The Underrepresentation of Women in Interscholastic Athletic Leadership: A Qualitative Study on the Effects of Role Incongruity

Dana Massengale, Texas Tech University
Nancy Lough (Advisor), University of Nevada Las Vegas

Management/leadership
Abstract 2010-003
June 3, 2010 8:00 AM 25-minute oral presentation (Snowy Egret)

Despite improved athletic opportunities for girls and women since the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, women's representation in leadership positions remains low. At the interscholastic level, the most recent study on the participation rates revealed that high school athletic participation continues to increase. According to the 2006-07 High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the National Federation of High School Sport (NFHS), female participation rate set an all-time high of 3,057,266 girls (Gillis, 2007). Although data regarding the gender makeup of participants is readily available, there is a shortage of information concerning the number of women in athletic administrative positions. Research has estimated that women comprise 7-17 percent of high school athletic directors (Whisenant, 2003; Whisenant, 2008; Whisenant, Vincent, Pedersen, & Zapalac, 2005). Within state associations women make up six percent of the top leadership positions (executive directors) (Massengale, 2008).

Scholarly research devoted to the sparse representation of women in leadership roles has pointed to three key themes. “Pipeline” theory focuses on the concept that only a low number of qualified women apply for leadership positions. Second, the shortage in the area of sport 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); homophobia (Griffin, 1992) and occupational closure (Kanter, 1977; Witz 1991). The third theme involved social limitation theories that conclude with women opting out or exhibiting self limiting behaviors and these include social cognitive theory and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2003) symbolic interactionism (Satore & Cunningham, 2007) and work life balance (Inglis, Danylychuk & Pastore 2000; Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Bruening, & Dixon, 2008).

With the increased participation of female athletes and the escalation of girl's high school teams since the emancipation of Title IX, it would seem logical that growth would translate into an ostentatious opportunity for women to advance in athletic leadership roles. Role congruity theory proposes that prejudice toward female leaders takes two forms: (a) perceiving women as possessing less leadership ability than men and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role more negatively when it is enacted by a woman compared with a man. One consequence of these two forms of prejudice is that attitudes are more negative toward female leaders and potential leaders than male leaders or potential leaders. Other consequences are that it is more difficult for women to become leaders and to achieve success in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The purpose of this research was to investigate the underrepresentation of women in interscholastic sport leadership positions by analyzing perceptions of state association administrators and athletic directors of the function, if any, that role congruity theory plays in the underrepresentation women. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews involving nine women leaders in interscholastic athletics. The criteria for participation placed them into one of three categories: 1) participants who were currently working as state association athletic administrators as either an executive director or associate director; 2) participants who were currently working as a high school athletic director in addition to a leadership role in their state athletic directors association; 3) participants who were working in interscholastic athletic administration at the national level.

Eight of the nine participants interviewed believed role congruity plays a part in the underrepresentation of women in interscholastic athletic administration. Based on the lived experiences of the participant the degree of impact varied. The results imply despite the many advances that have taken place for women, there are still many limitations, based on role congruity theory, that exist in interscholastic sport leadership. Eight of the nine participants recounted specific experiences where they have been subjected to prejudice based on predicted consequences of role congruity theory, in their professional environments. These prejudices took the form of questioning their leadership ability, backash, and slowing professional advancement. Their unique experiences give...
further support to role congruity theory and the prejudices female leaders are facing due to incongruence between leadership and gender role.

All nine of the women interviewed perceived representation of women in interscholastic athletics as a problem that exists at the leadership position and as well as other positions in interscholastic sport. The participants described barriers including work-life conflict, self efficacy, and effects of symbolic interactionism that they perceived as factors in the current state of underrepresentation. More specifically, the women viewed themselves as capable; however they viewed other women as having low self efficacy when pursuing leadership positions. The women perceived this low self efficacy to be based on the hegemonic nature of athletic administration. The participants also perceived lack of role models and networking to consequently effect the representation of women. In general, the participants believed a combination of barriers has resulted in lower numbers of women reaching leadership positions.

Mentoring and networking were the two consistent strategies the participants advised for women to overcome barriers. However, due to women’s current low representation, opportunity to take advantage of mentorship and networking is lacking. In addition, the participants explained that there were circumstances based on gender beyond representation that limited opportunity for networking. The participants believed networking was more difficult because they were female, and that male networking is often done in venues where they may feel uncomfortable. Further, participation in these networking opportunities may have negative professional consequences. As a result, women have been forced to create different ways of networking. The study participants also advised women to get a broad base of experience. They specifically warned against focusing solely on girls sport and being known as exclusively the “Title IX person”. Implications of the findings for policy and practice, as well as recommendations for future research will be discussed.