Reflections on Career Development: Female Coaches’ Experiences within The Canadian Sport System

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Previous research indicates that coaching is still very much a man’s world. Despite increases in female participation rates in sport (Demers, 2003; Kerr, Marshall, Sharp & Stirling, 2006; Reade, Rodgers & Norman, 2009), a small percentage of women coach at any level of sport in Canada (Werthner & Callary, 2010). This is particularly noticeable at the higher levels (Theberge, 1993). For example, in 2005, 20% of Canadian Interuniversity Sport head coaches were female (CIS, 2005). Further, while 195 men coach women’s university teams, only 10 women coach men’s university teams (CIS, 2005).

Historically women faced many gendered obstacles in establishing a coaching career within the Canadian sport system (Theberge, 1988, 1993). As a result of being a minority within the coaching profession, female coaches frequently experienced the effects of tokenism and gender marking. For example, since they are often the only woman at a sport event, training environment, or coaches’ meeting (Theberge, 1993), they are highly visible and feel greater pressure to perform in an effort to show that they belong. Further, Theberge (1993) found female coaches experienced gender stereotyping on the part of athletes and parents who focused on traditional ideas of men and women. These beliefs depicted men as “rational and instrumental” and therefore assumed to be better technicians than women, whereas women were thought of as “affiliative and expressive” and specializing in communication (Theberge, 1993, p. 308). These difficulties become particularly pronounced when one looks at the case of women coaching male athletes. Staurowsky (1990) argued the expectation that men, but not women, should coach male athletes arose from an underlying belief linking sport expertise and leadership with male superiority. More recently, Reade, Rodgers and Norman (2009) presented empirical evidence that suggested many of these obstacles persist today. Despite the fact that men and women have similar coaching credentials in terms of education and competitive experience, there is a consistent pattern of women dropping out of coaching at all levels. However, those women who remain in coaching tend to be young, single and without a family, hold part-time positions, and are less likely to coach male athletes (Reade et al., 2009).

Only a handful of studies (i.e., Kamphoff, Armenrout & Driska, 2010; Staurowsky, 1990; Theberge, 1993; Young 2005) specifically examined the experiences of women who coach male athletes. The findings of these studies focused on gendered experiences, barriers to coaching, and relationships with athletes. However, these studies and other previous research on women in coaching in general tend to overlook the success stories in female coaches’ career development. What has worked for them in the current sport system to allow them to succeed in this male dominated domain? Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the experiences that have helped female coaches establish their careers in the context of the larger Canadian sport system. This study examines two key areas of interest: (a) career development and (b) experiences within the sport system.

Phenomenological research describes the meaning of lived experiences of several individuals with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The phenomenon of interest in this study is the career paths of women coaching male athletes. In this ongoing research project, in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 female athletic and cross-country coaches, who have been working with high performance male athletes for a minimum of 3 years. Participants were asked to discuss their career development and experiences within the sport system. Content analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts.

Preliminary findings suggest the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) plays a key role in the coaching development with initiatives, such as the National Coaching Certification Program and the Women in Coaching Program. The availability of CAC programs varies from province to province, which appears to affect individual female coaches’ experiences within the larger sport system as these programs connect them at the provincial, university and national
levels within Canada. The role of provincial sport governing bodies and strategies for further inclusion of marginalized individuals in CAC programs will also be discussed.