Examsing Work-Life Balance Among NCAA Student-Athletes Who Are Fathers

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Parents who work in sport often cite work-life balance as a major difficulty of their occupations (Dixon & Bruening, 2005). This relationship can function in both directions, where either work interferes with family (work-to-family conflict) and/or family interferes with work (family-to-work conflict; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Scholars have also begun to investigate how work and family may interact positively (i.e., work-family enrichment; Schenewark & Dixon, 2012) and how other life components besides family may be involved (e.g., work-extracurricular conflict among graduate assistants in college athletic departments; Ervin & Cianfrone, 2011). Most studies of work-life balance in sport focus on working mothers; however, Graham and Dixon (2014) argued that fathers in the sport industry may experience role conflict more intensely due to the time requirements, hypermasculine culture, and ethic of personal sacrifice that are common in athletics. Dabbs, Graham, and Dixon (2015) found coaching fathers and coaching mothers experienced relatively similar work-to-family conflict throughout their career cycles, but males with young children experienced the highest levels of conflict early in their careers.

Dixon and Bruening (2005) developed a multilevel model integrating the individual, structural, and social relations approaches to work-life balance. The individual approach looks at how a person’s personality, values, attitudes, family structure, coping strategies, and gender affect their work-life balance; the structural approach focuses on organizational factors such as job pressure, stress, work hours, schedule, and work culture; and the social relations approach is even broader and examines social meanings, norms, and values of work and family as gendered social constructions (Mazzarole & Eason, 2015). Antecedents of work-life balance issues may include: competitive personalities, conflicting internal values, and lack of family support (individual); long hours, travel, and perceived task autonomy (organizational or structural); and gender norms and masculinity in the workplace (sociocultural; Dixon & Bruening, 2007). Outcomes may include difficult relationships with partners and children, guilt, and exhaustion (individual) and job turnover (organizational or structural). Coaching mothers reported they used coping mechanisms such as stress relief through escape or productive/functional task completion, exercise, increased self-awareness and mindfulness, better organization and time management, sacrificing work for family, and ad hoc support networks among family, friends, and colleagues (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). Work-life enrichment may be found when employees learn how to balance various roles or improve their overall perspectives or where resources or coping mechanisms acquired via one role can be employed synergistically in another role (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). For example, interpersonal and organizational skills honed at the office helped coaching mothers deal with difficult parents in the coaching sphere, while care and compassion learned as a mother made them more patient, thoughtful coaches and workers (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011).

Like college coaches and administrators, student-athletes may experience role conflict and other work-life balance issues as they simultaneously attempt to maximize their academic, athletic, personal, and social development. The researchers recognize that student-athletes’ athletic and academic responsibilities are not technically “work.” Although the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) restricts countable athletic-related activities to 20 hours per week in season, many student-athletes self-reported spending upwards of 30-40 hours per week on athletics, before accounting for any academic and family responsibilities (NCAA, 2011). The NCAA does not track how many intercollegiate athletes have children, but the phenomenon of student-athletes-as-parents is receiving increasing attention in the press (Finley, 2007; Norlander, 2015). Scholars such as Brake (2008) and Sorensen, Sincoff, and Siebenbeck (2009) have contended there is a need for better laws and policies protecting pregnant female athletes, but little research has examined how these young parents—especially fathers—navigate multiple roles, identities, and responsibilities. Likewise, although researchers have studied identity and role conflict in intercollegiate athletes (Killeya-Jones, 2005; Mahoney, 2011; Sack & Thiel, 1985), they have yet to consider the impact of fatherhood in this aspect of student-athlete life.
The purpose of this study is to apply Dixon and Bruening’s (2005) multilevel model to intercollegiate athletes who are fathers. Given Dabbs et al.’s (2015) conclusion that male coaches who had young children and were at the beginning of the career cycle experienced the highest levels of conflict, it seems likely that male student-athletes with young children may suffer similar stresses. Specifically, the researchers are seeking to answer the following questions: (a) How do student-athletes who are fathers experience work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict at the individual, organizational, and social relations levels? (b) How do student-athletes who are fathers cope with work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict? (c) What organizational resources are available to support student-athletes who are fathers? and (d) How do student-athletes who are fathers perceive the effect of work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict on their athletic and academic performances?

The researchers are employing a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews of 8-12 current and former student-athletes who are/were fathers during their college sport careers. The researchers used personal contacts and asked student-athlete support staff at several athletic departments for the names of male student-athletes who are also fathers. The study is currently in the data collection phase. The semi-structured interviews include questions regarding the participants’ family circumstances, the various pressures they face as parents, students, and athletes, and the support systems and coping mechanisms they use. Interviews will be transcribed, and inductive content analysis will be used to examine the results. The authors will code the transcripts to identify higher-order and, if appropriate, lower-order themes, similar to the methods used by Lumpkin and Anshel (2012), regarding the antecedents and outcomes of student-athlete work-life balance issues.

This study will extend the academic canon on work-life balance by exploring a previously unstudied group—student-athletes who are fathers. From a practical perspective, it will help college coaches, administrators, and support staff better understand the experiences of student-athletes who are fathers so that they can determine how to best assist them. The researchers will discuss further implications for practitioners and scholars, as well as propose future research extensions.