Valuing Feminine Traits in Coaching: The Impact of High and Low Exposure to Female Coaches

Rachel Madsen, Niagara University
Brianna Clark, Temple University

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In 2014 the number of female collegiate head coaches was 4,154 which accounts for only 22% of all head coaches and 43% of women's team coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). This is even more troubling when we consider that before Title IX was implemented, women were coaching 90% of women's teams. The percentage of female assistant coaches is higher (57%) which would seem to be positive, as head coaches most often come from the assistant ranks. However, it is disconcerting that these assistant coaches are not transitioning into head coaching positions at a higher rate. In fact, while the percentage of female assistants has risen from 55% to 57% since 2001, the percentage of female head coaches has gone in the opposite direction from almost 45% in 2001 to 43% in 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

Previous research examining the lack of women as head coaches has identified several contributing factors, such as work-life balance issues (Bruening & Dixon, 2008), lack of same sex mentoring (Fazioli, 2004; Gogol, 2002; James, 2000; Massengale, 2009; “Wanted!” 2009), lack of interest in coaching by female athletes (Madsen, 2010), lowered self-efficacy among female assistant coaches (Cunningham et al., 2003) and perceptions of gendered opportunities (Kamphoff et al., 2010; Walker & Bopp, 2010-2011). However, there has been limited consideration as to why the number of female assistant coaches is rising within intercollegiate athletics, but those women are not transitioning into head coaching roles in greater numbers (Cunningham et al., 2003). In exploring this phenomenon, Madsen et al. (2013) found that masculine traits are more valued in head coaches compared to assistant coaches which may make head coach positions seem more natural and attainable for men.

Research examining management and leadership has demonstrated that when organizational positions are aligned with stereotypical masculine gender roles, male candidates are perceived as better suited for those positions (Heilman, 2012; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). This has been described within the Lack of Fit model (Heilman, 2012), which can result in women being perceived as better suited to positions more closely aligned to stereotypical female roles. Within coaching, the Lack of Fit model can be used to explain why there are more men in head coach positions and more women holding assistant coach positions (Masser & Abrams, 2004). Gendered attitudes are commonly seen in sport, as athletes tend to hold more positive attitudes toward male coaches and provide them higher ratings when compared to female coaches (Barber, 1998; Weiss & Stevens, 1993; Williams & Parkhouse, 1988). Also, both female and male athletes have indicated a greater preference for male coaches (Fazioli, 2004; Drago et al., 2005). This preference for male coaches may have serious implications in that it may result in negative attitudes toward female coaches from athletes, making it more difficult for female coaches to be successful (Drago et al., 2005). Male athletes typically have very little exposure to female coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012), making this issue more salient among female athletes. Therefore, it is crucial to further explore and understand the perceptions and attitudes female athletes have towards female head coaches. Specifically, this study delves further into the topic by examining the past experiences of female-athletes who perceive masculine traits to be more important compared to feminine traits in a head coach. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: More exposure to female head coaches will lead female athletes to value feminine traits in head coaches more than those who have had less exposure to female head coaches.

H2: Female athletes who play feminine-typed sports will value feminine traits more than those who play gender neutral or masculine sports.

Participants for this study are female student-athletes from three Division I universities in the northeast and midwest United States. Participants were randomly assigned to either the head coach or assistant coach group and were then asked to consider the attributes of an ideal head coach or an ideal assistant coach and choose corresponding
characteristics from the short version of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory Scale (BSRI, Bem, 1981). The BSRI assesses masculine sex roles (e.g., assertive, forceful), feminine sex roles (e.g., affectionate, understanding), and includes ten neutral items not used in scoring. Even though the BSRI was developed in 1981, validation has been continually confirmed by many researchers and particularly for the short version of the inventory (Choi et al., 2009; Gershenoff & Foti, 2003; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Seem & Clark, 2006). Additional demographic data will be collected from participants including age, sport played, sex of head coach, sex of assistant coaches, and number of years playing for a male and a female head collegiate coach. To evaluate the proposed hypotheses, data will be analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance. Masculine and feminine scores on the BSRI for ideal head coach will serve as the dependent variables. Participants’ level of exposure to female head coaches and type of sport (masculine, feminine, gender neutral) played by participants will serve as independent variables.

Results of this study will lead to a better understanding of the impact of female coaches on female athletes. Application of the Lack of Fit model will help determine if a greater exposure to female head coaches lessens or intensifies traditional gender role expectations. In addition, this study will help determine if the type of sport played impacts the value placed on feminine traits in coaching. A greater understanding of these variables may shed light on why more women are not advancing to head coaching positions. In short, one may speculate that more exposure to female head coaches may make athletes less rigid in their ideals of gender roles and therefore they may be more likely to value women as head coaches more than those who have had little to no exposure with female head coaches. In addition, those who play feminine-typed sports may be more accepting of feminine traits and may view feminine characteristics as beneficial to the head coach role and thus view female coaches in a more positive light. There is no denying that if more female athletes are able to accept the position of head coach as an appropriate career progression for women, they will be more likely to pursue such positions.

The under-representation of women as head coaches is a complex and important issue that deserves attention. While there certainly are a great number of issues contributing to this situation, this study may provide additional understanding as to why women coaches are facing difficulty advancing in college athletics.