Gender in Youth Sport Management

Cassandra Coble, University of Connecticut
Jennifer Bruening (Advisor), University of Connecticut

Thursday, May 29, 2014
20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)

Abstract 2014-068
3:50 PM
(Phipps)

Sport has long been considered a male domain (Koivula, 1995); however, the impact of Title IX legislation has led to an increase in participation rates of girls in sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010) and women can now be found in some high level sport industry positions (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Despite the increase of females participating in sport, rates women in positions of power within sport organizations remains relatively low (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; Lavoi, 2009), including those in youth sport (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009).

Youth sport programs rely heavily on volunteers (Kim, Chelladurai, & Trail, 2007), and positions within these programs are often gendered (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Understanding how gender is presented in youth sport leagues is essential as researchers and organizations continue to explore how to alter the gendered landscape in youth sport management. An examination of the factors that lead to the low numbers of women in sport, and specifically in positions of power, is necessary and can be explored by considering how gender in sport is learned, understood, and enacted by adults in the youth sport context.

Individuals learn and develop an understanding of gender roles beginning in childhood (Stangor & Ruble, 1987). Social cognitive theory proposes that gender learning and understanding is dependent on three modes of influence: modeling, enactive experience, and direct tutelage (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The importance of the three modes of influence varies by the age and developmental level of the individual (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Modeling can begin after birth while enactive experiences and direct tuition require linguistic skills and therefore develop later (Bussey & Bandura, 2004).

Each mode of learning can expose an individual to gender role assumptions, including those assumptions related to the appropriateness of a task or position, which may promote gender bias (Heilman, 2012). Role congruity theory examines the impact of gender role assumptions and leadership, noting the influence of prejudice that occurs regarding women in positions of power (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Understanding gender role stereotypes of the appropriateness of women occupying leadership positions in youth sport could provide a more thorough comprehension of the learning process of both adults and children related to gender roles within sport. Examining gender development and functioning by considering language tied to enactive experiences and direct tuition in the sport domain may help to better understand how gender role learning occurs within the sport domain.

The presence or absence of women within sport can be traced to the socially constructed nature of gender and gender roles and expectations (Fallon & Jome, 2007; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007), influencing the acceptance or denial of females within this arena. Within athletics, parents encourage sport participation in boys more than girls and spend more time on athletic tasks with boys, indicating what activities are considered acceptable for each gender (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Peers (Higginson, 1985; Horn, 2008), teachers (Eccles & Harold, 1991) and the media (Cookey, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013) also present information concerning gender appropriateness of sport, providing a foundational understanding of gender appropriate sports and activities. As approximately 45 million children are involved in youth sport programs (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002), acknowledging the impact of gender expressions within youth sport programs are necessary. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the volunteer understandings of, expression of, and interpretation of gender within a youth sport organization.

RQ1: How do men and women in volunteer youth sport leadership positions express gender?

RQ2: How does the leadership within youth sport organizations perpetuate or counteract gender norms?

Internationally, soccer is considered the world’s most popular sport (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1994) and is male dominated (Mean, 2001). However, in the United States, soccer appears to be more gender neutral (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2008). Despite this neutrality, the numbers of female volunteers remains low and females who are involved in
soccer are often relegated to less prestigious positions (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Therefore, soccer is a sport that will allow for an examination of gender in youth sport leadership.

A case study approach will be undertaken, in which an all-girls youth soccer league will be analyzed. The site has been chosen as policies enacted by the board are designed to increase female participation at the coach level. However, the board and league are tilted to skewed, with men representing the dominant group at the volunteer level. To analyze gender in the youth sport league, observations, document analysis, and interviews will occur with board members, league volunteers, and parents.

Observations will occur at board meetings, team meetings, games, and practices. The researcher will collect notes during observations focusing on the activities, interactions, conversations, and nature of the setting (Patton, 2002). Document analysis will also take place, focusing on the league website, the charter, mission and values statement, and all e-mails, handouts, and pamphlets provided by the league. Additionally, documents from past years will be included to track the historical development of the discourses within the league over time as outlined by Foucault (Grbich, 2010).

Additionally, interviews lasting approximately one hour will take place with board members (7 males, 7 females). The interviews will focus on the assignment of roles and responsibilities of board members, the selection of board members, the gender ratio of the board, the attitudes concerning policies to address the underrepresentation of women in the league, and the influence of gender within each of these topics. In addition to conversations with board members, coaches and parents will be interviewed on the same topics to give a more thorough understanding of board policies and procedures that impact gender expression.

Data will be analyzed using NVIVO 10. An a priori content analysis will be used to identify core themes and meanings (Patton, 2002). The first researcher will use focused coding to identify “meaning units” (Cote, 1993) which may include messages such as words, themes, paragraphs, and concepts (Berg, 2009). The codes will then be reviewed by a second researcher familiar with the data (LaPelle, 2004; Ryan, 2004). After the focused coding occurs, higher order themes will be identified. The results are expected to focus on the gender ratio of the board, the recruitment, selection, and task assignments of board members, the attitudes concerning policies related to gender, and the impact of gender on these processes.

While gender in sport boards and volunteer coaches have been examined (e.g., Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009), an understanding of volunteer management and gender at the youth sport level is lacking. Therefore, it is essential to understand how gender is expressed in youth sport leagues to address the low numbers of women in leadership positions at the youth sport level.