



# Token responses to gendered newsrooms

## Factors in the career-related decisions of female newspaper sports journalists

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### ABSTRACT

Female sports journalists work as tokens in gendered organizations where masculinity is integral to hierarchical logic and newswork processes. Through in-depth interviews, this longitudinal study explores how women in the industry manage their gendered and professional identities and make career decisions. Our findings suggest that although participants framed their decisions to stay or to leave in idealized terms, their choices were also guided by cultural and structural impediments acknowledged but accepted as natural and immutable. The women noted negative gender-related experiences, but most minimized them and saw their gender as an advantage. They also described their struggles to balance their work and social lives, the latter of which they saw as a necessary sacrifice to become ideal workers. We discuss these issues and suggest that sports media will fail to reach gender parity until these barriers are addressed; until then, the revolving door will keep turning.

KEY WORDS ■ gendered organizations ■ social identity ■ sports journalism  
■ tokenism ■ women

When US newspapers and websites affiliated with Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) were surveyed about newsroom diversity during 2008, the results were so dismal that researchers gave APSE members an 'F' for their gender hiring practices (Lapchick et al., 2008). In a news release, the lack of women in sports departments was blamed on the faltering US newspaper industry. John Cherwa, sports coordinator for a group of major metropolitan dailies, said:

Newspapers across all regions and circulation sizes have been downsizing at accelerated rates... There are fewer hiring opportunities than there used to be. For example, if you look at the figures for ESPN.com and its columnists, you'll see great numbers. ... where did those columnists come from? Newspapers.

Blaming online media and chaos in the newspaper industry for the paltry number of women in sports departments is as flimsy as newsprint itself. Women have historically been under-represented in sports journalism, and the 2008 survey results do not differ from previous research (Etling, 2002; Hardin and Whiteside, 2006; Lapchick et al., 2006). The most recent study reflects an enduring industry trend: women in sports departments work in token status, where they constitute a fraction of sports editors (6%) and reporters (10%). These numbers represent a decline from even two years ago (Hardin and Whiteside, 2006; Lapchick et al., 2006, 2008) and compare unfavorably to the distribution of jobs in the general newsroom, where women make up 35 percent of supervisors and 39 percent of writers (American Society of News Editors, 2008). Hardin et al. (2008: 68) likened sports journalism to a 'revolving door' for women – as some enter, many leave, stagnating movement toward equity. The important question then becomes *why* women leave the profession, and even as many report high job satisfaction (Hardin and Shain, 2006).

In pursuit of an answer to the 'why' question, this research explores the intersection between gender and newswork in the (short) careers of 10 women in sports journalism. Through in-depth interviews with participants over several years, we interrogated their experiences and their rationales for working in the industry or, as half did, leaving it. Our findings suggest that although participants framed their decisions to stay or to leave in idealized terms, their choices were also guided by cultural and structural impediments acknowledged but accepted as natural and immutable. We suggest that sports media operations will fail to reach gender parity until these barriers are addressed; until then, the revolving door will keep turning.

### **The journalism workplace**

Organizational scholars argue that cultural norms contribute to the construction of an ideal worker, whose dedication to industry values maximizes the organization's goals (Williams, 2000). In journalism, the ideal worker is objective, practices value-free and dispassionate journalism and is always available (Robinson, 2005: 102). In theory, such dedication requires the negation of external demands, especially familial responsibilities (Acker, 1990).

Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations is a useful lens for viewing newsrooms. She argues that individuals do not bring gender to organizations, but that gender is integral to organizational processes. An organization is 'gendered' through the division of labor along gender lines, the construction of symbols that explain, reinforce or contest those divisions and the

interactions between individuals that enact dominance and submission. These processes position gender as the underlying framework for the logic and hierarchy of organizations. The division of beat assignments (men on sports and politics; women on features) and work policies that privilege individuals without primary childcare responsibilities (generally, men) are two examples.

### **Women and journalism**

Feminist scholars have noted that the prevailing newsroom culture logically leads to lower retention rates among women (Chambers et al., 2004; Robinson, 2005). It is overly simplistic, however, to view women as passive victims. Nicholson (2007), for example, suggests viewing female journalists as 'career confident' and 'career conflicted' to better understand their career paths. In that study, those categorized as 'confident' indicated they were satisfied with their careers, a sentiment expressed by many female journalists in interviews (Joseph, 2004; Robinson, 2005; Van Zoonen, 1998). 'Career conflicted' women expressed doubt about advancement because of sexism and felt less support from supervisors (Nicholson, 2007). Studies have also documented women's perceptions of sexism in newsrooms, including discrimination in hiring and promotion and the 'oppressive pressure of constantly having to prove themselves' (Joseph, 2004: 171; see also Chambers et al., 2004; Hardin and Shain, 2006). Other studies have focused on the 'motherhood penalty', 'glass ceiling' and 'leaky pipeline' as illustrative of organizational structures impeding the careers of workers who must focus some energy in the domestic sphere (Media Report to Women, 2002a, 2002b; Peters, 2001; Vavrus, 2007; Willard, 2007; Williams et al., 2006).

The conflict experienced by many women manifests in a low retention rate and a female workforce that is disproportionately younger than its male counterpart. Because younger workers are more likely than older workers to leave their jobs (Cohen, 1999), women as a group end up treading water, unable to make major headway.

### **Neo-liberalism and the rationale of 'choice'**

The exodus of women from newswork and other professions has been framed as a personal lifestyle choice unrelated to institutional norms; women leave in response to their natural urge to pursue domestic roles as they feel an 'internal, biological "pull" rather than a workplace "push"' (Williams et al., 2006: 5; see also Harvey, 2005; Vavrus, 2007). This reasoning ignores the dynamics of the gendered workplace and instead embraces neoliberalism,

a 'common-sense' worldview focusing on individualism and oblivious to institutional reinforcement of political and socio-economic hierarchies (Vavrus, 2007). Neoliberalism implies the disappearance of mutual obligation between institutions and individuals and instead emphasizes the individual's welfare as independent of institutional structures (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Thus, 'choices' such as accepting or leaving employment and starting or delaying families are also seen independently from their institutional context (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Questioning institutions and their inherent processes, routines and hierarchies, then, is muted, as they are accepted as natural (Davies et al., 2005). The practical result in the journalism workplace is that the:

... dramatic failure of high-hours, high-pressure workplaces (such as newspapers) to retain and promote proportionate numbers of women [are depicted as] nobody's fault; in fact, it's inevitable given that the 'brains of men and women light up differently' ... nothing needs to change. (Williams et al., 2006: 9)

### **Managing social identity**

Social identity theory suggests that individuals use multiple identities (e.g. woman, mother, reporter, sister, and athlete can all be claimed by the same person) to define themselves. These identities are 'descriptive, prescriptive, and evaluative' (De Bruin, 2004: 4) and hierarchical in a way that is situation-dependent (Joseph, 2004).

De Bruin (2004) positions gender as perhaps the most complex social identity; it involves everyday assumptions about orientations in thinking, feeling and behaving attached to the social categories that have been assigned to sex categories. Gender identity shapes and maintains work structures, and, as Acker (1990) argues, vice versa. De Bruin noted, after a series of interviews with male and female journalists, the ways women minimized their feminine identities to fit in with men and advance their careers; she concluded that '(over)identification with a traditional male work ethos and professional values ...seemed to be instrumental in avoiding gender tensions and polarization' (2004: 13).

In this way, women may be compelled to share in (male) rituals, such as sports talk, although these rituals often have little to do with an ability to do the job (Helgesen, 2003). Ascribing to established rituals, however, may be less about fitting in and more about adjusting to male-established rules and norms (Van Zoonen, 1998).

Robinson, however, suggests most female newsroom professionals do not opt out or become one of the boys, but rather 'use their gender strategically in certain circumstances' (2005: 187). For instance, they may use an

assumption about their lack of expertise to spend more time with key sources or use their interpersonal skills (e.g. 'flirting') to secure invitations to important social events (Hardin et al., 2008).

Many female journalists see their gender as an advantage in doing newswork (Chambers et al., 2004; Frohlich, 2004; Hardin and Shain, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008; Van Zoonen, 1998). A 2000 survey found that many women believe they bring a 'more human perspective' to news (Chambers et al., 2004: 103), a sentiment also echoed in qualitative interviews (Hardin and Shain, 2006).

It is important to note, however, that although female journalists may see their gendered identities as strategically advantageous, they also articulate attitudes and views on surveys that are similar to those of men. Chambers et al. (2004: 105) speculate that it is 'perhaps in part because women must adopt male-dominated newsroom values and practices in order to be regarded in the profession'.

### **Women in sports journalism: the theory of tokenism**

Although women have not reached parity in US newsrooms, they have moved beyond token status. Scholars suggest that members of a minority group have token status when they compose less than 15 percent of the workforce (Kanter, 1977). Eclipsing this number creates a 'critical mass', where they may be more likely to create change benefiting them directly (Grey, 2002; Saint-Germain, 1989; Thomas, 1991, 1994). Women who work in sports departments can be understood as tokens because they fail to meet the 15 percent threshold.

The work of Kanter (1993, 2003) and others on tokenism is useful for understanding women in sports journalism. Tokens are seen as symbols of a category, and judged as such, rather than as individuals (Riordan et al., 2005). Tokens have a higher turnover rate than majority groups; it is likely that they leave a workplace because of their scarcity and its attendant problems rather than the social group in which they are identified (women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, for example) (Kanter, 2003). Studies of workplace tokens, such as male flight attendants or non-white corporate leaders, have found that they exhibit lower organizational attachment, higher levels of anxiety, increased role ambiguity and increased perception that they are a poor fit for their responsibilities (Riordan et al., 2005).

Because they are highly visible within their organizations, tokens are under intense levels of performance pressure. Their response to such visibility may be to: 1) over-achieve to minimize organizational and peer concerns

(‘prove themselves’); 2) work to turn their increased visibility to their distinct career advantage; or to 3) seek to assimilate with the goal of becoming socially invisible (Kanter, 2003).

Kanter (2003) warns that choosing to overachieve to avoid lack of respect requires a great deal of job-related competence and political sensitivity, which could take years to acquire; her 1993 research on young corporate women found that they had great difficulty at work because of their lack of skills and political staying power. Those women who capitalized on their visibility saw other women as threatening their ‘special’ status, but they were also less likely to be cognizant of the risks associated with their minority status. The third strategy, aiming for invisibility, involves efforts by women to minimize their sexual attributes and blend ‘unnoticeably into the predominant male culture’ (2003: 41). Tokens may find themselves conforming to the group rather than challenging group norms or expectations (Riordan et al., 2005).

### **Research on women in sports journalism**

As sports are ‘home to one of the most intense and most historically enduring gender divisions in journalism’ (Chambers et al., 2004), it is no surprise that female sports journalists reflect the sentiments of tokens. The struggle to ‘prove themselves’ has been a constant theme for women in sports (Hardin and Shain, 2005, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008). Others have minimized their gender by emphasizing their occupational identities as primary. In Hardin et al.’s study (2008: 72) one woman said she aimed to have the men she worked with believe, ‘She’s just like us.’ Some saw their gender identities as holding privileges that could advantage them unfairly.

Tokens have little leverage in the workplace and are more likely to be subject to harassment and discrimination, two issues that have historically plagued women in sports journalism (Chambers et al., 2004). Female sports-writers started the Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM) in 1987 to address these issues, but recent research suggests female sportswriters may resist the idea that they face a disadvantage at work (Miloch et al., 2005). Some women, especially younger ones, believe gender is not an issue in the workplace and express reluctance to advocate women’s issues (Hardin and Shain, 2006; Stauroskey and DiManno, 2002). Jane Chastain, one of the first female sports broadcasters in the USA, for instance, recounted a case of harassment early in her career but denied discrimination as an issue. ‘In your career, you don’t complain,’ she told an interviewer. ‘You do what you have to do to get to your goal’ (Kammer, 1994).

Their reluctance to see the workplace as gendered and their willingness to take an individualist view seem to reinforce Hall's (1996) characterization of women in sports journalism as generally resistant to the politicization of their gendered status; they instead take a 'commonsense' view of their gendered identity as private and manageable in relationship to their profession. In light of the theory of tokenism, this view and its accompanying behavior are also understood as part of a *career-survival* strategy in an overwhelmingly masculine workplace.

### **This research**

Female sports journalists work as tokens in gendered organizations, where masculinity is integral to hierarchical logic and processes. We sought to explore how these journalists manage their gendered identities and their professional identities and how they make decisions about their career paths. We did so by following the careers of women new to the profession over a span of three years and interviewing them once a year to assess their experiences and attitudes toward their work in sports journalism.

### **Participants**

The lead researcher recruited 10 women beginning their careers in sports journalism in 2005, using contacts in the AWSM to meet women who had begun their careers as reporters or copy editors less than two years previously. The women represented small, mid-sized and large dailies; the reporters covered beats ranging from prep sports to prominent university and professional teams. Some worked as the only woman in their department; others had a female colleague or two, but also had a work situation that kept seeing that colleague from being routine.

Only one of the women was married, and none had children. Most were not in committed relationships, but several developed such relationships in the course of the project. Most were 26 years old in the summer of 2008, when the latest round of interviews took place. All of the participants identified as Caucasian except one, who identified as Asian. Pseudonyms are used in the findings to protect confidentiality promised in the interviews.

By the third round of interviews, in 2007, five of the 10 women had left sports journalism; four of the five who left had also left full-time newsroom work (one woman began working as a features reporter). All, however, agreed to continue with the interview process.

### Interviewing procedure

During recruitment, the women agreed to be interviewed in one-year increments for five years, following their first year on the job; most have completed their fourth-year interview. One of us, a researcher with formal training and extensive experience in interviewing, conducted all of the interviews, which have lasted about an hour (Acker et al., 1991). The interviews were done in person if logistically feasible; for instance, the researcher interviewed some participants when they attended annual AWSM meetings. The researcher conducted the tape-recorded interviews using a 'semi-structured' format that included several main questions that were asked in each session (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 135). The lead researcher began the interviews by asking the participant to describe her current work responsibilities. Other specific questions asked in all the interviews included: 'What would make your work experience better?'; 'Can you describe your long-term career goals?'; 'What are you most proud of in your career?'; and 'Would you recommend this profession to other women?' Although the researcher began with a list of main questions, follow-up questions were unique to each individual based on response (Potter, 1999). As the years went by and the participants' career paths diverged, interviews with former sports journalists varied from those who were still working in the business. After completing each interview, the women were paid \$25 as a token of appreciation for their time.

### Analysis

The recordings were transcribed and then sent to the participants to review and make changes, although none did. We analyzed the transcripts using Braune and Clarke's (2006) model of a theoretical thematic analysis, which provides a rich analysis pertaining to a specific aspect of the data, in this case how newswork relates to tenure and experience. This widely used analysis allowed for the identification and analysis of patterns in the transcribed conversations.

We independently analyzed the transcripts and then met to discuss our interpretations in order to address and improve the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). While the names we chose for our themes were not always identical, many of our ideas converged. We discussed any differing interpretations and mutually agreed on the final analysis.

While the ultimate goal of using more than one investigator in the qualitative analysis of data is not and should not be replicability, discussion related to the analysis contributes to its credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Further, as feminist researchers, we embrace 'the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the



research process' in establishing trustworthiness (Fonow and Cook, 1991: 2). We assessed our own analysis through deliberate focus on our theoretical lens and through conversations about how our own social identities might influence our understanding of the women we studied.

### **Findings: managing expectations and identities**

In our analysis, we noted themes common to the work experience and identity management of all participants. For instance, nearly all noted negative experiences in which gender played a key role, but most minimized these experiences and saw their gender as a strategic advantage. All noted their struggles to 'prove themselves' and to balance their work and their social lives, which they felt had been a (necessary) sacrifice to become ideal sports journalists. Most also weighed the chaos in the newspaper industry as they considered their options. We discuss these issues in depth, contrasting the perceptions of women who have stayed in the industry with those who decided to leave.

#### **Incorporating the ideal-worker standard**

In general, the women accepted the ideal worker norm as part of the sacrifice of being in sports journalism. Sandra, who had worked as a preps writer at a small paper before moving to the same job at a much larger paper, said working 70-hour weeks to cover the 47 high schools in her beat was necessary for her to keep up with the competition from nearby papers.

Lisa, who had risen in three years from preps reporter to NFL beat writer for a major paper, also said much of the reason she put in the long hours was not because she actually had work to do, but because she was afraid of the work her competition might be doing. She called it the 'fear factor'. She did not take days off, she said, because she knew other writers on her beat were not. She had also moved twice for her job, breaking up with a boyfriend when she moved; she said she saw no other option.

Lisa and the other participants discussed the toll the grueling schedules took on their social lives. For some participants, hosting friends for lunch on a holiday before heading out to work the night shift or figuring out a way to attend church each week were small victories. Some participants, most often the reporters, found that they ended up socializing with other reporters because of the similarities in their schedules. Nancy, who worked as a reporter and fill-in editor at a small, rural daily paper (and who left after only about two years), said:

It's almost impossible to date in this job, I have found. Nobody understands. Unless you are in the business nobody understands why you have to go to soft-ball practice at night. 'Can't you just do it later?' No, I have to go talk to the coach, and it's hard to explain to friends and family why your schedule is the way it is.

***Incompatible demands and goals*** Although most saw the hours and schedule as a roadblock to satisfaction of personal goals, the women who left often cited the demanding work hours as a main reason for their departure. Ultimately, they saw sports journalism as preventing them from pursuing the family they anticipated when they became involved in a serious relationship. Karen, a reporter for a mid-sized paper, said about the prospects of balancing a career in sports and a family: 'I know people do it, but I just – at least the way I was going, it just didn't seem like it was gonna really work.'

Shannon, the only married participant, could envision a family after she moved from being a sports copy editor at a large paper to features writer at a small daily:

Now that we're both 9-to-5 schedules, I can definitely see us having kids in the next couple of years. We didn't want to have them before ... And, you know, as far as the kid thing goes, working at night, a lot of times the people I worked with who had kids, it was horrible. They would have to call at 9 p.m. and say good-night to them, and like, you know, then they really didn't get to see them. I didn't want that at all.

***Positioning themselves as ideal workers*** Those who stayed persisted in viewing the hours as a necessary sacrifice to attain career success. They rationalized their decision to stay in sports journalism by seeing themselves as taking advantage of job opportunities because they could: They were young, single, ambitious and without attachments. Sandra, for instance, complained about her beat (covering 47 schools), but then said:

The competition has four people. I'm one. So it's a little intense, so it would make my job a lot happier if we could get someone else in to share the responsibilities, but at the same time, like, I kind of like having everything to do myself because I get all the best stories. I get all the best games.

Mary, a college beat writer at a mid-sized paper with a boyfriend who was also a sportswriter, said: 'I think it would be hard to be working weekends all the time when that's maybe all the time you have with your kids, but I guess, again, that's something I'm not really going to do anytime soon.'

The others, two beat writers at large papers and a copy editor at a small paper in the town where she attended college, positioned the hours as serving their career goals and allowing them to stay competitive. Lisa, the NFL writer, said she appreciated friends who understood her need to send a web feed from

her Blackberry during dinner; she also speculated that when she did date, she needed to date another journalist who understood her lifestyle.

The role of romantic relationships as a potential disruption to a sports journalism career, however, was a possibility. Sandra, the preps writer who often worked 70-hour weeks and who described herself as an 'obsessive personality' in relationship to her work, had aspired to rising to a college beat. She reported in her fourth interview, however, that she had started a serious relationship. Her boyfriend, a college coach, had just moved out of state, she said, and she intended to follow him even if it meant giving up sports journalism. 'It's a really scary point,' she said. 'I want to hang on to my career, but I want to hang on to him, too.'

### **Managing a gendered identity in the workplace**

Participants talked about their work and their work-related relationships in ways that underscored the complexity of their efforts to manage their gendered identities. They sought both to minimize their gendered identity and to use it to strategic advantage.

**Minimizing gender identity** Most participants were acutely aware that their status as women meant potential for peril in the way co-workers, supervisors, sources and readers perceived them. One perception was that they were unqualified to work in sports. 'If you ask a dumb question, you don't know what you are talking about,' said Janet, the NBA writer. 'If a guy asks the same question, it's just a dumb question.' Several participants were perhaps most sensitive about perceptions by co-workers that they were not hired on ability and, thus, were not qualified to hold the job. Several hinted that they felt as though they had been hired because they were women, and they felt guilty about it.

Generally, the strategy these women used was to minimize their gendered identities in two ways: by 'proving themselves' through overachieving, and by becoming 'one of the boys' through exhibiting toughness and expressing a preference for working with men. Comments like the following from Jane, a copy editor who eventually left, were common, especially in the first- and second-year interviews: 'I felt right away that I needed to prove myself because I wanted them to respect me as their equal and as someone who had equal sports knowledge as them.'

The two women with the most prominent professional-beat jobs talked less in terms of 'proving themselves' and more in terms of making sure they were not 'pushed around' by sources. 'You always wonder if people are taking you seriously,' said Janet. 'You have to be careful not to let other people

dominate.' Jane, who sometimes supervised her copy desk, struggled for credibility with the men she supervised and encountered hostility:

Most of the men who work for the preps section are middle-aged men who've never had to work for a woman before and they have a problem with that. I was called a bitch – which I do not, I don't think any woman likes to be called that, but – to have people say it when you're right there, it's not good ... There are other jobs where I won't have to deal with it as much.

The need to prove themselves and to keep from being pushed around on the job was, in the minds of most participants, connected to the need to show themselves as tough and 'thick-skinned', as more than one woman characterized it. Lisa wondered during her second-year interview, when she was still a preps writer:

... do I have that, whatever that chip is that journalists need that are able to be ruthless and ... I don't think anybody ever wants to be ruthless and destroy people's lives ... Sometimes I wonder do I have that thing in me.

Janet, the other professional-beat writer, also struggled with the expectation to be aggressive. She announced in her latest (fourth) interview that she was considering leaving the industry, and much of the reason, she said, is that she did not see herself as 'totally cut out' for it. She said part of the reason for her dissatisfaction was that 'you're intruding on people. No matter what, I can't get over that. I don't know if that's being a female ... I don't think anyone else feels bad doing that.'

The need for a thick skin, however, was also perceived as necessary to deal with colleagues. Participants did not condemn the sports-department culture, one where 'boys will be boys' was used to rationalize sexist behavior, but instead discussed their ways of dealing with it. The thick skin was an asset; 'we are fighters', one woman proclaimed as a defining characteristic of women in sports journalism. Participants who did not think their skin was thick enough doubted their 'fit' in the newsroom. After her second year, Nancy noted, 'I take everything personally, and that's one reason I kind of thought, you know, maybe I'm not cut out for this.'

Handling the 'boys-being-boys' environment was seen as an effective way to assimilate. For instance, Jane said that being 'sensitive' when men are condescending or sexist was ineffective. 'I'm a big girl. I can handle it,' she said. After Jane left her job for a PR position, however, she reflected on the harassment she had received as a desk supervisor, and decided that perhaps the tough guise was ultimately not the best strategy:

Some of the stuff that's happened to me, no one even knew about it. I mean, I didn't tell anyone because I don't want to be a tattletale or immature or anything – but if they want to keep women around, don't let some of this stuff happen.

Most participants, however, were generally not concerned with ways to 'keep women around'. Most said they enjoyed working in an environment dominated by men and even preferred it to working with women. Lisa jokingly referred to the television sitcom 'My Boys', based on a female sportswriter whose best friends are almost all men, as typifying her life. Comments like the following from Karen were also common:

I'm pretty much left to just hanging out with guys. I mean, for the most part I'm used to it so it's not that big of a deal. I've always been able to handle myself around guys because I'm very much a smart aleck and very sarcastic, which is how 90 percent of guys are.

A few participants viewed other women with suspicion or competition. Lisa, the NFL writer, said she tended to see other women as competition because 'you know they're gonna interview one woman if there's a job open, and you feel like, okay ... this is our competition, right here.'

***Strategically using gender*** On the other hand, almost all participants talked at length about the ways their feminine identities could help them on the job and be an advantage. Copy editors said they use their identity as women to ask reporters for clarification on a story without hostility, positioning assumptions about their lack of sports knowledge to their advantage.

Reporters saw the potential to establish an identity. Janet, the NBA writer, said, 'I'm the only female, and everyone else is a 60-year-old male, so you probably have a better chance of standing out and having people remember you.' Elizabeth, who worked a prominent college beat, said she did not flirt or dress provocatively, but:

... if you're a 21–22 year old college football player, would you rather talk to me or would you rather talk to a scruffy 45-year-old kind of obnoxious guy who is every other writer on the beat?

Elizabeth also came to believe that the advantages she had with sources made up for discrimination she might encounter. She told a story about an assignment during her first year on the job to survey major league baseball players during spring training. One day, she brought a male intern with her: 'He noticed it was much easier for me – these guys gave me the time of day, and they wouldn't give it to him,' she said.

***Gendered identity and career-altering decisions*** Overall, there was little difference in the gender-management strategies of women who changed careers and those who still work in sports journalism. All, to one degree or another, were concerned with fitting in, proving themselves and exhibiting a certain toughness.

Instead, it seemed to be the experiences of participants and their sense of control over their careers that drove their decisions. For instance, Jane and Karen, who both reported experiencing discrimination or harassment on the job, left. Those who stayed, including Lisa, Mary, Vicky and Janet, reported that they could not recall being treated in a way they would characterize as discriminatory. Instead, they tended to see their work through the lens of their *professional* identities, which minimized their identification with (female) gender, and had enough positive experiences to make that identity salient.

Although they viewed their futures cautiously, they were confident about their abilities and expressed a sense of accomplishment about their achievements. This was in contrast with most of the women who left; rather than seeing themselves in control of their own careers, those women felt no sense of accomplishment and saw themselves as lacking power to achieve professional goals. Again, this was grounded in their experience.

Ultimately, that lack of control may be enough to give women that final push out. Karen, who landed a job at a mid-sized paper right out of college noted throughout her first-year interview the bad schedule, low support and sexist comments she heard on a regular basis; by her second year she had left her job saying she felt 'underappreciated', finally noting:

I didn't leave sports journalism because I wasn't good at it. You know, I had a pretty decent job and I was close enough to getting better jobs that I knew I could have moved up in the business. I just decided that I didn't want to.

### **Uncertainty in the industry**

A concern heard only sporadically in initial interviews but which dominated later discussions with some participants was that of the uncertainty in the US newspaper industry. None of the women were laid off from their jobs or even felt a threat of being released, but all – even those who continued in their careers – said the situation had given them pause for thought. Several who left pointed directly to the industry as a reason they left.

Janet's story was illustrative of how these issues became more prominent for each woman. In her first-year interview, she recognized the challenges faced by newspapers but did not see them affecting her personally. By the end of her third year, she talked at length about how industry trends had directly impacted her job. When asked to 'bring me up to speed' by the interviewer at the beginning of the conversation, Janet noted that consolidation had decreased the reporter pool for her beat. She missed working with one writer specifically, a fellow minority who she felt like she 'clicked' with; later she said:

You're doing more work now than you were before for the same amount of pay, vacation and everything else. Probably in a lot of ways it's less rewarding because of all the media that's out there – the Internet and everything else. It's not like [you have] the exclusivity or whatever over your beat in the same way.

Several of the participants who had left directly attributed the struggling newspaper industry as a primary reason for their departure. They could not envision their own future in an industry that they saw as unstable. Jane explained:

I just didn't feel like I was ever gonna make any money because, to get a position where you're gonna make money, you have to be an editor, and to be an editor, you've gotta stick it out and put in your time. And the way that papers were going, it was really discouraging.

The women who stayed, however, saw themselves as being able to survive and felt they were insulated from layoffs. They were also relatively optimistic about their ability to adapt to the demands of new media. Two women also saw potential for advancement in the chaos. Lisa and Sandra, for instance, both saw the fact that they were younger, less experienced employees as making them more attractive: they demanded a lower salary than their older, male counterparts. They wondered however, if their feminine identities would be strategically advantageous with employers, as they assumed that hard times in the newspaper business would diminish newsroom diversity initiatives. They shared the same outlook as Elizabeth, who predicted when she left that it would become harder for women to grab the small number of available jobs. 'Gender issues are inseparable from the state of the industry right now,' she said. 'How is anyone going to solve hiring issues when no one is hiring right now?'

### **Discussion: token responses to a masculine culture**

Our efforts to make sense of how these women managed their identities and career decisions were informed by our understanding of their roles as tokens in gendered (masculine) newsrooms. All of the participants enthusiastically entered sports journalism careers, and all reported that the actual work was satisfying. What was not satisfying, within four years, were their careers. Five of the 10 women had left by year four, and two more (Sandra and Janet) expressed serious reservations about whether they would stay much longer. The number of 'career-conflicted' women far outweighed, within a short span of time, those who were 'career-confident'.

Our understanding of the sports department as gendered allows us to understand the role of masculinity in the standards, norms and expectations of the women we interviewed. The structure, as Acker (1990) explains, privileges an ideal (male) worker that is unencumbered by domestic pursuits. 'Total availability', then, is the standard. It is understandable why participants felt they had no choice but to work long hours, even when they did not have unfinished tasks. Pursuing this ideal, however, collided with their pursuit of social relationships and their vision of the possible family lives. It is interesting to us that it was not the reality of these family responsibilities and goals – none of the women we interviewed had children – but the *anticipation* of such that distressed some women. The sports-journalism career demanded almost total devotion, and even a romantic relationship (sans children) was reason enough to pause and ask whether the career was still viable.

Our understanding of the gendered workplace also allowed us to fully appreciate the gender-management strategies of the women we interviewed. The women spent a great deal of time and energy in managing their gendered and professional identities, seeking the sliver of common ground between the two. Becoming 'one of the boys', a strategy Van Zoonen (1998) and others have observed among women who do not cover sports, was especially salient with these women, probably because of the enduring rigidity of male privilege in sports. As they pursued the thick-skinned toughness and socialization associated with masculinity to varying degrees, they also had to use their gendered identity when it could expedite a professional goal (such as getting an interview with a young, male athlete). It seems that the constant juggling of their feminine identity and professional (masculine-pursuant) identity could be exhausting, although none of the participants acknowledged such.

### **Theory of tokenism**

Our understanding of tokenism, informed by that of the gendered workplace, allows us to better understand the ways our participants responded to their newswork environment. As tokens, the women we interviewed feel extraordinarily 'oppressive pressure' (Joseph, 2004: 171) to prove themselves because of their visibility – they cannot escape scrutiny. Their decisions about conformity to the ideal-worker norm and to the masculine culture, for instance, are even greater than for women in other parts of the newsroom.

Kanter (1993, 2003) suggests that tokens often overachieve in an effort to prove they deserve the job and/or work to turn their visibility to advantage. Most of the participants, perhaps also because these were their first jobs, expressed concern about proving themselves. Those who stayed focused less on that pursuit as the years passed. Those who left, such as Nancy, were still



in the proving process even as they walked out the door. A few of our participants also sought to turn their rarity into advantage; perhaps the most notable was Lisa, who said she saw other women as competition; their presence diminished her value as a scarce commodity.

Kanter (1993, 2003) also suggests that tokens leave the workplace at a higher rate than do members of the majority for a number of reasons, and we heard those reasons echoed in our interviews. For instance, several participants presented lack-of-fit as a reason they left or were thinking about leaving. We suggest that as US newsrooms downsize, the number of women will continue to fall – not only because sports editors may lower their priority for diversity initiatives (as our participants observed), but also because female sports journalists, who have never been welcome and are more likely to question their suitability for such careers, may be more likely to leave.

Young women in token positions may also leave because they do not have the combination of high competence and the political savvy to survive (Kanter, 2003; 1993). In our interviews, we saw several women, especially Jane, Nancy and Karen, struggle to overachieve while they grappled with the harassment and discrimination. It is easy to understand why this double-burden is too much to bear, and leaving the workplace is a relief.

### **Individual choice and institutional responsibility**

The women who left and those who considered leaving presented their decisions as individual, free choice. They acknowledged barriers such as the time demands and what they called a ‘boys-will-be-boys’ culture, but did not see these barriers as institutionally constructed. Instead, they accepted them as natural and immutable. Jane, the copy editor who was verbally abused on the copy desk, did say that supervisors needed to ‘do a better job of overseeing everything’ (i.e. spotting and stopping harassment), but did not see the sports-journalism environment, which privileges men, as part of the problem.

This ‘commonsense’ logic of neoliberalism, which ultimately equates personal freedom with institutional lack of social responsibility and individualizes structural problems (e.g. a bad supervisor is to blame for the expectation to work long hours), obscures the root of problems in newswork. It also obscures the nature of newswork as a gendered institution, one where a male-as-norm ethos is built into its processes and organizational hierarchies. It perpetuates the dynamics that keep women in perpetual ‘token’ status inside sports departments, and it produces the kinds of work-life and performance pressures that drive them out. Thus, when an editor uses low hiring rates in the newspaper business to justify an ‘F’ for gender parity in sports, few voices rise in protest. When women leave and cite family or personal reasons, the

institutional framework that led to her *experience*, in which she has grounded her decision that she cannot fit in the sports-journalism culture, is not interrogated; thus, the revolving door keeps turning.

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