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“What d’you know, you’re a girl!” Gendered experiences of sport coach education



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ABSTRACT

The recent increase in female participation in sport has not been matched by the involvement of women in decision-making and coaching roles. The present study used Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to examine experiences of male and female sport coaching students regarding the use of (association) football as a context for assessment. Results demonstrated that female students were less likely to have had experience playing or coaching football and many were uncomfortable with football as a medium for learning. Paradoxically, however, having greater informal knowledge (based on experiential learning) was perceived as a barrier to learning for some male students.

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1. Introduction

Participation in sport amongst women has increased dramatically since the mid-1960s, due in part to the introduction of equal rights policies and legislation such as the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act in the UK and Title IX in the United States (Coakley & Pike, 2009; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). This increase in participation has not, however, been matched by the proportion of women in key decision-making roles in a variety of sports organisations. In the UK, women comprise less than a quarter of active coaches (Norman, 2008) and only a third of UK Sports Council board members (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Furthermore, several National Governing Bodies have no female board members at all, and those women who do gain decision-making roles are often paid less and have a lower status than their male counterparts (Women’s Sport Foundation, 2007). In a comparative study of male and female coaches in Canada, Reade, Rodgers, and Norman (2009) found that women were more visible in entry level coaching courses and in some more traditionally feminine sports, but were disproportionately under-represented at the high-performance level. Indeed women who had secured a high-performance coaching role tended to hold more advanced qualifications and more experience of competing at international level than men in similar roles.

The absence of high profile female coaches is a concern for a number of reasons. Female coaches can act as important role models, positively influencing development of self-esteem and healthy body image in women (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Zimmerman & Reavill, 1998). There is also evidence that female athletes coached by women are less intimidated by the prospect of a career in coaching and more likely to continue participation (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). Numerous explanations have been advanced to account for the disproportionately small number of women in coaching roles. Structural barriers include discrimination in recruitment, sexual harassment, conflict with family duties, lack of feedback or support, powerlessness when in post (Knoppers, 1994), and the influence of the ‘old boys’ network’ (Acosta & Carpenter, n.d.).

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A more precise analysis of the impediments facing female coaches was provided by Kilty (2006) who identified a typology of external and internal factors. The former include the assumption of unequal competence (with men assumed to be more competent), hiring from a principle of similarity, homophobia, and lack of female mentors; the latter include perfectionism, lack of assertiveness, inhibition in promotion of accomplishments, and stress in balancing work and personal life. Confirming the importance of coaching self-efficacy beliefs, Moran-Miller and Flores (2011) argue that there remains an issue about the perceptions of their level of ability. Norman (2008) also offers the possibility that women continue to be marginalised because of the dominant coaching paradigms, philosophy and infrastructure in the UK – and research has been more concerned with quantitative distributive factors rather than exploring personal experiences (Norman, 2010).

The pattern of representation of women in sport coaching is also evident in sport education. Sport-related programmes of undergraduate study are still dominated by men. Female students continue to account for only 32% of enrolments, and male lecturing staff are in the majority (Elliot & Sander, 2011). Predictably, numerous explanations for these data have been suggested: less extrinsic value placed by girls on physical education in comparison to other academic subjects (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001); limited job opportunities for women in sport (Delpy, 1998); the greater tendency amongst females to participate in exercise rather than sport (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001); and the deeply ingrained gendered nature of the sport 'industry'.

Many of the practical barriers faced by women undertaking sport leadership roles are related to the underlying construction of masculinities and femininities, both in society in general and in sport specifically. The emphasis in many sports of traditional masculine characteristics such as aggression, domination, physicality and muscularity stand in direct opposition to those often expected of women (Coakley & Pike, 2009). This is, of course, rather a crude binary model of gender. A more nuanced and sophisticated theoretical position is offered by Connell (2008) who argues in favour of gender as a relational concept, with numerous potential positions on the masculine/feminine continuum which may be adopted by both men and women. Yet there exists a form of hegemonic masculinity which is reinforced by dominant discourses in sport (Gorely, Holroyd, & Kirk, 2003). Coaching styles themselves are gendered and distinguish between a feminine approach, characterised by empathy, communication and cooperation, and a masculine approach, which is defined by aggressiveness, authoritarianism and demonstration of power (Fasting & Pfister, 2000). Although the feminine style has been reported to be preferred by female players, the institutional values of sport organisations are more likely to be constructed through hegemonic masculine emphases (Norman, 2010).

There are now 130,000 women and girls playing (association) football in English Premier League affiliated teams (Jeanes, 2011) and football is considered the most popular female team sport in Scotland (SportsScotland, 2008), but the sport remains a predominantly masculine domain (Caudwell, 2011; Clark & Paechter, 2007). Women and girls who do choose to participate can still face problematic incongruence between the traditionally masculine characteristics required for the sport, and dominant notions of femininity (Caudwell, 2011; Clark & Paechter, 2007; Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011; Welford, 2011). In her study of 10- and 11-year-old girls, Jeanes (2011) reported that although participation in football was considered acceptable for girls, traditional notions of femininity were evident in the perceived pressure to remain slim and in the restrictions on aggressive play. Women are now more accepted at some levels in football, but professional leadership roles in the male game are still unlikely. It is for this reason that Caudwell (2011) has argued in favour of gender-based research in football moving beyond the analysis of participation and focusing instead on issues such as coach education.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine experiences of female coaching students within a coach education programme. As part of their degree programme at a UK university, these coaching students undertake a module in performance analysis, which utilises association football as a context for an assessment. The paper first addresses literature concerned with the gendered nature of sport and of football in particular, before examining data collected through student focus groups. The research explores the level to which those with less lived experience of football were comfortable with engaging with the work, and, whether these experiences were gendered.

2. Theorising gender and coach education

The theoretical framework for this paper utilises the work of Bourdieu – specifically, the concepts of symbolic violence, *habitus* – the means by which power and dominant ideologies are (re)produced and enforced across generations. Linked to the Marxist notion of 'false consciousness', power is (re)produced by partly subconscious domination by 'ruling' social groups – sometimes economic, but also ethnic and gendered. As a result, such discourses can become misrecognised as legitimate and 'natural' (Bourdieu, 2001). Symbolic violence helps to account for the continuing barriers many women and girls face in accessing predominantly masculine sports. The supposedly 'natural' tendency for women to participate in traditionally feminine activities like gymnastics and dance may result, to some extent, from the misrecognition of masculine domination in other sports as legitimate.

Although Bourdieu has written about physical culture, critics of his work accused him of androcentrism (Laberge, 1995; McCall, 1992). It is only recently that his work has found favour with some feminist researchers who have highlighted his potential contribution to the examination of gendered experiences in sport (Brown, 2006). In the context of the stability of gender relations, Bourdieu's (2001) account of the "paradox of *doxa*" is illuminating. In short, he explains that despite the millions of gender-based actions, or *doxa*, performed each day, which would suggest extensive opportunity for change, these actions serve only to reinforce or stabilise masculine dominance. The acquiescence to such dominance, according to Bourdieu, is effected through symbolic violence, which naturalizes the social order characteristics and dispositions which

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