Looking at the Work-Life Interface of College Head Coaches through the Kaleidoscope: A Gender and Career Stage Study

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Successful navigation of the work-life interface remains an important issue for sport management scholars and practitioners. In sport management, high levels of work-life conflict have been linked to low job and life satisfaction, lower career commitment, and high levels of stress (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Sagas & Dixon, 2008). Despite much emphasis in organizations on work-life issues, recent trend analysis suggests that almost half of employees feel they are not balanced and spend considerable time outside the workplace on work-related activities. Trend analysis also reveals that there are clear cohort and life-stage impacts on perceptions of work-life expectations and outcomes (Workplace Trends, 2015). The importance of the issue and the need for exploration of cohort and lifespan effects provides the impetus for this study and the theoretical framing thereof.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) is a nontraditional career model attempting to understand the changing nature of careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Specifically, the KCM posits that men and women alter patterns in their careers and rotate various aspects of their lives based on their roles and relationships. Using a kaleidoscope metaphor, as the tube is rotated, colored glass chips fall into different arrangements, with one color being more visible and intense than the others. These colors represent three primary career needs or parameters that are said to influence employee’s career development and decisions (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006). Authenticity (being true to oneself and making decisions that suit the self above others), balance (making decisions so that the various aspects of one’s life, including work and non-work, form a coherent whole), and challenge (engaging in activities so that one can pursue autonomy, responsibility, and control while learning and growing) are all important to employees. However, across a person’s lifetime career needs and priorities shift, resulting in career decisions (Cabrera, 2009).

Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) concluded women placed an emphasis on challenge in early career, balance in mid-career, and authenticity in late career while men focused on challenge in early career, authenticity in mid-career, and balance in late career.

The KCM describes balance as the need for an individual’s work and life to integrate in a way in which work and nonwork demands form a coherent whole (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2006). Recently the literature has called for a more balanced view of the work-family interface examining the experiences of both women and men (Graham & Dixon, 2014). This is in part because research suggests that both men and women experience tension as they try to balance work and family responsibilities (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2011; Schenewark & Dixon, 2012). Further examination suggests that men who are currently early in their career may especially be at risk for conflict between work and family as they feel both the traditional pressures to be the primary breadwinner, as well as the modern social pressures to be more involved with their families (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2014).

Much of the work-family literature focusing on college coaches is insightful and useful. However, two gaps require attention. First, many studies have taken a static or cross-sectional view. That is, most coaches (primarily women) have been asked about their work and family conflict at one period in time. Darcy et al. (2012) suggested that “organizations may need to re-think their policy in relation to work–life balance and more specifically pay closer attention to the needs of employees at differing career stages” (p. 117). Second, much of the research has focused primarily on women in sport, resulting in reduced understanding of men’s experiences. This study offers a new perspective, one that studies both male and female coaches’ work and family conflict across the career span. Furthermore, the KCM is an appropriate framework for studying the work-life interface of coaches because it is structured around gender and career stage.

In an effort to study head coaches’ work-life balance, a census was conducted, in which all head coaches working at the NCAA D-I level were asked to participate in the study. Utilizing the College Coaches Online Database,
approximately 5,067 head coaches working at D-I colleges and universities across the United States were asked to participate. There was a final sample of 840 head coaches, with a response rate of 17%.

Netemeyer, Boyles, and McMurrian’s (1996) 10-item scale was used to measure D-I head coaches’ work and family conflict levels which served as the dependent variables. Gender and career stage of the coach were the independent variables. The researchers combined age and tenure (assistant coaching and head coaching experience) to define the career stage of the coach. Coaches 20-34 years of age with 0-10 years of coaching experience were categorized as early career, coaches 35-50 years of age with 11-20 years of coaching experience were labeled mid-career and lastly, coaches older than 50 years of age with more than 20 years of coaching experience were grouped as late career stage. One main Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) statistical test was conducted to answer the research questions related to the work and family conflict levels, gender, and career stage.

Descriptive statistics show of the coaches who responded, 64.5% (n = 542) were male and 35.5% (n = 298) were female. Career stage frequencies indicate male coaches in early career (n = 39), mid-career (n = 229), and late career (n = 203) and female coaches in early career (n = 68), mid-career (n = 132), and late career (n = 63). Research question 1 addressed the levels of WFC and FWC for male and female coaches across early, mid, and late career. Descriptive statistics suggest WFC (M = 3.42; SD = 1.04) and FWC (M = 2.46; SD = 1.06) was highest for male coaches in early career. For female coaches, WFC (M = 3.15; SD = 1.05) was highest in mid-career and FWC (M = 1.92; SD = .95) is highest in early career.

Research question 2 sought to determine differences between male and female coaches levels of WFC and FWC across the career span. For male coaches, a significant multivariate main effect of career stage (Λ = .955, F = 5.491, df = 4, 934, p < .001) was found. Post-hoc Tukey found statistically significant differences for male coaches’ levels of WFC between early and late career (p < .05). Also, post-hoc Tukey found statistically significant differences for male coaches’ levels of FWC between early and late career (p < .05) and middle and late career (p < .05). For female coaches, a non-significant multivariate main effect of career stage was found (Λ = .995, F = .303, df = 4, 518, p = .876). This suggests female coaches’ levels of WFC and FWC is not significantly different across the career span.

The KCM has been slated to be useful in addressing gender differences in under-studied professions (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008). As such, using the KCM to study work-life interface allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of male and female coaches across the career span. WFC and FWC levels for coaches changed across stages regardless of gender which supports the influence that life-stage has on work-life outcomes. Also, these findings give further insight into the lives of men in sport. As the data suggests, those male coaches who were early in their career not only experienced significantly more WFC and FWC overall, they also experienced significantly more WFC and FWC then other male coaches who were in later career stages. These findings confirm studies conducted outside of a sport context (Aumann et al., 2014). Societal pressures continue to place expectations on men to be more involved with familial activities, becoming more of a co-parent and co-homemaker (Goldberg, Tan, & Thorsen, 2009; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). Meanwhile, sport culture is less responsive to modern expectations of men (Graham & Dixon, 2014), thereby creating increased tension for men in the early career stage cohort. Lastly, with five generations co-existing in the work environment and only 20% of American families being breadwinner-homemaker families (Cohn, Livingston, & Wang, 2014), it is important athletic administrators understand their workforce and provide resources for coaches at all stages of their career. It is suggested that athletic departments promote a climate that supports coaches’ need to balance work and non-work demands and recognize the tension male coaches’ experience between the traditional gender role and the modern expectations of familial involvement.