The Under-Representation of Women Working in College Athletics

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With the adoption of Title IX in 1972, many more athletic participation opportunities were created for girls and women, yet the numbers of women employed in sport has steadily decreased. Prior to 1972, 90% of women's teams were coached by women and a female administrator oversaw 90% of women's athletic programs. Today, only 21% of athletic directors are female and 48% of women's coaches are female. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that 11% of athletic departments have no women in any administrative role (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008). The largest and growing group of women employed in athletics is at the assistant coach ranks, but there is no consistent movement to head coaching among this group. Title IX was quite successful at increasing participation in sport for girls (now at an all time high,) however, the percentage of women employed as head coaches is currently at an all time low which brings this issue close to a point of crisis.

Studies reveal several factors contributing to the low numbers of women employed in athletics: work-family balance (Hart, Hasbrook, & Mathes, 1986; Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Shaw & Hoebel, 2003; Hovden, 2000; Cunningham & Sagas, 2003), lack of mentoring relationships (James, 2000), masculine nature of the work environment (Shaw & Frisby, 2006), and gender role conflicts (Ross & Shinew, 2008; MacKinnon, 1987; Messner, 1998). However, these factors have chiefly been identified through research with women already employed in athletics. The current study seeks to uncover reasons why female athletes avoid athletic careers altogether. As early as 1986, Hart et al. identified work-family conflict as a factor contributing to the low numbers of women working in college athletics. Since that point, many researchers have argued that all work is organized around unencumbered men with no responsibilities for family or children (Acker, 2003). Male dominated fields have long assumed the employed person has an external support system (e.g. stay at home wife), an assumption that results in fewer internal support structures (Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

Liff (2001) finds that women are often keenly aware of the bias against employees who utilize family-friendly assistance. As a result, they often refrain from asking about family friendly policies in interviews. Women without children, on the other hand, tend to embrace the coaching lifestyle and not question the athletic culture. However, once they have children women tend to recognize the system as being incompatible with family life (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). Women who are already mothers are often not encouraged to become career employees (Liff, 2001) as there is often an assumption that women with children have inherent child care responsibilities that conflict with coaching duties in the early morning or evenings and job related travel (Shaw & Hoebel, 2003). This assumption is particularly damaging for women who desire a career in college athletics. Cunningham and Sagas (2003) confirm that there is scant flexibility in athletics and the culture usually does not allow it. Other research shows that while work family conflict negatively affects women's coaching careers, it does not affect men's careers (Hovden, 2000). As a result women plan for their coaching careers to be shorter than men do (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003).

While Title IX was extremely successful at increasing playing opportunities for girls, female athletes are missing out on mentoring opportunities, which could impact their motivation to pursue athletic careers. Research shows that same sex role models result in more effective mentoring relationships (Ibarra, 1993), as there tends to be an increase of information and social support when mentoring relationships consist of individuals with similar demographics (James, 2000). Little or no demographic similarity (e.g. different genders) between individuals, on the other hand, has been shown to restrict mentoring relationships from even forming (Ibarra, 1993). Aside from a lack of mentoring, other barriers female athletes face include the difficulty they report in reconciling athletic expectations with gender role expectations (Ross & Shinew, 2008) as feminine gender role traits and expectations tend to be contrary to athletic norms (Eagly, Wood, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2004; MacKinnon, 1987; Messner, 1998). Athletic jobs are associated with masculinity because of masculine assumptions about athleticism and also because dominant, leadership positions are often deemed to be at odds with femininity (Schein, 1973; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Because Title IX has been so successful in providing opportunities for female athletes, there seems to be a widespread assumption that gender equity has been attained in college athletics. An immediate conflict can be seen...
however, when participation statistics are compared with employment statistics; there is a definite disconnect between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law that Gherardi (1994) described as the gap between the “gender we think and the gender we do” (p. 591 as quoted in Hoeber, 2007). Hoeber further claims that this assumption of equity is damaging because it prevents any further consideration into the existing gendered athletic culture. Even though the message is clear that girls and women can and should play sports, there is an equally clear message to female athletes that there is still no place for them in athletic careers. Hoeber (2007) concludes that with this message, both male and female athletes are being socialized into traditional gender roles through their higher education experience which should instead teach and encourage more progressive and critical thinking. Despite the policies that were created to allow access for girls to participate in sport, the widely accepted gender discourse equating maleness with athleticism and femininity with passivity has not been deconstructed in athletics and still exists as an underlying assumption and prescriptive stereotype today (Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

In order to explore this topic, I have posed the following research questions: What factors contribute to women athletes avoiding careers in athletics? How do female college athletes perceive athletic careers for women and how does this perception inform their future career plans? I will conduct a qualitative study reflecting a combination of phenomenology and narrative analysis. Data collection will consist of focus groups (4) comprised of 24 upperclass, female athletes at a Division I university. I will ensure that 12 participants are currently coached by a male and 12 are currently coached by a female to explore whether the gender of the coach has any affect on the athlete’s perception of an athletic career. Although participants will not be recruited based on racial or socio-economic characteristics, or whether they received an athletic scholarship, this information will be collected to determine if further research into this topic warrants such purposive sampling. Participants will represent the sports of soccer, basketball, rowing, lacrosse, track, softball, volleyball, and swimming. Interview questions will include the following topics: factors they consider in choosing a career, their perceptions of male-dominated occupations, anticipated barriers to pursuing desired occupations, and whether they intend to pursue a career in athletics. Follow-up individual interviews will also be conducted with participants who expressed a dissenting opinion in the focus group. This negative case sampling is a valuable tool in qualitative research to ensure accurate data collection (Johnson, 2003).

Although the topic of women in athletics careers has been studied by previous researchers, most of this research has focused on women who were already working in athletics and inadequate attention has been paid to female collegiate athletes who make up a highly qualified pool of candidates for these positions. Providing these athletes with a setting to consider and discuss their experiences will allow them the opportunity to provide valuable input as to why many of them are opting out of athletic careers.