Work-Family Balance for Men in Sport: An Examination of Organizational Support and Perceptions of Psychological Safety

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Psychological safety is critical to the health and effectiveness of organizations and teams. In terms of organizational climate, psychological safety refers to practices and procedures encouraged by an organization, both formal and informal, that guide and support trustful interactions (Baer & Frese, 2003). Psychological safety for individuals refers to a belief that they can propose new ideas, voice concerns, or discuss problems with managers and colleagues without fear of experiencing negative consequences, such as restricted career mobility or a loss of support from superiors and peers (Detert & Burris, 2007; Kahn, 1990). Psychological safety has been linked to favorable employee behaviors such as voicing (Detert & Buriss, 2007), engagement (Kahn, 1990), innovation (Baer & Frese, 2003), as well as improved performance for individuals and organizations (Brown & Leigh, 1996).

Although not often utilized, psychological safety has strong implications in the realm of work-family interactions and organizational policies and climate. For example, a study examining the experiences of women college coaches who were mothers found managing mothering and coaching roles was facilitated by a supportive organizational climate (Bruening & Dixon 2007). Those authors argued, “Department administration played a large role in the establishment of a family-friendly culture” (p. 487). Respondents in their study explained how athletic department administrators provided support mechanisms (e.g., providing flexible work hours, allowing children to travel with the team) and personal support (e.g., demonstrating personal interest, listening carefully, and taking action when possible), which were helpful for the mothers as they balanced family and work obligations (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). Although they did not use the term psychological safety, they were indeed describing a psychologically safe environment. When sport organizations had high levels of psychological safety, mothers felt comfortable discussing the challenges of work-family balance with their superiors, thereby alleviating some of their felt tension and increasing their ability to balance work and family responsibilities. In contrast, the study found that when administrators were unaware of or lacked knowledge of ways to be supportive for employees seeking to balance work and family, a family-friendly atmosphere was reduced and conflict increased (Bruening & Dixon, 2007).

Recent research suggests that men in sport also face tension with balancing work and family responsibilities (e.g., Graham & Dixon, 2014). In fact, research in family studies literature indicates that fathers in dual earning households report significantly more work-family conflict then they did 40 years ago – a rise from 35% in 1977 to 60% in 2008 (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2014). With more women entering the workforce, men will continue to feel pressure to be more involved at home and experiences of work-family conflict for fathers are expected to remain a challenge (Aumann et al., 2014). This is especially true for men in the sport industry, which is characterized as having low levels of job security, high levels of traditional hegemonic masculine ideals (e.g., machismo and hyper-competition), and low levels of worker flexibility (Graham & Dixon, 2014), all antecedents to work-family conflict (Voydanoff, 2004).

The purpose of this ongoing study is to examine the experiences of coaching fathers in relation to the individual and organizational supports and challenges that impacted their work-life conflict. The purpose of this specific portion of the study is to utilize a psychological safety framework to examine the organizational climate of coaching fathers and how it impacts their experience of work-life conflict.

Twenty-four high school varsity head coaches volunteered to take part in the study. At the time of the study, each of the coaches was married and had at least one child. The participants represented a number of different sports including football, basketball, baseball, track, cross country, soccer, and swimming. The primary investigators conducted individual, face-to-face interviews that followed a semi-structured questionnaire. Each interview was audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Once the transcriptions were finished, the principle investigators utilized an inductive coding strategy to identify meaningful themes from the data.
During the interview and analysis process, it was clear that the fathers in the study utilized a range of coping strategies to manage the tension that comes with balancing work and family. For example, the fathers relied on friends and family for support with childcare. Additionally, the fathers discussed the need to plan, create schedules, and communicate events with significant role partners (e.g., spouses or assistant coaches) to reduce the chance of missing important happenings. Furthermore, the fathers discussed a balance of integration and compartmentalization tactics for including family with work.

One glaringly missing coping strategy, however, was the expected reliance on athletic administrators or other school administration for formal and informal support, similar to what the college coaches who were also mothers in Bruening and Dixon’s (2007) study discussed. However, when probed about the potential for seeking out support from school administration, almost all of the coaches responded negatively. One basketball coach said, “In coaching there are no guaranteed contracts, it’s year to year … So you have to be very careful of what you reveal to the administrators” (Coach Q, Basketball, emphasis added). In other words, this coach felt it was unsafe to reveal personal challenges as they might be interpreted by administration as a lack of ability, which was feared might result in negative consequences. Another basketball coach discussed how he had an administrator who seemed to purposely make his job as a coach more difficult, saying, “I had one [administrator] that seemed to really kind of pick on coaches … that would go looking for stuff [to be upset about]” (Coach U, Basketball). Naturally, this kind of working environment in which an individual feels singled out for negative treatment is not likely conducive to feelings of safety or trust. However, one coach did discuss how his administrator provided support, saying “It seems if you have a principal who is trustworthy and who you feel like you have a comfortable relationship with, they’re a great resource” (Coach R, Track and Field). In this case the administrator was viewed as a resource to the coach, which was a natural result of a relationship built on trust and comfort.

Overall, the data are clear that the coaches did not perceive a climate of psychological safety in many cases. The required feelings of trust, understanding, and security were simply missing from many of the administrator coach relationships. As a result, the fathers in this study mostly avoided their administrators informally, and did not utilize formal supports unless no other option was available. In contrast, the coaches reported an incredible reliance (potentially an overreliance) on family and friends for support.

The implications for this alarming trend are important to consider. These findings suggest that men in sport may be more paranoid about the climate of safety in an organization then women. Consequently, men may be less willing to trust those in authority over them and show vulnerability. This suggests an important boundary condition to the psychological safety framework, one requiring further empirical examination. Furthermore, the findings indicate that sport administrators may require additional training for showing support and promoting support mechanisms for men. If reports are accurate and men are experiencing higher levels of work-family conflict today, then this is an important managerial topic that needs to be addressed. Additionally, if these findings are transferrable and men in sport perceive high levels of personal risk when seeking support from superiors, balancing work and family will continue to be a challenge for men in sport, which may result in higher levels of turnover and reduced satisfaction for coaching men. Further research is needed to understand this phenomenon in greater detail.