Through the Kaleidoscope Lens: Exploring Gender Differences in the Career Needs of NCAA D-I Head Coaches

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The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) is a relatively new career model used to explain employees’ career decisions and posits men and women follow different career patterns and value different needs at various times throughout their careers. Authenticity (being true to oneself), balance (work and non-work form a coherent whole), and challenge (growth, autonomy, and responsibility) were coined as the three career parameters or needs employees have across the career span (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). Despite numerous studies using the KCM to explore women’s career needs, there is a gap in the literature when investigating men and women’s career needs within a specific occupation.

At the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I level, the role of the head coaches leading these sports programs is ever so important. Not only do coaches have the responsibility of representing their institution, leading their student-athletes, and preparing their athletes for competition, there is an expectation for coaches to win. Also, there is a gender gap in the coaching profession with recent data showing a steady decline in the number of female coaches in intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). The KCM was used as the theoretical framework for this study in an effort to explore the career needs of NCAA Division I college head coaches. It was unknown if authenticity, balance, and challenge, as suggested by the KCM, describes coaches’ career needs and if there are differences in the needs for these coaches based on gender of the coach. Also, because the KCM was created with women in mind, it may be a useful framework in further understanding female coaches’ careers.

Knowledge of potential differences in coaches’ career needs may help organizational leaders and athletic administrators make important decisions about human resource policies and practices.

To investigate the career needs of D-I college head coaches, a census was completed and an online survey was emailed to all head coaches working at Division-I colleges and universities across the United States. Approximately 5,067 coaches were asked to participate, and at the completion, there was a final sample of 840 (N = 840) head coaches, with a response rate of 17%. Each career need served as the dependent variables, and one main Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) statistical test was conducted to answer the research questions related to the career parameters and gender. Sullivan et al.’s (2009) 15-item KCM scale was used and additional demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, sport coached) were collected.

Of the 840 coaches who responded to the survey, 64.5% (n = 542) were male and 35.5% (n = 298) were female. The majority of coaches (n = 682) were White/Non-Hispanic (81.1%) and married or in a committed relationship (72.2%). There were 349 coaches (41.5%) without children living in the home under the age of 18. The coaches’ age range was 22-74, with an average age of (M = 45.9; SD = 10.11). Coaches’ occupational tenure averaged (M = 14.5 years; SD = 10.55). The study’s research questions were focused on determining which of the three career needs (authenticity, balance, and challenge) was deemed most significant to D-I head coaches and if any differences were found between male and female head coaches. Descriptive statistics indicated coaches’ need for challenge (M = 3.74; SD = .76) best describe D-I college head coaches, followed by authenticity (M = 3.28; SD = .82), and balance (M = 3.05; SD = 1.02). When analyzing the overall effect gender had on the career needs of college coaches, results indicated a significant multivariate main effect of gender ($\Lambda = .968$, $F = 7.987$, df = 3, 734, $p < .001$). Specifically, there was a statistically significant difference in coaches’ need for balance based on gender of the coach, $F (1,736) = 20.434$, $p < .001$, with male coaches’ expressing a greater need for balance than their female counterpart.

D-I college head coaches expressed a great need for challenge in their careers. Challenge as a career need, regardless of gender of the coach, seems fitting for the profession and administrators must provide coaches the opportunities for autonomy and growth. This could include supporting coaches’ endeavors to take their team abroad or providing training resources for coaches. Much of the sport literature supports female coaches’ struggle to balance work and
non-work demands. However, results suggest male coaches have a great need for balance. Graham and Dixon (2014) recently published an article urging researchers to explore coaching fathers and the challenges they encounter with balancing work and family. This data supports the need for future research on the topic. This study was exploratory in nature and it is recommended future research analyze the careers of coaches at different stages of their career. The KCM provides a framework for this inquiry and may be helpful to administrators who are in charge of supervising both young and older coaches. Lastly, studying coaches’ career needs across sports (revenue versus non-revenue) or the Power Five conferences versus other NCAA D-I conferences may shed light on potential differences between coaches’ career needs based on level of competition.