Women in Leadership within Professional Sport in Canada

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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Abstract

Many women enter graduate and undergraduate sport management degree programs to prepare for leadership positions in sport (Brassie, 1989). However, in professional sport in North America, the proportion of women advancing to senior roles is comparatively small. Previous research (Berry & Franks, 2010; Dreher, 2003; Lough & Grappendorf, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007) and a review of the company directories all confirm that a relatively small proportion of women hold senior leadership roles at either the league or team levels. In fact many teams do not have a single woman in a senior leadership role in spite of the fact that our top universities have been producing graduates in the area for decades. A number of researchers (Burton, 2015; Hardin, 2004; Hums & Grappendorf, 2007; Inglis, Danylchuk & Pastore, 2000; Masteralexis, Barr & Hums, 2011; Moore, Parkhouse & Konrad, 2010; Shaw & Frisby, 2006) have investigated the experience of female leaders in sport, but to date, researchers have not focused on the experiences of women holding senior leadership roles within professional sport in Canada.

The researcher conducted a descriptive research study designed to explore and describe the career experiences of women holding senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. Data were gathered through a qualitative data collection process designed to uncover the experiences of women holding these roles. In addition, the researcher sought to secure expert opinion on future activities, policies and practices that may help alleviate the underrepresentation in the future. All of the women (N=7) holding these senior leadership roles were invited to participate in the study. Each woman was interviewed and asked pre-tested, semi-structured and open-ended questions designed to uncover their leadership development, career experiences, and advancement strategies. A pilot study was conducted in advance of
the research study to pre-test all of the research procedures and research instruments. The findings of this research were compared to the growing literature bases in both the leadership development and women in leadership areas.

The results of this study confirm that although there have been many advances for women in sport leadership, there are still limitations for those seeking to advance to senior leadership levels. Each participant experienced obstacles and varying degrees of discrimination throughout their career. However they persevered to advance their professional careers. Most of all, the results of this study confirmed the perception that a “leaky pipeline” exists in professional sport as it does in other industries (Hancock & Hums, 2016). These women believe that some of their female colleagues prematurely defect from their careers in sport, and as a result women are not proportionately represented in senior leadership candidate pools. According to these women, others may not secure diverse enough experiences and/or don’t develop professional networks and advocates. The study participants unanimously believe that change is necessary, and consequently, they offer helpful suggestion based on their experience. These women also believe that modified human resource procedures might keep women in the candidate pools and help women better prepare for senior-level leadership positions in sport.

The findings of this research study will help sport management academicians; sport policy makers, and sport leaders better understand, and address the situation. A number of empirically-based recommendations to facilitate improved leadership development and placement of women in senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada are also proposed.

Keywords: women in leadership, career experience, professional sport, Canada
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Jim Weese from the Faculty of Health Sciences at Western University. The door to his office was always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research or writing. He consistently allowed this paper to be my own work, and always steered me in the right direction whenever it was needed.

I would also like to thank the other academics who were involved in this research project, namely: Dr. Alison Doherty, Dr. Karen Danylchuk, Dr. Julie McMullin, Dr. Laura Misener, Dr. Heidi Grappendorf, and Dr. Janelle Wells. These women are exceptional leaders in their own right, and their research insights and expertise helped shape my thinking and guide this project. I would also wish to acknowledge Cheryl Finn and Patty Howard who participated in the pilot study that helped prepare me for the research project. Provost Janice Deakin has also been a great support for me and I wish to acknowledge her. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support and friendship of the other graduate students. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Jonathan Hood. Their passionate participation and input made this research project possible.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my parents and to my boyfriend for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of school and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

Thank you to all.
DEDICATION

To my teammates who taught me that anything is achievable if you improve each day.
# Table of Contents

Abstract..............................................................................................................................................i

Acknowledgements.........................................................................................................................iii

Dedication...........................................................................................................................................iv

Chapter 1 - Introduction.....................................................................................................................1
  Statement of the Problem.................................................................................................................1
  Importance of the Study...................................................................................................................5
  Limitations and Delimitations.........................................................................................................7

Chapter 2 – Review of Related Literature .....................................................................................9
  Women in Leadership.......................................................................................................................9
  Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles .................................................................11
  Gender Bias in the Workplace ........................................................................................................13
  Social Constructs of Gender...........................................................................................................14
  Lack of Sponsorship.......................................................................................................................18
  Recent Approaches to Leadership................................................................................................19
  Professional Sport Organizations in Canada................................................................................24
  Summary.........................................................................................................................................27

Chapter 3 – Methodology ...............................................................................................................29
  Research Design.............................................................................................................................29
  Study Population............................................................................................................................31
  Pilot Study.......................................................................................................................................32
Appendix A: Email Script for Recruitment .................................................100

Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent to Participate in Research with Audio Taping .................................................................101

Appendix C: Interview Telephone Guide ..................................................104

Appendix D: Research Ethics Board Approval .........................................106
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This chapter introduces the study and is presented in the following five sections, namely: (a) Statement of the Problem; (b) Importance of the Study; (c) Research Questions; (d) Limitations of the Study, and; (e) Delimitations of the Study.

Throughout history, women have had to fight for an equal place in society. The struggle at the highest levels of professional sport have been especially odious. Over the past century women have had fewer legal rights and career opportunities than men (Bajdo, 2005). Some have suggested that women have been stereotyped for many years as the weaker sex and less intellectual (Cohen & Huffman, 2007). Whatever the reason, women are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. A review of staff directories confirm that a limited number of women hold entry-level leadership or mid-career positions within the Canadian professional sports industry. Many undoubtedly have ambitions to be promoted to a senior level role. However, an analysis of the organizational charts and staff directories of all professional sport in Canada confirms that women are not holding a proportionate number of senior leadership positions in these organizations. Why is this the case?

Young (2015) reported that women consistently understate their own achievements. Many suffer from imposter syndrome, a phenomenon where highly competent individuals lack the ability to recognize their accomplishments for a fear of being exposed as a "fraud" (Drexler, 2013). This phenomenon is commonly found in women and visible minorities who worry about being perceived as a disingenuous. They
may lack confidence in themselves (Langford & Clance, 1993). Contemporary leadership theory places a high premium on concern for others (i.e., servant leadership) and emotional intelligence. Servant leaders seek to enrich the lives of others and in doing so build better organizations (Greenleaf, 1970). Ironically, research indicates that women score higher than men in areas like achievement orientation, transparency, empathy, having a service orientation, developing others, inspirational leadership, and being a catalyst for change (Young, 2015). Conversely, men scored higher in areas of emotional self-control, self-confidence, and self-assessment. Given the high premium placed on empathy and emotional intelligence in contemporary leadership theory (Cohn & Moron, 2011), it is puzzling as to why such a underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles still exists in many fields including sport leadership (Burton, 2015).

Some women have reported a lack of leadership development opportunity, sponsors, and/or unfair treatment limited their advancement to senior management positions relative to their male counterparts (Lapchick et al., 2013). Dreher (2008) suggested that family responsibilities and/or work-life balance demands often take a higher level of priority for women in comparison to men. This research finding has been cited as a reason why women don’t pursue senior-level leadership positions. Some researchers (Carli & Eagley, 2001; Eagley, 2007; Scott & Brown, 2006) believed that the underrepresentation is due to a gender bias in the workplace, while others believe that leadership practices of women are often under recognized or rewarded (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Geis, Boston & Hoffman, 1985). Whatever the reason, it is clear that a disproportionate number of women occupy senior leadership roles in business and
industry. This is especially true within the senior leadership roles of professional sport in Canada.

The authors of the *Race and Gender Report Card* (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod & Anjorin, 2012) highlighted the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within professional sporting leagues within the United States. These authors also concluded that women working in sport management reported that college sport had the worst hiring practices for women and people of colour. In fact, Lapchick et al. (2013) suggested that for women and people of color are often excluded from consideration for top management positions in professional sport teams. The National Football League (NFL) boasts that women hold 28% of their management roles, but a deeper analysis reveals many of these positions are not senior level leadership roles. The Major League Baseball (MLB) suggests that women occupy 38% of their executive leadership roles but again, a more thorough analysis reveals that these positions are mostly in the mid-career ranks. The same can be stated for the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Soccer (MLS) who both report that 42% of management positions are held by women (Lapchick et al., 2012). At present 29% of the senior leadership positions are occupied by women within the Canadian Football League, while there is not a single woman working in a senior leadership position within the National Hockey League (NHL).

Researchers (Dixon & Breuning, 2005; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Haslam & Ryan, 2008; and Hums & Grappendorf, 2007) have concluded that women leave mid-career roles for a variety of reasons and therefore are not prepared or available to compete for senior leadership roles. Cunningham (2008) argued that women leave management roles in different sports settings because they often face hostile, antagonistic, and difficult work
environments. Regardless of the reasons, many women do not stay in middle management roles and therefore are not proportionately reflected in candidate pools for senior leadership positions. Hancock and Hums (2016) have referred to this concept as the “leaky pipeline”. Researchers need to identify what factors affect women’s career development and advancement. Researchers and sport leaders need to gain a better understanding of why women are absent from executive leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. Hancock and Hums (2016) conducted interviews and developed career maps to identify personal and contextual factors affecting career development for women. They uncovered that perceptions of readiness, skill acquisition, gender stereotypes, interpersonal relationships, and value incongruence reduced the pool of candidates of women for executive leadership positions. Perhaps a better understanding of the career experiences, the challenges faced, and the strategies employed by women who have secured senior leadership roles in professional sport would be helpful to women aspiring to these roles. The same information may be of value to the human resource professionals and selection committees housed in these organizations.

This qualitative research study explored the career experiences, leadership development, and advancement strategies employed by all of the highest-ranking women working within professional sport in Canada. The researcher uncovered the perspectives of these leaders specific to how to improve the preparation, development, and advancement of women in senior leadership roles within professional sport in Canada. The women who qualified to participate in this study (N=7) represented the entire group of women who held senior leadership roles within Canadian professional sport teams or
leagues. They were identified through contact with league and team officials and through an analysis of the organizational charts of the Canadian Football League Head Office, the National Hockey League Office, the Toronto Blue Jays, the Toronto Raptors, the Vancouver Canucks, the Edmonton Oilers, the Calgary Flames, the Winnipeg Jets, the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Ottawa Senators, the Montréal Canadiens, the British Columbia Lions, the Calgary Stampeders, the Edmonton Eskimos, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, the Toronto Argonauts, the Ottawa RedBlacks, the Montréal Alouettes, the Toronto FC, and the Vancouver Whitecaps.

**Importance of the Study**

Regardless of gender, an organization’s leader must be equipped with the best qualities to effectively lead. Previous research has found that women tend to be slightly more effective in comparison to men in leadership roles that place a high premium on communication, empathy, and emotional intelligence (Budworth & Mann, 2010; Cohen & Huffman, 2007; Dreher, 2003). Alder (2001) studied Fortune 500 companies for every year from 1980-1998 and found that companies with higher proportions of female executives outperformed their counterparts on three measures of profitability, namely, profits as percent of revenues, assets, and stockholder equity. An analysis of sport management graduate and undergraduate programs suggest that women are preparing for careers in the sport industry. In addition, women are entering careers in the field given the employment data for entry and middle management positions. For some reason, they are not reaching the senior level leadership positions in commensurate levels (Offerman & Gowing, 1990).
The results of this research have shed greater light on ways that senior-level female leaders in sport are developed, sponsored, and advanced in professional sport in Canada. An analysis of their career experiences can help decision-makers better understand the phenomenon of the leaky pipeline and its relevance in professional sport in Canada. The results of this study can also help women and girls who seek senior level roles better understand the issues and provide them with proven strategies to overcome these barriers. Finally, the results of this research study will provide expert opinion on how sport management programs and professional sport organizations might better prepare, support, and promote women into senior leadership roles.

This research is important, as it has uncovered insights into the challenges that women face when pursuing senior-level leadership positions in professional sport. This research study was focused on the “leaky pipeline” where women become discouraged, disillusioned, or disenchanted and/or because of other circumstances, are not considered or presented in candidate pools for senior level positions.

The following three research questions guided this research project:

1. What has been the career progression of women occupying senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?

2. What recommendations do these senior female leaders have for women seeking senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?

3. Do women holding senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada experience any barriers that need to be overcome to advance their career?

The current imbalance of women in senior roles in Canadian professional sport brings to surface the stories of many women who have excelled beyond the “leaky
pipeline” and secured senior leadership positions in sport. This research study gathers a more thoughtful understanding of the career experience of those female leaders in sport management, and how they overcome the odds of adversity. The discoveries provide a rich and powerful glimpse into the career experiences of female leaders working within professional sport organizations in Canada. An analysis of the findings of this study determined the extent to which the “leaky pipeline” really inhibits women from becoming top leaders in professional sport.

**Limitations of the Study**

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations in this research project:

1. Bias is of concern for any research project. The researcher acknowledged that she is a female working within the sport management industry and so will employ data collection, analyses and interpretation techniques to minimize the effect of bias.

2. Although the researcher ensured confidentiality, the participants may not accurately describe the behavior and decisions of colleagues, as they may fear negative consequences associated with providing negative feedback. The researcher will do her best to encourage honest responses through assurances of confidentiality.

3. The participants may not have understood the objectives of university research, and therefore not contributed sufficient time or thought to their responses.

4. Self-reported information can be skewed as it can rarely be verified in an independent and objective manner and is potentially impacted by the limitations of selective memory, telescoping, attribution, and exaggeration.
5. The issue of memory recall and personal biases of subjects that could potentially influence the direction of the study, regardless of efforts taken to remain unbiased.

6. Interviews allowed participants to tell their career experiences. However, the responses provided by each participant has no guarantee to be completely truthful and without bias.

7. Interview protocols can be time-consuming which may be problematic given the busy schedules of the participants in this study.

8. This thesis only studied women and leadership and the researcher recognizes there are other variables that could be impacting the situation including generational issues, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture, etc.

**Delimitations of the Study**

The researcher has delineated the scope of the study in the following ways:

1. The researcher has delimited the investigation to the topic of women and leadership, and not considered other minority groups such as race, socioeconomic status, and other areas of diversity.

2. The research was delimited to women who hold senior leadership roles in professional sport, and not those who hold middle management or entry level positions in the organization. The researcher recognized that their experience could be different to those of the senior leaders.

3. The research is delimited to women who hold senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada and not those from other professional sport leagues or teams based outside of Canada. The researcher recognized that their experience
could be different that the experience of senior leaders from other professional
sport leagues outside of Canada.

4. The researcher has delimited the study to career-related leadership development,
mentoring and preparation and not focused on leadership development or career
experiences outside professional sport in Canada.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature relevant to this study. The main sections of this chapter include: (a) Women in Leadership (b) Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles; (c) Social Constructs of Gender; (i) Self-Limiting Behaviours; (ii) Work-Family Balance; (d) Lack of Sponsorship; (e) Recent Approaches to Leadership: (i) Transformational Leadership Styles; (ii) Servant Leadership; (iii) Collective Leadership; (f) Professional Sport Organization in Canada: (i) The Canadian Football League and member teams; (ii) Major League Baseball and the Toronto Blue Jays; (iii) Major League Soccer and member teams; (iv) National Hockey League and member teams; (v) National Basketball Association and the Toronto Raptors, and; (g) Summary.

Women in Leadership

Research has proven that gender equality practices and policies can be successfully implemented by sport organizations (Bass & Avolio, 1994). However, Shaw and Penney (2003) stated that most organizations implement gender equity policies primarily to secure funding. They argue that these policies often fail to address inequitable operational processes. The cultures of organizations that adopt such policies see this as “a chore to implement and a politically correct way to have a positive image” (Hoeber & Frisby, 2001). The structure of an organization also can impact a women’s experience working within a sport organization as “cultures of similarity that marginalize women are instituted within sport organizations” (Cunningham, 2008, p. 137). As previously stated, the majority of sport organizations support and perpetuate norms,
values, and behaviours that reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Spoor and Hoye (2013) specified that when an organization’s leadership values gender equity there are positive outcomes for men, women, and the organization. They also noted, "perceptions that top management truly supports gender equity had a consistent effect on an employee’s psychological relationship with the organizations in comparison to equity human resource management” (p.13). Lastly, the organizational practices that supported women also had a similar impact on men’s organizational commitment and intention to stay, which suggests that support for women can have a large impact on the organization as a whole (Spoor & Hoye, 2013). A “work-life balance” continues to be one of the largest workplace challenges. Dixon and Bruening (2005) found that family and supportive work benefits for employees allowed employees to remain in their job and advance without feeling obligated to leave their careers. Women working within an organization may not have a shared meaning of gender equality. Some may believe that it is a woman’s responsibility. However, not everyone may share this view resulting in multiple, and often contradictory interpretations within the organization.

Women may choose not to compete for senior roles, thereby creating a male-dominant candidate pool. Others suggest that women are often less likely to be in contention for leadership positions, as the roles are perceived to require stereotypical masculine attributes and behaviours (Cunningham, 2008). Women in these roles are often evaluated differently and their behaviors are often perceived as being incongruent with their gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). For instance, access discrimination occurs when organizations exclude members from entering the organization or by providing certain members with fewer organizational resources than what they deserve (Greenhaus,
Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Women may be excluded from social activities within organizations as a result of the 'Old Boys' network (Aicher & Sagas, 2009; Hoffman, 2011). Consequently they may not have the same social supports and advocates as their male counterparts. Borland and Bruening (2010) explained that “access discrimination” can often affect career advancement, and generally in one of more of the following three ways: fewer minority administrators are in a position to make hiring decisions, limited candidate pools, and heterosexism.

Leberman and Shaw (2012) determined that relationship building, stakeholder management, self-awareness, and sense of judgment were critical to success in the sports industry. Further, they noted that the sports industry often pay women less than men doing the same work. Leberman and Shaw (2012) studied female CEO’s working within the sports industry and confirmed the positive impact that mentors can have in combatting the established "Old Boy's" networks that often exist in the industry. They also recommended curriculum changes to assist graduates in sport management programs to develop relationship-building skills and self-awareness skills to facilitate effective networking. They also encouraged university students to work/volunteer to develop career development skills and better understand work-life balance issues. Leberman and Shaw (2012) observed that both women and men are working in middle management positions in sport. However, they also noted that women were largely absent from upper-level roles. Why is this the case? Perhaps one of the concepts discussed in the next section provides some insights.

**Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Roles**
In Canada, women in 2016 represent 47.2% of the total labour force in comparison to 37.1% in 1976 (Young, 2015). Males who entered their careers in 1980 are not only still in the workplace, but now occupy the majority of senior level roles. Their attitudes carry weight and inform their intrinsic and unconscious bias. However, business leaders who will prove to be successful will need to adapt to the changing world, understand the benefits of globalization, technology, and the new attitudes towards ethics and fairness. The future leaders must possess a high level of emotional intelligence and practice servant leadership. Through these leadership practices, leaders will build strong, empathetic, and collaborative relationships within the organization and all stakeholders involved. They will also develop a performance-enhancing culture that will support sustainability. According to the 2015 Global Gender Gap report, women are still 118 years away from closing the gender gap, in terms of labour market opportunity, education, health, and political clout. Organizations are failing to build future female talent pipelines. Although there may be improvements in hiring at the lower and mid-level leadership levels of the organization, this practice has not been extended to the more senior leadership roles. This means current human resources practices are insufficient to create gender equality in senior leadership roles over the next decade. Even if organizations hired equal rates of male-to-female executives as a “quick fix” strategy, changes in policies and practices would also need to transpire or the same senior women hired would likely prematurely exit (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Mercer’s Effective Gender Strategy, noted that women thrive when there is individual and organizational alignment. Organizations need to install regular and robust processes to ensure equity, and implement programs to support staff. In order to understand why organizations are not
making progress in building their future female talent pipeline, researchers must understand why men continue to be hired and promoted from mid-level positions at higher rates than women. Decision makers also must understand why mid-career women are more likely to leave an organization compared to men. Women appear to be restored when extended leave and flexibility programs are effectively managed (Dixon & Bruening 2005). However, these same programs may detract from gender diversity, as there can be an unconscious bias in rewards and promotion decisions that might be triggered by a leave (Hums & Grappendorf, 2007). Less than 30% of organizations routinely review performance ratings by gender to safeguard against biases that might translate into different ratings and for promotional opportunities for men and women (Herrick-Phelps, 2006). Another area that is often neglected is the financial aspect for women, as women tend to work in lower-paid employment roles than men and they have more significant career disruptions.

**Gender Bias in the Workplace**

The gender bias is often present in a workplace. A gender bias often hinders the ability for women to perceive themselves as leaders. It may also negatively impact how others see these women as leaders. These women often face different obstacles. Shaw and Hoeber (2003) reported that in order for women to be more competitive than males within sport organizations, they must prove their ability as leaders. They discovered that managers admitted to giving more challenging interviews to women as there was an assumption that they would be less suited for available leadership positions. Many women often feel liked, but not respected. They believe that they receive less social support to assume a leadership role. Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) noted that,
People see men as better fit for leadership roles partly because the paths to such roles were designed with men in mind; the belief that men are a better fit propels more men into leadership roles, which reinforces the perceptions that men are a better fit, leaving gendered practices intact. Thus, a challenge for women is to construct leader identities, despite the subtle barriers organizations erect to their leadership advancement (p. 478).

There have been several studies conducted to determine reasons why women have not elevated to the top of an organizational chart as quickly as men to positions of CEO’s, CFO’s, Presidents, and Vice Presidents. According to Houlihan (2008) women multi-task with ease, are great communicators and listeners, and have better intuition than men. These attributes are key components of contemporary leadership theory and intuitively it would appear that these attitudes would serve women well in leadership roles.

Masden (2008) noted that people with higher confidence levels are more likely to attempt greater challenges, like senior leadership roles. They also learned to effectively deal with disappointment and adversity, while learning leadership skills from their experienced coworkers. Perhaps women are tougher on themselves and therefore their confidence levels remain depressed (Eagly, 2006). Skills learned through diverse career experiences were both valuable and transferrable, such as (a) developing a strong work ethic; (b) better time management skills; (c) making better decisions, especially under pressure, and; (d) setting higher standards for performance.

Tan (2008) suggested that women and men lead differently. Women were said to possess an enormous amount of autonomy, flexibility in scheduling, extended financial parameters, and power. He further suggested that entrepreneurial women had
characteristics of joy, satisfaction, and success from accomplishments while being better at building relationships with customers and employees. With such positive results, it is hard to believe women are not assuming the senior level leadership positions in sport at comparable rates as men.

**Social Constructs of Gender**

Due to the tensions created by the social construct of gender, women face complex situations in the workplace that are often different from men. The idea that gender difference is socially constructed is a view present in philosophical and sociological theories about gender. According to this view, society and culture create gender roles, and these roles are prescribed as ideal or appropriate behaviour for a person of a specific sex. When women choose to adapt characteristics that subordinates and peers would want in a leader, they may not be seen as such but as conniving and mean-spirited. It has been determined that women are often deemed less effective by male subordinates and that internal behaviours produce negative reactions to women in leadership roles (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002). This bias against women is often an oppressive force that prohibits women the opportunity to break through the “glass ceiling”. If this prejudice is constantly acted upon it significantly reduces women’s chances of rising to higher-level leadership positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men are overrepresented in higher status jobs with higher compensation levels. By extension, this social practice feeds the stereotype that men are perceived as more powerful and women are perceived as more compliant. Positions and tasks are
purportedly constructed to favour men (Ely & Padavic, 2007). Shaw (2006) examined sport organizations in the UK, through the processes adopted by the organization, humour, informal networking, and use of dress codes all sustained masculine work practices. It was also determined that men and women held positions based on gendered assumptions. According to Sibson (2010), this is seen through the roles that women on the Boards of Directors often hold (i.e., clerical work). Burton, Grappendorf & Henderson (2011) confirmed that for positions that required more communal skills, women were often favoured. They further noted that when males attempted to apply for the position, they were viewed as less masculine than candidates who applied for Director roles. This study also contributes to the perpetuation of informal practices that place men in leadership positions, and women in support roles with sport organizations (Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

**Self-Limiting Behaviours.** In situations where women use autocratic behaviour, they are often judged negatively by peers as being power hungry (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). This often leads peers to undervalue the female leader’s achievements, consequently making it harder for them to advance their careers to higher levels of leadership. Women often have to meet a higher standard within the workforce, in order to be viewed as competent relative to their male counterparts (Bajdo, 2005). The cultural and social factors that shape a women's identity may be in conflict with the unconscious display of self-limiting behaviours (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). These self-limiting behaviours happen when women fail to see themselves as potential leaders. As Sartore and Cunningham (2007) described, “When applied to sport organizations, it is
perhaps these self-limiting behaviors that are partly responsible for the under-representation of women within leadership positions” (p. 246).

The self-limiting barriers often take a toll on a women’s confidence leading to high levels of self-doubt. As a result, many females are less confident in their leadership abilities, which may preclude them from pursuing higher-level leadership opportunities. Kay & Shipman (2014) observed that women generally only apply for positions when they feel that they are 100% confident that they have met all of the qualifications. They also concluded that men typically feel they are confident enough to apply if they meet 60% of the qualifications. Women in the workplace need to realize that confidence plays a large role in gaining a sense of competence. If they lack confidence, they may decide to by-pass opportunities to compete for leadership roles.

Sartore and Cunningham’s (2007) believed that self-limiting behaviours are the reason why women generally will not actively pursue career advancement opportunities. They noted the discrepancies that often exist between women's leadership identity and the contributions of their peers. If their peers do not grant them the proper leadership identity, a woman may not actively seek leadership roles and/or seek additional responsibilities and experiences that would help prepare them for candidacy and effectiveness in the role (Gardner, 1995).

**Work-Family Balance.** A common life decision facing many women is the competing role of serving as a mother and family life. Although we live in an age of co-parenting, many women still assume more family-related responsibilities. Family time is often thought to take women away from work. Women take more maternity or parental leaves, that results in them having less job experience. This may have a negative effect on
their career advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). While more women are pursuing demanding, executive level careers, this counteracts the family devotion schema, a cultural model that frequently defines marriage and motherhood as a woman’s top priority (Berry & Franks, 2010). Weiner & Burton (2016) noted that women are more likely to feel constrained due to familial considerations which often shape their employment decisions. Children are often seen as in need of a mother’s care, while males are often perceived as unable to provide the selflessness and patience that children require. Career-orientated women who publicly spend too much time attending to their family needs are sometimes viewed as violating the work devotion schema. Some have suggested that while career-oriented women may be seen as neglecting family responsibilities. Those who spend a disproportionate amount of time with family may be seen as neglecting their work commitments. The result is a work-family conflict (Blair-Loy, 2009). Many achieve a perfect work-family balance by establishing clear priorities such as having a supportive family unit, developing great communication skills, setting limits, and by learning to say “no” where appropriate (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The sport industry has a large percentage of single career women who do not have children (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Perhaps they have the same amount of time to devote to their careers and networking as men frequently devote (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Socializing and networking within coworkers, especially after work hours is rarely done for people with family commitments, and especially women with comically commitments. In the workforce, this social capital is often necessary for advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) noted that recruitment and selection of women as members of Boards of Directors, followed a gendered ‘fit’.
Specifically they found women occupying these roles generally had no children, were well educated, and have previous executive experience. The same was the case for men holding these roles. They further concluded that women who were selected for leadership positions in sport "were not openly feminist, yet had experience, knowledge, and commitment to their sport" (p.504). Their findings illustrated how male leaders may be able greater opportunity to emerge while women’s opportunity might be limited to those who ‘fit’ the mold.

**Lack of Sponsorship**

Ironically, when strong and caring male sponsors support women they do advance further in leadership positions (Toland, 2007). Without this support women tend to secure lateral positions rather than advancements (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). Sometimes women limit themselves by perceiving promotions as risky endeavours with additional responsibilities (Budworth & Mann, 2010). Some worry that their family life may suffer if children are involved. It has been recommended that in order for some women to be deemed successful they must be supported by an organization makes it possible for them to balance work and home life (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Pfister & Radtke, 2009).

Sponsorship of fellow co-workers has become an avenue for individuals to build on their own leadership skills (Gardner & Laskin, 2011) and advance their career development. According to Hu, Thomas, and Lance (2008), sponsoring a co-worker provides an exchange between the two individuals. The sponsor has the experience and insights to help the one who is inexperienced participant. This relationship provides the two involved personal and professional growth experiences through consistent interaction and development (Crawford, 2007; Herricks-Phelp, 2006; Kram, 1988). Sponsoring is
most effective when there is a mutual understanding of an attainable goal (McCann & Johannessen, 2009). The individual being sponsored may receive increased pay and bonuses, promotions, and the satisfaction of learning (Warnberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). Mentors often view the opportunity as a satisfying way to help a colleague (Wanberg et al., 2003). However, sponsoring also creates a way for individuals to improve their leadership skills that may facilitate advancement to a higher leadership level (Hicks & McCracken, 2009). Gibson (2006) identified five components of positive sponsoring experiences, namely: (a) having someone who truly cares and acts in one’s best interest; (b) a feeling of connection; (c) being affirmed of one’s worth; (d) feeling of not being alone, and; (e) an understanding of the fact that politics are part of one’s experience (p. 67-68).

Files, Blair, Mayer, and Ko (2008) chronicled the wide variety of differences between male and female sponsoring styles. Similarities between genders existed on aspects like focus on goals; fostering positive work relationships, engaging in person-to-person relationship, and, focusing on the initiation of structure (Raabe & Beehr, 2003). However, women are often stereotyped to be the nurturing types and people expect a people-oriented management style (Cocheo, 2007). Consequently, men are considered to be task-orientated individuals, concentrating heavily on the goals of the organization (Van Engen, van der Leeden & Willemsen 2001). Women are often viewed as consideration-orientated leaders (Carter, 2006), focused more on people and their emotions. Ironically, this later perspective forms the bases of the latest developments in leadership, namely emotional intelligence and servant leadership (Burton, et al., 2007; Young, 2015).
A research study of 66 managers on 360° feedback ratings found that female managers consistently scored higher on effectiveness scores in comparison to their male counterparts (Millmore, Biggs & Morse, 2007). The researchers believed that the higher scores were due to female managers working harder to achieve the results, and by the belief that they must continually demonstrate their skills and competencies (Greener, 2007; Millmore et al., 2007). Research also indicates that female managers maintain success by encouraging group participation and sharing information (Bajdo, 2005). Improved communication with employees, priority establishment, and the ability to see the bigger pictures are several of the differences that make researchers believe women have an advantage over men (Johansen, 2007). However, in most organizations, men continue to hold key positions while women continue to feel the need to prove they can handle senior leadership responsibilities (Weidenfeller, 2006). The situation can change by, eliminating organizational cultural barriers, creating leadership and mentoring programs for women, allowing flexibility in the work schedules while promoting a family-orientated and supportive work environment, and providing ongoing support and encouragement (Widenfeller, 2006).

Obtaining sponsorship for women is often more difficult in comparison to men as there is a lack of female sponsorship opportunities available within organizations (Toland, 2007). This may be due to the shortage of women in senior level leadership positions (Ozkanli & White, 2009). Women have reported the need to secure a sponsor of the opposite gender as necessary to increase their chances for career advancement opportunities due to the shortage of female sponsors (Toland, 2007). Hopefully this will change in time.
Researchers have confirmed that women tend to leave the workplace prematurely and for a host of reasons, such as, feeling their work is undervalued, and/or the belief that they are receiving differential treatment on the job (Carter, 2006). If organizations are able to better support women in the workforce, they may not feel devalued in comparison to their male counterparts. They may stay in the role and gain the required experience needed to compete and secure senior level leadership positions. Limited gender equality in executive level leadership positions suggests a need for additional research regarding sponsorships for women. Researchers need to determine ways that women can secure and succeed in senior executive leadership roles especially in the realm of professional sports.

**Recent Approaches to Leadership**

As previous research has indicated, women often assume a more transformational leadership style, and in turn often employ traits and behaviours that align with effective, contemporary leadership theory (Eagly & Carli, 2002). A woman may be seen as a superior leader due to the fact she possesses the traits of a contemporary leader. Research also indicates that there is a positive correlation between transformational leadership and job satisfaction. According to Burton and Welty-Peachy (2009), both males and females with transformational leadership styles are preferred over transactional leadership styles. This preferred leadership style is also positively associated with organizational outcomes (Eagly, 2007). Additionally, Burton (2015) and Welty-Peachy & Burton (2012) leaders who adopted transformational styles received extra effort from more satisfied followers. Transformational leadership styles are effective when organizations are in the process of a culture change. Leaders will be able to focus on vision, creation, and implementation of new policies and ideas. This idea counteracts the assumptions of previous research.
studies that conclude that female leaders are favoured over men due to their alignment with the transformational style. This may be due to the socially constructed role femininity plays in the exchanges (Burton 2015; Welty-Peachey and Burton, 2012). Whatever the reason, the fact remains that women do not gravitate to senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada. Something happens that precludes their candidacy and/or appointment.

Although there are multiple success stories of male collaboration (e.g., Procter & Gamble, Kimberly-Clark, Johnson & Johnson, Ben & Jerry), female collaborations are much less recognized. In observing the well-known success stories of male collaborations, Polk and Chotas (2014) presented evidence that partnerships work for females too. In their interviews with great female leaders, they concluded that, "partnership is a professional model with the power to make life work more successful and life itself a whole lot safer for women who are ready for a better way" (p.3). Even though the female partnerships may be less visible, they are still occurring and having an impact in their respective disciplines.

Currently, we know information about leadership styles within sport and how women are perceived as competent and qualified. However, we know little about how women develop their leadership identity within the context of a sport organization. There are few, if any, studies that explore the development of women's leadership identities in sport. In considering the idea that leadership identity development is ever changing and influenced by a variety of factors, including personal development and social interactions, this research will be able to bring greater understanding to help women gain confidence, and work within male-dominated sporting organizations. Additionally, when
women discuss their leadership identities this can be seen as an empowering process further benefiting female leaders within the workplace.

This new leadership approach places emphasis on the "caring principle" with leaders acting as "servants". Leaders employing this style focus on the well-being of their followers. There are concerned with helping followers become more autonomous, knowledgeable and like servants themselves (Northouse, 2015). As women become more dominant in the workforce, gender-based studies have gained momentum. According to Greenleaf (1970), this model promotes teamwork and community. These leaders involve subordinates in decision-making, and prioritize ethical and caring behaviour. Servant leaders are often excellent listeners who hold the ability to connect with others as they are able to practice empathy (Greenleaf, 1970). These leaders consistently display ethical behaviour and employ a leadership style that encompasses the attributes of love, humility, and empathy. Burton, Welty Peachy and Wells (2017) concluded that servant leadership was directly related to trust in leadership and perceptions of an ethical climate. They recommended that the decision making process needs to be transparent, consistent, and hold integrity throughout the organization to create an ethical environment. Many positive organizational outcomes will be associated with servant leadership such as increased ethical behaviour, organizational citizen ship behaviour, and organizational commitment (Burton et al., 2017). Professional sport organizations are business-orientated. Perhaps a servant leadership style in the senior levels of profession sport in Canada is appropriate and needed.

Women often find themselves having to make a tough decision (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Should they take on a more autocratic or democratic approach to leading? Shared
or democratic leadership focuses on group dynamics and encouraging decision making to allow more of a collective process. Often a shared leadership style aligns with the socially constructed characteristics associated with female characteristics. An example of this would be feminine characteristics of being loving, supportive, caring, understanding, nurturing, and gentle. However, an autocratic leadership style is often associated with male behaviour (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men tend to be more task-focused with self-assured, controlling and confident tendencies that are reflected in behaviours like assertiveness, forcefulness, and self-confidence. Through these common behaviours, men are often viewed as the ideal leader while females are often ignored from the ‘natural fit' category as leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). With fewer women in senior leadership roles, women are often prone to behave in a ‘gender clichéd' manner due to adopted aspects (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Ely (1995) concluded that in the workplace, women who aim to be the “ideal” leaders often feel the tension between the two gender roles.

Professional Sports Organizations in Canada

The Canadian Football League and Member Teams. The Canadian Football League (CFL) is a professional football league with nine teams across Canada attracting many top level football players from all over North America. The CFL has distinguished itself from American football by improvising the rules and scoring systems to make their league unique. Throughout history, the Canadian Football League has had many ups and downs but it has proven to be resilient as the league continues to expand salary caps to attract the best talent while consistently improving their broadcast ratings. Despite its success, the CFL continues to have some concerns over declining attendance and league
identity due to the continual rebranding of The League. Nonetheless, the CFL continues to be a unique part of Canadian Sports culture dating back to 1860. The Grey Cup is hosted during the last two weeks in November drawing in fans from across the country. The Ottawa Renegades, Hamilton Tiger-Cats, Toronto Argonauts and Montreal Alouettes from the Eastern Division and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, Saskatchewan Roughriders, Calgary Stampeders, Edmonton Eskimos, and British Columbia Lions make up the Western Divisions.

**Major League Baseball (MLB) and The Toronto Blue Jays.** Founded in 1903, this is the oldest of the four major professional sports leagues within North America. This league also oversees Minor League Baseball and hosts the World Baseball Classic tournament. The MLB is comprised of 30 teams 29 within the United States and one in Canada (Toronto Blue Jays). Major League Baseball is broadcast on the top four major TV stations, along with radio and the Internet (Akin, 2012). They also have the highest season attendance out of any sports league in the world with more than 73 million spectators in the 2015 season (Brown, 2015). The Toronto Blue Jays compete in the American League (AL) East Division. The team plays its home games at the Rogers Centre. The "Blue Jays" name originates from the bird of the same name, and blue is also the traditional colour of two of Toronto's other professional sports teams, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Toronto Argonauts. In addition, the Labatt Brewing Company originally owned the team, makers of the popular beer Labatt's Blue. The club was founded in 1977. Originally based at Exhibition Stadium, the team began playing its home games at the SkyDome in 1989. Since 2000, the Blue Jays have been owned by Rogers Communications, and in 2004, the SkyDome was purchased by that company,
which it renamed the Rogers Centre. The Blue Jays are the second MLB franchise to be based outside the United States, and currently, the only team based outside the U.S. after the first Canadian franchise, the Montreal Expos, moved to Washington, D.C. in 2004 and became the Washington Nationals (Jozsa, 2016).

**Major League Soccer (MLS) and Member Teams.** Major League Soccer is comprised of two Canadian teams and eighteen teams throughout the United States. The League first began signing many international players often reaching the end of their careers. However, over recent years the MLS is attracting big names, allowing for league expansion. Over the next three years, the league plans to expand by adding three more teams with international interest from the United Kingdom. The league has attracted increased attendance along with growing TV networks. Many franchises are building new stadiums to keep up with this growing demand, and players are now coming from all over the world and MLS is now broadcast globally on major networks at peak times. As of 2016, Major League Soccer was earmarked as the fastest growing sport league in the World (Pyne, 2015). In Canada, there are three MLS teams; Toronto FC, Montreal Impact, and Vancouver Whitecaps FC.

**National Hockey League (NHL) and Member Teams.** The National Hockey League is the premier professional hockey league in the world attracting 50% of its top talent from Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic and the US. (Marsh, 2012). The league is comprised of 30 member teams with seven teams located in Canada and twenty-three in the United States. There has been struggle throughout the league, like other professional sports in regards to labour unrest and escalating ticket prices. The Stanley Cup has been awarded each year to the playoff champion since 1927 (Marsh, 2012).
Canada, there are seven NHL teams: the Montreal Canadiens, the Ottawa Senators, the
Toronto Maple Leafs, the Edmonton Oilers, the Calgary Flames, the Vancouver Canucks,
and, the Winnipeg Jets.

**National Basketball Association (NBA) and The Toronto Raptors.**

The National Basketball Association is the major men’s professional basketball
league in North America and is considered to be the premier men's professional
basketball league in the world. It has 30 teams 29 in the United States and one in Canada.
The NBA is one of the four major professional sports leagues in the United States and
Canada. The Toronto Raptors are a Canadian professional basketball team based
in Toronto, Ontario. The Raptors compete in the National Basketball Association as a
member club of the league's Eastern Conference Atlantic Division. The team was
established in 1995, along with the Vancouver Grizzlies, as part of the
NBA's expansion into Canada. When the Grizzlies relocated to Memphis, Tennessee to
become the Memphis Grizzlies in 2001, the Raptors became the only Canadian-based
team in the NBA. They originally played their home games at SkyDome, before moving
to the Air Canada Centre in 1999.

**Summary**

This chapter, presented a review of the literature relevant to this research study.
Scholars have examined the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within
sport organizations for years, yet minimal progress is being made. Some (Borland &
Bruening, 2010; Brassie, 1989; Burton, 2015; Cocheo, 2007; and Dreher, 2003) have
chronicled the challenges and obstacles that women encounter when seeking executive
leadership positions. The various gender equality practices and policies examined in this
study connect to the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon. Women seem to be underrepresented in candidate pools for senior leadership roles for a number of reasons. We now understand some of the challenges that women often face when pursuing a career in senior leadership in sport. We debated whether flexibility programs help or hinder gender diversity gains as there may be an unconscious promotion bias triggered when women assume a leave of absence from their career. Leader identity helps inform why men are often more sought for leadership positions due to cultural perceptions.

The recent developments in emotional intelligence and servant leadership also help rectify the situation. The ability to read and consider emotions has been identified as a key to effective leadership. Women appear to have advanced skills in this area (Young, 2015). A leader needs to maintain a positive impression with coworkers to create security, trust, and satisfaction to maintain an effective team (Gardner & Stough, 2002).

Exclusionary concepts like the “glass ceiling and the “leaky pipeline” are also examined relative to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles in professional sport. Concepts including the self-limiting behaviours of women and the struggle that may face with work-family balance were also discussed. Lack of mentorship and sponsorship were also described as a potential barrier to women seeking senior leadership roles in sport (Ibarra, Carter & Silva, 2010). Finally, the new approaches to leadership were discussed, including developments in transformational leadership and servant leadership areas. These leadership models promote teamwork and community through ethical and caring behavior and may create opportunities for more women aspiring to senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research procedures employed in this investigation and is presented in the following seven sections, namely: (a) Research Design; (b) Study Populations; (c) Pilot Study; (d) Data Collection Procedures; (e) Data Analysis Procedures; (f) Research Bias, and; (g) Consent & Ethics Approval.

Research Design

This study was designed to uncover the experiences of all of the women who hold senior leadership roles (N = 7) in Canadian professional sport organizations at the time of the investigation. Jackson (2009) noted that there are three main types of descriptive methods: observational, case study and survey. The researcher will employ the case study approach to gain valuable information on the background and experiences of the women in the senior leadership roles within professional sport in Canada. This is a confirmatory study, which used open-ended interview questions to gain insights into the experiences, opportunities, and challenges facing women who are interested in securing a senior level position in professional sport, increasing the proportion of females holding senior leadership positions in Canada. The researcher also secured suggestions for heightening the proportion of women holding these roles.

A case study was an appropriate approach given the objectives of the research project. However, it is important to consider the context of professional sport in Canada, and more specifically the underrepresentation of women holding senior leadership roles in these organizations. This research study provided an insight into the career experiences of these female senior vice presidents working within professional sport in Canada. The
open-ended interview questions produced rich, in-depth responses that helped the researcher understand the participants’ career experiences. An introductory letter outlining the researcher’s background, interests, and experience was circulated to potential study participants to garner their interest and secure their participation in the study. The researcher acknowledged the fact that descriptive research methods can only explore and describe a situation. These methods do not confirm causality.

**Study Population**

The study population for this study was a census of the female Senior Vice Presidents working within professional sport in Canada (i.e., the Canadian Football League Head Office, the National Hockey League Head Office, the Toronto Blue Jays, the Toronto Raptors, the Vancouver Canucks, the Edmonton Oilers, the Calgary Flames, the Winnipeg Jets, the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Ottawa Senators, the Montréal Canadiens, the British Columbia Lions, the Calgary Stampeders, the Edmonton Eskimos, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, the Toronto Argonauts, the Ottawa RedBlacks, the Montréal Alouettes, the Toronto FC, and the Vancouver Whitecaps). The most recent staff directories were reviewed and senior officials were consulted to ensure a valid study frame. Every female senior vice president (N = 7) was invited to participate in this study. Currently, there are 58 Vice President positions or higher existing within professional sport in Canada. Only seven women occupy these positions (i.e. 12%). Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect anonymity. Their job titles are presented in Table 1.
Table 1

*Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Executives</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>Senior Vice President, Marketing &amp; Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>Vice President, Facility Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>Senior Vice President, Sales &amp; Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>Vice President, Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #5</td>
<td>Senior Vice President, Business Operations &amp; COO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #6</td>
<td>Vice President, Finance &amp; Human Resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in advance of the research project. Two senior sport leaders from the City of London participated in the pilot study. The process allowed the researcher to familiarize herself with the data collection and data analysis procedures as well as test the open-ended questionnaires for clarity and face validity. This process also helped the researcher increase her experience and confidence in conducting this type of research. Patton (1990) suggests that a pilot study is useful to: (a) detect flaws in measurement procedures; (b) test the procedures for face validity by interviewing participants to ensure clarity and understandings and; (c) identify questions that may
make potential participants uncomfortable by observing non-verbal behaviour. At the conclusion of the pilot study, the two participants were interviewed and confirmed that they understood and comprehended each of the interview questions used in the study. The pilot study also allowed the researcher to assess the quality of the data produced, the efficacy of her proposed data analysis procedures, and preliminary insights into the themes that might emerge in the research study.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher initiated the data collection procedures by studying the organizational charts of the professional sports teams and leagues operating in Canada. A preliminary discussion with senior officials at both the league and team levels indicated strong desire to have their organization or team participate in the research. A copy of the Pre-Study Letter (See Appendix A) was first distributed to those women holding senior leadership positions and the letter was followed by the Letter of Information (see Appendix B).

The pre-study letter introduced the leaders to the researcher, her advisor, and her university, and it outlined the importance of their engagement in the research project. As per Research Ethics protocol, the participants were advised that their participation was important, but voluntary. They were also advised that their insights would be managed anonymously. Finally, they were informed that they would receive a summary paper following the study as an incentive to participate in the research. Dillman, Sryton, and Christian (2009) noted that incentives are effective strategies to increase subjects response rates. Participants were required to read and sign the Consent to Participate in Research and Audio taping (presented in Appendix B) prior to engaging in the study. The
researcher was responsible for ensuring the purpose of the participant fully understood the study and what was required of them as participants. In compliance with research protocol, the forms were completed and signed, and the researcher reminded each participant that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time during the research.

The first round of data collection began two weeks after the distribution of the pre-study letter. Data were generated through a phone interview (presented in Appendix C) that asked respondents to summarize their formal education and career highlights that helped prepare and propel them into their senior leadership roles. Open ended and partially open-ended questions were used throughout the data collection stage of this research project. The open-ended questions allowed for a greater variety of responses while Closed-ended questions are easier to statistically analyze, but they may limit participant responses (Jackson, 2009). A copy of the interview guide is presented in Appendix C.

Study participants were given two weeks to respond to the pre-study letter. A three-step non-response procedure was then employed to maximize response rates. The prospective respondents received a reminder phone call if they had not responded within two weeks after the pre-study letter was distributed. They received a second phone call reminder if they had not responded after a three-week time frame. After four weeks the prospective participant was be eliminated from the study.

The researcher was guided by the helpful instructions of Patton (1990) for conducting qualitative research. The interview script was assessed for content validity using an expert panel. The process provided valuable insights relative to framing the
questions. The expert-member panel was comprised of three sport management scholars from the United States who conducted research in the areas of sport leadership, equality and diversity. Consistent with the case study approach, the interviews were designed to produce deeper understandings of the respondents' experience and uncover their suggestions for improving the proportion of women occupying senior leadership roles in professional sport organizations. Each interview was audio recorded to facilitate accurate data capture and analysis. Field notes were also taken by the research to ensure accurate data capture. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes each to complete. The instrument and interview script were tested for face validity in the pilot study.

According to Patton (1990), the benefit of having an interview guide is to help the interviewer effectively utilize the limited time available in interview situations. Patton stated that the four major reasons to use standardized open-ended interview were: (a) the exact instrument used in evaluation is available for inspection by those who will use the findings of the study; (b) variation among interviewers can be minimized where a number of interviewers must be used; (c) the interview is highly focused so that interviewee time is used efficiently, and; (d) analysis is facilitated by making responses easy to find and compare. By having an open-ended interview the researcher allowed participants to elaborate as needed on various topics.

Processes were established to ensure the anonymity of the participants and protect the validity of the study. During each interview, the researcher was equipped with: (a) a notebook; (b) consent letters that have been previously signed; (c) list of local mental health agencies; (d) laptop; (e) digital audio recorder, and; (f) an interview protocol. Each interview was audiotaped from start to finish, and questions emerged from the
Predetermined Interview Guide (See Appendix C).

The interview protocol called for the researcher to talk with the research subjects, have them assemble their stories, and reflect on their past experiences and perspectives (DeVault & Gross, 2010). The interviews followed a research guide, however, consistent with the advice of Patton (1990), the researcher allowed for free flowing dialogue to take place. The participants in this study were directly involved with leadership experiences that were explored in depth to extract the themes behind their career experiences. An investigation of the participant’s career experiences allowed for an all-inclusive approach; however, the same phenomena can be experienced and interpreted differently by each participant.

It was critical that the researcher understand the participants’ background to help interpret the findings of the research. Researchers like Litchman (2006) and Hittleman and Simon (2006) have purported the benefits of utilizing a qualitative research designed for studied seeking personal insights and reflections. They noted that qualitative researchers are concerned with the process rather than the outcomes of interactions, that interviews must be conducted within a natural setting; that should be data collected verbally from participants; the data should be analyzed rationally to generate deep connections to research questions, and; that researchers often view the subjectivity of their study as a strength. Litchman (2006) added that this form of research has an all-inclusive approach. Research like this has fluidity and is interactive through the interview exchange between the researcher and participant. The open-ended interviews facilitated the researcher looking deeply into a few key elements.

Data Analysis Procedures
The following steps were undertaken to analyze the data. First, the researcher read the transcribed interviews to understand what the participant was saying. The transcription was subsequently read again, but in more detail to allow the researcher to identify the emerging themes and patterns. The researcher identified and eliminated all redundancies. After carefully re-reading the clarified transcript, the researcher was able to cluster the common themes together. Finally, the work was incorporated into a mind map to highlight the common and interconnected themes.

The researcher took the central phenomenon, then analyzed and interpreted it by highlighting the common themes. In any phenomenological study, the data must be grouped according to statements that are associated with larger meanings and themes, then followed by an extensive description (Creswell, 2002). The researcher enacted a double-coding process where the data set was coded, and then after a period of time, the researcher returned and coded the same data set to ensure consistency (Krefting, 1991).

Patton (1990) cautioned researchers about prematurely focusing on the analysis as it may interfere with the openness of naturalistic inquiry. Rushing to premature conclusions was avoided. Consistent with Patton’s approach (1990), the investigator had two primary sources to draw from in organizing the data: (1) the questions generated prior to fieldwork, and (2) analytic insights and interpretations emerging during the data collection process. Gaps found in data required the researcher to reconnect with participants to clarify or deepen responses.

**Research Bias**

Every effort was made to control bias and to ensure that the interviewees were not directed or mislead. However, a number of biases have been reported throughout this
research. The women included in this study did not have similar backgrounds or leadership experiences (e.g. similar owners, directors or leaders). A potential bias may be present from women who have been subject to workplace issues or to differing leadership styles of superiors. Women who may hold a grudge against a previous leader may have answered interview questions with a bias. Finally, respondents may have had an inclination to exaggerate the truth when responding to interview questions. The utilization of transcription, direct quotes, member checking, and field notes helped ensure the accuracy of each participant’s response but would not account for bias.

Consent and Ethics Approval

Before this research study was undertaken, a research proposal and written application to conduct research was submitted to The University of Western Ontario's Research Ethics Board (no.10013278). The committee approved the project on December 9th, 2016 (See Appendix D).

Consistent with The University of Western Ontario’s Ethics Board expectations, all materials used in this study were stored in a locked filing cabinet behind two locked doors. The researcher and her thesis advisor were the only two individuals who reviewed the transcripts. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher confirmed that voluntary withdrawal was possible. The participants were advised that the researcher had the right to use the data from this study for further publications, conference presentations or future studies if needed. Participants were advised that after three years, a professional company would shred the data.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This qualitative study captured the perspectives and career experiences of women who have emerged to hold senior leadership roles within professional sport in Canada. Each of the study participants held senior vice president roles. The researcher asked participants to comment on their career experiences. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a description of the participants in the study. The second section outlines the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis. The third section summarizes the research findings and specifically addresses the three research questions.

Participants

Six of the seven women holding senior vice president roles in Canadian professional sport agreed to participate in this in-depth research project (85.7% participation rate). The seventh participant wanted to participate in the study but was unable to do so due to her work commitments. The interviews were conducted between January 3rd and February 8th, 2017.

Theme Identification

The six-step process called for "preparing and organizing the data for analysis, exploring and coding the data, describing and developing themes from the data, representing and reporting the findings, interpreting the findings, and validating the accuracy and credibility of the findings" (Creswell, 2002, p. 257). Each of the participant's responses and researcher’s notes were organized in alignment with the interview questions and the research questions guiding the study. The sequencing and
organization of the data allowed for the identification of themes. These themes were used to organize the responses about the participants’ career experiences as senior female leaders within professional sport in Canada. The major themes that emerged were: (a) secure diverse career experiences; (b) overcome perceived barriers to advancement, (c) understand the perceptions of role incongruity, and; (d) develop strategies to advance to leadership positions in professional sport. Each theme was further coded into sub-themes as appropriate. The themes and subthemes are presented in Figure 1.

The first theme was labeled “secure diverse career experiences” and it was partitioned into three distinct sub-themes. The first sub-theme was “interest and participation in athletics”. Data related to this subtheme were catalogued. The participants discussed the importance of participation in a variety of sports as a way of developing passion and knowledge of sport that served them well. The second sub-theme was titled “multiple industry training”. Five of the six participants had worked in more than one industry before working in the sport industry. They discussed the importance of developing a diverse skill set and they credited these diverse experiences to helping them prepare to compete for, and advance in senior leadership roles. The third sub-theme was titled, “importance of sponsors and role models”. Each of the six participants emphasized the importance of having mentors and role models to their career success and career trajectory. They discussed the importance of having advocates who helped mentor them as emerging leaders and helped position them as strong candidates for senior leadership roles.

The second theme, labeled "overcome perceived barriers for advancement", was identified from the interview data and based on the current under-representation of
women in senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. The women in this study all described barriers that they overcame in their careers. The results were consistent within the findings of industries as well as the findings of other women in sport leadership literature studies. Participants argued that women in mid-management roles in sport often face hostile, antagonistic, and challenging work environments. The first sub-theme of this section was: “work-life balance”. Participants noted that family commitments often took time away from their work and they felt that some of their male counterparts resented this fact. However they felt lucky to have had enlightened leaders who understood the issue and provided appropriate accommodations. However, they noted that not all women experience this and those who do may have less job experience that could potentially slow career advancement and career earnings. They were able to manage their work and family obligations, but suggested that others may not have been as fortunate, and as a result, withdrew from their careers and subsequent opportunities for advancement. They also believed that human resource decision makers may subconsciously favour leadership styles generally linked to male behaviour. The social networks and informal support system may be controlled and perpetuated by males.

The second sub-theme, “hiring practices”, pointed to the fact that Canadian professional sport leadership remains a male-dominant domain. “Social issues” comprised the third sub-theme with theories of self-efficacy and self-limiting behaviours. These women all highlighted this area as a reality for them and for the female colleagues they observed over their careers. They all suggested that women often place limits on themselves and this may be a significant determent to career progression to senior leadership levels in any field, including professional sport.
The third theme, titled “understand the perceptions of role incongruity”, described the impact that a participant’s perceived role incongruity had on the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions within Canadian professional sport. This theme described the actual experiences participants have encountered. Each respondent touched on a degree of role incongruity that they experienced in their workplace. This theme was divided into two sub-themes: questioning of leadership ability, and professional advancement.

The final theme, titled “develop strategies to secure leadership positions in professional sport in Canada”, identified the tactics the participants effectively utilized to manage their careers. They discuss how they dealt with prejudice as well as shared strategies they used to advance their careers in the male-dominated field of senior sport leadership. This theme was further coded into three sub-themes: sponsorship, networking, and career limitations.
Figure 1: Code Tree of Themes and Sub-themes for Women who Assumed Senior Level Leadership Roles in Professional Sport in Canada
Theme 1: Secure Diverse Career Experiences

The women in this study shared stories about their career paths including their experience, education, and professional positions held throughout their career. The following section presents the sub-themes that emerged from their stories, including: (a) their interest and participation in athletics; (b) the value multiple industry training received, and; (c) the importance of having strong sponsors and role models.

Sub-Theme 1: Their Interest and Participation in Athletics. All of the participants competed in sport at some point in their lives, from recreational to elite athletics. The participants all competed in team sports, although the length of participation varied by participant. These experiences had an impact on the development of the participants and opened the door of opportunity to their positions as leaders in sport, as they already understood the sport culture.

For example, Participant 5 stated:

I have followed a variety of sports, along with being a varsity athlete. My understanding of what it means to practice hard, manage my time, along with how to win and lose gracefully came in handy working in the sports industry. I also knew when to shut up and get down to business. Office work really is just teamwork, if you understand the dynamics of a team you can understand the culture.

Participant 3 spoke to her love of athletics and appreciation for sport. She noted, that she always had an interest in sport. Although she was never considered a great athlete, she was always involved, attending local football games with her family and going to NHL hockey games with the office staff. Sport has always been a part of her life.
Participant 5 mentioned that by growing up in a large urban Canadian city she had great pride for the city’s sports teams. She noted that her weekends were often spent attending games. She also revealed that she was a competitive athlete who understood the dedication sport required. She claimed to have a deep respect for Canadian professional sport.

*Sub-Theme 2: The Value of Multiple Industry Training.* Each participant agreed that those interested in working within the sports industry should acquire a deep and diverse skill set. Experience in a number of related areas helps increase the competitiveness of male or female candidates and is a great strategy for preparing for a leadership role in the sports industry. Many seek careers in sport so candidates must differentiate themselves. Due to some of the systemic biases that exist women may need to differentiate themselves to a greater degree. Participant 2 observed that in the early stages of her career she modeled her behaviour and career path after those who are successful in other industries, she then adopted those strategies to fulfil her goal of securing a leadership position in sport.

Participant 5 stated:

Once prospective candidates have a diverse portfolio of experiences it is easier to break into the sports industry at a manager level versus working their way up from an entry-level position. She believes there are more opportunities with less competition for those with experience in other industries.

Participant 3 expanded on the importance of navigating to other positions, departments, and industries in her field. She gave the example of a person in a marketing
role. She suggested that individuals need to understand and be able to connect brand development and sales to really understand the relationships that are critical to success in the area. Without understanding the relationship the person will not be as an effective or promotable as a leader. She also mentioned collaboration was imperative to be successful in senior leadership positions.

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 consistently noted that a diverse preparation is one thing. Performance is another matter and leaders must get results. Participant 3 mentioned that doors would open if colleagues have a reputation for getting results. The participants also noted that luck (i.e., being at the right place at the right time) should not be discounted either, especially in times of team expansion or relocation. Most of the participants highlighted the need for women to pursue challenging opportunities when they become available, even in the face of self-perceptions of insufficient preparation or experience. Leaders have frequently assumed challenging roles early in their careers (Gardner & Laskin, 2011) to boost their skill set, experience, and confidence. All participants agreed that many women do not pursue these opportunities that men feel they are qualified to assume. All the participants agreed on the benefits of having a thick skin, an open mind, and strong integrity. Each participant felt that it is only a matter of time before more young women with diverse portfolios advance to senior level leadership roles.

**Sub-Theme 3: The Importance of having strong Sponsors and Role Models.** All of the women acknowledged the role that sponsors and role models had on influencing on their career path and progression. Several of the women pointed to an influential woman from their early career experiences that inspired them. Others talked about male
supporters who had a strong and supportive impact on their careers. Participant 4 pointed to the positive influence of many mentors in her life, most predominately, her Minister. She recalls a sermon that this minister delivered that reminded busy parents to always be home for dinner, and not allow outside work commitments to interfere with important family time. She claimed that this advice stuck with her throughout her career and has been a touchstone for work-life balance decisions she has made throughout her career. In fact, she attributes her successful work-life balance to this advice.

Participant 6 attributed her progression to her senior leadership position to a female mentor who opened multiple doors for her. Many participants noted that they were recruited or referred to jobs through the help of their mentor. These mentors served as advocates for the emerging leader. Participant 3 stated that in the early stages of her career, she was not able to find a female sponsor although she had a number of strong male mentors. However, now there are women in management that she looks to for support, information, and confirmation when needed. She also described how her employees motivated and influenced her:

There were a couple of people who really made an impression upon me along the way. Being an athlete, many of my coaches shaped the way I try to lead. I also try to extract the best attributes and leadership skills from my middle management team along with my direct reports and learn from that.

Participant 2 recounted strong women who influenced her, stating "my mother and sister were great role models for me, as both very successful in other male-dominant fields." She routinely sought and guidance from female colleagues who started in the sports industry at the same time as she entered the field.
The participants noted that as their careers progressed, they often credited a male as being their main role model who encouraged them to pursue leadership positions and advocated for their appointment. Most of the women had many sponsors, both male, and female, but more males were available to these women early in their careers. Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 all pointed to males encouraging them to assume leadership positions. Participant 2 commented on how a male sponsor helped her earn a senior leadership role.

As early as high school there were coaching people that I looked up to. However, it wasn't until undergrad when my athletic director got me in contact with the Commissioner of my conference who took me under his wing to teach me about the sports industry. He was very instrumental in encouraging me to become involved and attend as many conferences as I could and early on in my career.

Participant 5 also credited men with influencing her move into her senior leadership position. Throughout the interview, she continually referenced how supportive and collaborative her environment is at her current office due to the two males leaders to whom she reported. When she was recruited to the position she currently holds, she took a chance along by trusting in her mentor who convinced her she had the skills and experience need to secure and excel in the role. She would not have competed for the role without his support.

Participant 1 mentioned the roles that men and women played in her career development:

There were both women and men that helped me as I was getting started. I connected with women when I began working in media, this proved to be invaluable. If it weren’t for these connections the jump to the sport industry would
have been much harder. Being close with my female mentor while working in media allowed me to discuss the difficult career decision to leave to the sports industry. She supported me and encouraged me to take on the job.

**Theme 2: Overcome the Perceived Barriers to Advancement**

This section examines the perceptions of the women leaders regarding why there are so few women occupying the senior leadership positions in Canadian professional sport. The data were assembled from interview questions in relation to the under-representation of women holding senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. The participants cited several obstacles that they needed to overcome such as: eliminating organizational cultural barriers, not having leadership and mentoring programs for women and; not having flexibility in their work schedules to promote a family orientated and supportive work environment which would allow for the success of women. The first sub-theme, work-life balance, was the most commonly mentioned barrier. This was based on the concept that a senior leadership position within Canadian professional sport was a time-consuming role that came with evening and weekend commitments. The role made it difficult to also balance a healthy family life. The second sub-theme, hiring practices, supported the perception of the sport management profession is male-dominated. Social issues were the focus of the third sub-theme identified. In this sub-theme theories of self-efficacy and self-limiting behaviours were reinforced as barriers to women who strive to be leaders in Canadian professional sport. The participants also alluded to what researchers (Hancock & Hums, 2016) refer to as the “leaky pipeline”, noting that frequently women previously often psychologically or literally withdraw from competing and/or preparing for advanced leadership roles due to
a number of reasons (e.g., perceived lack of opportunity, perceived lack of support, or perceived lack of interest in them). As a result, the candidate pool, frequently do not contain qualified women who could effectively compete for senior level leadership roles in Canadian professional sport.

Consequences of this phenomenon affect the number of women reaching the highest levels of leadership. This scenario was consistently suggested in all of the interviews. Although the participants recognized the issue of the leaky pipeline, they have not done anything to date personally to counteract the situation (e.g., increase sponsorship opportunities for other women). Participant 6 explained this point at the professional sports team level:

There are not many females working in team offices and often when a new position appears it is filled internally. This means women are limited just by the fact that there are not as many women working at the team level so that reduces the numbers.

Sub-theme 1: Work-life balance. All six study participants experienced difficulties with work-life balance and noted it is a major reason why more women have not secured leadership positions in professional sport. The time commitment of senior leadership positions within professional sport is a significant barrier. Participant 4 gave an explanation: “Why do I want to be the Vice President and work 12 hour days when I can be a Director and go home in nine hours. The time commitment is the biggest difference.”

Because of time demands and family commitments, the participants believed women often retract early in their career progression path, again impacting the gender composition of candidate pools. She also expanded on this idea explaining that it isn't just
the amount of time that senior leaders work but also the instability of hours that make it
difficult for women, especially mothers.

Being a working mother of three, I know there are things I have to sacrifice to put
in the hours that I do at my job. I think what happens for a lot of women is that
they don’t have the support system behind them that is necessary for them to
make those sacrifices. If you do not have a strong network, being friends and
family, it is hard to make those choices and put those hours in. There are certain
times of the year that you have no time for yourself, and other times when you get
to enjoy time with your family and friends.

Each participant mentioned the importance of supportive parents who instilled in
their daughters that they can do anything they dreamed. Some also spoke of the
importance of supportive partners who assumed great parental roles in their family
dynamic. However, they also claimed feeling of guilt when their professional
responsibilities took them away from their families for extended periods of time.
Participant 6 also referred to the work-life balance mothers in professional sport face
believing that the women who have been successful in securing and advancing in these
roles are often single. She said:

Women traditionally, no matter what have so many roles at home and if they are
married with kids combined with a senior leadership role this makes it very
difficult with the added responsibilities. Most of the women in even middle
management roles are often single; they are able to put more time into it, as they
do not have so many commitments pulling them in different directions.

*Sub-theme 2: Hiring practices.* The participants all supported the perception that
senior leadership positions within professional Canadian sport remain largely a male-dominated profession. Participants described their belief that “the old boys club” still exists in professional sport as sport often systematically reproduces itself by hiring more men than women for senior leadership positions. Participant 5 explained how males have traditionally held these positions and that most have long contracts holding them in the position. Participant 1 stated that the concept of senior leadership is traditionally perceived to be male, and therefore is a barrier to women in most areas of society, especially sport. Being female, many of the participants felt they had to go above and beyond to show they were competent, capable and willing to assume the role.

Sub-theme 3: Social Issues. Social limitations included low self-efficacy and self-limiting behaviours as reasons for the low number of women reaching leadership positions in Canadian professional sport. The participants perceived other women were opting out of competitions or exhibiting self-limiting behaviours. Several participants believed many women were not pursuing leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. Participant 5 explained this point by noting that:

I had the audacity to take the biggest job I could, every time I could. The reason some women haven’t sought these jobs out could be that they are afraid of rejection. I have been fortunate to never have had my gender be a discouraging factor in my career.

Participant 3 agreed, noting that:

Professional sport in Canada (and elsewhere) is so male dominant when a female comes on board they are expected to have tough skin and a tolerance. However, women need to get out of their comfort zone and imagine no barriers.
Some participants suggested that women working in middle management roles within the professional sports industry often had low levels of self-confidence and were not willing to take the risk that they may not secure the role. For example participant 4 stated:

On the other side of things is that females perhaps lack low levels of self-efficacy due to the perception of not being sure they want to take on everything. When in reality it is not as complicated as one might think it is going to be.

The perceptions depicted by the participants reflected the belief that professional sport in Canada continues to be dominated by men. In addition, they perceived women to face unique barriers including work-life conflict, hiring practices, and social issues that may impede women's advancement into the consequences affecting the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada.

Theme 3: Understand the Perceptions of Role Incongruity

Perceptions of role incongruity also impact the under-representation of women in leadership positions in professional sport. Every participant believed that discrimination was evident and they had to overcome it while earning their position. These perceptions ranged in degrees of prejudice from being a major factor, to a minor factor. Participant 6 expressed her view that the perception of leadership has been labeled male within the sporting scene in Canada:

After working within sport for 30+ years I have seen a lot of women interview for management positions and enter at entry-level positions. There is still this notion that the person in charge really ought to be a guy. You hear it often. However, it is
more under the radar now but it’s still there.

Role incongruity theory plays a part in the under-representation of women in professional sport in Canada according to all of the participants. This theory proposes that prejudice toward female leaders takes two forms: (a) perceiving women as possessing less leadership ability than men, and; (b) evaluating behaviour that fulfills the prescriptions of a leadership role more negatively when it is enacted by a woman compared with a man. This theme describes actual experiences participants have encountered associated with role congruity in the workplace. The results originated from the interview questions asking about personal experiences with the two types of prejudice proposed in role congruity theory. This theme is divided into two sub-themes: (a) questioning of leadership ability, and; (b) professional advancement.

**Sub-theme 1: Questioning of Leadership Ability.** Many participants believed that past and present colleagues display a general resistance to women being in a leadership role. Participant 3 recalled a time when she had to make a ruling that others did not agree on within the organization.

…it would be I need to speak to your boss." Well I'm it. You're at the top level. Even little things, for example, when they were talking to a man they may say Mr. Doe and then when they are talking to me they use my informal first name.

According to Participant 6, this perception was not only apparent from the general public, but from also her direct reports. She noted that:

When discussions occur over a project that went well or changes that are made to a strategic plan, sometimes the assumption is that it was the male that was involved that did it. He did it.
Sub-theme 2: Professional Advancement. In each of these examples, the participants revealed experiences where the received prejudicial treatment was stemming from the fact that they were female. In general, the experiences came in the form of questioning of their leadership ability, and professional advancement. They believed that both males and females were less tolerant of female bosses who lacked empathy, were seen to be aggressive, and/or those who did not embody the characteristics that society expects from women, such as nurturing, inclusive, and empathy (Drexler, 2013). These very characteristics that might propel women forward in their careers may also be the same characteristics that hold them back as they advance in an organization’s structure.

The following section chronicles the advice that the research participants gave to address the situation and ensure a greater proportion of women comprise the senior leadership positions within Canadian professional sport.

Theme 4: Develop Strategies to advance in senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport

The last theme, labelled strategies to secure senior leadership positions in Canadian professional sport, outlines tactics that participants suggested that may be effective for female advancement in the male-dominated field of professional sport. This theme was further coded into three sub-themes: (a) sponsorship, (b) networking, and (c) career limitations.

Sub-theme 1: Sponsorship. Each participant in this study placed a high emphasis on the value of sponsorship, both by crediting their success to a sponsor, and in their stated belief that sponsors are necessary for women to secure senior leadership positions within professional sport. To summarize, the participants said there needs to be an
increase in formal mentoring and sponsorship programs available to women and interventions should take place at every step of the career path to senior leadership in Canadian professional sport. These formal programs should be established within their organization and their respective professional society (e.g., Canadian sports management industry). Participant 1, like the other participants, saw the value in having a mentor. She noted that although she had mentors in previous positions she did not have one in her current position.

Two women and one man served as my mentors, they solidified my passion for my job and leadership. My male mentor invited me to meetings that on paper, I shouldn’t have been at, he valued my opinion on topics, and we still stay in touch. My first professional mentor is still my most influential; she has opened up many doors for me that wouldn’t necessarily have been there. These mentors gave me a lot of encouragement and confidence to be brave and take risks.

Many of the participants said that their position allowed for them to have the opportunity to sponsor emerging women in their organization. Participants felt they were helped by others during their career, and wanted to "give-back". Many of the women expressed a desire to mentor other women due to the importance they placed on talking to those who have "walked the walk". They believe that they had credibility in the eyes of their protégés. These participants saw this role as a professional obligation. Every participant agreed that one-on-one mentoring is critical, even if it is a simple note or quick phone call to support protégés and let them know that their mentor is available to give advice as needed. Participant 5 mentioned she would love to be able to work towards having some type of mentoring program to involve women from all industries.
Sub-theme 2: Networking. In addition to mentoring, developing relationships with other professionals within the industry was reported by every woman as being vital to career advancement. The belief that strategic networking would increase opportunity and exposure for women entering the field was obvious. However, the perception that women, in general, do not have enough networks or do not effectively engage in self-promotion was very apparent in each interview. Participant 6 mentioned that though networking and self-promotion may not feel natural, for her it was essential. She went on to say, “if you do not make yourself heard, there will be no movement.”

The idea that a woman needed to network differently than men was also a consistent theme offered by the study participants. Participant 5 explained that by having strong female mentors she did not try to be "one of the guys”. Conversely, she found ways to effectively integrate and network. Finding the best way to communicate within the organization's culture was seen to be imperative to the career advancement of these women. Participant 3 believed that women needed to employ specific strategies in terms of networking within social settings. She went on to state that interactions should focus on skill development, career planning and confidence building themes. If career planning is a goal, women who aspire to senior leadership levels should let others know your experiences and this aspiration. Young women should ensure that goals are communicated and widely shared with mentors. They should demonstrate their values to others by participating in collaborations that create opportunities to showcase their talents. Additionally, the study participants highlighted the importance of women networking outside of their current organization. All participants agreed that senior leaders have an obligation to create meaningful social and professional opportunities for
an inclusive involvement for all staff members. For example, one participant suggested that:

Women should learn to golf as there is a lot of networking done on the golf course. This allows for people to have the chance to really get to know one another.

Participant 2 commented that although she is not a golfer, she makes sure to put herself into situations that are more social in nature, whether they are in her industry or outside the office. She suggested finding a way to create an informal social setting, to be comfortable being yourself. Several of the participants believed there was also a need to replace a social scene that involved going to the bars or drinking with colleagues.

Participant 3 explained:

I am not going to the bars with my staff, as everyone is predominantly male, I choose to remain professional. I found the best place to have more of a social interaction is through breakfast or a lunch as it is a very comfortable setting that can be informal but can still get business done.

Lunches, coffee breaks and out-of-work events should be designed to be inclusive. In addition to implementing different strategies, every participant reinforced the value of women networking with other women as an essential function. Many noted this was one of their most difficult tasks, as social networks for men are generally well established. Through mentoring and networking, it was suggested that senior women coach other women on networking strategies that appear to work effectively for male colleagues.

Sub-theme 3: Limitations. The participants believed potential leaders needed to
consciously work on not limiting themselves. Self-limiting beliefs and behaviors are matters that people believe to be true about themselves and they limit an individual from pursuing the goals and reaching one’s full potential. Participants concurred that to overcome self-limiting beliefs women must be confident and secure experiences in multiple to excel within professional sport in Canada. The participants encouraged women to expose themselves to a range of experiences and industries to broaden their skill set and maximize their marketability. Participant 3 suggested that women:

“Get the most diverse experience you can because you never know what conversations may lead to other careers, based on other relationships.”

In addition, the women believed that young women need to be willing to accept positions that may not be in demand to show their commitment and desire. Volunteering to gain valuable work experience, develop helpful contacts and “get a foot in the door” were also often suggested. Participant 3 said that:

Young women entering the workforce should volunteer and be open-minded to be mentored by someone. Everyone starting out is money hungry, however, experience will be more valuable and internships are not often taken advantage of enough.

Beyond just gaining experience, women interviewed felt strongly that professional development, participation in other industries, and additional training was helpful in increasing opportunities for women. Several participants pointed to the fact that these programs and opportunities were not available to them as they progressed through their careers. Each participant suggested that young women should aspire to the highest level of their profession if this is their goal. However they need to be supported,
encouraged and mentored so they can be prepared and successful in their candidacy and in the role.

**Summary**

The research participants discussed their career experiences as a woman working within professional sport in Canada and how prejudice may contribute to the challenge of under-representation of women within their industry. The women in the study expressed unique perspectives to help answer the study's research questions, but many of their perspectives had commonalities as well. The commonalities have been represented as themes and sub-themes. Five out of the six study participants entered the sport industry at the management level. Only one participant started in the sport industry (over 30 years ago) in an entry-level position. The participants agreed that securing a mid-level leadership positions was critical to her career growth, as they had time to gain experiences that made them the most qualified candidate for their current role. Their diverse experiences and skill sets were seen as critical to setting her apart from other candidates. They encourage young women to pursue growth opportunities early in their career, especially in diverse settings (vs. staying in one organization). It was also noted that they had experienced less competition and debatably had more opportunities entering at the management level with a diverse portfolio than those working their way from an internship position or as a recent graduate. It was also noted to not overlook the role of luck, often in times of expansion or team relocation. Multiple participants noted that being prepared and at the right place at the right time played a role in their career advancement. Some admitted to feeling that they were not prepared at the time, but history proved that they had more skill and experience than they initially perceived.
Participants recommended multiple strategies for women seeking senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada to overcome the effects of the leaky pipeline. Participants confirmed the value of having strong mentors and sponsors, to engage sponsorship, and the value of networking while gaining diverse skills from multiple industries. Sponsorship was emphasized as a specific strategy used by all of the participants. All participants agreed that mentoring was the most important factor in their success. Furthermore, the women named female mentoring as a factor impacting the success of other women entering the profession, especially in light of the fact that there are so few women occupying senior leadership positions in professional sport. There was a general acknowledgment that women needed to be open to both men and women as mentors. Participants also stressed that mentoring was a continual process that needed to occur at multiple levels along one’s career path. They all indicated that there needs to be more structure and sustained mentoring if a significant change in the gender composition of leaders in Canadian professional sport is to transpire. In addition to mentoring, networking was advised as a means to increase the future representation of women in senior leadership positions. They stated that women do not typically engage in networking activities compared to their male counterparts. The participants mentioned specific strategies they implemented to increase their presence in social situations. They advised against becoming “one of the guys.” They recommended that women entering the industry should not limit themselves within one industry or department. The female leaders recommended that women get a wide range of experience from multiple industries to increase their competitiveness. Finally, they encouraged women to be confident and apply for roles that they may feel not 100% prepared to assume.
The women holding senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada believed that they experienced many barriers that they needed to overcome to advance their careers. The participants unanimously agreed that sport was still perceived as a man’s world or traditionally male domain profession. The women referred to several barriers that they believed contributed to a low representation, the most common of which was work-life balance. Time commitments and parental roles were identified as impeding women seeking top levels of administration. The participants also mentioned that hiring practices were a barrier. They stressed that they believe that Canadian professional sport has been improving but signs of hegemonic masculinity were reported.

Self-efficacy and self-limiting behaviours were perceived as a barrier for young women coming into professional sport. The participants believe that young female professionals need to have higher levels of self-efficacy and confidence. They also believed that women were not seeking out leadership positions in fear of rejection. In addition, the women also believe that potential female leaders are afraid to take the risk of trying and in fear that they may not succeed in the male-dominated industry of professional sport. All of the reasons mentioned above not only contribute to the low percentage of women in senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. Understanding the issue is one matter, but implementing the results of research is another. The results of this study will be discussed in the next chapter along with the implications and strategies designed to make systemic change. Candidate pools do not generally have large numbers of qualified women. As confirmed in this research, many defect from middle management roles and/or do not apply for senior level positions. There were numerous reasons by study participants including work-life balance concerns, experience
and career gaps, lack of encouragement and support, and insufficient advocates.

Unfortunately these realities limit the candidate pools and consequently, a large number of highly competent women are not considered for senior leadership roles.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings from this investigation and is presented in the following six sections, specifically; (a) Introduction; (b) Summary of the Findings; (c) Discussion of the Research Findings; (d) Implications of the Research; (e) Recommendations for Future Research, and; (f) Conclusion.

Introduction

This study was conducted to better understand the career experiences of women who have secured and operated in senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. The opportunities, experiences, and challenges that these women faced were uncovered and analysed relative to the women and leadership literature. Several issues were identified that align with the findings of other women and leadership research in sport and other organizational settings. These research findings align with the body of literature that chronicle the systemic barriers that inhibit women’s progress into senior leadership roles. Three key themes were identified. First “the leaky pipeline” theory focuses on the reality that a low number of women are in for leadership positions. Second, the shortage of female candidates in the area of sport management has been attributed to discrimination in the hiring process including hegemonic masculinity (Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002); homologous reproduction (Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Stangl & Kane, 1991; Sagas, Cunningham & Teed, 2003) and occupational closure (Kanter, 1977; Whitz, 1991). The third theme that emerged from this research was the social limitation theories that suggest that women often exhibit self-limiting behaviours (Burton, 2015; Bandura, 1986; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2003) that may discount
them from applying or competing for senior level leadership positions in sport. Others point to limits imposed by unaccommodated work-life balance issues (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Inglis, Danylchuk & Pastore, 2000). However, not one theory can adequately explain the gendered situation and its impact of the uneven gender balance that is transpiring at the senior leadership ranks in professional sport in Canada.

The objective of this study was to provide a greater understanding the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles by collecting and analyzing the perspectives of the women who have overcome the situation and secured a senior leadership role in professional sport in Canada.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the underrepresentation of women working within senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada by analyzing their career experiences and gathering the recommendations of women who have secured these positions. The findings of this research study confirm that career progression is often hindered for women working within the professional sports industry in Canada due to a multitude of factors as strategies utilized in the past are not working, new strategies are required (Burton, 2015). The researcher interviewed six of the seven women who held senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. The following three research questions guided this research:

1. What has been the career progression of women occupying senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?

2. What recommendations do these senior female leaders have for women seeking senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?
3. Do women holding senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada experience any barriers that needed to be overcome to advance their career?

**Discussion of the Research Findings**

The data collected from the women working within professional sport in Canada, were grouped into the following four themes: (a) Need to acquire diverse career experiences; (b) understanding the perceived barriers to advancement; (c) appreciating the perceptions of role congruity and; (d) employing strategies to secure leadership positions in professional sport in Canada. These themes were then organized according to the research questions then intentionally ordered based on the overall purpose of the study. The discussion follows the same organizational flow.

*Need to acquire diverse career experiences.* All participants agreed that by working in a variety of industries women could gain diverse experience that would help them excel and advance in the sports industry. The women in this study recommended that prospective female leaders look to enter the industry at the entry or managerial level. This is often due to increased opportunities at these levels. They suggested that these women felt that they were the type of role model that aspiring women leaders need and these senior leaders take great pride in this role.

This is often due to increased strong collaborative skills and an understanding of the role of emotional intelligence. Finance, fundraising, and budget management were identified as important skills for a senior level leader to acquire (Grappendorf, Lough, & Griffin, 2004; Hoffman, 2010). A potential candidate must also have increased adaptability, gained from assuming diverse career experiences and a host of developed skill sets. The
experiences will better prepare these leaders, and ultimately their organizations to adapt to unforeseen challenges and opportunities that emerge. Career adaptability refers to an individual’s ability to cope with developmental tasks (e.g., learning new skills, assuming new responsibilities) and contextual factors (Savickas, 2005). Contextual factors are comprised of structural (e.g., gender role stereotyping, opportunity for promotion and advancement, discriminatory hiring practices, organizational policies inhibiting work-life balance) and social determinants (e.g., networking, mentoring/role modeling, work-life balance). Additionally, employing female candidates from a variety of industries and backgrounds can also bring a new and different perspective to the organization. An organization with a diverse workforce can often increase productivity by tapping into the wealth of different perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of their staff (Herrick-Phelps, 2006). Finally, employing those with a wide variety of opinions, skills, experiences, and backgrounds creates a way to encourage innovation in the workplace.

While important to men and women, the interviewees felt that women might benefit from these experiences as they typically lack the networks that their male counterparts typically employee. The accompanying skill sets from these experiences will provide these women with adaptable, transferable skill and the confidence needed to apply and secure senior level leadership positions in sport.

**Understanding the perceived barriers to advancement.** The interviewees were now confident in their leadership role, however, they all admitted that this level of confidence needed to be developed. Heightened confidence for them came from hard work and incremental wins in the workplace. They also developed a resiliency to address and overcome barriers.
Sport management researchers have reported on gender stereotypes that create barriers for women (Burton et al., 2009, 2011; Calaringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Grappendorf et al., 2004). First of all, gender roles may segregate men and women into professional roles men as senior and executive management and women as support or administrative staff (Burton et al., 2009). If women remain trapped in these administrative roles they cannot gain the necessary skills of needed for senior level leadership to advance their careers (Burton et al., 2009). Secondly, these gender stereotypes reinforce traditional social roles, which perpetuate perceptions of power and status (Correll, 2004). The participants agreed with Schein (2007), “that gender stereotyping of the managerial position fosters bias against women in managerial selection, placement, promotion, and training decisions” (p.7). Finally, the lack of female representation in senior leadership roles and an accompanying voice of role models at decision tables fosters and perpetuates the stereotype that women are not capable, or sufficiently qualified to assume senior leadership positions. As Cohn and Moran (2011) noted, selection committees generally struggle with decisions related to selecting strong leaders. They often rely on anecdotal evidence and in many cases, are unsure of what they are looking for or need in a leader. Aspiring female leaders may be able to utilize this information by highlighting a strong vision, providing examples of integrity, empathy, emotional intelligence, passion and courage as the foundation of their leadership style (Cohn & Moran, 2011).

The study participants suggested that women must be more strategic in managing their careers, and more determined to help each other. They offered that senior female leaders often create more barriers for each other by not offering more career support and
guidance (i.e., Queen Bee Syndrome). They often keep women down through their words or actions (or lack of the same). Each participant interviewed was a wife and mother. The task of balancing the role of a mother and wanting to be a successful senior leader within professional sport can lead their peers and coworkers to perceive them as a less than ‘ideal worker’ due to other commitments.

Gardner (1983) suggested that the first step to being a leader is to act and speak like a leader. However, this is only possible when a leader’s followers are present and accepting of that message. When a leader assumes a new leadership role, they deserve attention by virtue of their position authority. He stated that there is a necessity for leaders to reflect on their personal experience and values. Their values must be the foundation of their leadership style. When a leader embodies his or her values in their leadership styles helps make them are credible and authentic in the eyes of their subordinates. Trust levels can rise as a result. Gardner and Laskin (2011) noted that leaders must have expertise or credibility in their respective field, generally garnered from education and experience. They will also need self-confidence and the verbal communication skills to effectively communicate their message. Finally, contemporary leaders need to display empathy and emotional intelligence while showing genuine interest in understanding others (Burton, 2015). Gardner and Laskin (2011) also addressed the questions of what makes a leader. He reported that leaders do seem to have certain experiences and traits in common and they are usually risk takers, curious, energetic, and gifted with a sense of humour. Aspiring female leaders should assess their behaviours against these four areas.
Although these female leaders believed they possessed strong collaborative skills and backgrounds after gaining experience in multiple industries, they felt that their strong leadership skills and positive contributions often went unrecognized. The participants believed that systems are required and necessary to reward collaborations and the flexibility in working with others. If a system like this was established, these women believed that they would have had the recognition they deserved. Their confidence levels would have been bolstered. These respondents believe that if women are not given an equal opportunity within an organization they will never gain the level of confidence needed to advance to the senior leadership levels of professional sport in Canada. Leagues and teams might consider the type of leadership they publically reward and promote. Perhaps there should be more public ways of recognizing the efforts or supportive behaviours that align with leadership. Women can harness their abilities to relate and connect with others to gain access to resources (e.g., information, people). This has the potential to result in changes in power dynamics (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010) and aligns with contemporary leadership theory (Young, 2015). Increased access and a shift in power dynamics may result in organizational changes that favour women’s voices and, by extension, their career advancement.

**Appreciating the perceptions of role congruity.** Role congruity theory (Eagly & Diekman, 2005; Eagly & Karu, 2002) proposes that prejudice arises from an incongruity between a group stereotype and social role characteristics when members of a group enter or attempt to enter into roles that are stereotypically mismatched for their group, in this case, women entering a senior leadership role within Canadian professional sport. The study participants believed that initially they were seen as possessing less leadership
ability than males as well as being judged negatively for possessing leadership traits often associated with male leaders. From an early age, women are often socialized to fall within the social constructions built for them prior to entering the workforce. Women assign order, property, and descriptions that fall within the parameters of these socially embedded norms.

"Women must not be too much within or too far outside of social constructions of femininity; the consequence of doing so can be detrimental to the perceived competence of the woman's leadership" (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak & White, 2015, p.65). Some female leaders are often viewed as falling outside of the social constructs of femininity. Some may feel they must carefully manage tensions and conflicts as a result. Men can aggressively plan, negotiate and play the politics with their subordinates. Women are not typically socialized in this manner and they are often criticized for behaving in this way (Block & Tiftjen-Smith, 2016). As a result, and due to the shortage of female role models aspiring female leaders may to emulate the behaviours of their male leaders. This emulation may make them seem overly-aggressive, cold or calloused. Women who are perceived as being more approachable may be seen as too motherly and/or not being tough enough to assume the leadership role (Block & Tiftjen-Smith, 2016).

**Strategies to secure leadership positions in professional sport in Canada.** The successful senior leaders interviewed in this study unanimously believed that sponsorship and networking were the two most important activities that aspiring leaders need to undertake to advance their careers in senior leadership. Preparation and talent are a given for men and women, but aspiring female leaders need to match men on the networking
and sponsorship front. They generally fall short in this area. Sponsorship was deemed as the most important aspect of career progression into senior leadership roles. The leadership emergence literature confirms the importance of having advocates who help advance the candidacy of emerging leaders (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). The first formal sponsor is usually the most influential according to the research participants. They all recommended that young women to find a female sponsor. Sponsors have the potential to give young women an increased sense of confidence and they can open many doors for gaining early managerial experience. These experiences can develop appropriate skill sets and teach valuable leadership lessons employing emotional intelligences and taking educated risks. The participants, recognized the need for more female mentors, and agreed that one-on-one interaction with young women is both important and inspiring. They do it and encourage other female leaders to do the same. They hope that future generations of female leaders will see this role as a profession obligation.

Once the sponsor and mentee develop a strong, authentic relationship, they can discuss and deconstruct issues that happen in the workplace. The mentee will learn valuable lessons in conflict resolution and decision-making. Mentees will learn to tolerate tension and conflict in relationships. This is possible through the assistance of a female mentor who has undoubtedly experienced similar issues in her career. Sponsors can also help the mentee when she deal with feelings of disempowerment, and help her develop strategies to re-gain social power in work relationships. The study participants all live complex lives, and are 100% committed to share insights to help those who follow them. They agree with other writers who suggest that mentors need to “be sensitive to this
complexity, and be prepared to help with time management suggestions or tips for overcoming guilt and anxiety” (National Institutes of Health, 2012, p.2).

Although there are many educated and experienced women working within sports management, women are still underrepresented in senior vice president roles. In order for this change, sponsors need to support the next generation of leaders. The idea of “sending the elevator back down” to pick other women up is a great analogy for the future. Several benefits of positive mentoring relationships were identified by the women interviewed in this study such as: (a) improving opportunity and success in career advancement; (b) increasing institutional loyalty; (c) improving time management and productivity behaviours; (d) increasing the procurement of grants; (e) improving mentee satisfaction with professional and work-life balance; (f) instilling higher administrative aspirations in mentees, and; (g) and assisting mentees with improved networking skills. Women need to have access to the perspectives of other women who have forged their way into senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada. These women are prepared to help. Hopefully those who follow them will have the same degree of commitment.

Networking was determined the second most important strategy to secure a senior leadership position in professional sport. Developing relationships is critical in the sports industry (Burton et al., 2017). Through strategic networking women increase their exposure and opportunities when entering the field. The interviewees were united in their belief that most women working within professional sport do not effectively network. In addition, the interviewees believe that many women they have worked with lack valuable self-promotion skills. Some have suggested that women network differently than their male counterparts (Johansen, 2007). The study participants identified a need for women
to put themselves in situations where they do not feel that they need to be "one of the guys". They need to feel comfortable showcasing their own skills, talents, and potential. They need to display confidence and commitment comparable to the levels that some of their male counterparts display.

Aspiring female leaders need to form strong female networks so the group can collaborate and grow together. An ‘association’ was recommended by one of the study participants, others suggested similar ideas. Aspiring female leaders need to connect with other strong female leaders, including those from other industries. “Visible institutional support, particularly from senior management, is vital to ensure support for an success of a mentoring program” (Quinn, 2012, p.14). Institutional support may be in the form of a mentoring program. Organizations can provide the structure and resources to support an effective mentoring program. Formal programs to prepare mentors and mentees can be developed. Rewards can be provided for those who are an exceptional mentor. Grants could be secured to support mentoring initiatives (National Institutes of Health, 2012).

In addition, the study participants were united in suggesting that women need to break the tendency of engaging in self-limiting behaviours. These behaviours hold women back from securing senior leadership roles and consequently, reaching their full potential as leaders. These behaviours frequently sabotage the career advancement of women in senior leadership roles. As Gardner & Laskin (2011) noted, the first step to being a leader is to speak and act like a leader.

The recommendation to have women gain multiple industry training is well founded and may increase their experience. They will also learn to take on projects and assume risks earlier in their career and in doing so ultimately gaining confidence. The
study participants agreed that working in smaller departments in the early stages of their careers would provide candidates with growth opportunities that they may not receive in larger institutions. They suggested that women seize these opportunities to heighten their experience levels, develop complimentary skills, and build confidence levels. This may be an effective strategy for women seeking senior leadership positions in professional sport.

**Implications of the Research**

**Implications for the Profession of Sport Management.** The participants unanimously cited work-life balance as the most significant barrier for women who seek senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. According to the women interviewed in this research study, senior leadership positions require time commitments that made parental roles extremely challenging. Some benefit from a supportive spouse. Others do not have that opportunity. Human resource departments must make these positions possible for women with families in order to increase representation in senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. According to Dixon, Tiell, Lough, Sweeney, Osborne, Bruening (2008), work-life balance issues most strongly impact the retention of females. Current hiring practices and job descriptions must be analyzed and revised to ensure they do not promote a gender bias that denies women an equal opportunity to compete and carry out these positions.

The lack of female role models and mentors also contributes to the situation. Aspiring female leaders may be more hesitant to compete for senior positions as a result. Traditional norms and beliefs not only effect employers. They also will have an impact on the women employed in these organizations. If both men and women have traditional
beliefs some may view men as the breadwinners and women are homemakers, it can lead to decisions that support the stereotype and exasperate the problem.

Parental leaves occur in all organizations, and often it is the woman who takes the majority of the leave. This may create a norm within the organization, shaping an employers' expectations of parental leaves. It becomes less of a norm for men to take paternity leaves. This may impact employers’ expectations within the organization. These differences may lead to women not being eligible for the same growth opportunities as men in the workforce due to being absent on parental leave. This lack of experience and/or opportunity, in turn, may lead to women not applying or being considered for senior level leadership roles when they are available. As well, women who return to the workforce after a parental leave may find it more difficult to balance career and family life if a spouse or their organization does not appropriately support them.

The Implications for Sport Management Academic Programs. Women working within professional sport are often excluded from valuable mentoring and networking opportunities. Due to their underrepresentation, the study participants believe that women’s networks within professional Canadian sport are limited or non-existent. This limits the opportunities that young women have to be mentored by another successful female leader. The findings from this research study propose that the lack of networking and mentoring is hindering the progress of women into leadership positions in Canadian professional sport. In order to eradicate this problem, two propositions are suggested.

First of all, every participant in the study recommended that an association should be formed for women working in professional sport in Canada. Those with aspirations to
work in the industry should also be invited. Findings from this study along with other researchers (Whisenane et al., 2002; Whisenant, 2003; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004) suggest that mentoring and networking are powerful tools in advancement of women into leadership positions. The study participants suggested that women who aspire to occupy senior leadership position within Canadian sport create a network and find a mentor in the network. The study participants shared strategies that they employed in the absence of a network. However all agreed that a network would have made their journey less audacious. Another positive result of building a female sport leadership network would be the increase of accessible female role models for current students, recent graduates, and young professionals. The study participants discussed how many female candidates are often afraid of pursuing leadership positions within professional Canadian sport due to the environment being hegemonic in nature. A women’s sport leadership network would draw attention to the women currently occupying the decision making positions, and tangibly prove that women can be successful, strong senior leaders within professional sport. Current students and recent graduates of sports management programs would use the network to develop skills and contacts, gain support and grow their confidence levels as future leaders in professional Canadian sport. This idea might model the women in the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) developed for current and aspiring sport management academicians (WIN – Women in NASSM).

Next, current leadership must be proactive to promote change. Current leaders in Canadian professional sport, regardless of gender, must take the initiative to serve as mentors and promote networking opportunities. A suggestion from the study participants was for current leaders to appoint a mentor for each new female employee hired. The
mentor could assist the new recruit in getting off to a good start and help them manage their careers. Through this structured mentorship program, young women could build their own professional networks and hopefully combat the existence of the leaky pipeline. Ultimately, all colleagues must be held accountable so that their human resource processes embrace equity for all in professional sport in Canada.

**Implications for Career Progression for Women in Sport.** The study participants highlighted on the importance of household support for women seeking careers in professional sport. This support starts with having strong, empowering parents who instilled the belief in their daughters that they could do anything that they dream. This support needs to begin in childhood and continue into adulthood. The observation that most women who hold senior leadership positions are single drives home the point. Women need partners who can show strong support and take on additional parenting roles so these women can navigate their careers give the time demands of senior leaders in professional sport.

Another implication for women working within professional sport is the ability to possess strong leadership traits that may predominantly be viewed as male and not be frowned upon for doing so even though they are female. Future female leadership candidates need to be assertive and create opportunities for themselves. The study participants often noted that when they were applying for a new job or an internal promotion that they let those around them know what they wanted, and they were not afraid to let this be common knowledge. They also need to be able to engage themselves in risk taking, something many suggested was instilled in them at a young age. This will help young women gain confidence early on in their careers, allowing them to grow and
develop from small wins, and instill the necessary confidence to pursue senior leadership roles.

The results of this study underscore the notion that there may be a gender difference due to female executives having a high desire for children and family. The working hours in the sport industry require many sacrifices that may conflict with the realities of child rearing. Female executives also more often take on the primary responsibility of both household and childcare than their male counterparts (Hoffman, 2010). Ibarra (2010) found that having children had a positive impact on the promotion chances of men, but had a negative impact on women’s promotion opportunities. According to the senior leaders interviewed, having children often were viewed as a career ‘slowdown’ for female executives compared to their male co-workers.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In this research study, senior female leaders working within professional sport were interviewed about their career experiences in order to understand why there is an underrepresentation of women holding executive positions. Future research should focus on a multitude of areas, including the extension of this study in other countries to determine if similar themes arise of female underrepresentation in professional sports organizations.

First of all, a future qualitative study might assess the opinions of the male leaders to see if their experiences and strategies differ. Secondly, future researchers may choose to examine the qualifications and experiences that are required for top leadership
positions in professional sport and determine the precise skill set that is necessary to excel in the role. Previous studies (Grappendorf, Lough & Griffin, 2004; Smith, 2005) have analyzed the career paths and backgrounds of intercollegiate athletic administrators. However, a limited amount of research has been done on women in professional sport.

Additional research might examine how both men and women working within professional sport in Canada form and maintain their networks. This type of study would undoubtedly underscore the impact that a strong network and mentorship has on the success of candidates striving for a senior leadership position in sport. Perhaps there are gender differences that could be uncovered and addressed. In addition, a study like this might examine the difference in both male and female networking tendencies, between career levels. Perhaps different networking and mentoring programs are needed at different career stages.

Although participants viewed themselves as competent, they perceived other women as having low self-efficacy and fearful of taking risks. Future researchers might wish to examine the application databases for the position of both senior vice president and Director positions to evaluate if women are indeed applying for these jobs within professional sport in Canada. Perhaps the leaky pipeline is more porous in professional sport organizations then it is in other industries. Potential female leaders be studied to examine their intentions for pursuing a leadership position. Perhaps a longitudinal study following sport management students through preparation, entry to the profession and advancement through the profession would be enlightening. It would be interesting to collect data during times of high stress and to see if timely intervention can effectively keep these women in the pipeline. It would help researchers and human resource officers
understand why women often self-selecting themselves out of positions. Finally, future researchers could focus on the process of identifying qualified women leadership to determine the selection process used for senior leadership positions in Canadian sport. Perhaps there are systemic barriers in these organizations that disadvantage and alleviate women. They clearly show interest given their enrollment in sport management programs. Perhaps things will engage in time. However this researcher believes that managed change is required and both aspiring leaders, current leaders and their organizations need to make adjustments.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of women working within professional Canadian sport. The study was undertaken given the underrepresentation of women in these roles in spite of the enrollment of women in sport management education programs by analyzing perceptions of all female senior leaders in the industry. Networking is the key to alleviating the issue to better understand the situation and employ strategies to alleviate any of the issues and obstacles. Those who have lived the experience identified these issues and obstacles in this research. They also provided valuable suggestions that could address the issue. Six out of the seven women holding senior leadership positions in Canadian professional sport were interviewed based on their career experiences. The results of this study add to the current body of literature, stating that although there have been many advances for women; there are still many limitations for those working within the sport industry. Each of the participants experienced varying degrees of discrimination that they had to overcome in their professional careers. The respondents proved examples of discrimination, such as
colleagues questioning their leadership abilities, leaders appearing to stifle their professional advancement, and other colleagues criticized their character or leadership behaviors. They often felt discouraged by this treatment but they persevered. They all noted how important commitment and perseverance are to their career advancement in the industry.

Participants acknowledged the low representation of women within professional Canadian sport and viewed it as a problem that exists in other industries as well. This research study confirmed the pressure of the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon as an explanation to the low percentage. The participants described barriers as the work-life balance, self-efficacy, and the effects of self-limiting behaviours that are to blame for the underrepresentation of women working as senior leaders in professional Canadian sport. Self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required managing prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p.2). According to Bandura (1986), such judgments of personal capabilities are important because they predict goal setting, perseverance, the outcomes people expect from behaviours, and performance. In seeking to understand why such a disparity of women leaders has continued, researchers have pointed to differences between men and women in self-efficacy (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007; Cunningham, Sagas & Ashley, 2003). In addition, Satore and Cunningham (2007) proposed that gender roles and stereotypes connected to sport ideologies hinder women in sport organizations, arguing that women might not view themselves as capable leaders due to the existing low levels of power and status of women in society. This results in self-imposed limits on their leadership behaviours (Satore & Cunningham, 2007).
Although the participants all viewed themselves as capable, they frequently suggested that women they worked with over the course of their careers frequently had low levels of self-confidence. These women often did not pursue leadership positions some left the industry all together. They believed that the reason women have low self-confidence in leadership roles due to the hegemonic nature of professional sport. The study participants also identified the lack of role models and available female mentors consequently affect the underrepresentation of women. It was believed that the combination of barriers and support systems contributed to women not securing leadership positions in proportionate numbers.

Sponsorship and networking were two of the most common interventions recommended by these female leaders. Conversely, due to low female representation, the opportunity to take advantage of sponsorship and networking is challenging for aspiring female leaders. In addition, the participants explained that there were circumstances based on gender beyond representation that limited opportunity for networking. Some participants expressed concerns stating that they found networking hard, as they were female, and that male networking is often done in settings where some may feel uncomfortable. Respondents also noted that participation in this male-focused networking opportunities may have negative professional consequences and as a result, women are often forced to create different ways of networking. A structured and conceptually sound mentoring program or may help aspiring female leaders secure senior positions in the sports industry. The study participants also advised women to get career experience to develop broad and transferrable skill sets that will serve her well as she competes for senior roles.
Sports organizations must foster a workplace culture that is supportive of women who aspire to senior leadership positions. Sponsors and mentors also need to be acknowledged and rewarded by their organizations. Sport organizations need to create an environment that supports and rewards leadership from both men and women. "Recognition of sponsorship is likely to increase the number of senior leaders willing to spend time sponsoring more junior colleagues" (Block & Teiten-Smith, 2016, p. 310).

Weiner & Burton (2016) noted that both men and women view effective leadership as having a communal orientation through reinforcing the importance of workplace collaboration, capacity building and shared decision-making. This researcher recommends that women should employ a transformational leadership style.

By understanding the complexity of the issues facing women, sport organizations can cycle and ensure that the talents and experiences of strong and effective female leaders is not lost. Current leaders and team owners must encourage, create and implement supportive and inclusive policies and practices that promote equality in senior leadership positions within professional sport in Canada. It is recommended that researchers continue to study this issue so major change can transpire. Professional sport organizations in Canada should shift from the traditional view of leadership so women can contribute in higher proportions. It was clear that workplace issues and policies are working against aspiring females leaders. The leaky pipeline must be fixed. Professional sport organizations need to employ women in senior leadership roles to a high proportion. A vast amount of leadership talent is defecting and a significant demographic is overlooked. Significant change is warranted.
References


Email Script for Recruitment

**Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research**

Hello,

We have received your email address from the Canadian professional sports organization you work for (i.e. CFL, MLB, MLSE, NBA will vary & be personalized per participant). You are being invited to participate in a study that we, Dr. Jim Weese (Principal Researcher) and Amanda Cosentino (M.A. Candidate) are conducting. Briefly, the study involves investigating **Women and Leadership within Professional Sport in Canada**. Through this interview, we will gain a better understanding of how women progress to senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport.

To qualify for participation in this study, you must be a female that holds the highest ranking job within your respective professional sport organization. Participation will involve taking part in an interview with the primary researcher. The total time commitment will be approximately 30 minutes, this will be via telephone at your convenience. You will be compensated with a copy of the finished thesis findings.

Your participation is voluntary. There are no known risks to participating in this study. If you decide to participate, you may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

If you would like more information on this study or would like to receive a letter of information about this study please contact the researcher at the contact information given below.

Thank you.
APPENDIX B

Letter of Information and Consent to Participant in Research and Audio Taping

Senior Female Leadership in Canadian Professional Sport: Opportunities, Experiences, and Future Directions

Dr. Jim Weese, PhD, Kinesiology, Western University,
Amanda Cosentino, M.A. Candidate, Western University

You are being invited to participate in this research study about Women and Leadership within Professional Sport in Canada because you are a female that holds the highest-ranking job within your respective professional sport organization.

There is limited understanding of the opportunities, experiences and challenges that women face securing senior leadership roles in professional sport. The results of this thesis will help shed light on this important area. The researcher hopes that the findings of this research project will help sport management academicians; sport policy makers and sport leaders better understand the situation so they can address the situation. Further, the researcher will offer empirically based recommendations to facilitate improved leadership development and placement of women in senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada. Through this interview, we will gain a better understanding of how women progress to senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport.

It is expected that you will be in the study for one month, there will be one study visit during your participation in this study that will last approximately thirty minutes. If you agree to participate you will be asked to dedicate thirty minutes to a phone interview at your convenience to discuss your experiences working within professional sport in Canada. The interview will be audio-recorded however you are still able to participate if you do not agree to be recorded. This study is based out of Western University in London, Ontario. Phone interviews were chosen as the study is spanning nation wide.

The research will aim to answer the following questions:

1. What has been the career progression of women occupying senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?
2. What recommendations do these senior female leaders have for women seeking senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada?
3. Do women holding senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada experience any barriers that needed to be overcome to advance their career.
There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. However, if you experience any emotional upset or distress, a list of local mental health professionals will be provided to you. The possible benefit to you may be gratification telling your experiences to better society and improve the chances of women progressing to senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. Only the researcher and the principle investigator will have access to information collected. While we do our best to protect your information there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. The inclusion of your initials and date of birth may allow someone to link the data and identify you. If data is collected during the project which may be required to report by law we have a duty to report. The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for a minimum of 5 years. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file. If the results of the study are published, your name will not be used.

A summary of the results will be available upon request at the completion of the study as compensation for your participation in this research. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on any aspect of your employment or this study. We will give you new information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

If you have questions about this research study please contact Dr. Jim Weese, or Amanda Cosentino. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.
Verbal Consent Form

Do you confirm that you have read the Letter of Information [or the Letter of Information has been read to you] and have had all questions answered to your satisfaction?  
☐ YES  ☐ NO

Do you agree to participate in this research?  
☐ YES  ☐ NO

Do you agree to be audio-recorded?  
☐ YES  ☐ NO

This is optional, if you choose not to be audio recorded your information will be transcribed from the phone interview and reviewed with you at the end of the interview verbally, to eliminate error.

Do you consent to the use of personal, identifiable quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?  
☐ YES  ☐ NO

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?  
☐ YES  ☐ NO
APPENDIX C

Interview Telephone Script

Telephone Script
(To be used when the contact information is publicly available)

Hello, may I please speak with [insert the name of the potential participant here].

Hi, [insert the name of the potential participant here] this is Amanda Cosentino calling from the office of Dr. Jim Weese. I am calling today to ask if you are interested in a research study we are conducting. The study is being conducted by Dr. Jim Weese and will look at investigating Women and Leadership within Professional Sport in Canada. Through this interview, we will gain a better understanding of how women progress to senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport.

Would you be interested in hearing more about this study?

*If no, thank them for their time and say good-bye*

*If yes, continue to explain study details to them based on the letter of information*

I am now going to read you the letter of information over the phone.

(NOTE: The participant should have already received a copy for their reference via email or mail).

Do you have any questions?

Do you agree to participate in this study?
*If yes, continue with the study

*If no, thank them for their time and say good-bye
Phone Interview Guide for Female Senior Vice Presidents

Opening Comments –

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on **Women and Leadership within Professional Sport in Canada**. Through this interview, I will gain a better understanding of how women progress to senior leadership positions within Canadian Professional Sport. I have a number of questions to guide the interview, but these are only guides. I am interested in understanding your career experience and progression as a woman holding a senior leadership position in professional sport in Canada. Therefore, anything that you would like to share with me that will help my understanding would be appreciated. I aspire to a senior role in sport management myself so I value your insights and observations.

1. **Career Experiences:**
   a. Tell me about your career progression.
   b. Are there significant decisions that helped advance your career?
   c. As you reflect on your career, can you point to critical opportunities that helped you advance your career?
   d. As you reflect on your career, can you point to any critical mentors who helped advance your career?

2. **Perceived Obstacles & Opportunities:**
   a. Did you experience any obstacles or barriers that slowed your career progression? If so elaborate.
   b. Did you enjoy opportunities that helped advance your career progress? If so, elaborate.
   c. Did you employ any strategies to navigate through the advances in your career?

3. **Suggestions and Advice:**
   a. What advice would you give young women like me who seek a senior leadership position in professional sport in Canada?
   b. What early experiences should young women acquire to prepare her to secure senior leadership positions in professional sport in Canada.

4. **Conclusion:**
   a. Do you have any other comments that would help me understand your experiences and career progression?
   b. Do you have any final recommendations that would help women progress to senior leadership roles in professional sport in Canada?

Upon the completion of this study you will receive a copy of the document as a token of my appreciation for participating in the research. Thank you.
APPENDIX D

The University of Western University Board of Research Ethic’s Approval

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Jim Wese
Department & Institution: Health Sciences/Faculty of Health Sciences, Western University

NMREB File Number: 10676
Study Title: Senior Female Leadership in Canadian Professional Sport: Opportunities, Experiences, and Future Directions

NMREB Initial Approval Date: December 09, 2016
NMREB Expiry Date: December 09, 2017

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

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<td>Western University Protocol</td>
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<td>2016/12/09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Telephone Interview Script</td>
<td>2016/11/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment Items</td>
<td>Email Script for Recruitment</td>
<td>2016/11/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter of Information &amp; Consent</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016/12/09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.
AMANDA BRITTNEY COSENTINO

CAREER OBJECTIVE
A challenging career in Kinesiology/Physical Education/Sport Management that allows me to deploy my skills in leadership and human relations.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS
- Excellent leadership qualities
- Well-developed emotional intelligence skills
- Honest, reliable, and hardworking
- Advanced customer service/relations skills

EDUCATION
2015-2017 Master of Arts Candidate: Sport Management & Leadership
Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Western Ontario
- CIS Academic All Canadian Recipient, Women’s Varsity Basketball Team

2010-2015 Bachelor of Physical & Health Education
School of Kinesiology, Laurentian University
- Dean’s Honour Role Recipient
- CIS Academic All Canadian Recipient, Women’s Varsity Basketball Team

2006-2010 Ontario Secondary School Diploma
Strathroy District Collegiate Institute

CERTIFICATIONS
2015 The Teaching Assistant Training Program
2014 CPTN Personal Training Certification
2012 Life Saving Society First Aid

EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE
2015-2017 Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario
- Medical Issues, Sport Psychology
- Teaching lectures/conducting laboratories sessions
- Proctoring/marketing exams, holding office hours

2013-** Director of Golf
FireRock Golf Club, Komoka, Ontario
- Planned, promoted and directed all golf activities including daily management responsibilities including marketing (both print and e-based) throughout the GAO (Golfers Association of Ontario) and the PGA of Canada.
- Organized and conducted successful golf tournaments and major events. Schedules staff hours to assure that members are fully served and labour costs are maintained.
- Successfully hosted 52 Golf Tournaments (from company tournaments to celebrity charity events valued up to $180k) in the 2015 Season as well as managing approximately 400 Club Members.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

2016 2nd Annual Leader Character Conference
      *The Ivey Business School*, London Ontario

2016 *North American Society for Sport Management* (NASSM)
      Member, Orlando, Florida