenomenological research. It is valuable because the researcher must reflect on experiences throughout the data collection process (Vicary, Young & Hicks, 2016). Using a reflexive journal helped the researcher stay vigilant of any potential bias, so objectivity could be maintained throughout the study (Vicary, Young & Hicks, 2016).

Table 2 contains information regarding the specific attributes of each interview as well as averages for interview time and the number of transcript pages.

Table 2
Interview Data

Participant	Setting	Interview	Duration	# Transcript Pages
A	Zoom Conference	6/4/23	81.5 minutes	22
B	Zoom Conference	6/13/23	62 minutes	19
C	Zoom Conference	6/27/23	58 minutes	13
D	Zoom Conference	6/23/23	78.5 minutes	19
E	Zoom Conference	6/26/23	64 minutes	18
F	In-Person	6/26/23	69 minutes	20
G	Zoom Conference	6/27/23	90.5 minutes	20
H	Zoom Conference	6/28/23	58.5 minutes	16
I	Zoom Conference	6/30/23	56.5 minutes	15
J	Zoom Conference	7/14/23	72.5 minutes	17
K	Zoom Conference	7/6/23	76 minutes	20
L	Zoom Conference	8/22/23	68.5 minutes	17
MEAN	N/A	N/A	69.6 minutes	18.0
TOTAL	N/A	N/A	835.5 minutes	216

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, they were transcribed, and member checking was conducted. This is the process of asking for feedback from the study participants about the data. This validity check is a requirement for rigorous qualitative research (Motulsky, 2021).

The data were analyzed using Heidegger's method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. This method was chosen over Giorgi's method of analysis because it is used to examine the context of the participant's experiences in relation to factors like culture, gender, or employment (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). In Giorgi's method "the results reflect a careful description of precisely the features of the experienced phenomenon as they present themselves to the consciousness of the researcher" (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 130-131). Using Giorgi's method of analysis, results are described simply based on the accounts of participants (Giorgi, 2009). Heidegger's method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis goes further than just the description of the participants' experiences and is used to seek meanings that are embedded in the everyday accounts (Pham, 2021).

There are eleven steps to complete a proper Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The study followed the necessary steps during data analysis. According to Creswell (2007), the steps of the analysis process are as follows:

- 1: For data preparation, a transcript must be created for each interview, which is derived from the recordings. In this step, the researcher must also assign any appropriate or necessary pseudonyms.
- 2: For data cleaning, once the data are transcribed the researcher must conduct any error detection and error repair before the interpretive analysis process. Data cleaning involves removing errors or inconsistencies to improve the overall quality of the data (Rahm & Do, 2000).
- 3: The researcher must read and re-read each participant transcript for accuracy and become immersed in the subject matter. The researcher listens to the original data and reread the transcribed data for better comprehension. This allows the researcher to become fully immersed in the content.
- 4: For initial noting, the researcher explores content of each individual transcript and record initial notes within the research data. This also involves exploring semantics within the content.

It is important to evaluate verbiage used by the participants to describe their experiences. Notes are then grouped and identified by the researcher. Notes must be identified based on the purpose of the study.

5: In order to develop initial themes, the researcher focuses on portions of each transcript individually and develops the assigned notes into themes. There can be many initial notes in the data. Those notes must then be combined and narrowed into initial themes based on the data and the purpose of the study.

6: In order to develop emergent themes, the researcher looks for connections across emergent themes within each individual transcript. These themes are then be compared with one another to look for similarities and differences.

7: To move to the next case, steps 3-6 are completed again until all transcripts are themed. Each transcript must be considered individually before moving to the following steps in the process.

8: In order to report individual themes, the researcher reports the themes of each individual participant and transcript. It is important to highlight each participant's experiences and emergent themes before moving forward and comparing cases within the study.

9: In order to look for patterns across cases, the researcher looks for patterns among the emergent themes across each participant's transcripts. The researcher tries to bracket previous themes only after treating each case as an individual entity. Bracketing is used in qualitative research to mitigate researcher bias that may taint the research process (Dorfler & Stierand, 2021). After each case has been considered individually, the researcher can look for patterns across participants.

10: In order to take interpretations to deeper levels, the researcher takes initial interpretations to deeper levels to gain a deeper understanding of the content. This is one of the steps that differentiates Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis from other qualitative analysis methods (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

11: For the summary of findings, a researcher creates a summary of the findings based on the data and themes that have emerged from the participants during their individual interviews. The findings are detailed in a report, and the researcher highlights the common themes that were discovered as well as any other unique findings that address the phenomenon and the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Maintaining trustworthiness was a crucial component of this study. Trustworthiness is an important component to assessing qualitative research, and it is the most important aspect for ensuring transparency (Adler, 2022). In addition to bracketing, the interview protocols were reviewed by an expert panel and three field tests were conducted to help the researcher understand and fine tune the interview process. As a result of the expert panel, adjustments were made to improve the interview protocols. The field tests were

valuable in providing insight while also teaching the researcher about the interview process. The researcher practiced maintaining impartiality as the participants responded to the open-ended questions. The researcher also made adjustments to cadence and timing when conducting the interviews to improve the way the interview flowed.

Additionally, member checking was conducted after the researcher created each interview transcript. Member checking is the process of asking for feedback from the study participants about the validity of the data or interpretations. This validity check is a requirement for rigorous qualitative research (Motulsky, 2021). Ensuring trustworthiness was important to this phenomenological research because this study relied on the depth of participant experiences in order to explore the phenomenon.

Results

Before presenting the results of themes across participants, it is important to examine the results of each individual participant. Each participant had unique experiences throughout their respective careers. The naming convention for the pseudonyms was “participant” followed by ascending letters of the alphabet (i.e. Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, etc.).

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how do executive women describe their lived experiences pertaining to gender bias while working in the sport industry? There were three emergent themes that contributed to answering the first research question. Those three emergent themes were identified as “gender bias”, “the Queen Bee Syndrome” and “non-gendered challenges”. Within those three emergent themes, several individual themes were identified, and they were important to include because nearly all or all participants discussed them in their respective interviews.

Gender Bias

The first emergent theme was “gender bias”. This theme was significant because every participant in this study identified that gender bias did exist in the sport industry. Every participant acknowledged they had not only experienced unfair treatment because of their gender, they had also witnessed other female colleagues or supervisors being treated unfairly on the basis of gender. Within the emergent theme of gender bias, there were six subthemes that provided context, and at least 10 of the participants acknowledged the significance of each subtheme as a contributing factor in their respective interviews.

Work-Life Balance. The first subtheme contributing to gender bias was “work-life balance”. Every participant in this study identified that women have had to balance both home and family life while the same expectation does not exist for men. Participant A and Participant B both identified a need to adjust their work schedules or the need to find roles that accommodated for the ability to balance home and work. Participant A indicated, “Once I started a family, I was like, oh, I need something more nine to five.” Participant B acknowledged that after a significant change in her personal life, she transferred divisions so that she would be available to meet the needs of her family. She stated, “That was a real eye opener there, and then,

life had changed for me. I needed to find something that was work from home at that time, and I was able to transfer divisions within the same company.” Other participants discussed the struggles they faced while trying to balance the demands and the unpredictable hours of the sport industry along with the demands of having a family. Participant K even discussed the struggles she has seen regarding work-life balance among her single childless colleagues.

It is also very interesting, because a lot of times the single women are asked to do more work because they’re perceived to have more time. Married colleagues, with children would often ask single colleagues to cover things for them, but what they don’t understand is that single people have work-life demands as well; they just aren’t the same.

Work-life balance was an issue among all participants regardless of their position in life.

Double Standards. The second subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of gender bias was “double standards”. In analyzing the results, 11 of the 12 participants identified behaviors directly linked to work-life balance that suggested double standards existed between men and women in the workplace. Behaviors associated with domestic life like being a wife, mother, and managing a home had an impact in the workplace. Participant E noted that in her experiences, females had not been entitled to the same perks and benefits as their male counterparts. She also indicated that if a woman did not have to manage the demands of work-life balance, she would be able to compete with the men in her organization. She told the story of a female colleague who was able to compete with men in her organization because she did not have children. “There was this executive and she was able to compete with her male colleagues because she was not married and did not have children.” She had the ability to do everything that a man could because she did not have to worry about taking care of children. The double standard existed in the fact that men could have children and families, yet a woman had to be single and childless to earn the same level of success. She indicated that the demands for men were far less cumbersome than for women. She stated, “The male executives are all married, so they have a wife at home to help with children.”

Participant F discussed double standards in the way she was treated as opposed to her male counterparts. Her every move was measured and monitored, yet the men were not judged as harshly. “It was just the way he treated the women in the office. If I went to the restroom, I was asked about where I was going. It was very much a gendered thing.” Participant C even recounted how her appearance often led to being misjudged in a way that men would not. She stated,

When I walk into a sports venue more often than not, people come up to me and ask me whose wife or girlfriend I am. They don’t ask or assume that I am an executive. It’s just an assumption that’s made.

Many of the participants discussed that these behaviors would not and did not happen to their male colleagues.

The Need for Male Sponsorship. The third subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of gender bias was “the need for male sponsorship”. This subtheme first presented itself with Participant A. It was a theme that did not seem overtly significant, and the researcher addressed potential skepticism in the reflexivity protocol. However, this individual theme was present among 11 of the 12 participants. Participant A suggested that throughout her career, once she was able to break through barriers with men, they proved to be a better ally than women. “I find males, once you're able to break down the barrier, they can be a better ally. To me, that's my experience than female at times. Because I find that we're our own worst enemies.” She also stated that of all the times she had been promoted or offered an opportunity for advancement, it was given to her by a man who acknowledged her work ethic and value to the organization. “And through working various positions in the business at [company name], there was a man [name] was like, ‘Man, you're such a good worker. We want to promote you here’, and I just kept getting promoted.” The researcher added a line of questioning regarding this topic as a result of the interview with Participant A.

Participant C discussed that her career path was a direct result of a group of men that saw her skill set as an asset. The men who launched her career were always very supportive and constantly asking her how they could help her. She stated,

The people I work with are great. They are family to me and huge mentors. About one year into my career, they said ‘how can we help you? Obviously, you have done some great work, but how can we help you.

Participant K discussed the premise that women’s ideas are often dismissed and then accepted when they are presented by a male. She told a story about a male colleague actually giving her credit when it happened to her.

There was an instance where I brought up an idea in a room with a lot of people and they completely dismissed it. Then a couple months later, a man in a position of power brought it up, and they were like, ‘Oh, my God, that's so great.’ Then he flipped it back and said, ‘You know, she mentioned that a few months ago.

Ten of the 11 remaining participants identified a significant need for male sponsorship throughout their careers within the sport industry.

Men as Decision Makers. The fourth subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of gender bias was “men as decision makers”. Much like “the need for male sponsorship”, this subtheme also presented itself in the interview with Participant A. She stated that post the “Me Too” movement, women had been promoted to executive levels more than ever before. However, she was curious to know how many of the women being promoted were actually considered to be true decision makers. It was her understanding that while it was wonderful to have women in positions of power, there were still men ultimately making the final decisions. She stated, “I mean, when

I was in [industry], most of the decision makers were men. They're the ones making the decision for you to be sharing the table with other women.” The suggestion was that many women may be promoted to executive roles for optics rather than input. Participant D discussed the fact that her male colleagues would often seek opinions from other men to validate their thoughts instead of asking her opinion. “I knew that they were not going to take me seriously because I'm a woman. You get that feeling when you're talking to them. They'll go to a couple other people, the male counterparts for similar asks or answers”. Participant K also included a similar sentiment from her career. She stated,

A lot of times, it's when you're sitting in the room, and a woman will say they have an idea, and people kind of brush it off and move along. Then that same exact idea is replicated, you know, maybe an hour later, or in a different meeting by a white man, and everyone is like “Oh, my God, this is amazing. That's such a great idea.” They're, the one getting the credit for it. Then to not acknowledge where it came from in the first place.

Societal Gender Roles. The fifth subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of gender bias was “societal gender roles”. This subtheme was present among 11 of the 12 participants. The participants identified that there were certain behaviors and responsibilities that were inherently connected to being a woman. The belief was that these roles and norms were perpetuated by society. Participant A identified several examples of behaviors that American society placed on women and girls. For example, there was an understanding in this country that women fulfilled more domestic responsibilities like childcare and cooking. Men tended to fulfill roles outside the home, and they tended to be more adept in STEM fields. Participant A indicated,

But it's the perception that, you know, it's the idea, right? That guys, they are good at math, smart at math, and sciences, and you know, we are good at decorating and baking cookies. So um, I don't even think it's intentional, but it's just natural.

Participant D discussed that societal gender roles stem from a historical context, and they all build upon one another. She stated,

I think that just goes to other things that are out of our control as far as historical opportunities for minorities. It still exists because of the inequities of education. It still exists, even though they're getting slightly better, but it still exists pretty badly. So, those cultural things...they all build on each other. So, the cultural things lead to inadequacies or fewer opportunities for school, and it builds as you go. So, then that sets you up further behind the further you go.

Stereotypes. The sixth subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of gender bias was “stereotypes”. Of the participants in this study, 10 of 12 participants presented information about the existence of stereotypes in the workplace. Participant C included several examples of how

stereotypes had affected her throughout her career. She felt that as she met women in the sport industry, they were often labelled as a bitch. To her, that term was not meant in a derogatory way, but as a way of identifying that a woman was very tough, assertive, and hard-nosed.

But it's the perception that, you know, it's the idea, right? That guys, they are good at math, smart at math, and sciences, and you know, we are good at decorating and baking cookies. So um, I don't even think it's intentional, but it's just natural.

There was a unique connection and assumption that if a woman was successful in the industry, she had to be a bitch to be successful.

Participant H discussed stereotypes she faced while she was pregnant. Her subordinates assumed she could not handle certain tasks because it would be too daunting with “pregnancy brain”. She indicated,

I was told by a couple lower-level managers who reported to me. ‘Hey, let us. Don't worry about doing that. We can take care of it. We know you probably have that pregnancy brain and it's a lot for you to think about.’ I remember thinking at the time, ‘Well, no, I've earned this position, and I should be able to go do it.’ The funny part is I know these individuals, and they're great people. They're still my friends. Their thought process was, ‘We're going to help her.’

Even when the intent was not malicious, she still faced stereotypes and judgement about her fitness to do her daily tasks.

Queen Bee Syndrome

The second emergent theme that contributed to answering the first research question was “the Queen Bee Syndrome”. Queen Bee Syndrome occurs among women who are successful in a male-dominated industry and have earned high-level positions. Sometimes these women create obstacles for other women based on societal roles in an attempt to discriminate against or suppress other women (Apaydin et al., 2021). It is also the notion that female executives knowingly or unknowingly view other women as a potential threat; therefore, they ostracize themselves from these other women in an attempt to protect themselves and their successes (Apaydin et al., 2021).

Of the 12 participants in this study, there were 11 that had either experienced or witnessed the Queen Bee Syndrome during their careers. This theme was significant because there was an assumption prior to this study that only men were contributing to the gender disparity in the sport industry. However, it became apparent in the interview process that not only were women facing challenges from men, but they were also facing challenges from other women. Participant A suggested that this phenomenon had developed early in female youth as part of society and culture. She stated that from a young age, girls were taught to be catty, mean spirited and competitive with each other as a result of feeling threatened.

One of the things that I found out is, girls are really taught to be catty from a small age coming up, right? It's always, you know, even the moms competing about

who makes the better cookies, right? It was the moms talking about how much playing time each girl is going to get, and what this girl is doing, versus what this girl is doing.” Some girls were taught this “mean girl” behavior, and it eventually manifested itself in the workplace.

Within the sport industry, many of the participants stated that some of their biggest challenges came from other women. Participant A had experienced and witnessed this behavior. She included stories of female supervisors who intentionally hindered her growth and were constantly difficult as she tried to better herself and create opportunities for advancement. Participant A noted, “I can tell you stories of being burned, but it's always by a female. Like, you're asking me this, and then it's crazy, but it's always the times when I've gotten burned. It's been a female.” She also witnessed this behavior among female colleagues. She saw other women being hindered or unsupported by female executives. She could not understand why women would choose to be unsupportive of each other given the already tenuous level of competition with men in the workplace. She alluded to the idea that many women believed there was only one seat at the proverbial table, and the only time there was not competition was when women worked for different departments or companies. She included, “And I think what it is if you're in different organizations, different companies, it will work because there is no threat, no direct threat for your job.” Nearly all of the participants cited examples of experiencing or witnessing the Queen Bee Syndrome within the industry, and they all acknowledged it was a significant factor that could hinder a woman's career.

Non-Gendered Challenges

The third emergent theme that contributed to answering the first research question was “non-gendered challenges”. This theme includes factors that were hindering to a female executive's career; however, it may not specifically have been related to gender. There were individual themes included in this emergent theme that inhibited a woman's career. The argument could be made that they may have contributed to the overall experience that a female executive had; however, they could not exclusively be tied to gender.

Eleven of the 12 participants identified several challenges that had also contributed to their experiences working in the sport industry. For example, ageism, aggressive competition, career demands, hypocrisy and racial bias were all significant individual themes that emerged from the interviews. Aggressive competition was an individual theme that resonated with many of the participants. Participant D suggested that this factor may have been specific to the culture within the sport industry. She indicated that many former athletes had chosen a career in the sport industry, and as a result, they are treated better. Participant D stated, “He is a former [professional athlete] that now is [working] for us. So, the owners of my team already have him in a much higher regard than probably everybody else.” By nature, sports are aggressively competitive, and she suggested that competition had translated from the playing

surface into the workplace for many of her colleagues, and there was a mentality to think like a man. She indicated,

I think the joke nowadays is like you have to think like be like a man, right? Like, not doubt yourself and abilities. You might only have 70-80% of the skills on that job description, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't apply for it. I think there's a lot of that. I think there's more of a need to take an action right away, as opposed to trying to get all the details out.

Research Question 2

The second research question was how do executive women in the sport industry describe their lived experiences of overcoming challenges of gender bias in attaining executive positions? The phenomenon associated with this question focused on how female executives in the sport industry navigated challenges associated with gender bias while also earning executive positions.

There were five emergent themes that were developed to answer the second research question. Those five emergent themes were identified as “how to overcome/succeed”, “moving forward”, “positive career experiences”, “building relationships”, and “career path”. Within those five emergent themes, several individual themes emerged, and they were important to include because nearly all or all participants identified them in their respective interviews.

How to Overcome/Succeed

The first emergent theme was “how to overcome/succeed”, and this theme was significant because every participant in this study identified factors and methods for how to overcome challenges associated with gender bias and how to succeed within the sport industry. There were two subthemes that provided context, and nearly all of the participants acknowledged their significance as contributing factors to this emergent theme.

Confronting Situations. The first subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of how to overcome/succeed was “confronting situations”. The manner in which the participants chose to confront situations was important to understand in answering this research question. These methods were essentially attributed to the participant’s personality type. These two personality types were identified as confrontational and non-confrontational.

Approximately half of the participants identified as having a confrontational personality. This means that participants were not afraid and showed no hesitation in confronting situations and people that treated them unfairly based on their gender throughout their careers. Participants D and G included several instances in which they addressed situations that they deemed biased or inappropriate. Participant D suggested that because of the nature of the industry and the male dominated nature, she felt a need to always be proactive and vocal about the way she was treated. Participant D indicated,

But I had a specific incident when I was with the [team name] that I had to confront. If I didn't, you know, I probably still would have been fine. But also, it was that I was going to confront this. It could either lead this

way, or this way. It could lead to a good reaction and a positive reaction for these people to be better and help me. Or they were going to blacklist me, and I was going to be out of here and never be in this again.

Participant G also discussed the importance of having a confrontational personality with regard to fighting for promotions. She described a situation by stating,

So, I decided, what would a guy do? I went back in the office, sat down with my boss and said, ‘Is this number firm? Or is this negotiable?’ I always use the term fight with facts. I said, ‘So I've done a, b, c and d’ just like the guy in the office. I showed him the numbers, showed him a, b, c and d. I've done this and I feel like this doesn't represent the work I've performed. Sure enough, I got a bump up.

Conversely, approximately half of the participants identified as having a non-confrontational personality. This means that participants would rather not address situations of gender bias. Some of these participants chose which battles to fight with a scale of importance. Others chose not to confront situations at all because causing too many problems may result in being fired or other repercussions. Either way, the participants felt this method was significant in the manner in which they had been able to earn new opportunities for advancement while being a female in the sport industry.

Need for Confidence. The second subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of how to overcome/succeed was a “need for confidence”. Ten of the 12 study participants identified that confidence was crucial in succeeding and navigating gender bias in the sport industry. Participant A discussed that learning how to be confident was done through job experience because it isn't learned in school. She stated,

But there is a way to tactfully do it with confidence. Yes, because there is not a course in school that teaches you confidence. So how do you get confidence? So, when you get knocked down, how do you get up? Right? Yeah, you have to have the confidence to get up, but they don't teach it.

She found that there were ways to be tactful and confident in addressing specific situations.

Participants D, E and G also indicated that confidence had been important in their careers. All three women discussed the importance of having confidence especially when competing and working with men on a daily basis. Participant E even alluded to the fact that women would often bring different skill sets to an organization as opposed to their male counterparts, and it was important to see those skills as assets and not liabilities. She indicated,

I mean, I think it's hard, but women have different skills than men. I mean women are great problem solvers. We figure it out. We can figure it out in the same way (if not better) than men figure stuff out, you know?”

Making that distinction often took confidence, and while it could be scary or overwhelming, developing confident behavior was important for navigating gender bias and earning executive roles in the sport industry.

Moving Forward

The second emergent theme that contributed to answering the second research question was “moving forward”. This particular theme addressed how gender bias was still a prevalent issue within industry. This theme included factors or perceptions that women believed were important for reducing the existence of gender bias in the workplace. For example, Participant E stated,

Women can choose not to want a family or kids and men can do the same. This is a big reason why men should and could take paternity leave and be encouraged to leave the office. They should want to talk about their families at the office and want to say, ‘I’m going to leave early for my kids soccer game.’ No one should judge a man or a woman for doing that. I think if a man says, ‘I’m going to go home and cook dinner for my family tonight,’ let’s applaud that and change the narrative. So, to me, I think as we grow, it just has to be continuing to equalize that.

Many participants acknowledged a need to change behaviors and attitudes moving forward and to change societal gender roles placed upon women; however, they did not know where to begin the behaviors for change. They suggested that while progress may have been coming, there was still a very long way to go before there was true gender equality in the industry.

Gender Bias Improving. One subtheme that contributed the theme of moving forward was “gender bias improving”. Ten of the 12 participants acknowledged that as bad as their experiences of gender bias had been, they believed that it was improving. The participants believed that the incidents of gender bias were becoming less severe as opposed to the earlier stages in their careers. Several of the participants also acknowledged that the existence of gender bias was not nearly as significant for them as opposed to prior generations. Participant A identified,

So, I will say there’s a lot more awareness of gender bias. I also will say I feel like females have gotten in a position of power now. So, I can speak my mind and be heard. versus, you know, when I was much younger, there weren’t a lot of females in power.

Participant H included thoughts that gender bias is improving and changing gender roles and stereotypes should be praised. She stated,

This is a big reason why men should take paternity leave and be encouraged to leave the office. They should want to talk about their families at the office and want to say, ‘I’m going to leave early for my kids soccer game.’ No one should judge a man or a woman for doing that. I think if a man says, ‘I’m going to go home and cook dinner for my family tonight,’ let’s applaud that and change the narrative. So, to me, I think as we grow, it just has to be continuing to equalize those roles for both men and women.

Positive Career Experiences

The third emergent theme that contributed to answering the second research question was “positive career experiences”. While the topic of this research study could certainly have assumed negative connotations or a negative perspective, there were several positive career experiences that emerged within the data. Eleven of the 12 participants identified one or more positive career experiences within their careers. There were two significant individual themes that emerged as positive career experiences for the participants.

Positive Overall Experience. The first subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of career experiences was a “positive overall experience”. Given the nature of this research topic, it could have been easy to assume that the bulk of the data could be perceived negatively. However, when asked, 10 of the 12 participants noted that even with gender bias as a contributing factor, they would still say their overall career experience was positive. Participants A, B & D indicated that while there were certainly things that were negative, overall, their experience was mostly positive. Participant B stated, “I don’t want to say like that it’s...it’s not negative. There are negative aspects, but those negatives, I think a majority of the time they have turned into positives.” Finally, even though Participant F had a terribly discriminatory beginning to her career, she expressed that her career had been positive since then. She stated that, “I’d say it’s much more positive now. I mean, I don’t know if I could draw on anything super negative probably in the last 10 years.”

Gender Bias as a Positive. The second subtheme that contributed to the emergent theme of positive career experiences was “gender bias as a positive”. This individual theme drew upon the experiences in which the participants were able to use their gender in their favor or to gain an advantage in the workplace. Nine of the 12 of the participants used the stereotypes or societal gender roles placed upon them to their own benefit. Participant F noted that because she worked with a predominantly male staff, she was able to draw upon stereotypes. The men on her team often used a softer approach, and they did not speak to her as harshly as they spoke to each other. She did not feel like she faced as much aggressive competition or confrontational behavior as her male counterparts. She was certainly confident in handling those situations, but she was also content that her male counterparts were not as aggressive or combative because she was a woman. Participant F stated,

I would say that is probably has existed. You know probably when I was in a [specific] role like using charm and using all the things that you have at your disposal, right? You know, that probably could have worked in my favor for sure. That would probably be the most I can draw upon that. Even now like working with males and they are using a kind of that softer, kind of slightly different approach. They may not argue or come at me as much as they wouldn’t necessarily like a male counterpart. It can be good and bad. You know, it

works to my advantage because I can just kind of soft pedal it or they will soft pedal me versus coming at me harder.

Participant G discussed the importance of using gender to her advantage. As a woman, she felt like she was able to relate better to her colleagues and subordinates in ways that her male counterparts could not.

So, I would say emotional intelligence is important, because you have to understand the balance between head and heart, and situational analysis, or situational awareness. If you have those, you're able to read a room. You're able to read a person that you're sitting in front of. You can drive how you want that conversation to go. For example, I can see I'm not getting anywhere with this person, because right now they're just not there. They are distracted, or they are connected to something else. I can tell they're not engaging in what I'm saying. So, I need to either say it another way or I need to change gears and give them something else.

While gender bias was mostly seen as a disadvantage throughout this study, this emergent theme illustrates that there were positive career experiences within the sport industry that shaped the careers of these female executives.

Building Relationships

The fourth emergent theme that contributes to the second research question is "building relationships". Ten of the 12 participants identified the importance of building strong relationships throughout their careers. These relationships helped the participants navigate the challenges of gender bias and also the challenges throughout their careers to achieve their respective levels of success. Within this emergent theme, 10 of the 12 participants acknowledged they had positive relationships with their coworkers. Participant B indicated, "I am extremely fortunate in my career. Everyone's been very helpful to help me develop the skills, and I tried to pass that along actually myself as well." Because of those positive relationships she tried to instill that same behavior to other colleagues and subordinates.

Career Path

The final emergent theme that contributed to the second research question was "career path". This emergent theme was present among all 12 participants. The career path of each participant was integral in shaping their careers. Because of the skills and education developed upon entering the sport industry, the participants were equipped to handle and navigate challenges associated with gender bias. Within this emergent theme, there were two subthemes which were identified as "traditional" and non-traditional". Pertaining to their career paths, half of the participants identified having a traditional path, and half of the participants identified having a non-traditional career path.

For half of the participants, formal education followed by internships and industry experience was the appropriate path for their respective careers. However, the other half of the participants had a non-traditional path to the sport industry. These women had attended a university, but their experience and careers initially led them to different industries upon graduation. Those experiences often led them to building relationships with

a person or a company that had an affiliation with sport organizations. Because of the relationships and experiences, participants were then offered careers in the sport industry serving as a department head, member of the C-Suite or executive board.

The five emergent themes of how to overcome/succeed, moving forward, positive career experiences, building relationships, and career path were significant for answering the second research question. They directly related to how the participants navigated the challenges associated with gender bias throughout their careers. These emergent themes were also significant for the process of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis because they specifically focused on exploring the lived experiences of the participants in relation to understanding the phenomenon.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study examined the research questions of how executive women describe their lived experiences pertaining to gender bias while working in the sport industry and how executive women in the sport industry describe their lived experiences of overcoming challenges of gender bias in attaining executive positions. The results of this study contribute to both the Leadership Labyrinth, which was the theoretical foundation for the study, as well as the Queen Bee Syndrome. The Leadership Labyrinth asserts the glass ceiling is no longer relevant for how women achieve success. Unlike the glass ceiling, the Leadership Labyrinth suggests that each woman's experience and struggle for success is different and convoluted; thus, each account must be examined uniquely (Hancock et al., 2018). Each woman in this study had unique stories and experiences that were specific to their own journeys; thus, this study contributes to the validity of the Leadership Labyrinth and its value as a theoretical foundation. Participant E even found the Leadership Labyrinth to be more representative of women in executive roles. Upon being shown a diagram of the Leadership Labyrinth, she stated, "Oh, that's funny. This is this is much more of an accurate depiction as to what is experienced at this level."

This study also contributes to the Queen Bee Syndrome. The Queen Bee Syndrome occurs among women who are successful in a male-dominated industry and have earned high-level positions. Sometimes these women create obstacles for other women based on societal roles in an attempt to discriminate against or suppress other women (Apaydin et al., 2021). Nearly every participant in this study had either witnessed or experienced the Queen Bee Syndrome. This study adds depth to the theory, and it provides a basis for research to be conducted in the future.

Practical Implications

The results of this study could be applied in a practical setting. The participants of this study were serving as executives in the sport industry at the time of this study. Their interviews revealed some very real issues related to gender bias that could be addressed for current and future generations of women who pursue a career in sports. Human resource departments could use the results of this study to

evaluate the hiring practices within their respective organizations. Additionally, practices could be put in place to evaluate the way women are treated in sport organizations. The participants of this study did not always feel safe reporting inappropriate behavior, and that stemmed from human resource departments lacking the outlets for employees to feel safe and protected.

Organizational cultures should also be evaluated. A woman does not feel inadequate or inferior because of her gender if the organizational culture promotes equality and diversity. If an organization truly saw women as equals, it would have a safe space for women to voice their concerns. Additionally, there would be procedures in place to reprimand or discipline those people who discriminate against women. If an organization's culture truly promoted equality, the issue of gender bias would not have been found in this study.

Finally, women within the industry should be held accountable regarding "Queen Bee" behavior. It is hard enough for women to succeed in the sport industry by having to compete with men on an uneven scale. They should not have to compete with women as well. Women are connected by the commonality of gender; thus, women would be more likely to support each other's goals and ambitions (N.A., 2021). By supporting each other, it would eliminate the cutthroat mentality, and women could combine to exist as a dominant force. There would be more space at the proverbial table (not less) if women fought together instead of with each other.

Future Research Implications

There are a few implications for future research. Several participants expressed the interest in understanding the male perspective regarding gender bias. This study did not consider male executives in the sport industry, but they could be studied to determine if male executives share similar views as their female counterparts. Additionally, race presented itself many times in the interviews with participants. The African American participants seemed to have more challenging experiences in the industry because they were discriminated against by both race and gender.

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