Head Coach Gender and Team Performance in the WNBA

Lindsey Darvin, University of Florida
David Berri, Southern Utah University

Diversity  Friday, June 3, 2016  20-minute oral presentation
Abstract 2016-095  8:50 AM  (including questions)
(Forum West 3)

Women in leadership positions of the workforce are an anomaly. Despite years of progress made by women, who now currently occupy more than 40% of all managerial positions in the United States workforce, they remain “as rare as hens' teeth” within the ranks of top leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2011). Similarly, within the sport industry women hold top leadership positions at a much lower rate than their male coworkers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Moreover, previous literature has determined that sport is one of the most hegemonic practices present in today's society (Bryson et al.). The emphasis on masculinity in sport serves to exclude feminine attributes from entering the sphere and affirms men's power not only over sport, but over women as well (Whisenant, Pederson & Obenour, 2002).

Additionally, previous research has indicated that women have proven their ability to be successful once reaching upper management positions, but gaining access to the top positions has proven a much more difficult task for women than their male colleagues (Acker, 1999). Countless organizations continuously reinforce women's secondary status in working life. Acker (1999) asserts that gender itself is embedded in the day-to-day organizational processes, and therefore inequalities are reproduced as the routine work of the gendered organization is completed. Thus, women are subject to varying organizational gender divisions (e.g. gendered hierarchy, gender segregation of jobs and positions, a gendered wage gap) that as a result limits their access to the highest professional levels of the organization (Acker, 1999).

According to Cunningham and Sagas (2007), women not only have less access to positions as head coaches, but when women are able to obtain these positions they are not treated with the same level of respect that their male colleagues are privileged to. Further, previous research has suggested that access and treatment discrimination greatly influence the lack of women in leadership positions of sport organizations (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Knoppers, 1992; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). In the sport context, access discrimination suggests that the “old boys network” or exclusive networks in general, prevent certain individuals from entering the field (Walker, Sartore-Baldwin 2013). The lack of female representation at the highest leaderships ranks within the sports industry calls into question not only the hiring practices of organizations, but the actual impact of an individual found in a leadership position, on the overall success of that organization.

Overall, the contributions made by organizational leaders of either gender to the success of that organization is an under examined phenomenon. To further understand the current gendered nature of leadership positions within sport, an analysis of head coaching positions, the most visible leadership role in the sports industry, can provide tremendous insight. The purpose of this current examination is to analyze the contributions made by head coaches in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Because a) the WNBA employs both men and women head coaches and b) player performance in the WNBA can be accurately measured; the WNBA provides an ideal data set to examine how men and women impact the performance of the workers they lead. In order to combat the gendered nature of sport organizations it is crucial to establish whether top leaders (i.e. head coaches) truly play a substantial role in the overall success of the program.

Previous research has successful examined the role of a leader in the sports industry through an analysis of National Basketball Association (NBA) head coaches. Berri, Leeds, Leeds, and Mondello (2009), found that most NBA coaches do not have a statistically significant impact on the performance of their players or the performance of their team. Berri et al., (2009) concluded that based on the findings, NBA coaches can therefore be classified as “principal clerks” a term Adam Smith used to refer to managers more than 200 years ago. From this, it is possible that the leaders (i.e. head coaches) in the WNBA will also follow a similar trend and in turn raise the question of a reevaluation of the hiring process for these top leadership roles.
For this current study, we will follow Berri, Leeds, Leeds, and Mondello (2009) in our study of WNBA coaching. Specifically, we will begin with the following model adapted from Berri, et. al. (2009).

\[ \text{PROD40} = f(\text{PROD40}(-1), \text{Age}, \text{Age Squared}, \text{GP}, \text{TMPROD}, \text{COACH}, \text{GENDER}) \]

Where:

\( \text{PROD40} = \) A player's overall productivity per 40 minutes played [this will be measured following the work of Berri (2008) and Berri and Schmidt (2010)]

\( \text{Age} = \) Age of the player (squared term is included because this is not expected to be a linear relationship)

\( \text{GP} = \) Games played

\( \text{TMPROD} = \) Productivity of teammates

\( \text{COACH} = \) Dummy variables for coach

\( \text{GENDER} = \) Dummy variable for gender of coach

This model will address two research questions. First, (1) do coaches impact the productivity of individual players? And secondly, (2) how does the gender of the coach effect this impact (if the impact exists)?

Data for each player has been collected for the previous 19 seasons dating from 1997 to 2015. Data for each player was obtained through online databases such as archived team rosters, archived player profiles, and through http://www.basketball-reference.com/wnba/. This data set includes numerical statistics and demographics for every player in the WNBA that competed between the years of 1997 and 2015. The next phase of this research will be conducted during November and December of 2015. This phase will include an analysis of the player data through the use of the above model as well as an analysis and interpretation of those results.