Are Male Athletes Ready to Have Female Coaches? Male Athletes’ Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) and the Role of Cultural Tightness on Perceptions of Female Coach Leadership

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This conceptual paper comprehensively describes essential aspects determining male athletes’ perceptions of female coaches in elite male sports drawing from implicit leadership theories (ILTs) while observing the influence of the culturally tight hegemonic masculine sport culture based on the theory of cultural tightness-looseness (CTL). In addition, the first process model is presented examining how these leadership perceptions occur.

Sport coaches have been sensationalized by society as distinguished leaders and studied by individuals to learn leadership wisdom (DiRenzo, Weingarden, & Resick, 2016). However, perceptions of leadership are in the eye of the beholder and perceiving an individual as a leader is critical for that individual to lead. ILTs imply that people have implicit assumptions about the intrinsic qualities, traits, and characteristics leaders possess (Forsyth, 2014). These assumptions of leader prototypes navigate an individual’s perceptions and followership of a leader (Forsyth, 2014). Individual ILTs are socially and cognitively developed from previous exposure (Fischbein, & Lord, 2004). Therefore, a male athlete’s ILT is constructed from exposure to coaches as well as societies’ aggrandizement of the hegemonic masculine sport culture. If the female coach does not match the male athlete's perception of a coach, then the female coach will not be effective in exerting the necessary influence on the male athletes to achieve the required goals (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) to sustain the coaching position.

In the last decade, men’s professional and collegiate sports have slightly wedged the door open by hiring female coaches (Evans, 2016). Prior research suggested society is ready and comfortable for women to coach men’s sports (Walker, Bopp, & Sagas, 2011). Conversely, other studies indicated men’s sports has an embedded hegemonic masculine culture. Results denoted the culture to be gender exclusive, masculine, and resistant to change. Nonetheless, it is rare to see women coaching men’s sports (LaVoi, 2016) and for nothing more than fugitive stints. As explained by the theory of CTL, norms in tight cultures are explicit, homogeneous in beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and composition, and deviation is minimal (Uz, 2015). Tight cultures negatively impact women leaders because the predominance of existing male leaders is resistant to change (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). Finally, research indicates that tightness is positively related to perceptions of leadership (Aktas, Gelfand, & Hanges, 2016).

Thus, the conceptual model connects the relationships and effects of the hegemonic masculine cultural tightness moderating the process of how male athletes’ predispositions form perceptions of a female coach. Taken together, I argue that male athletes' ILTs, influenced by a tight hegemonic masculine culture, make it more difficult to view a female coach as a leader, ultimately hindering positive leadership outcomes such as leadership acceptance, viability, and followership.

This study provides insightful information on perceptions of coaching leadership in sports and sports organizations for challenges that exist when introducing female coaches into a tight hegemonic masculine culture. Practical implications for leadership in organizations and contributions are made to the ILT body of knowledge in sport and CTL is introduced to the field of sport management.