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Examining Professional Identity among Collegiate Athletic Trainers and its Relationship with Work-family Conflict

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Abstract

Purpose: Professional identity is defined as an individual's set of attitudes and beliefs about their specific role in their profession; a concept that could perhaps have implications on experiences of work-family conflict. The purpose of the study is to examine professional identity within college athletic trainers and how it relates to experiences of work-family conflict. **Methods:** Data was collected through an online survey (Qualtrics) where participants responded to demographic questions and previously validated Professional Identity and Values (PIV) Scale and the Work-Family Conflict (WFC) Scale. Demographic data were reported and analyzed for descriptives and frequencies. Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests were performed to identify differences among groups. **Results:** 585 (373 female, 210 male) college athletic trainers completed our study. Participants on average were 33 9 years of age and had 10 8 years of experience. Participants average score on the PIV scale was 93.618.96 and 4511.55 on the WFC scale. A Mann Whitey U test revealed there was no statistical difference between genders within the PIVS scale (p=.527). A Mann Whitey U test revealed a significant statistical difference between those who had less than 3 years of experience and those who had more than 3 years (U=20178.5, pConclusions:Male and female athletic trainers, regardless of their level within the NCAA collegiate setting, reported similar levels of PIV, but those athletic trainers with more than three years of experience reported higher levels. When an athletic trainer has responsibilities at home that require time and energy, his/her level of PIV is reduced.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Professional identity is defined as an individual's set of attitudes and beliefs about their specific role in their profession; a concept that could perhaps have implications on experiences of work-family conflict. The purpose of the study is to examine professional identity within college athletic trainers and how it relates to experiences of work-family conflict. **Methods:** Data was collected through an online survey (Qualtrics) where participants responded to demographic questions and previously validated Professional Identity and Values (PIV) Scale and the Work-Family Conflict (WFC) Scale. Demographic data were reported and analyzed for descriptives and frequencies. Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests were performed to identify differences among groups. **Results:** 585 (373 female, 210 male) college athletic trainers completed our study. Participants on average were 33 $\pm$ 9 years of age and had 10 $\pm$ 8 years of experience. Participants average score on the PIV scale was 93.61$\pm$8.96 and 45$\pm$11.55 on the WFC scale. A Mann Whitey U test revealed there was no statistical difference between genders within the PIVS scale ($p=.527$). A Mann Whitey U test revealed a significant statistical difference between those who had less than 3 years of experience and those who had more than 3 years ($U=20178.5$, $p<.001$). Athletic trainers who were married scored statistically higher on the PIVS scale (95.619$\pm$7.93) than those who were single (91.67$\pm$9.63). A Mann Whitney U test revealed a significant statistical difference between those who were married and single ($U=19149.0$, $p<.001$). **Conclusions:** Male and female athletic trainers, regardless of their level within the NCAA collegiate setting, reported similar levels of PIV, but those athletic trainers with more than three years of experience reported higher levels. When an athletic trainer has responsibilities at home that require time and energy, his/her level of PIV is reduced.

Key Words: work-life balance, job demands, role congruence

Key Points:

1) Sex and collegiate level hand an influence on athletic trainers self-reported PIVS scores.
2) Married athletic trainers and those with 3 or more years of experience as an athletic trainer self-report higher levels on the PIVS.
3) Family interference with work was negatively related to PIVS, and predicted PIVS scores.

INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of work-family conflict is not unique to the profession of athletic training, but the sources of conflict can be distinctive from other fields.[1] Athletic trainers who are working in the more traditional settings, such as the secondary school and collegiate settings, have been the large focus on the work-family research initiatives; mostly due to its characterization of being demanding and time consuming.[2] The collegiate setting is the largest employer of athletic trainers,[3] currently and there is no evidence to suggest that work-family conflict experiences differ among the levels within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)[1]; despite inferences that the NCAA Division I setting is viewed as more demanding of its members.[2] Moreover, the NCAA setting often sees turnover, due to challenges with burnout, role incongruence, and work-family conflict.[4,5] The strength of one's identity, particularly towards their job or career, may help mitigate the experiences of work-family conflict. Thus, it is an important construct to understand, particularly for an athletic trainer.[6]

Professional identity is defined as an individual's set of attitudes and beliefs about their specific role in their profession, as well as the ability to demonstrate knowledge and skills in their professional field.[7] Through professional education, potential graduate assistant positions, continued work in the athletic training field, and ongoing interactions with skilled colleagues, athletic trainers experience professional socialization in order to develop a professional identity.[8,9] Although much of the focus on professional identity is about the athletic trainer becoming legitimized into their future professional role, the concept is also a process in which the athletic trainer develops their own set of beliefs that will help them govern their management of their professional role, as well as their own personal lives.[10] During this process, the athletic trainer observes their professional mentors navigate the long hours, the travel load, and patient care schedules, all of which are job related responsibilities that are time intensive and draining. During this impressionable time, it is conceivable that the athletic trainer learns valuable tools and strategies to help them balance their work expectations to allow for time and energy to participate in family time and personal hobbies or leisure activities that also define them as individuals. The importance of role models and mentoring extends beyond the tangible skills needed for success as an athletic trainer as it can positively impact one's beliefs on finding work-life balance.[11]

The importance of developing one's professional identity first emerged in athletic training as research grew around the factors leading to work-family conflict as well as factors supporting retention. Particularly, interest grew around an athletic trainer's alignment with the values, beliefs, and roles of the profession within their employment setting.[7,12] Goodman et al[13] found that when an athletic trainer aligned with their role, they were happier and remained in their jobs longer. This was initially reported within a female specific population, but later sex was not found to be a factor. The concept of professional identity, values, and alignment with the workplace setting and role of the athletic trainer was conceptualized as a variable of the work-life balance interface.[13,14]

The process of developing one's individual, professional identity can take several months to a few years to complete, and recent data suggests that age and years of experience influence the process.[12] Simply speaking, those athletic trainers who have recently transitioned and who are younger are likely to experience professional insecurity early in their first year on the job. Over time, with experience working independently, the athletic trainer gains more confidence and settles into their role, with job acceptance and inductance. Once this stage of development is reached, the athletic trainer is likely to experience less stress and in turn develop the necessary coping strategies to manage the stressors of the job.[15] Furthermore, it is likely that female athletic trainers may likely take longer to transition out the professional insecurity stage of development, as they often experience more stress than men in general.[16]

Using the concept of work addiction, it is plausible that if an athletic trainer has a strong professional identity, they are more likely to experience work-family conflict. Moreover, data suggests that female athletic trainers are at greater risk for compulsive tendencies, a component of work addition.[17] This is interesting evidence, as sex differences are not found when looking at work-family conflict,[18] but perceptions do vary when examining parenting roles, experiences of burnout, and factors influencing retention and satisfaction.[14,19,20] Time has traditionally been a antecedent to work-family conflict. With a finite amount of time, when the work role is demanding, it leaves little time for family obligations or personal interests and hobbies. Although time is the primary reason for work-family conflict for athletic trainers, one's professional identity could provide an additional framework to understand its occurrence. Professional identity has roots in social identity theory which postulates a person classifies themselves into various social groupings which helps them identify their place in society.[21] So, if an athletic trainer views himself/herself as a successful and valuable athletic trainer, they may experience work-family conflict when other social and life roles limit time to complete work-related tasks. Sources of work-family conflict have been explored, exhaustively in the athletic training literature, most often through descriptives such as age, gender, or marital status, and not the value placed upon social identity (i.e., professional identity).

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the professional identity and values within collegiate athletic trainers and how it relates to demographics and work-family conflict. We predicted the following hypotheses:

H1: male athletic trainers will demonstrate higher levels of professional identity than female athletic trainers.
H2: athletic trainers who have 3 years or less of experience as a clinician will report higher levels of professional identity than those who have more than 3 years of experience.
H3: athletic trainers employed in the NCAA Division I setting will report higher professional identity than those working in the NCAA Division II, and III levels.
H4: athletic trainers who are married will score lower levels of professional identity than those who are single.
H5: family interference with work will be predictive of professional identity among collegiate athletic trainers.

METHODS

Research Design

We selected an online cross-sectional survey (Qualtrics, Provo UT) to collect data on college athletic trainer's professional values and identity related to several participant demographics and work-family conflict. The PIVS[7] and WFC[22] scales selected for the cross-sectional survey are reliable, valid measures (Table 1), and both scales have been used within the athletic training literature beforehand. None of the instruments were altered, as they had been previously validated within the literature and are viewed as the gold standard. The scales selected have not been used simultaneously but are used commonly in the literature to evaluate their respective constructs. The study was approved by the University of Connecticut's institutional review board before data collection began.

Participants

At the outset of the study, one member of the research team developed a list of all colleges and universities offering NCAA athletic programs (D1=351, D2=307, D3=442). From that list, the same member of the research team found the sports medicine departments' directories and an email contact list was developed, as a result. The list included 6,1110 athletic trainers employed across the NCAA Division I, II, and III settings. Email invitations were sent to those 6,110 athletic trainers during the Fall of 2020. We had 757 responses (12% response rate). Our response rate is comparable to survey research published in the field of athletic training, and comparable to work published on the topic of work-family conflict, which range between 14-21%.[7,16] Additionally, our response rate is much higher than other published research that uses email methods for recruitment.[22] We manually reviewed the survey responses for our inclusion criteria (clinically working 50% or more of working hours and employment in the NCAA Division I, II, and III setting) and completing all sections of the survey; 585 responses remained for data analyses (77% completion rate).

Instrumentation

The online questionnaire (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) included a demographic section and 28 questions related to the aforementioned variables. Demographic questions were related to participant age, sex, marital and family status, weekly hours worked, highest level of education, National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) District association, NCAA Division (I, II, or III), and years of BOC certification.

Work-Family Conflict. Work-family conflict was measured using a scale validated by Carlson et. al,[23] which included 3 subscales (time, strain, behavioral). The 18-item questionnaire has been previously used in the athletic training population and proven to be a valid, reliable measure of work-family conflict.[24] For purposes of this study, we focused on the directional nature of conflict between work to home/family life. The scale does measure both work-family conflict and family-work conflict.

The scale asks respondents to rate their level of agreement (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly agree) with statements regarding their work and life roles and how they interfere with one another. Sample items included: "The time I must devote to my job keeps me from participating equally in household responsibilities and activities," "I am often so emotionally drained when I get home from work that it prevents me from contributing to my family", and "The problem-solving behaviors I use in my job are not effective in resolving problems at home." The subscales are totaled with a maximum score of 45 for work-family conflict; a higher score indicates a higher level of work-family conflict.

Professional Identity and Values Scale. To assess our sample's professional self-concept and values, we used the Professional Identity and Values Scale (PIVS). The PIVS was validated within the athletic training profession and measures the athletic trainer's professional identity development and professional self-concept.[7] The overall questionnaire is comprised of two subscales: professional development and professional orientation and values (7-items). For purposes of the study, the totality of an athletic trainer's professional identity and self-concept to the profession were the focus. The 20-item questionnaire is rated on a 6-point Likert scale 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree with respondents indicating how much they agree with each statement relate to their professional identity and development. Sample items included: "At this stage in my career, I have developed a professional approach that is congruent with my personal way of being", "based upon my level of experience within the athletic training

profession, I have begun developing specialization within the field", and "I always gauge my professional competence based on both internal criteria and external evaluation." Table 1 represents internal consistency scores of the instruments.

Table. Survey Scales Validity

SCALE ITEM	PREVIOUSLY VALIDATED	OUR SCALE
WFC	**α**=.78-.87	**α**=.88
PVIS	**α**=.70	**α** =.80

Data Collection Procedures

In the fall of 2020, all potential participants were sent an email invitation to complete the survey. The email provided inclusion criteria information, steps for completion (including the link to the survey), and the general purpose of the study. After consenting, the participants were asked two yes/no inclusions to screen for our inclusion criteria: (1) do at least 50% of your job responsibilities involve practicing clinically as an athletic trainer, and (2) are you currently employed in the NCAA collegiate setting? The two specific questions were strategic to ensure the research aims could be met as our focus was on the collegiate athletic trainers who provide direct medical and patient care. After sending out our initial email, we sent two reminders at 1-week and 3-weeks. Once all data collection was completed, the data was uploaded into SPSS on a secure, private platform to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Participant data was cleaned, and any participant who did not meet our inclusion criteria was removed from data analyses.

Data Analyses

The final data set was analyzed using SPSS. Prior to analysis, a priori level of p=.05 was set. The demographic data, including age, gender, years of experience and marital status was analyzed and reported in means, frequencies, and standard deviations. The WFC and PIVS were reported as means and standard deviations. Data collected in this study was non-parametric. WFC and PIVS were analyzed both as total scores, and sub-scale scores. Non-parametric tests including Mann-Whitney U tests were used to determine significant differences in WFC and PIVS scores between gender, years of experience and marital status. To investigate correlations between WFC, PIVS and their respective subscales, a Spearman correlation was performed. Correlation analysis allows for assessment of multicollinearity, variables that are correlated suggest prediction of the construct.[25] Of course, correlations that are above .85 indicate the variables are linear and measure the same construct.[25] As a result of the Spearman correlation, any variables that were weak to moderately correlated were entered into a linear regression analysis to determine if there are significant predictions.

RESULTS

Participants were employed as collegiate athletic trainers (*n=585, male=210; 373=female, 2 did not disclose*). The average age of participants was 33 ± 9 years, with a range of 21-70 years of age. Participants averaged 10 ± 8 years of experience, ranging from 0-45 years. On average, our participants worked 59±12 in the peak season, while working 46 ± 10 hours in the off-season. Of the participants, (43%) were married (n=251), 32% were single (n=189), 19% were in a relationship (n=110), and those who were engaged, separated, divorced, and widowed made up the last 6% (n=35). Our sample represented NCAA Division I (n=335), NCAA Division II (n=95), and NCAA Division III (n=153). Participants were asked to provide their NCAA Division in the demographic section of the survey instrument.

Participants' average score on the PIVS was 93.61±8.96 and 45±11.55 on the WFC scale. Female athletic trainers scored a mean of 93.35 ± 9 on the PIVS scale where male athletic trainers scored a mean of 94.07 ± 8.92. A Mann Whitey U test revealed there were no statistical difference between sex within the PIVS (p=.527), rejecting hypothesis 1. Athletic trainers who had less than 3 years of experience scored significantly lower mean (89.72±10.62) on the PIVS than those who have more than 3 years of experience (94.61±8.20). A Mann Whitey U test revealed a significant statistical difference between these two groups (U=20178.5, p<.001), rejecting hypothesis 2.

Within the PIVS, Division I athletic trainers scored an average of 93.83 ± 9.26. Division II and III athletic trainers scored similarly, 93.87 ± 8.98 and 92.91± 8.27 respectively. A Kruskal-Wallis test resulted in no significant differences between groups (p=.402), rejecting hypothesis 3 on NCAA level.

Athletic trainers who are married scored statistically higher on the PIVS (95.619±7.93) than those who are single (91.67±9.63). A Mann Whitney U test revealed a significant statistical difference between those who are married and single (U=19149.0, p<.001), a finding that rejects hypothesis 4. A Spearman correlation resulted in a WFC subscale, family interference with work (FIWC), having a weak negative correlation with the PIVS scale (rs[584]= -.227, p<.001). FIWC predicted PIVS scores (b=99.68, t_{582}=-5.41,

p<.001). A significant regression equation was yielded (F[1,583]=29.34), with an R^2 of .219 where FIWC subscale score was used to predict PIVS scale total score. These results support hypothesis 5, the final hypothesis of the study.

DISCUSSION

Work-family conflict represents the possible discord that can arise when trying to balance one's professional responsibilities with their family life obligations. Conceptually, that is, an individual must have developed a sense of one's professional identity, as well as a personal identity as they recognize how they must allocate time, energy, and resources to these roles. Moreover, from a social identity theory lens, how one views oneself, or places value in their personal or professional identity could have influence on their experiences of work-family conflict.[21] To our knowledge, an athletic trainer's professional identity has not been fully explored, in relation to their experiences of work-family conflict and other important demographic variables.

Sex and NCAA Division

We initially hypothesized that male athletic trainers would report higher levels of professional identity. Our premise for this hypothesis was largely founded on traditional work/family related gender role beliefs. Traditional gender roles suggest that males align with the financial provider of the family; a traditional work/family belief that would suggest a male would have a higher professional identity compared to a female.[26,27] Furthermore, athletic training has strong roots to sport; a culture that also resonates with traditional gender roles that suggest that sport is what men do naturally.[28] While athletic trainers may work with patients outside of "sport," all individuals in this sample were employed within college athletics, a setting that has disproportionately high rates of male leadership.[29] Given the importance of professional interactions and professional mentorship, we suggested that females may have scored lower on the PIVS due to limited opportunities to receive professional mentorship from females in positions of leadership withing their workplace settings. Despite our prediction for differences, we found no differences between males and females in the college setting.

The profession of athletic training continues to demonstrate a higher percentage of females than males;[30] suggesting a field that attracts females. Plausibly, females who select a career in athletic training are drawn to the roles and responsibilities, as well as the employment setting and therefore have a strong professional identity as a result. Goodman et al. found those female athletic trainers who persisted did so, due to an alignment with their employer. Referencing traditional work/family gender roles, many of the core aspects of the athletic trainer's role require compassion and care; attributes that align with core female gender beliefs.[26,27] Additionally, professional identities are often formed through role modeling and mentorship;[11,31] and as more females remain in the profession, the impact can be seen by an increase in professional identity formation. Finally, there is growing evidence that suggests athletic trainers, regardless, of sex have a strong professional identity. A facilitator of professional commitment for the athletic trainer is often related to identifying with job responsibilities;[32] thus, regardless of sex, the athletic trainer, if in the right employment setting, will have a strong professional identity.

At the outset of the study, we predicted differences between the NCAA levels regarding professional identity. Despite not finding differences between the 3 levels, we initially thought NCAA Division I athletic trainers may have a higher score on the PIVS.[33] We thought this as researchers found the concept of professional commitment varied for athletic trainers based upon the level at which they were employed. The NCAA Division I setting is notoriously characterized as arduous and time-intensive. Thus, we thought those athletic trainers who were currently employed within the Division I setting would report a higher professional identity.[34] This was largely theorized on the affective component of professional commitment as it relates to one's attachment to their professional roles and duties.[35]

Years of Experience and Marital Status

We theorized that athletic trainers who are newcomers would have a higher PIVS score than those who had been in the profession longer than 3 years. An assumption that was built upon life stage as well as the idea that a newcomer to the field would demonstrate greater passion for their role, as well as their current life stage, would be centered on their professional development. For many young professionals, the focus of their overall identities may be aligned with their role as a career orientated individual.[36] Thus, we anticipated our sample to score higher on the PIVS; a scale that measures professional development and values of the profession.[7] Moreover, the millennial generation is career-orientated and eager to have opportunities for career growth. Accordingly, we predicted that perhaps the newly credentialed athletic trainer would have higher levels of PIVS; as we felt athletic trainers with 3 more years of experience may get married or start families; shifting their focus. However, we found that those who were married reported higher PIVS scores. Perhaps this recognizes the shift in the millennial generation's views on work-life balance and their personal and professional identities.[37] That is, they can have strong links, and place value in both their professional and personal identities. A recent study reported that athletic trainers are experiencing bidirectional work-family guilt because of their allegiances to both their careers and families and wanting to be successful in both roles.[38]

Our results, however, suggest that athletic trainers who are still transitioning into full-time practice have yet to fully cultivate their professional identity. Professional identity is a process that takes time, and often develops over time through engaging in the role; so, although professional identity formation begins in professional education, it may not fully realized until after engaging in the role full-time.[9] Our findings align with Eason and peers, who found that age and years are prognostic in the professional development of collegiate athletic trainers;[12] which suggests that professional develop and identity development take time and are not appreciated within the first 3 years of the job.

Work-family Conflict and PIVS

Work-family conflict occurs when an individual perceives their work and family roles to be incompatible. As we predicted, when an athletic trainer experiences family interference with work, their PIVS scores are lower. As one invests more time and resources in one role, it will reduce their ability to devote the same level of time and resources to the other role—which could impact satisfaction. Research demonstrates that when people experience stress, such as work-family conflict, they experience a reduction in their resources and energies for other roles.[39] So, if the family domain begins to require more time and energy, then it makes sense that an individual would likely begin to place less emphasis on other roles as they do not have finite time or resources. Our study found married athletic trainers experience higher levels of PIVS, than single, which may indicate that only when an athletic trainer has a family does the shift in identities occur. We know that athletic trainers who are parents, struggle with work-family conflict and guilt as they want to be present and active in each life role-yet both are time intensive and demanding.[38]

Future Direction & Limitations

Our data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and although the information advances our knowledge, the influence of the pandemic must be taken into consideration. Future research can build upon this study by examining PIVS with perhaps the non-COVID influence. We recognize that our study only examined the collegiate setting, so future studies need to include other employment settings. Possibly, employment setting may have an influence on an athletic trainer's PIVS, as well as their experiences of work-family conflict. The development of PIVS may also have an individualized component, like work-family conflict, thus using a qualitative framework may continue to expand our understanding about it.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results demonstrate that an athletic trainer who has yet to become fully inducted into their role, professionally has a lower self-reported PIVS. Moreover, the NCAA level in which the athletic trainer is employed does not seem to influence PIVS scores. Moreover, collegiate athletic trainers, regardless of sex, have similar PIVS scores. Athletic trainers who experience family interference with work, have a reduction in the professional identity and values; which implies that when their time and energy is needed at home, they identify less with their work role.

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