A Pipeline Leak: Career Experiences of Former Intercollegiate Female Assistant Coaches

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Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles throughout the sport industry, and occupational turnover for women within the sport industry is pervasive (Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006). Female professionals in sport, regardless of rank, have higher occupational turnover intentions (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). Occupational turnover, which disproportionately affects women, can have severe consequences, including a supply shortage of women to fill sport leadership positions, such as the role of head coach (Cunningham, 2015). Career experiences of former female assistant coaches have not been considered within this emerging discourse.

As female assistant coaches comprise the pool of potential sport leaders, understanding their career experiences within the profession is increasingly important in combatting the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership (Wells, 2016). The current study aimed to unpack the leaking pipeline phenomenon of NCAA female assistant coaches who have voluntarily engaged in occupational turnover. The research question that guided the inquiry (and served as the interview guide) was: What are the career experiences of former NCAA female assistant coaches who have engaged in voluntary occupational turnover?

The research design was grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology and hermeneutics, employing an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). According to Creswell (2013), “the purpose of [a] phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, and identify how phenomena are perceived by the individuals in a situation” (p. 300). The hermeneutic school of phenomenology operates as “…an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject throughout their life world stories” (Kafle, 2011, p. 186). The subjective nature of women’s retrospective accounts of career experiences in sport underscores an inherent contribution to understanding the influence of lived experiences on decisions to voluntarily quit the profession (Smith, 1997).

The sample (N=12) was comprised of women who: a) have voluntarily quit the assistant coaching profession within four years of interview, b) served as an assistant coach at a NCAA institution, and c) worked within the sport of women’s basketball, women’s soccer, women’s swimming, or women’s lacrosse. Unstructured interviews were conducted with 12 participants who met the prescribed criteria. A third-party service transcribed the interviews, which ranged in duration from 78 minutes to 137 minutes. An inductive analysis of the data revealed five themes centering on the participants’ career experiences as an assistant coach: a) time commitment, b) recruiting obligations, c) off-season façade, d) controlling environments, and e) building relationships.

The findings of this study provide career insights of women who were positioned to gain the requisite experiences that, for many, translate into sport leadership, but voluntarily left the profession. Participants’ accounts of their experiences in (and exit from) the profession elucidated emergent themes that might contribute to understanding the effects that voluntary turnover has on the leaking pipeline of women pursuing leadership positions in sport. Discussion of the emergent themes identifies possible disruptions in women’s path to sport leadership as the industry attempts to combat the underrepresentation of female sport leaders.