

**Female College Athletes' Leadership Juxtaposition**

*Vicki Schull, University of Minnesota*

*Lisa Kihl (Advisor), University of Minnesota*

**Diversity**

**Saturday, June 1, 2013**

**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)**

**Abstract 2013-275**

**1:35 PM**

**(Room 404)**

While contemporary leadership approaches have shifted from traditional styles featuring authoritative, command and control practices—which are socially constructed as masculine—to more collaborative and relational practices—which are socially constructed as feminine (Eagly, 2007; Fletcher, 2004), leadership within a sport context has remained stuck in outdated leadership practices and ideals (Drago et al., 2005; Hanlon, 2011). This places female college athletes in a juxtaposition of leadership between contemporary leadership approaches valuing cooperation and relational practices and the masculine sport context where aggressive individual leadership beliefs and gendered assumptions and stereotypes persist (Drago et al., 2005; Hovden, 2000, 2010). This juxtaposition is problematic because leadership is socially constructed and embedded in a context where history and assumptions matter (Osborn et al., 2002). Therefore, female athletes' understandings of sport leadership might be manifested based on their experiences of gendered stereotypes and assumptions embedded in the sport context. The twofold purpose of this research was to examine: 1) how female college athletes come to understand leadership in the context of sport; and 2) how these constructions are gendered. This is important given the overall dearth and continued decline of women in sport leadership positions within intercollegiate athletics, and our need to further understand how gendered leadership assumptions and stereotypes are developed via sport participation experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 female athletes participating in six team sports at the NCAA Division I level. Using an interview guide participants were asked to define leadership in sport, identify specific situations in sport where leadership occurred, and to reflect on the relevancy of gender in sport leadership. Interviews were between 35 and 65 minutes in duration, were audio-taped, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis involved first engaging in initial and axial data coding to develop categories, properties and dimensions of leadership. Next using the literature, thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify, analyze, and report themes in terms of leadership perceptions and the gendered nature of participants' understandings of leadership.

The findings showed that female college athletes' perceptions of leadership included communication, being an example, and social leadership. Themes that emerged included hierarchical leadership, heroic individual leadership behaviors, and aspects of authoritarian communication. These leadership themes are in conflict with contemporary leadership practices characterized by collaborative, egalitarian, and relational practices (Eagly, 2007; Fletcher, 2004), and support the contention that the sport setting and associated leadership analogies have become outdated given today's leadership context (Drago et al., 2005; Hanlon, 2011). Gendered leadership stereotypes also persisted in the context of intercollegiate athletics; however, while participants recognized such stereotypes and assumptions, they often distanced themselves from them, which highlights the fluidity of gender (Ashcraft, 2010) and contributes to our understandings of gender relations in sport. The findings and implications are further discussed in relation to the leadership and gender literature. From an educational standpoint, these findings can help inform coach education and leadership development programs, particularly aimed at increasing the number of female leaders in sport.

References

Ashcraft, K. L. (2010). Gender and diversity: Other ways to make a difference. In M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies*, London: Oxford University Press.  
Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.  
Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101

## **2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)**

- Drago, R., Hennighausen, L., Rogers, J., Vescio, T., & Stauffer, K. D. (2005). CAGE: The coaching and gender equity project. Final report for NCAA, NACWAA and The Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved from The Pennsylvania State University, Labor Studies and Employment Relations website: <http://lser.la.psu.edu/workfam/CAGE.htm>
- Eagly, A. H. (2007). Female leadership advantage and disadvantage: Resolving the contradictions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 1-12.
- Fletcher, J. K. (2004). The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, 647-661).
- Hanlon, M. T. (2011). Leadership, women in sport, and embracing empathy. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 31, 160-165.
- Hovden, J. (2000). "Heavyweight" men and younger women?: The gendering of selection processes in Norwegian sports organizations. *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 8(1), 17-32.
- Hovden, J. (2010). Female top leaders – prisoners of gender? The gendering of leadership discourses in Norwegian sports organizations. *International Journal of Sport Policy*, 2(2), 189-203.
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men and sports*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Osborn, R. N., Hunt, J. G., & Jauch, L. R. (2002). Toward a contextual theory of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 797-837.