"That Whole Baby Thing": Constraints to Millennial Generation Female Assistant Coaches

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Despite the exponential increase in participation by women since the passage of Title IX, the rate of female coaches has actually declined significantly in the same time period (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Previous literature has found that female coaches face a litany of barriers to pursuing careers in coaching. These barriers include family and time commitments (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Kamphoff, 2010), a lack of opportunities (Weiss & Stevens, 1993), the old boy’s club, a lack of an old girl’s club, and the hegemonically masculine nature of athletic organizations (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Kamphoff, 2010; Kane & Stangl, 1991). Researchers, however, have not looked at coaches from the millennial generation (born after 1980), who grew up with many benefits from Title IX, in a society that was much more accepting of women in sports than previous generations. Millennial women had access to female athletes as role models, and had the opportunity to play intercollegiate athletics at unprecedented levels. Due to the societal change, millennial women may view coaching careers differently from previous generations and may not perceive as many barriers due to their experiences with fewer barriers as athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine what, if any, barriers millennial generation female assistant coaches’ perceive as present to pursuing careers as head coaches.

This study was framed in feminist standpoint theory which contends that people experience the social world and particularly the work force depending on their social and cultural positions (Hartsock, 2004). It asserts that women experience life differently than men due to their standing in society as a less privileged group (Hartsock, 2004). Feminist standpoint theory also maintains that women experience the world differently from each other based on individual differences such as generational experiences (Krane, 2001). Due to the gendered nature of coaching, it is likely that women experience the field differently from men and millennial women may have different views from older generations of women due to the differences in their athletic and cultural experiences. As such it is important to understand the views of millennial generation coaches from their own perspective in order to provide recommendations on how sport organizations and athletic departments can decrease the barriers to women in coaching and create environments that are more accepting to female coaches. This in turn, could help them recruit and retain more female coaches to their organization and the profession as a whole.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 millennial generation female assistant coaches from Division I programs to elicit information regarding barriers they may still encounter and how that affects their pursuit of a head coaching career. Purposive snowball sampling was used to select participants. The interviews were constructed based on an adaptation of Seidman’s (2006) concept of a three-part interview and lasted between 25-70 minutes. Data analysis was conducted using the tenets of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

This study found that the assistant coaches were very positive about their careers and believed that they could successfully become head coaches. When asked about barriers, the coaches actually challenged that language, stating that they did not perceive any insurmountable barriers. However, they described challenges that they could overcome, similar to the concept of constraints discussed in the leisure participation literature. Constraints may not prevent participation in leisure but may alter how a person participates (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993). The primary constraint cited by the assistant coaches was juggling work-family life. They were concerned with how to “do it all”–have a head coaching career, spouse, and child. However, most of them believed it was possible, they just had not yet figured out how to negotiate it. The view of this as a constraint is due in part to the female coaches who are currently raising families while serving as head coaches.

These findings have implications for the recruitment and retention of female coaches. Since they view family as a constraint, not a barrier, primarily due to the women seeing other coaches successfully navigating coaching and family life, sport organizations and athletic departments should encourage the sharing of knowledge amongst female
coaches. Sport organizations should create mentorship opportunities and host clinics aimed at female coaches sharing their experiences with other female coaches. Athletic departments should foster more family friendly environments and encourage better work-life balance through their human resource practices and policies, which will help both male and female coaches. Athletic departments should also create mentoring opportunities for new coaches within their organizations. Creating family friendly environments, and encouraging knowledge sharing amongst coaches in similar situations, both within sport organizations and athletic departments, may help female coaches have a better understanding of how they can successfully “do it all”, navigate coaching and family life, and may help to recruit and retain more female coaches.

References


