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# ***“IF A WOMAN CAME IN ... SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN EATEN UP ALIVE”:***

## ***Analyzing Gendered Political Processes in the Search for an Athletic Director***

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*The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand and critique the gendered political processes in the search for an athletic director following a merger between men's and women's intercollegiate athletic departments in a U.S. university. Semi-structured interviews were used to ask 55 athletic department stakeholders their perceptions of the search process and associated politics. Findings indicated gendered political activities occurred along gender-affiliated departmental lines. Political strategies contributed to gendered processes favoring certain masculinities and male candidates in the search for an athletic director. While gender equity was an important consideration in the search process, because of the controversial nature of the merger and the politics expressed, the belief that hiring a man was essential to the merger's success was widely accepted by many stakeholder groups. The findings are positioned in the critical management and sport literature. This research contributes to our understanding of the complexity of gender relations and provides insight into the gendered political processes that inform leadership searches.*

**Keywords:** *gender relations; gendered political processes; leadership searches; intercollegiate athletics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many sport organizations, departments, and programs have been segregated historically by gender. More recently, mergers between gender-segregated organizations have become a frequent occurrence within the sport industry as organizations attempt to eliminate redundancies in operations and services while capitalizing on synergistic potential between similar organizations (e.g., the English Hockey Association merger in 1997, University of Arkansas athletic department merger in 2007, and Golf New Zealand merger in 2010). As such, mergers between gender-affiliated organizations offer a context-specific event to examine how gender relations are shaped within certain organizational processes and how processes shape gender relations (Kihl, Shaw, and Schull, forthcoming). Mergers also provide well-defined arenas for organizational politics and power struggles between previously separate groups attempting to control and influence organizational decision making (Nguyen and Kleiner 2003; Tienari 2000). A key part of the merger process is how it is led (Kihl and Schull 2011; Sitkin and Pablo 2005). Therefore, the selection of a leader in a merger is an important and often political decision. In the context of intercollegiate athletics, the position most closely representing the CEO is the athletic director. In this article, we examine the gendered political processes associated with the search for a new athletic director in a gender-affiliated athletic department merger. Our aim is to contribute to better understanding the complexity of gender relations and provide insight into the gendered political processes that inform leadership searches in organizations.

Political processes are an inherent aspect of organizational employment searches (Klein and Stern 2009; Pfeffer 1989; Townley 1993). Following Mumby, we position political processes as “the articulation of various individual and group interests through the everyday enactment of communicative processes that produce, reproduce, resist and transform collective (intersubjective) structures of meanings” (Mumby 2001, 587). In a merger, the process of searching for a figurehead to lead a newly combined organization may be politicized and may emerge as a battle between stakeholders affiliated with previously separate organizations. In this research, the merger is between departments organized by gender; therefore gender is a key aspect of the merger and athletic director search process. Davey (2008) contends that politics operate as gendered processes within organizations. She argues for an increased focus on the role

organizational politics play in maintaining gender relations. Leadership searches also have gender implications, including gendered discourses, divisions, and stereotypes (Acker 1990, 1999; Ely and Meyerson 2000; Fletcher 2004), particularly in sport contexts (Hovden 2000; Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008; Shaw and Hoerber 2003). While mergers between gender-affiliated sport organizations have been an element of the international sport scene for at least 40 years, little attention has been given to political processes and gender surrounding the subsequent leadership search process. Gender-affiliated sport organizations are an interesting case, providing what Britton (2003) describes as a rare opportunity to examine parallel organizations—yet where one is male dominated, and the other is female dominated—that are otherwise similar in form and function. In addition, mergers between gender-affiliated sport organizations provide a highly political and gender-focused context to examine gender relations, thus contributing to Davey's call.

We use the concept of gendered processes (Acker 1990, 1999; Britton 2003) to examine the political processes associated with the search for an athletic director following a merger between the men's and women's intercollegiate athletic departments at a large American university. More specifically, we examine (1) how the stakeholders' roles in, and perceptions of, the gendered political strategies in the athletic director search process were expressed and (2) how those political strategies contributed to gendered processes favoring some men and certain forms of masculinities in the search. Our contribution is to develop our understanding of the complexity of gender relations and to provide insight into the gendered political processes that inform leadership searches such as the search for an athletic director in this merger. To address our research purpose, a theoretical framework is outlined in the next section.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Acker (1990, 1999) defines gender as a complex set of social relations embedded in a variety of organizational processes. While masculinities, or behaviors, assumptions, and actions most often associated with men, and femininities, or behaviors, assumptions, and actions most often associated with women, are socially constructed with multiple meanings, masculinities are most often perceived as superior to femininities (Ely and Meyerson 2000). Organizational processes that privilege certain gender related

actions, behaviors, and processes over others are considered gendered, and Acker identifies at least four categories of gendered processes that are inherently connected aspects within organizations.

First, organizational structures in the form of formal hiring practices, policies, and job descriptions create gender divisions and place certain men in more powerful positions (Acker 1999; Britton 2003), such as the athletic director in intercollegiate athletic departments (Acosta and Carpenter 2012; Hoffman 2011). Consequently, men largely control hiring and are able to maintain male dominance via work practices such as homologous reproduction, tokenism, and marginalization (Hoffman 2011; Kane and Stangl 1991; Stangl and Kane 1991). In her study on Norwegian sport organizations, Hovden (2000) found that language associated with leadership selection normalized masculine competencies and placed female candidates at a disadvantage. Organizational members, however, perceived formal selection criteria to be gender neutral. Her findings illustrate the insidious nature of certain gendered processes and demonstrate how gendered discourses can influence more formal search practices leading to marginalization of groups of people who do not fit the mold, including women.

Second, gender relations are reinforced in organizational culture, language, and ideology (Acker 1999; Britton 2003). Search practices and role assignments in sport are influenced by socially constructed ideologies of masculine and feminine and operate to reproduce gender relations (Hovden 2000; Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008; Shaw and Hoerber 2003). For example, images and discourses associated with management and leadership in sport are infused with masculine traits and characteristics such as toughness, sport playing experience, and instrumentality (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008). As Hovden (2000) found, sport leadership selection can be highly gendered. She reported that leadership discourses in Norwegian sport organizations were tightly linked to images of corporate action-oriented leadership, heroic leaders, and associated masculine skills including possessing unrestricted time resources and an extensive social network.

Third, gender relations, structures, and cultures are maintained via everyday social interactions creating dominance and submission (Acker 1990, 1999). These interactions are political and concern the everyday social micro-processes through which power is maintained and resisted (Davey 2008; Knights and McCabe 1998; Mumby 2001). Politics are often justified and accepted in organizational settings through social

interactions and a “that’s just the way it is” logic that goes unchallenged, serving the interests of the individuals and groups who are active in creating them. Critical theorists (e.g., Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Knights and McCabe 1998; Mumby 2001) contend that organizational politics is concerned with power structures, relational struggles, and the social processes and ideological constructions through which power is maintained and resisted. For example, informal networks in sport operate as gendered political processes based on the power inherent in such networks and the lack of access afforded to women (Hoffman 2011; Hovden 2000; Shaw 2006).

Finally, gendering in organizations may occur in the ways in which organizational members create gender-appropriate personas, behaviors, and identities (Acker 1990, 1999; Britton 2003). Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008) examined discourses that male sport managers used to describe their work and make representations of themselves as sport managers. They found that discourses of instrumentality, passion for sport, and homogeneity “preserve, legitimize, and naturalize the power and privileges of those already holding senior positions” while reinforcing a culture that excludes women and individuals who do not match those discourses (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008, 101). Hovden (2000) found that gendered personas in sport leadership selection included candidates with “heavyweight” leadership skills and competencies (e.g., experience in elected positions, experience with budget and strategic planning, and extensive contacts) and were more likely to be found in male candidates. Involvement in organizational politics also implicates gender appropriate behaviors and identities. For example, Davey (2008) found that female employees in male-dominated organizations constructed politics as masculine in nature (e.g., competitive, aggressive, and individualist) and counter to what she identified as feminine identity and interactional styles.

While Davey (2008) identified gendered assumptions within organizational politics, she also cautioned against absolute statements regarding women’s and men’s positions in organizational politics. This is because gender is fluid and acknowledging it as such “implicate[s] structure, culture, interpersonal interaction, and identity . . . [and also] concern[s] informal influences that are largely unacknowledged and thrive on ambiguity” (Davey 2008, 653). Supporting this argument, she found that in some situations, stereotypical notions of masculine rationality and feminine emotion were undermined in organizational politics. In other words, men’s political behaviors were perceived as irrational and emotional

compared to women who behaved more rationally by demonstrating resistance to engage in politics. Alongside researchers such as Britton (2003) and Irvine and Vermilya (2010), Davey highlighted the complexity of gender, extending Acker's (1990, 1999) framework, and we recognize and advocate this stance within our research as it allows us to see the multiple ways in which gender is articulated in organizations.

Examining the search process for an athletic director in the context of a merger between gender-affiliated sport organizations provides a context-specific event in which to understand and critique the role that informal political behaviors play in reproducing gender relations, particularly in the search for sport leadership positions where females continue to be significantly underrepresented. Acker's (1990, 1999) gendered categorization is useful in this context to improve our understanding of gendered political processes and their effect on the athletic director search process. The gendered processes framework assists us in critically examining the role organizational politics play in maintaining gender relations and to further our understanding of the persistent gendered structures and cultures of sport organizations. Considering the intersection between formal practices and policies (i.e., job descriptions and qualifications) and more informal social processes (i.e., politics and ideologies of effective leaders) also enhances Acker's framework. Alongside this, engaging with Hovden's (2000), Davey's (2008), and Britton's (2003) work encourages us to extend our conceptualization away from gender binaries, allowing us to engage more fully with the complexities of gender relations (Butler 2004).

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Our research setting was a merger between the men's and women's athletic departments at a large American university and the subsequent search process for an athletic director to lead the new department. The merger was initiated in 2002 and ended 29 years of gender-segregated athletic departments (University eNews 2002). At the time of the merger announcement, the athletic departments employed approximately 250 employees and sponsored 25 sports (12 men's and 13 women's), and their combined operational budget was \$40.9 million (University Office of the Vice President [OVP] 2002). Approximately \$20 million of the operational budget included shared expenses (i.e., administrative support, debt services, and capital expense), leaving \$20.6 million for sport budgets (University OVP 2002). Men's athletic programs accounted for \$13.8 million of the \$20.6 million sport budget, while women's athletic programs

accounted for \$6.8 million (University OVP 2002). Many believed the university's was among the top athletic programs in supporting women's athletics (Dougherty 1998) and demonstrated a commitment to Title IX, which is a law in the United States prohibiting gender discrimination in educational programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance (Staurowsky 2003). For example, the women's athletic department received a state appropriation, which helped fund separate playing facilities and equalized operational budgets (Dougherty 1998; Kucera 1979), thus providing the university a means to achieve gender-equitable programs and Title IX compliance.

The impetus for the merger was a 2001 fiscal review conducted by the OVP. The report indicated that the university was spending \$10 million subsidizing separate athletic departments—a figure that could be reduced through merging departments to achieve more coordinated and efficient financial planning (University OVP 2002; Putnam 2002). Separate departments also featured divergent program philosophies and inconsistent management practices, and fostered competition between departments (Putnam 2002). For example, while the women's department followed an educational model with a primary focus on academic success and high-quality athletic experiences, the men's department represented the athletic business model, focused primarily on winning (Staurowsky 1998). The differences were gendered, as the educational model reflected women's lack of professional playing opportunities and the subsequent importance of educational principles, while the business model highlighted the focus on men's intercollegiate athletics as entertainment and revenue generation (Staurowsky 1998) and a training ground for professional sport.

These stark programmatic differences promoted unhealthy competition and rivalry between the departments and their respective administrators, which undermined efforts to cooperatively manage departments (University eNews 2002). The dysfunction was also evident as both department administrators publicly criticized and blamed financial problems on each other (Goessling 2002). Several men's department stakeholders were critical of the women's department and believed budgets for men's programs were shrinking because of Title IX (*Star Tribune* 2002). In addition, men's department stakeholders were critical of the women's department athletic director because they believed her demands for gender equity, including equity in the distribution of external donations, operating budgets, and separate playing facilities, were unrealistic. The women's programs benefited from the advocacy of many internal and external stakeholders, including athletic boosters. Athletic boosters are



individuals who actively support and advocate for the athletic department, and who often provide large financial donations to the department or to specific sport teams. Stakeholders from the women's department were critical of the men's department's fiscal mismanagement, lack of program oversight, and hostility toward the women's program (Goessling 2002).

A merger, therefore, addressed both the fiscal shortfalls of intercollegiate athletics by eliminating redundancies in services and operations and the perceived dysfunction amid the two departments. However, within this contentious context, stakeholders from both departments were concerned about the identity of the new leader in the combined organization and focused on influencing the athletic director search. The search committee comprised 11 members, including three university administrators, two faculty members, two athletic boosters, two athletic coaches, and two student athletes (Brackin 2002). University administrators and the search committee were faced with the challenging task of dealing with politics along gender-affiliated departmental lines during the athletic director search process, which took place over a three-month period between May 2002 and July 2002.

## METHODS AND DATA

A single case study design (Yin 2009) was used to examine the political influences associated with the hiring process for an athletic director in a university athletic department merger between its men's and women's athletic departments. Single case studies are appropriate for extensive examinations of unique situations, and provide a means to further our knowledge of organizational, social, and political phenomena (Yin 2009). Selection of this context-specific and unique case helps us understand and unpack the complex gender relations within the search process and the politics associated with the process. As Ashcraft (2010) has argued, case studies allow for the examination of the particulars of gender relations within a given period in time. Examining the gendered political processes associated with the search process in this case, while not generalizable to all sport organizations, can provide insights and broad conceptual claims (Misener and Doherty 2009; Yin 2009) into the complexities of the gendered political influences associated with leadership searches in organizational settings where gender is an inherent feature.

Data collection took place over a one-year period between 2004 and 2005. The primary data source was in-depth interviews with 55 athletic department stakeholders who had firsthand experience with the merger

process. The third author negotiated access to the research setting in 2004 with the athletic director, who was appointed in July 2002 (Schmid 2002). The athletic director served as the organizational gatekeeper for athletic boosters. More specifically, he emailed the research invitation to both men's and women's athletic boosters informing them of the study and directing them to contact the third researcher if they wished to participate. Access through the athletic director may have shaped our data to some extent. For example, athletic boosters supportive of the athletic director may have been more inclined to participate in the research. However, we believe this potential bias was minimized via a strict confidentiality agreement, which ensured that participants would remain anonymous to the athletic director. The third author contacted internal stakeholders (i.e., administrators, coaches, and staff) directly via email informing them of the study and inviting them to participate. Thus, the athletic director did not provide direct access to internal stakeholders and was unaware of who participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 athletic department administrators, seven coaches, nine athletic department staff, 17 athletic boosters, two central university administrators, three faculty, and five search committee members. An elevated confidentiality agreement was in place because of the contentious nature of the case. The confidentiality agreement does not allow us to refer to participants by both their gender and role. Therefore, participants were identified in the findings by either their general participant category (e.g., coach, booster) or their gender (i.e., male/female participant). The confidentiality agreement was included in the Institutional Review Board ethics approval process. Pseudonyms were used to replace the proper names of candidates in participants' descriptions and newspaper quotes.

An interview guide provided consistency in the case-specific questions while enabling flexibility to develop a conversational style (Patton 2002). The interviews were retrospective constructions of stakeholders' experiences and understandings of the political nature of the search process. While we believe the participants were forthright during the interviews, we accept the notion that their accounts might contain recall errors and/or include selected perceptions of this process. Experiences of critical incidents, such as the different political activities of the athletic director search process, might have influenced their interpretations. As such the range of, and comparisons among, stakeholder accounts, the interview guide, probing questions, and the analytical process enhanced our ability to assess and interpret them.

Participants were first asked to describe their affiliation with the athletic department during the merger (i.e., years worked in separate or merged

departments, positions, roles, and responsibilities). Next, participants were asked their perceptions of the athletic director search process, the candidate criteria, and the challenges involved in the search process. Probing questions were posed to elicit details related to the nature of the political processes engaged in during the athletic director search. Interviews ranged from one to two hours, were audio recorded, and were conducted at a site of the participant's choice (i.e., participant's office or researchers' offices) or by telephone. Secondary data included newspaper articles, news media reports, and institutional reports.

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and participants were provided the opportunity to verify their transcripts for accuracy. Follow-up questions and clarifications were elicited via email where needed. Interview transcripts ranged from 12 to 22 pages and produced more than 760 pages and approximately 75 documents. All data were downloaded into the qualitative software ATLAS.ti (Scientific Software Development 2003-2010). Data analysis involved three main stages and was completed independently by two researchers. Initially, the data were read and reread to allow the researchers to become intimate with the data (Patton 2002) and familiar with the case (Yin 2009). Data were then openly coded and categorically organized (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to identify specific aspects of the search process (i.e., establishing a candidate pool and candidate criteria) as well as the presence of specific political influences (i.e., media manipulation and negotiations). Category development involved comparisons between participant accounts in interview transcripts and other relevant documents until no new properties or dimensions emerged and saturation was attained. Categories were further developed for analysis using axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to assess relationships between categories and identify gendered processes and themes. In other words, utilizing Acker's (1990, 1999) framework, connections between politics and gendered processes in the athletic director search process were pursued.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gendered political processes played a role in maintaining gender relations in the context of this sport merger and subsequent search for an athletic director. We present the results and discussion in two parts. First, we highlight the ways in which political influences were depicted as gendered based on the perceptions of various stakeholders associated with the previously separate departments. Second, we specifically outline the

gendered political strategies and discuss the ways in which those tactics led to processes favoring male candidates and certain forms of masculinity in the athletic director search.

### **Gendered Politics: “The Posse” versus “The Brotherhood”**

Participants depicted a gendered political battle between stakeholders associated with the previously separate men’s and women’s departments to exert influence on the athletic director search process. One search committee member referred to the two sides in the political battle as “the brotherhood” and “the posse.” The brotherhood was an explicitly gendered title given to an inner circle of stakeholders associated with the men’s department. A female participant perceived the brotherhood as “an old boys club . . . very well connected to [local media/sport columnist].” Alternatively, the posse included stakeholders associated with the women’s department and consisted exclusively of athletic boosters. One booster stated, “The posse was about 10 or 12 people that were basically fighting the merger and that included some very large donors.”

The brotherhood’s power was rooted in their connection to the media, which was instrumental to the political battle. More specifically, the media provided the brotherhood an arena to publicize their message. Furthermore, the connection to the media was perceived to be exclusive to certain men’s department stakeholders. One athletic administrator’s comments were illustrative of both politically powerful aspects:

They used [columnist] very well to voice their concerns. Anytime they wanted to get something out there, all they had to do is talk to [columnist] when he came walking through the hallway. . . . He never would stop into a women’s coach’s office but he always stopped into [men’s sports offices], and the more press they got the more they got going and pretty soon you are only getting one side of the story out there, but [the columnist] is not willing to talk with anybody else.

The columnist’s perceived unwillingness to talk to women’s department stakeholders implicates the presence of a gendered political network in sport, which was created and maintained via informal practices and social interactions (Acker 1990, 1999). Similar to other old boys networks in sports (Hoffman 2011; Shaw 2006), the gendered exclusionary nature of the brotherhood ensured that outsiders, including women and men who were not men’s department advocates, could not access the power held within the influential brotherhood.

The power of the posse was rooted in their continued financial support of the university and their ability to engage privately (Britton 2003) in behind-closed-doors negotiations with decision makers such as the university president and key administrators to influence the search process. One reason for the posse's use of private negotiations was the lack of access to the media network. Another was the perceived constraints that were placed on this stakeholder group by men's department stakeholders:

There were women in the university community . . . who were very upset because the message had been sent out that you had better not be too vocally supportive of the women's department basically because there would be repercussions, and I heard that from professors and from the dean of one of the schools here. (female participant)

In a sport merger context, as in other societal contexts, women are saddled with limitations on their political behaviors. They adjust their politics to comply with what are perceived to be appropriate behaviors for women to exhibit (Acker 1990, 1999). We are thus able to identify how organizational politics constituted informal social interactions within which people experience and create dominance and submission and the resulting expression of appropriate gendered behaviors (Acker 1990, 1999). Similarly, Davey (2008) found that women in traditionally male-dominated occupations did not engage in public political games because they knew "they would lose" and that the "macho competitive attitude" (659) necessary for such behavior was counter to their identities as women. While female stakeholders in this study did not necessarily express the belief that political activity contradicted their identities as women, they were fearful of a perceived backlash to their cause if they were "too vocal."

The posse also used their situation to their advantage. They positioned themselves as taking a more subtle, professional approach to discussions than their male counterparts. As one female participant described:

None of us really wanted to be too negative about it because we were really concerned at what would happen, and as down and dirty as the men sometimes play, we never really lowered ourselves to that because we knew it really wouldn't matter and then it could be used against the athletic department, the women.

The women's reluctance to "lower [them]selves" and get "down and dirty" echoes Davey's (2008) findings in which female participants perceived public political approaches as immoral and irrational, gendering

organizational politics as masculine. Rather than playing “down and dirty” or being seen as “too vocal,” these multimillion-dollar donors used their continued financial support of the university as leverage to influence the candidate criteria. One female participant described this as a “compromise” and “a strategic meeting” ultimately “for the sake of the athletes.” At first reading, this private, closed-door behavior finding reflects Acker’s (1990, 1999) appropriate gender behaviors and Ely and Meyerson’s (2000) public versus private gendered dichotomy in which the public sphere of work is seen as masculine and the private sphere as feminized and less influential. A more nuanced reading of this practice reveals a different type of public versus private dichotomy in organizational politics, wherein women have private access to influential decision makers and extensive financial power. Therefore, extending Acker’s and Ely and Meyerson’s findings, we suggest that women’s use of the private domain was influential in this case, and was seen as more acceptable to decision makers compared to the public expressions of power favored by the men.

Interestingly, the women’s approach was supported by some men, who perceived the brotherhood’s use of the media for self-serving and individual political gains as problematic:

One of the problems is the press . . . there are some long-time [men’s department stakeholders] that have used the press or their lawyers or whoever their interested parties . . . have used the press to, for lack of a better term, embarrass the department or try to use the press to leverage their position. (male participant)

Another male participant characterized this type of public politics as irrational, almost cowardly, and counterproductive for the overall department: “Don’t bitch to the papers. Don’t complain to other people . . . you keep it in-house. You’ve got a problem, you go speak in-house. Don’t air out your dirty laundry.” While the politics expressed in the media by some men’s department stakeholders could be understood as a masculine organizational process (Acker 1999; Britton 2003; Davey 2008), they were also found to be problematic by some men. Through this research, we therefore extend Acker’s (1990, 1999) work by recognizing some men’s discomfort with dominant masculinities, thus expressing gender as fluid and powerful in many different ways. Davey (2008) found that women perceived men’s articulation of politics as irrational, self-seeking, individualist political activity. We concur with Davey but extend her argument, contradicting binary approaches to gender relations as all men clearly did not support the public articulation of politics.

## Gendered Political Search Processes

In this section, we examine and discuss the negotiations between the posse and the university as well as the brotherhood's use of the media to attempt to manipulate the candidate pool.

*External candidate.* A primary condition sought by the posse from the president was to hire an external candidate. Illustrative of the "compromise" and private negotiations, a female participant stated:

[We] met with [the president] and we had a list of things that we wanted. . . . We said that if you can agree to these things, we will basically be quiet, and one of those was they had to start fresh. If they were going to merge the departments, they had to get rid of both [the men's and women's] athletic directors.

Participants perceived that hiring an external candidate was important because of the histories of the two separate departments and the dysfunctional relationships between the respective athletic directors. One search committee member stated, "[Former women's director] wouldn't be accepted by the men, [former men's director] wouldn't be accepted by the women." An athletic staff member stated they were "looking for a peacemaker, who had a calm demeanor and probably somebody who was going to come in and be fair, be able to listen to both sides because there were two definitely different sides."

First, these comments reveal the ongoing power of the posse. That this power was couched in the "quiet," private behaviors expected of women reinforces Acker's (1999) category of expected personas. The extension of this category is that these quiet, private behaviors were extremely powerful (Britton 2003), again undermining binary approaches to gender in which women are seen as weaker than men (Ashcraft 2010). This finding provides an opportunity for the analysis of the complex power and political relationships that constitute, and are constituted by, gender relations and should therefore be taken into account in the examination of situations such as the merger in this case.

The second consideration is the image of a "peacemaker" who could unify two opposing camps. The description of a peacemaker coincides with heroic leadership and associated masculinity (Fletcher 2004; Hovden 2000). The athletic staff member's description of the ideal candidate, one with a "calm demeanor" and who would "be fair" while appearing gender neutral, reflected features of heroic or hegemonic masculinity (Alvesson and Billing 1997), such as a leader who is rational, courageous, and

independent and can bring peace to the merged department. At one level, this finding contradicts our claims regarding the posse's power, as it appears that they would have preferred someone who exhibits what have been described as "masculine" values. More deeply, while the image of a peacemaker is gendered, members of the posse were still able to have some influence over this organizational process, as their focus was on an external candidate, male or female. So, through private skills of compromise and negotiation, the posse were able to influence the search process, albeit within their understanding of who would be a good leader in this context.

*When gender equity means looking for a man.* A second candidate criterion expressed in negotiations between university administration and women's athletic boosters was an established record and behavior supporting gender equity:

There were assurances made by the president and chief of staff that we would hire an athletic director that had a strong record of advocating for women, who had demonstrated progress in terms of Title IX, and there was a commitment from the university . . . that they would not allow the women's program to lose ground. (search committee member)

One female participant delineated the criteria for gender equity and the perception of what it meant to be an advocate for women's athletics: "I think it was so critical to bring in somebody that didn't have necessarily a reputation as being a football AD [athletic director] or a men's basketball AD, it had to be somebody who didn't have that rap." A candidate known as an advocate for men's revenue-producing sports (i.e., football and basketball) would be perceived as polarizing to women's athletics and incapable of administering a broad-based program.

These comments are largely unsurprising, and reflect the creation of a gendered culture (Acker 1999) via a commitment to gender equity. The findings become more interesting when we consider that, despite women's department stakeholders' political strategies to influence the candidate criteria, hiring an experienced external candidate for such a high-profile position places women at a distinct disadvantage. The majority of intercollegiate athletic departments are led by men, particularly at the NCAA Division I level, where women represent only 9 percent of all athletic directors (Acosta and Carpenter 2012). The low percentage of female athletic directors with the necessary qualifications for the position decreased the prospective hiring of a female to lead the merged department



and was reflective of gendered structures in organizations that create gender divisions and favor men (Acker 1990, 1999). Although women's department stakeholders were able to influence the criteria for the desired applicant, they could not influence the limited pool of female candidates.

The women's reaction to this was fascinating, recognizing women's weaker position in the search for a new athletic director and providing a counterintuitive solution. One female participant explained:

I know some of us spoke up . . . we didn't want [the athletic director] to be a woman because we didn't want to give [men's department stakeholders] any excuses. . . . Why give these guys any ammunition when they were already throwing plenty of things around or even make it that much harder for us to succeed, or that much harder on the women's side? . . . Many of us expressed that we thought the only way it would work would be to have a man.

Other stakeholders reiterated similar beliefs and shared their perspectives that female candidates would face significant challenges compared to their male peers:

The group felt very strongly on the merger that the new athletic director be a male. If a woman came in, no matter how good she was she would have been eaten up alive. (female participant)

Eventually the search committee said, no matter how good [female candidates] are, we are probably going to be setting them up [to fail] . . . (female participant)

I don't think the men would have looked at having a female boss . . . there was so much going against it if that would have happened. I could not recommend [the position] to any female—friend or foe. (search committee member)

The preference for a male candidate is an explicit gendered image and suggests the presence of hegemonic masculinity, which naturalizes men's power and domination over women (Connell 1987) and operates to define the competent in successful organizations (Acker 1990, 1999). Political activity served to create a gendered image of masculinity and resulted in the widespread belief that a male athletic director was critical to the success of the merger. This gendered ideology was accepted as natural, inevitable, and uncontested. It resulted in the consent of the subordinated group, reflecting the connections between gendered images and social

interactions that create dominance and submission (Acker 1990, 1999). Power was maintained via consent of the subordinated group (i.e., women's department stakeholders) to accept the dominant understandings of a male athletic director as inevitable and natural (Alvesson and Deetz 2000) in the context of a merger between gender-affiliated sport organizations. While this ideology could not be expressed formally through a job description, informally, however, if a woman were hired, it appeared inevitable to participants that she would be "eaten up alive" or "set up to fail." Thus, our analysis extends Acker's (1990, 1999) framework by revealing how gendered images and ideologies of an appropriate athletic director work together with social interactions embedded in organizational politics to influence more formal policies and procedures, such as candidate criteria. Simply put, rather than foist the athletic director position on a woman who would probably fail, the women were able to influence the choice of a man, who might succeed, in their view. Again, this can be interpreted as the ability of private influence to have far-reaching, and unexpected, influence, extending Acker's and Ely and Meyerson's (2000) framework.

*Media manipulation.* The brotherhood's connections with the media allowed them to engage in complex media manipulation, including lobbying and candidate leaks. Some men's department stakeholders lobbied for a specific male candidate who was internal to their department. The potential hiring of the internal male candidate would ensure that the interests of the men's athletic department would remain a priority in a combined department, and was also in direct conflict with the posse's external candidate criteria. An athletic administrator stated:

There were candidates that were using the media to lobby for the position or for the person that they wanted to see get the position . . . one candidate was using it to lobby on behalf of his candidacy . . . and having people plant commentary about his candidacy and capabilities.

An excerpt from the local newspaper provided a specific example of the lobbying tactic:

[Internal candidate] is the first person to publicly acknowledge applying for the job as the athletic director of the combined men's and women's departments. [Internal male candidate] said he is interested in the job but doesn't know if he will receive an interview. It's clear [he] wants to be an athletic director, as he has been a candidate for several such positions across the country. (Author withheld 2002a)

The “it’s clear” statement asserts the internal candidate’s individual agency and competency to fulfill the position, and is instrumental in confirming or perpetuating the image of the competent male worker (Acker 1990, 1999). Organizational politics function to affirm identities, further individual careers, and secure existing power relations (Davey 2008; Knights and McCabe 1998). Media lobbying thus served to position the internal candidate, and men’s athletic department, as superior to all other candidates, protecting the ideology of male dominance in sport. By analyzing the lobbying process in this case, we are able to provide explicit evidence of its influence and insidiousness within the search process and reveal ways in which power relations are created in organizational politics.

Additionally, candidates’ names were leaked to the media in an attempt to influence the candidate pool. This political strategy was intended to eliminate external candidates while promoting the men’s internal candidate. In intercollegiate athletics, athletic directors are the face of their programs, and being linked to another program could potentially jeopardize relationships with large financial donors and undermine fundraising efforts. Therefore, this “outing” tactic was based on the assumption that applicants would withdraw their candidacies if their names became public prematurely. A search committee member recalled:

There were some leaks early on in the [search] process and some names got out which was really going to choke the search...a leak of a name is the first thing to get someone right out of your pool...there were some selective leaks in my view designed to kind of get people out of the pool, and that was a real problem.

This media passage highlights one attempt to leak top candidate names:

[External male candidate Z], the athletic director at [University Z], is the leading candidate to become the athletic director. . . . Also in the running for the job is [external male candidate Y], athletic director at [University Y]. . . . Indications are that if [external male candidate Z] and [external male candidate Y] turn down the job, the search committee will interview [internal male candidate]. (Author withheld 2002b)

The identities of potential external female candidates were also leaked in the media:

The word at [University X] is that [external female candidate X], the school’s athletic director, is on the list of candidates compiled by a search firm who might be interested in the job. . . . However, [external female

candidate X] . . . has had problems keeping coaches. [University X's] women's basketball coach became the fourth coach this month to leave [University X] when he accepted [another] job. (Author withheld 2002c)

The "selective leaks" appeared to serve a twofold purpose. As the first column excerpt indicated, if external candidates withdrew from the search or turned down the job, the path to the athletic director position would be made clearer for the brotherhood's internal male candidate. Some men enacted power via the manipulation of social interactions and structures (Acker 1990, 1999). This political strategy is gendered, as men were able to affect the hiring process in a way not accessible to the women by controlling the alternatives, which would ensure the reproduction of their organization (Pfeffer 1989) and secure control of the merged department.

The second column excerpt, while prematurely identifying a potential female candidate, importantly served as a symbolic expression of gender (Acker 1999). The external female candidate faced heightened public scrutiny and was presented to the public as incapable of fulfilling the position. One female participant reflected on this political tactic in disgust:

[Columnist] did whatever he could do to ferret out whatever women candidates might be out there and absolutely dismissed them in the media . . . trying to figure out who the qualified women are and then proceed to discredit them in the paper as well . . . those [female candidates] probably never even looked at the job.

The "ferret out" comment suggested the perception of conniving, undermining, and deviant nature of this type of political action by some men. Similarly, women in Davey's (2008) study perceived the backstabbing and underhanded political behavior that men engaged in as masculine and "personally repugnant and morally suspect . . . enhance[ing] personal prestige without care for others" (660). We see this behavior as creating gendered personas (Acker 1999) that reinforces competitive masculinity (Knights and Kerfoot 2004) and places outsiders, including women and men who do not conform to certain ideals, at a disadvantage in political game-playing especially related to identity and career advancement (Davey 2008; Knights and McCabe 1998).

The female participant's previous comment also suggested some political actions were undertaken specifically to ensure a female would not get the job, which further highlights how organizational politics influenced gender relations in the athletic director search. While representation of both genders within the candidate pool was important, the initial list of

qualified female candidates was limited, in part due to the underrepresentation of female athletic directors within NCAA Division I athletics (Acosta and Carpenter 2012). The very few potential female candidates who were qualified for the position were being publicly scrutinized and portrayed in the media as incapable of fulfilling the position in another symbolic production of gendered personas (Acker 1999) perpetuating the image of masculinity in the athletic director position.

The brotherhood used the media to construct “an ideal internal male candidate” whose extensive experience and men’s department affiliation made him the obvious selection, reinforced gendered ideology, and reproduced gender-appropriate personas and identities. While external male candidates were subjected to indirect threats to their candidacies via media leaks, potential female candidates faced added scrutiny in the media perceivably because of the belief that it would be unsuitable to hire a female athletic director to lead a gender-combined athletic department. Gendered power relations were implicated in the struggle for meaning and the attempt to naturalize a gender binary where a male candidate is preferred over any female candidate. It is important to note, however, that a very specific sort of masculinity was evident. The brotherhood wanted a specific, internal candidate with whom they felt comfortable. In no way did they want an external, male candidate preferred by the posse. Therefore, gender relations were not playing out as men united against women’s wishes; rather, a very small, powerful group was able to influence the process. The social influences on formal job roles (Acker 1990) were therefore very specific and political (Mumby 2001), showing how politically charged the gender relations were in this case.

On July 12, 2002, the university hired a male athletic director who valued the student-athlete experience and was well respected for his honesty and integrity (Schmid 2002). His qualifications for the position included previous NCAA Division I athletic administration experience and experience managing a Division I broad-based gender-equitable program. He also possessed sound fundraising and fiscal management experience and previous coaching experience, and he was a state native.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The purpose of this research was to investigate gendered political processes associated with the athletic director search in a merger between gender-affiliated athletic departments. We used Acker’s (1990, 1999)

framework to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of the political strategies and how those strategies contributed to gendered processes in the athletic director search. The political influence strategies depicted in this case contributed to our understanding of the complexity of gendered processes in organizations.

In examining the gendered politics of this merger, we found that the brotherhood's (stakeholders associated with the men's department) exclusive connection and access to the media and specific sport columnists reflected gendered social interactions and gender-appropriate behaviors (Acker 1990, 1999). These findings point to the politicality of the search process and the gendered nature of politics. In addition, the significance of the gendered media network is an important finding, considering Acker's assertion that "intentional symbolic production of gender is the business of many complex organizations, particularly media organizations" (1999, 183). Future research focusing on the gender politics of representation and the use of various media sources to exert gendered power and ideology over other organizational processes, as well as on the gendered networks associated with access to the media, is recommended.

The posse's (boosters associated with the women's department) private political negotiations with university decision makers also reflected social interactions and gender-appropriate behaviors (Acker 1990, 1999). The negotiations resulted in gendered ideology (Acker 1999; Britton 2003) and candidate criteria inherently linked to male candidates, although a specific type of male candidate was sought, and certain candidate criteria were more subtly gendered. For example, external candidates possessing significant experience as Division I athletic directors and demonstrating records of gender equity were preferred. Given that less than 10 percent of Division I athletic directors are female (Acosta and Carpenter 2012), the likelihood that females who would be employed outside of the university and with significant experience was respectively low, and represents structural inequalities (Acker 1990). The gender equity criterion, while seemingly gender neutral, privileged a certain type of masculinity in the sport context—a man who values gender equity.

It is also interesting that many women and stakeholders associated with the women's department actively campaigned for a specific type of male candidate rather than a female candidate. Britton (2003) contends that women can also form alliances to maintain their dominance in female-dominated contexts. However, this is a rare occurrence and, more often, "women generally welcome men with open arms . . . and their presence quickly comes to seem indispensable" (Britton 2003, 16). The merger of

the men's and women's departments and the gendered political context created a situation where an alliance of women not only welcomed, but also lobbied for, a male leader. Negotiating for a male candidate reduced the pool of potential female athletic directors and thus perpetuated male dominance in sport leadership positions, where men are often seen as better-equipped or stronger leaders. In this case, a woman would be "eaten up alive," while a gender-equitable male candidate would be able to advocate for women's athletics and be seen as more credible to the men's department stakeholders. Future research is warranted to examine how male candidates are seen as more credible compared to their female peers in sport and other organizational settings where gender equity is at the forefront. In-depth investigations of power and influence as inherent aspects of large financial contributions to sport organizations, and the political and gendered motives associated with large monetary donations to sport organizations, are also needed.

In addition to our findings regarding gendered politics, we were able to extend Acker's (1990, 1999) framework by challenging binary thinking about gender. While the political tactic used by the brotherhood to influence the candidate pool (i.e., media manipulation) was specifically portrayed in masculine political terms (i.e., competitive, self-serving, irrational, and immoral) (Davey 2008), we were able to break down ideas of masculinity. For example, some men felt aggrieved at the media exposure of "dirty laundry" in this case. Others were at a disadvantage if they did not follow the brotherhood's support for an internal male candidate.

In addition, while female participants resisted certain types of politics as immoral and irrational, members of the posse were able to leverage political power through their financial support and private negotiations. Their accounts indicated that they saw their political actions in more feminine terms (e.g., private, focused on the collective, and moral), which adds to our understanding of women's experiences with organizational politics. For example, while female participants in Davey's (2008) study rejected politics based on the moral high ground, women in this study used the moral high ground as part of the justification for their political involvement. Through our various findings, we have contributed to extending frameworks regarding gender relations by examining the nuances of gender within this case.

Our research has therefore contributed on two counts. First, examining a specific, highly gendered case allowed us to examine gendered organizational politics in more detail (Ashcraft 2010; Britton 2003). Second, in so doing, we have extended both Acker's (1990, 1999) and Ely and Meyerson's (2000) gender relations frameworks. Gender relations need to

remain at the fore in sport organizations as we continue to see discrimination and underrepresentation of women at the highest levels. Search practices and politics, like all organizational processes, are gendered. In order to fully engage in gender equity, organizations must be aware of how specific gendered processes operate to create inequities. We suggest that future research include analysis of the public exposure of gender relations in the media, and the examination of various articulations of masculinities and femininities within organizations, to better understand these highly gendered contexts.

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