Female College Athletes’ Leadership Juxtaposition

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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socially constructed as feminine (Eagly, 2007; Fletcher, 2004), leadership within a sport context has remained stuck in outdated leadership practices and ideals (Drago et al., 2005; Hanlon, 2011).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 relevance 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


