

The Lived Experiences of Women in Major League Baseball:
Analyzing the Experiences of Women Working in a Male-Dominated Industry

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Introduction and Purpose

Now, more than ever, information about gender inequality is accessible to any researcher. Women's major league sports teams have notably been outspoken about this issue. However, rarely are the women working in administrative positions publicly asked their opinions on the matter, especially women working for male sports organizations. The purpose of this project was to interview women working in various departments of Major League Baseball organizations to better understand their experiences in a male-dominated industry. By hearing their experiences and comparing their interviews, data was collected to provide more insight into the lived experiences of women working for Major League Baseball teams, analyze themes by comparing interviews, and provide advice for women hoping to enter the sports industry.

Literature Review

Analyzing the lived experiences of women working in sports is no new venture. Female athletes, female news and sports reporters, their experiences, and their desires for change have been studied for decades. While information about gender equality, wage gaps, harassment, and more, is easily available at the fingertips of anyone looking for data. For example, there have been measures taken to push for gender equality in broadcasting, Antunovic (2017) states, "women still remain tokens in a male-dominated industry." Women, who have historically been criticized and judged on looks and sex appeal, are arguably still viewed as "lesser" when it comes to working in a sports and news realm.

It is vital to recognize the early treatment of newswomen in order to better understand the emergence of women working in sports broadcasting and sports, as a whole. As early as the 1950s, the treatment of women, specifically in the newsroom, became recognized as NBC correspondents Pauline Frederick and Nancy Dickerson spoke about this "token in the

male-dominated industry” mentality. These women broke the male newsroom mold and are recognized as pioneers in the development of newswomen. Over the next decades, women slowly became more visible in these roles. According to Allen (2019), “The emergence of TV newswomen is widely ascribed to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Accounts of figures from that period who confronted gender bias and rose as national role models after joining network newsrooms are prominent.” These national role models and advocates for change laid a path for women to move forward in roles not commonly held by females.

“In the early 1970s, the Associated Press estimated that only twenty-five women worked in newspaper sports departments, and just five worked in sports broadcasting.” (Hardin & Shain, 2015). While those numbers have increased since 1970, the ratio of men to women working in sports news is still greatly skewed. “When women are visible, their sociosexual status in relation to the male sphere is all too evident.” (Merrill, et. al, 2015) One major reason for this is the difference in standards that is set for men and women in the sports world. Broadcasters, specifically women, face backlash that men do not receive. For example, dress and appearance play roles for women that men never have to face, and this is not simply an “American trend.” An Australian news anchor pair, one male and one female, caused media attention for a social experiment that the male anchor conducted in 2014. Australian news anchor, Karl Stefanovic, wore the same suit for one year, excluding a few days for cleaning purposes, to prove a point that women are judged more harshly on appearances than men. “Stefanovic, who co-hosts the *Today* morning program in Australia, said he was frustrated by the sexism targeted at his female colleagues.” (Lee, 2014) Stefanovic said directly, “No one has noticed; no one gives a (expletive)...but women, they wear the wrong color and they get pulled up. They say the wrong thing and there's thousands of tweets written about them.” While viewers were sending feedback

about his female cohost's appearance, no feedback was received on the single suit experiment. Davis and Krawczyk state, "Although behaviors and occupations can change, it is much harder to change aspects of physical appearance, so it remains the most powerful stereotype." (2010) This is just one example of the discrepancies in media standards and gender equality that women endure.

Examining the female beauty standards given to women allows researchers to have a better understanding of why women receive the kind of backlash they constantly do. Mulvey (1975) states, "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for a strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." A major problem based on Mulvey's description is that this "to-be-looked-at-ness" does not discriminate from athlete to broadcaster to administrator and more. This male gaze, as described by Kelly Oliver in her reflection on the words of Laura Mulvey stated, "There is no place for identity with feminine activity. In this world all agents and identity are male and all objects to be desired are female" (2017). Essentially, everything is a performance for men. Sports Broadcaster, Erin Andrews was named "Sexiest Sportscaster" two years in a row by *Playboy* and, in 2009, was videotaped while undressed in her hotel room. While this was a horrifying and intrusive crime, Davis and Krawczyk state that "Erin Andrews" was one of the top ten Google searches during the time of the incident. Her name was searched more during this crime than prior to the intrusion and, after media coverage simmered, her name was less frequently searched. If broadcasters face the backlash and critiques of viewers commenting on every aspect of their looks, female athletes face the commentary on their looks and performances, what kind of criticisms do women face off the screen? Women whose performances, whether that is ticket sales, public relations, player relations, or strength and conditioning, determine their job stability

and success with an organization, also face pressures that typically go unnoticed to the public eye.

Tracy Everbach stated, “The hegemonic masculinity of the sports world traditionally treats women sports journalists as outsiders who receive unequal treatment compared to male media workers” (2018). In analyzing the experiences of women in sport, Duncan and Carlyle conducted an experiment where they observed the media coverage of women’s surfing, basketball, and marathon running. In their findings, they discovered that, “positive portrayals of sportswomen are combined with subtly negative suggestions that trivialize or undercut the women’s efforts. Such trivialization is a way of denying power to women” (1988). While this was a study conducted in the 1980’s, this “undercutting of efforts” still holds true today. In fact, it could be argued that it is even more present due to social media. In fact, as stated by Gayle Brisbane, Patrick Ferrucci, and Edson Tandoc in their article “Side-by-Side Sports Reporters: A Between-Subjects Experiment of the Effect of Gender in Reporting on the NFL”, “Consistent research updates on gender in sports media is necessary in order to discover whether an increase in numbers has changed the assessment of women in sports media” (2021). The article, written in 2021, clearly shows that there is still a great deal of work to be done. There is research that must still be conducted to ensure the “fight” for female equality is on a positive trajectory.

A digital campaign, “#MoreThanMean”, was released in 2016 by *Not Just Sports* to demonstrate the cruelty and harassment women reporters face online. Shareen Ahmed writes, “Nowhere is the epidemic of online abuse more concentrated than in the male-dominated realm of sports, a truth alarmingly familiar to female sportswriters.” This video is proof of that point. This #MoreThanMean video invites men to sit in front of two female sports reporters, Julie Dicaro and Sarah Spain, and read Tweets that have been directed at these women. (*It is important*

to note that the men reading the Tweets were not the authors of them.) The video begins with Tweets that are slight jabs and increases to Tweets that include foul language, sexual assault references, and death wishes. The video quickly reached “3.7 million views and generated widespread coverage in mainstream news media, sports media, and online-only outlets” (Antunovic, 2018). With decades of women fighting for gender equality, it is startling to think that new technology, while it can be helpful in promoting equality ideals, can also lead to new ways of female harassment and bullying. The #MoreThanMean video represents “one of a series of recent incidents calling attention to the inappropriate remarks and double standards women in broadcast face” (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018). If these double standards are acknowledged for women in front of the camera, what is happening in the lives of women behind the camera? Women working in administrative positions for sports teams do not have the same platform as those on screen, yet are still working in some male-dominated departments. It is necessary that these women feel they have a right to express themselves, as well. Exploring the literature related to the lived experiences of women in sports and news history is necessary in having an understanding of the progress that has been made regarding gender equality and the victories and hindrances women face today.

Methodological Approach

For this project, qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were sent an informed consent document to review before agreeing to the interviews. This informed consent was divided into the following areas: “Project Title,” “Principal Investigator,” “Purpose of Project,” “Procedures,” “Risks/Benefits,” “Confidentiality,” “Conditions of Participation,” and “Consent.” Interviewees returned the electronically signed informed consent via email before interviews proceeded. A set of ten questions was premade by the principal investigators and was not shared with the interviewees prior to their interviews. The intent of the premade questions was to use them as a foundation in hopes that conversations would lead to more details and stories derived from our base questions. Interviewees were reminded at the beginning of their interviews of the confidentiality portion of the informed consent document. The interviewers were the sole collectors of data for this project. While there were no apparent ethical issues, participants were ensured that their identity would be anonymous and the teams they are employed by would not be mentioned.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to reach a large sample size, it was decided amongst principal investigators to reach out to as many women working in the MLB via email as possible. We had a general email template with information about the project and principal investigators, time needed for a Zoom interview, and the Informed Consent was attached. Major League Baseball organizations take the privacy of their employees seriously, therefore e-mail addresses were not openly published on MLB websites. Therefore, after identifying potential interviewees via MLB website and solely gaining a name, additional investigative research was required in order to find contact information. Utilizing options such as LinkedIn, personal websites, and connections, contact

information was located for six female employees working for various organizations. After initially reaching out, two interviewees responded and agreed to schedule an interview time. Interviews were held via Zoom and data was collected in the form of handwritten notes. There was no audio or video recording of the interviews.

Methods of Analysis

Our methods of analysis were divided into three categories: content, thematic, and discourse. In the most basic form, our content analysis examined the phrasing used by interviewees at “surface level”. For example, Woman A stated that, when initially applying for jobs, she applied for “jobs she was qualified for” based on her experience. This led to a deeper discussion about her previous roles, what she felt made her “qualified”, and any changes in her professional employment trajectory that she felt notable. Analyzing this content led to more in-depth descriptions of previous roles, as opposed to information disclosed in our brief personal introductions at the beginning of the Zoom call.

Conducting a thematic analysis on the interviews we compared was vital for the overall goal of this project. In using the same example previously mentioned with Woman A, simply hearing her say “jobs I’m qualified for” made it appear that there was a potential for deeper meaning. While previous job experience is a determining factor in what makes a person qualified or unqualified for a position, our research proved to show that deeper themes were present in our interviews. For example, Woman A mentioned that she left her previous role after recognizing that men were being promoted over women and she felt there was a potential for upcoming discord. She described feelings of needing to defend herself because of her gender. While she mentioned she did not consider gender while applying for her position initially, she saw how it increasingly played a role in her treatment as an employee as time progressed. The most present

theme noted by interviewees was the necessity of confidence in the workplace. Both interviewees mentioned multiple times the necessity of having Themes of feeling the need to prove worthiness, knowledge, and the importance of recognizing equal pay were present in these interviews. In fact, Woman A felt passionately that knowledge of pay should not be as taboo as it appears to be in society today. Which leads to the final method of analysis used, discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis was vital in this project because worldwide recognition of gender inequality, especially currently with the ability to promote ideas and feelings over social media, is at an all-time high. With women's sports teams taking a global stand, specifically the US Women's Soccer Team, it was recognized that women on the field have a platform where they can share their ideas, displeasures, and thoughts for change. Then the question presented was this: where is the platform for the women behind the scenes? This project was vital in analyzing the experiences of those who do not have a public platform to discuss their thoughts and feelings. One woman interviewed expressed that she believes women do not have equal opportunities in male-dominated industries because men are potentially subconsciously chosen over women for positions. She emphasized that when hiring departments are looking at resumes they, in her opinion, will, some subconsciously and some not, choose the male candidate over the female solely based on gender. While those interviewed for this research were of different ages, they both provided helpful suggestions and pieces of advice for women hoping to move forward in the sports industry.

Methodological Choices

Semi-structured interviews proved to be the most logical choice for this project. While a list of generic questions was available to interviewers, it was found that the conversations flowed

naturally and many questions were answered in an unprompted manner. It was also valuable to see additional commentary provided by interviewees when asked general questions. They provided stories, facts, and experiences that added important details to their interviews. Interviewers were able to produce follow-up questions based on details given by interviewees. Using these methodological choices allowed for open dialogue, questions, and the opportunities to understand the lived experiences of the interviewed women in a deeper and more personal sense.

Interviewee A Background

Interviewee A is a member of a Major League Baseball organization. After majoring in communication and journalism in college with a minor in sport management, she knew pursuing a career in sports was the best option for her. She began her career working as an intern for a minor league baseball team and started in the guest services department. After receiving a full-time offer from her internship organization, she transitioned to the ticket operations office. After leaving the minor league organization, she briefly switched to non-profit work before becoming employed by her current organization. She has been working in the ticket operations department for this organization since 2019 and specifically mentioned feeling grateful to still be working after changes in staff due to the pandemic. She is currently a ticket operations coordinator.

Interviewee B Background

Interviewee B is a member of a Major League Baseball organization. Currently in her 10th season with the team, Interviewee B climbed quickly in ranks. She played softball growing up and has always had a love for sports. Immediately after graduating she joined the organization as she knew someone within the organization. Interviewee B took a marketing route. She began

in community marketing and outreach roles where she coordinated and executed numerous community initiatives for the club, as well as Major League Baseball, including player appearances and autograph sessions, classroom programming, and philanthropic events. She also managed relationships with event partners and sponsors for the organization. Other roles consisted of planned hospital visits with the players and a host to various charitable and non-profit organizations during games. Interviewee B then moved to working directly with the families, specifically wives, of players. She is currently in her sixth year with the organization.

Results

After interviewing both women, common themes and trends were noted, as well as any discrepancies in the two interviews. The pre-designed semi-structured interview questions were intentionally vague to allow for interviewees to take a “storytelling” approach in describing their experiences. The most common theme in the interviews was that of “confidence”, where both subjects went into detail about why confidence is necessary, how having confidence has been a factor in their specific roles, and how vital it is to be confident in the workplace. Interviewee A said it was important to “know your worth” and Interviewee B explained the necessity of being confident in one’s self and one’s abilities. When analyzing the specific role of a female in a male-dominated department, Interviewee B explained how she wanted to be recognized as a hard worker, not a *female* hard worker. Interviewee A narrowed in on the importance of using the term “male-dominated department” over “male-dominated industry.” She went on to describe that other departments, she said “marketing”, are primarily female. She said that she specifically works with a team of “white males”, but if a female in a female-dominated department was interviewed, that female’s experiences could be different.

Using a semi-structured interview style also allowed researchers to see how interviewees perceived different questions. For example, an intentionally vague question was asked about women having equal opportunities in sports. The question, “Do you think women have equal opportunities in sports”, led to the interviewees producing two opposite answers solely based off the experiences they have had in Major League Baseball. When asked this question, Interviewee A quickly responded that she did not feel that women have equal opportunities in sports. She went on to describe that she was “not sure” if this was intentional and said she felt that “people do things, like look at male resumes, subconsciously.” She then went on to describe how it was necessary for women to speak up to make others aware. She gave an example of a time she approached a male hiring manager and asked about the hiring of more men than women. She said that the male hiring manager explained that he was looking to hire women, but none were applying for the specific position. This conversation could have potentially led to a deeper conversation and a more analytical approach to see how this organization could have more women applicants. She also mentioned that she left her first full-time position with a minor league team because she was starting to notice male counterparts who had less experience being promoted over her and she recognized that she needed to defend herself.

When asked the same question, “Do you think women have equal opportunities in sports”, Interviewee B said that she did feel that women have equal opportunities. She based her answer off her own personal experiences and spoke about her personal history. She said at times she feels that she has to work harder because she is a woman, however people should be working hard anyway. In her interview, she recognized that every experience is different, but then offered the advice of “make the most of every opportunity you’re given.” She made a point to acknowledge that she understands not everyone will have the career she has had, and that not all

women have equal opportunities, but based on her experiences alone she does feel that women have equal opportunities.

Interviewee B also notably mentioned information about salary during her interview. She said that she was not under the impression that she was paid differently in her organization due to her gender. This led to a deeper conversation about Interviewee A's belief that salary information should not be a mystery and should be socially acceptable to discuss publicly. She emphasized that, in her opinion, it is not taboo for a man to negotiate pay before signing a contract, and she believes women should also follow that guideline. She offered the advice of "have tough conversations about pay" and mentioned she felt that it was appropriate to be paid based on experience and time with the organization, as she is currently experiencing with her MLB team. The interview experiences were valuable in understanding the background, current experiences, goals, and advice of both women who agreed to partake in this project.

Conclusion

Women are making great strides for gender equality every day. In the sports realm, specifically, women are stepping into roles historically held by men and breaking barriers that have been in place for decades. By interviewing two women who currently work for Major League Baseball organizations, personal information, details, and examples of the lived experiences of women in MLB were able to be studied and discussed in great detail. While the comments made were mostly positive, it is clear there are still steps that need to be taken to provide women with the feelings of support, equality, and security they deserve. By learning more about the lived experiences of the two interviewed women, and continuing to take the time to understand the experiences of women globally, steps to greater equality for women, and

hopefully ultimately the complete eradication of gender inequality, can be navigated and achieved.

Limitations

There were multiple limitations that were faced over the course of this research. The first limitation was the overall time to complete the project. Because this was research for a Capstone project for the Master of Arts in Professional Communication program at The University of Tampa, this research needed to be completed over the span of the academic year. This time frame also included time spent finding an advisor, creating a project, seeking approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), interviews, and analyzing results. Researchers for this project both agreed that more time to complete the project would have potentially led to more interviews, thus allowing researchers to analyze additional pieces of data. An additional aspect that added to the time limitation was the amount of time it took to complete the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) and receive approval from the IRB. Due to adjustments needed, additional paperwork, and feedback from the IRB, this process was significantly lengthier than it was initially assumed to be. It took about two months for total IRB approval.

Once IRB approval was received, researchers were able to begin reaching out to potential interviewees. However, due to the fact that this was the same time as MLB spring training, as well as the high levels of privacy on MLB websites causing additional challenges in receiving contact information, another delay was faced. Ultimately, two women working for MLB organizations responded and the project shifted to a comparison of the two interviews. While limitations were faced, future researchers can take this project experience and plan accordingly for personal research endeavors.

Ideas for Future Research

Investigators for this project found multiple opportunities for future research. First off, the women who replied to the email interview inquiry had, generally, positive things to say about their organizations and experiences. By continuing research and interviewing more people, it is possible that a broader range of feelings and emotions could be discovered. It would also be interesting to have more data, in general, for comparison. It was suggested by a peer to have input from a male working in a female-dominated department for continued research and additional comparison. It could be beneficial, as well, to interview women who have left the sports industry and hear their stories. By increasing the number of interviews, as well as examining female experiences in a larger range of departments, additional pieces of information could be collected and new themes, feelings, and suggestions could be discovered. Educating others about the experiences women face daily is important for the betterment of society and any additional research that can be done will be helpful in educating others, pushing for equality, and making a positive change.

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