Gender Bias in Evaluation of Leaders: Examining the Decline in Female Head Coaches

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In the most lucrative and powerful division of intercollegiate sport, the colleges/universities in the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), women make up only 39.6% of all head coaches of women’s teams and a meager 2% of all head coaches of men’s teams (LaVoi, 2014). Fewer women are being hired for head coaching positions (LaVoi, 2014, 2015) and some women in head coaching positions may be losing their jobs under questionable circumstances (Fagan, 2014, 2015). As noted by LaVoi (2014), a decline in the number of women in head coaching positions is critical, as this is a leadership role that provides women a point of influence and power within the institution of sport. To better understand why we are witnessing a decline of women in this leadership role, we adopted an implicit bias approach to understand how women may be differentially evaluated in leadership positions (head coach) and what factors may be contributing to this difference.

We contend that gender stereotypes associated with traditional gender roles and perceptions of leadership may affect how individual woman are evaluated within the role of head coach (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2012). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) noted societal expectations and stakeholder expectations of coaching impact how women are perceived in their coaching role. Masculinity and masculine behavior are supported and reinforced as the appropriate leadership qualities required in sport (Burton, 2015). This institutionalized masculinity applies to the domain of coaching, which reinforces a system that values men’s sports and men’s coaching over women’s sports and women’s coaching. The perception of a ‘good’ coach continues to favor men over women (Kamphoff, 2010; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

Role congruity theory purports that women experience a bias in evaluation of their leadership behavior as a result of stereotypes regarding women’s behavior (warm, kind, nurturing) that is inconsistent with the expected behaviors demonstrated by successful leaders (confident, ambitious, competitive) (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt & Burnette, 2013). Given that expectations of a head coach are consistent with being the leader of the team, women holding the head coaching position may experience bias in the evaluation of their coaching behaviors if these behaviors are not consistent with the stereotypes regarding women’s behavior and the behaviors expected of a successful leader. These potential biased evaluations may be a result of the perceived incongruity between the role of head coach (leader) and the inconsistencies in stereotypes held for women and leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Based on role congruity theory, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: A female head coach described by a more agentic coaching style will be negatively evaluated when compared to a female head coach described by a communal style or a male coach described by either an agentic or a communal coaching style.

H2: Participants perceiving agentic qualities as most effective to leadership will contribute to a bias evaluation of female head coaches.

H3: Exposure to female head coaches will moderate the relationship between perceptions of leader agentic qualities and a bias evaluation of female coaches, with less exposure increasing biased evaluations.

Exposure to counter-stereotypical gender role models (e.g., female head coaches) has led to a decrease in biased evaluations, including biased evaluations of women in leadership roles (Leicht, de Moura, & Crisp, 2014). Therefore, female athletes who have had more experiences being coached by women (i.e., exposure to counter-stereotypical role models) may demonstrate less bias in evaluation of women in leadership positions. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3: Exposure to female head coaches will moderate the relationship between perceptions of leader agentic qualities and a bias evaluation of female coaches, with less exposure increasing biased evaluations.
Participants were 113 current female intercollegiate athletes competing for NCAA Division I FBS universities. Each athlete was provided a fictional scenario depicting a male or female head coach describing their coaching styles using either agentic or communal leadership behaviors. Participants evaluated their perceptions of the fictional coach (admire this coach, this person would be an ideal coach (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree)) ($\alpha = .95$). Participants also evaluated their perceptions of an effective leader on agentic traits associated with leadership (competitive, analytical, determined, confident, ambitious) (Rudman & Glick, 2001) ($\alpha = .82$). Exposure to counter-stereotypical role models was measured by a mean score of participants' frequency (1 = never to 7 = always) of female head coaches in high school, club sports and college. To determine intergroup bias toward leaders, we calculated a leadership bias variable by subtracting the evaluation of the female coach (communal or agentic) from the male head coach (communal or agentic) with evaluation scores above zero indicating a male bias in leadership behavior and scores below zero indicating a female bias in leadership (Hoyt & Burnette, 2013).

Data analysis for H1 utilized an analysis of variance. Hypothesis 1 was supported, $F = 3.92$, $p < .05$. Post-hoc analyses were significant revealing the female head coach described by an agentic leadership style received the lowest evaluation by participants ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.0$) compared to the female head coach described by a communal leadership style ($M = 6.48$, $SD = .53$) at $p < .05$, and was also significantly lower when compared to the male head coach with an agentic leadership style ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.0$) and the male coach with a communal leadership style ($M = 5.81$, $SD = 1.4$) at $p < .10$. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were evaluated using Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macro with participants' perceptions of agentic traits associated with leadership and leadership bias variable entered into a regression equation with exposure to counter stereotypical role models as the interaction term. Findings did not support H2 ($\beta = -.36$, $p = .25$). Hypothesis 3 was supported, such that exposure to counter stereotypical role models both predicted leadership bias ($\beta = -.96$, $p < .05$) and moderated the relationship between perceptions of agentic traits associated with leadership and leadership bias ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$). Probing the interaction using Johnson-Newman technique indicated that bias in leadership based on favoring agentic characteristics in leadership occurred when participants had less exposure to female coaches.

Results of this study support the findings that attitudes toward women in leadership positions (head coach) are biased when women act outside of stereotypical female gender roles. However, when participants are exposed to counter stereotypical role models, this bias is reduced. These findings call attention to the need for women to be and remain in head coaching positions from grassroots sports to the professional level if we are to reduce gender bias in sport leadership.