Balancing Work and Family in the Mid and Late Career

Jeffrey Graham, University of Tennessee
Shaina Dabbs, Elon University
Marlene Dixon, Texas A&M University

Management - Work-Life (College Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2018-228
Friday, June 8, 2018
3:00 PM
Room: Acadia B

Introduction
College athletic programs represent a multibillion-dollar industry and are integrally linked to school branding and reputation (Sternburg, 2017). The coaches who act as primary spokespeople and recognized faces of these athletic programs have high levels of responsibility and pressure. Not only do coaches remain accessible to staff and players morning, day, and night, they work long hours, frequently travel to recruit, and are expected to lead their programs to success (i.e., win) (Bruening & Dixon, 2005; Wilson, 2007). The pressure coaches face to achieve on field success, intermingled with the demanding time requirements inherent to the position, make college coaching a rich context to explore the work-life interface.

Background and Theoretical Frame
Research in the field of sport management suggests that men and women both experience conflict stemming from work and family (e.g., Schenewark & Dixon, 2012), and that in general, men and women approach balancing work and family demands in fundamentally different ways (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Graham & Dixon, 2017). However, much of the research has examined the work-life interface of coaches with a special focus on the early career stage (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Sturges & Guest, 2004), especially among coaching mothers (Bruening, Dixon, & Eason, 2016; Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007) and fathers who have young children in the home (Graham & Dixon, 2017). From this research base it is clear that coaches with young children at home struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, especially as they try to establish themselves in their coaching career. However, conflict between work and family does not disappear as children age and the career stage progresses. Although the nature of the responsibilities in both realms may change over time, coaches need continued support to balance demands as they move through different life and career stages (Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Dabbs, in press; Dabbs, Graham, & Dixon, 2017).

Coaches in mid-late career reflect a large investment by organizations. Research suggests that initially most employees are a cost to the organization, and that over time, with the right practices, they become more and more valuable (Bersin, 2013). Coaches in mid-late career stage represent trained, developed, capable individuals who are not easily replaced or replicated. From this perspective then, helping mid-late career coaches is important for sport organizations to maximize their investment in human capital development. With this in mind, it is clear that sport organizations have a strong stake in understanding and supporting this group so that they continue to contribute to the organization’s success.

Preliminary data from research outside of the sport industry focused on mid-career employees indicate that tensions between work and family obligations at mid and late career often include having adult children living at home, navigating career flexibility, managing their legacy and career goals, as well as managing potential eldercare responsibilities (e.g., Erickson, Martinengo, & Hill, 2010; Marcinikus et a., 2007; Martinengo, Jacob, & Hill, 2010; Tement & Korunka, 2015; Thrasher, Zabel, Wynne, & Baltes, 2016). However, in the distinct context of sport, virtually nothing is known about how these kinds of factors, influences, and tensions may impact coaches in their mid-late career. Thus, by examining the work family interface through a life course perspective, especially focusing on coaches’ experiences balancing work and life at the mid and late career stages, scholars can continue to build on existing work-life theory in sport (e.g., Dixon & Bruening, 2005).

Purpose and Method
This in-progress study seeks to examine the life experiences of mid-late career NCAA head coaches. For the purposes of this study, mid-late career is defined as coaches who are between the ages of 35-50 and have 11-20 years
of coaching experience. Semi-structured in-person, in-depth interviews with NCAA Division I coaches are currently being conducted. Participants are male and female coaches with at least one child in the home, who also meet the definitions of mid-late career. Interviews seek to elicit experiences of both enrichment and conflict between the work and family role that is rooted in their current life and career stage. Also, interviews seek to draw out comparisons respondents themselves have noticed about how their experiences, levels of strain, and tactics for balancing work and family responsibilities may have changed as life and career stages have progressed.

Expected Findings
This study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences balancing work and family, specifically in this time period of the coaches’ lives. For example, the sources of role pressures may be different for those in mid-late career as opposed to those in early career. In the early career primary sources of role pressure and strain stem from dependent childcare responsibilities and goals to achieve career goals. Data from the interviews is likely to address how these sources of pressure and strain differ for those in later career stages. In addition, the interviews will focus on the type of coping mechanisms individuals in the mid-late career utilize to balance work and family. It is expected that more established forms of coping and higher levels of self-awareness about the effectiveness of these techniques will be expressed from this cohort. Finally, the study will explore the complex nature of their work-family conflict for those in this life and career stage. Previous literature suggests that behavioral motivation and the level of attached importance regarding work goals and family outcomes changes over the life course (Thrasher et al., 2016). As a result, the ways in which individuals experience and interpret the tension between work and family is also likely to vary. Consequently, it is expected that the findings from this study will support and extend these previously theorized relationships.

Conclusion and Contribution
Previous work highlights how sport organizations focus their attention on supporting young coaches to navigate their careers and balance responsibilities at work and with life. Policies and programs have been created and continue to be modified at countless athletic institutions to this end. However, little has been done to understand and support coaches who are in mid-late career. Therefore, the next progression in understanding the tensions surrounding the work-family interface is to continue this line of research and study the perspectives and experiences of coaches who are in mid-late career. Consequently, this study aims to extend our theoretical understanding of work-family balance across the life course, as well as provide practical guidance to sport organizations regarding policies and practices aimed to benefit coaches in the mid-late career stage.