

Work-Family Conflict in the Sport Industry: The Role of Control

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Poster**

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Balance between work and family in any industry is difficult. Coaching at the elite college level is no exception with high pressure, long hours, and extensive travel. Thompson, Beauvis, and Allen (2006) argue that specific industries have unique challenges and solutions, and that we must uncover the "unique configurations of work and family best practices" (p. 301) in each organization so that employers and employees can develop mutually supportive solutions to work-family balance. This study is part of an on-going effort to examine the work-family interface in collegiate coaching such that we might understand the specific challenges in the sport industry and be able to tailor both individual and organizational solutions for improving the work and family lives of the participants therein.

Role theory asserts that individuals who occupy multiple roles, such as worker and parent, experience stress and/or strain from the often conflicting time and energy demands of these roles (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). or work-family conflict. Individuals employ a variety of coping mechanisms to either alleviate the conflict or the resulting stress (Greenhaus & Powell, 2005). Previous research has indicated that control over one's time and resources may be a mechanism for coping with work-family conflict.

Control is defined as "the belief that one can exert some influence over the environment, either directly or indirectly, so that the environment becomes more rewarding or less threatening (Thomas & Ganster, 1995, p. 7). Control is theorized to work by reducing the feelings of stress and tension from threatening events. Individual strategies such as time management, formal organizational policies such as flexible scheduling, job sharing, and working from home, and informal organizational practices such as family-supportive supervisors who grant informal flexibility and understanding all may be helpful for providing employees with feelings of control (Allen, 2001; Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996; Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Control over one's schedule may be particularly important for mothers of young children as they have considerable demands and often limited options for childcare. Indeed, previous investigation of coaches who are mothers indicated that flexible scheduling and hiring a supportive work staff provided great assistance in meeting the demands of childcare, especially when their children were sick and could not utilize normal childcare arrangements (Bruening & Dixon, in press). While previous investigations on control have asserted that control is instrumental in reducing feelings of stress and/tension from work-family conflict, we hypothesize that it is also possible that control could actually reduce the incidence of threatening events by allowing working parents to navigate their multiple roles and reduce the overlap between work and family demands. The purpose of this investigation is to examine the most salient forms of control in the coaching industry, investigate the mechanism by which control works to reduce conflict and/or strain, and provide recommendations for individuals and organizations regarding strategies for gaining and maximizing such control.

Data were gathered via in-depth personal interviews from 17 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I coaching mothers. The mothers ranged in age from 29-40 years, had an average of 6.5 years of coaching experience, and represented six sports (gymnastics, soccer, tennis, volleyball, basketball, and rowing). The mothers had from one-four children, with most having two. There were 32 children represented in the study, with 25 of them under the age of six.

In the semi-structured interviews the coaching mothers were asked to describe their background in sports, their current coaching and family situations, how they balanced work and family, and the impact of their dual roles on their work and family lives. Interviews took place at the participant's home institution or at the participant's chosen location. All interviewees chose a pseudonym for confidentiality and provided informed consent for participation. Upon completion of the interviews, participants were able to review the transcripts for accuracy and clarity.

To establish inter-coder reliability, the two researchers independently developed coding schemes based on previous research, our knowledge and experience in the field of coaching, and our perspective on gender and motherhood in the workplace while realizing that there would be differences in our interpretations (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1984; Kirk & Miller, 1986). After creating these independent codebooks, we discussed our coding schemes (Altheide & Johnson, 1994) and found agreement after three rounds of discussion. Themes related to control were organized according to sources of control and the impact and mechanism of control. The following results are also organized according to those two categories. Understanding that not all

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views can be expressed, the quotes provided are representative of the group, unless specifically stated otherwise (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The coaching mothers agreed on several sources of control, the most important of which was being the head coach and in-charge of one's work schedule. As one volleyball coach explained, "When you're an assistant you're kind of at the whim of the head coach's schedule, so having kids as a female head coach it really helps out because we can schedule things around what works for our childcare situation." The coaches explained that this flexibility of schedule extends from setting practice times to choosing recruiting assignments to setting a summer schedule. Other salient sources of control were access to extended child care (e.g., nanny, family, babysitter), supportive athletic directors who did not dictate "face time" requirements in the office, paid leaves for maternity, and extended timelines for achieving success.

Consistent with our hypothesis, the coaching mothers said that control worked by reducing both the incidence of conflicting events and the resultant stress. For example, one mother whose husband was also a head coach said, "I can alter my travel schedule around his to make sure one of us is home . . . I've also altered my practice times . . . so I'm always able to pick up the kids." This example demonstrates how the control can reduce the actual conflict by reducing the time overlap of the roles. Having control also alleviated the stressful feelings. Several coaches explained how their supervisors encouraged them to have balance and let them know it was acceptable not to be in the office all the time. These coaches said that having this support reduced the tension and stress in difficult times. Conversely, several explained how having an unsupportive supervisor and constant pressure to "prove myself right now" created tremendous psychological strain and guilt when trying to balance work and home especially with very young children.

Results from this study indicate that coaching mothers can gain control from personal sources such as supportive families/spouses and extended childcare arrangements. Consistent with previous findings, they can also garner control from organizational supports such as flexible scheduling and supportive supervisors. This study indicates, however, that control works not only to reduce stressful feelings, but to reduce the conflict itself, proving especially important in navigating the dual high-pressure roles of mother and coach.

While individuals can be instrumental in gaining their own control, organizations play a large role in helping individuals thereby reducing their work-family conflict and the resultant stress and guilt. Specific "best practice" recommendations for organizations are as follows: 1) allow flexible scheduling of practices, recruiting schedules, and off-season responsibilities, 2) allow flexible work locations where coaching mothers can reduce hours spent in the actual office, 3) provide a supportive culture that trades short-term rigidity for long-term success.