

Modern Sexism and Preference for a Coach Among Select National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Female Athletes: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

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Summer 2012 marked the 40th anniversary of Title IX. Since its inception in 1972, participation opportunities for women have increased while the number of women coaching women has declined (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Women are also underrepresented in administrative positions.

The underrepresentation of women in coaching and athletic administration is of concern; however, what complicates matters is that research has shown that female athletes often prefer a male coach (Frey, Czech, Kent, & Johnson, 2006; LeDrew & Zimmerman, 1994; Medwechuk & Crossman, 1994; Parker & Greenawalt, 2007; Weinberg, Reveles, & Jackson, 1984). Research has also indicated that female athletes find it more difficult to accept criticism from a woman and, as a result, may evaluate women more negatively (Frankl & Babbitt, 1998; Weinberg et al., 1984). Other studies investigating preference for a coach revealed that the type of sport, the status of the coach, and the experience of playing for a coach of the opposite sex also impacted preferences for a coach (Habif, Van Raalte, & Cornelius, 2001; Medwechuk & Crossman, 1994). Only when the female coach was highly successful, which was defined by earning coach of the year honors and athletes earning national recognition, was she preferred over a male coach (Medwechuk & Crossman, 1994). A final issue related to preference is that research has indicated that female athletes perceive the experience of being coached by a man or a woman differently, and that these differences are based on behaviors more aligned with one sex than the other (Frey, Czech, Kent, & Johnson, 2006; Parker & Greenawalt, 2007).

Since traditional sex roles are linked to perceptions of masculinity and femininity, one must ask whether there exists a “think coach, think male” relationship. Schein (1973) first coined the phrase “think manager, think male” based on her research concerning managers. Her findings indicated that male middle managers (Schein, 1973) and female middle managers (Schein, 1975) equated managerial success with male attributes.

Fifteen years later, a study using both male and female middle managers (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989) and one using both male and female undergraduate students (Schein, Mueller, & Jacobson, 1989) found that men still perceived management to be related to masculinity; however, the perceptions of women had begun to change. The aforesaid research found that female managers and female undergraduates were no longer sex-typing managerial jobs.

The above referred to change in perception among female managers and undergraduates parallels the findings in LeDrew and Zimmerman’s (1994) study with female athletes. The results of their study indicated that female volleyball players believed that women had the ability to be good coaches and that equal opportunities were provided to women to achieve that end; however, almost 50% of the respondents stated they preferred to have a male coach, and an additional 15% stated that they would never want to be coached by a female. The authors suggest that traditional sex role biases may play a role in impacting an athlete’s preference. Aicher and Sagas (2010) suggest that in addition to sex stereotypes, preference may be related to modern sexist beliefs.

Modern sexism is based on the premise that sexist behavior still exists, but the behavior has become so covert and subtle that the practices often go unnoticed or are perceived as normative by both women and men (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995). In essence, modern sexists believe that discrimination is no longer a problem and, as such, have accepted inequality as normative.

Female athletes today are the beneficiaries of Title IX. Their world is defined by increased participation opportunities unlike anything experienced to date. It is also likely that the majority of these female athletes have

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been coached by more men than women (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Is it possible that their participation experiences have subtly reinforced sex role stereotypes that have perpetuated the aforementioned “think coach, think male” mentality?

The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods research study was to examine the relationship of modern sexism to a female athlete’s preference for a coach based on the sex of the coach. Female student-athletes (N = 155) from one National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I institution in the Northeastern United States served as participants in the study.

The research design was sequential, whereby the qualitative phase followed the quantitative phase. The quantitative phase required that participants: 1) indicate their preference for a male or female coach; 2) quantify the number of male and female head coaches that they had experience with at the youth sport and interscholastic level of competition; and 3) complete the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). The study then employed a systematic random sampling technique to select 10 participants for the qualitative phase of the study. Criteria for selection included preference for a male coach and willingness to participate.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 female athletes. The interview guide was divided into three segments: 1) early sport experience, 2) traits ascribed to coaches, and 3) the perception to which gender equality exists in intercollegiate athletics. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Results indicated that 117 (81%) of the female athletes in this study preferred a male coach. A one-tailed binomial test of probabilities favoring the preference for a male coach revealed the significance of this finding ($p < .05$) and was based on exceeding the critical value of 82. A logistic regression analysis was used to test for the significance of past experience with coaches at the youth sport and high school level as well as the association of modern sexism to one’s preference for a coach. The findings indicated that participants’ experiences with female coaches at the youth sport level Pearson’s Chi-square statistic with $2df = 10.05$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.53, 0.90], Nagelkerke R-square = .12; with male coaches at the high school level Pearson’s Chi-square statistic with $2df = 32.54$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [1.41, 3.26], Nagelkerke R-square = .33; and with female coaches at the high school level Pearson’s Chi-square statistic with $2df = 32.54$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.63], Nagelkerke R-square = .33 were significant predictors regarding preference for a female coach later in their athletic career. Confidence intervals (CI) were calculated for the exponentiated regression coefficients. Further findings revealed that the participants did not hold modern sexist beliefs as measured by the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim et al., 1995); however, their discourses revealed otherwise. Based on their overall experience with more male coaches than female coaches, a “think coach, think male” stereotype was shared among the participants in this study.

The findings in the present study are important for athletic administrators, coaches, and athletes at all levels of athletic participation. Attention must be paid to training and mentoring initiatives, to recruiting and hiring practices, and to the efforts that create an environment where discriminatory practices directed towards women are not tolerated. Without female coaches to serve as role models, it is unlikely that a female athlete’s preference for a coach will change.