Barriers and Constraints of Female High School Women’s Basketball Coaches

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The passage of Title IX in 1972 has had profound influence on the landscape of girl’s and women’s sport. While the number of female participants has increased dramatically as more schools offer opportunities for female sport participation (Acosta and Carpenter, 2008), an unforeseen consequence to the passage of Title IX has been the significant decline in female head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008). Recognition of this trend has prompted researchers to examine this phenomenon from a variety of theoretical frameworks and has shed light on an abundance of factors which contribute to the dearth of females in head coaching positions. For instance, Weiss and Stevens (1993) found female coaches cited the costs of coaching as extreme demand on their time, low perceived competence, and low coaching satisfaction. Knoppers (1987) found female coaches face different organizational barriers such as access to resources and disparate working conditions from male coaches. Additional barriers that have been noted in the research literature include a lack of female role models in head coaching positions (Acosta and Carpenter, 1985), masculine hegemonic influence and sexism in sport organizations (Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Whisenant, 2008; Whisenant, et al., 2005), the “old boys’ network” and homologous reproduction (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004), and work-family conflict (Dixon & Bruening, 2007).

While a great deal of research has looked at the constraints of women coaches, there has been less focus on why women remain in the coaching profession. The limited results have included the enjoyment of working with athletes, the fun of coaching (Stevens & Weiss, 1991), program success and the ability to remain active within their sport (Weiss & Stevens, 1993), and continued skill development (Weiss, Barber, Sisley, & Ebbeck 1991). Given the social, economic, and political changes within the interscholastic coaching environment, the decline in the number of female coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008), and the need to retain and promote females in the coaching profession, it is important to gain a comprehensive understanding of the realities that exist for female coaches within interscholastic sport. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to expand the existing literature and examine the experiences of a specific population of female head coaches.

Grounded theory was the foundation for collection and analysis of this study (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz notes that “objective grounded theory accepts the positivistic assumption ... [and] assumes that different observers will discover [their external world] and describe it in similar ways” (p. 524). Thus, the participants were presumed to describe their connection to phenomena in similar ways, and the researchers roles were to uncover the relationships and meaning between complex descriptions presented by each participant (Patton, 2002). It is important to note that this post-positivist perspective does not attempt to make generalizations, but rather uses a number of participants to paint an accurate picture of the experiences of the participants (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007).

This study focused on female head coaches within a large, Midwestern municipality in the United States. Data indicates that 23 of the 110 coaches in the area are female (OHSAA, 2009), and that this number has declined from recent years (OHSAA, 2009). The participants in the study were included based on theoretical sampling where individuals are selected based on their potential representation of important theoretical constructs (i.e., gendered head coaching experiences) (See Patton, 2002, p. 238). A total of 10 participants have been recruited, where four interviews have been conducted and analyzed to date.

Semi-structured interviews guided the purpose of this study. Structured questions provided the researchers with a framework for theoretical comparisons between the responses of the participants (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Further, the nature of the questions allowed for thick rich description regarding each topic area, therefore serving the purpose by giving the participants the freedom to elaborate on their responses (Creswell, 2003). The interview guide was developed to capture the experiences of female head coaches, with a specific focus on the participants’: (1) reasons for getting involved in the coaching profession, (2) barriers faced as a female coach, (3) methods used for overcoming barriers, and (4) philosophy of coaching. This focus was based on previous literature and helped maintain a framework for constant comparison between participant responses.
Interview data was transcribed verbatim, then analyzed using an “iterative process” that included axial, open, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Axial coding is a priori, where a given set of standards is used to guide analysis (Patton, 2002). This first step of coding included coding the transcripts into categories based on their relation to the four focus areas noted above (e.g., barriers faced as a female coach). Once this step was complete, the initial categories were then collapsed and coded into themes (e.g., time commitment). During this phase open coding also took place where new and emergent themes arose within the date (e.g., reasons for intentions to remain). In order to enhance trustworthiness within the findings, three researchers separately coded the transcripts and came together to compare and contrast coding schemes. Furthermore, participants will be sent final coding schemes and transcripts to confirm the uncovered codes and themes accurately represent their experiences as female head coaches, thus providing “member-checking”, as described by Patton (2002).

Four of the 10 interviews have been conducted and analyzed. The participants indicated competitiveness, presence of a role model, and a desire for continuous learning as reasons for getting involved with coaching. Further, stereotypes of female coaches and female sport, attitudes of parents, lack of mentors, lack of administrative support, time commitment, ageism, negative response from referees, and job availability were consistently labeled as barriers to coaching. In particular, all four participants were able to consistently describe barriers that existed both internal and external to their coaching institution. When dealing with these barriers the participants highlighted the need to proactively develop respect as a female coach, seek out mentors or become a mentor, and further, two participants specifically highlighted being prepared to “fight” for respect. A variety of coaching philosophies were noted by the participants, which included ideas of continually teaching or helping children, and treating every player equally. This contributed to each participants desire to “better the game” in some way. The findings from all 10 participants, as well as additional emergent themes, will be presented.

In conclusion, these initial findings extend previous knowledge into the barriers and experiences of female coaches in interscholastic sport. Future discussion, ideas for further research, and implications for practice will be highlighted in the presentation.