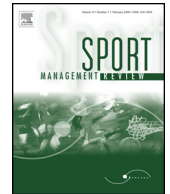




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Review

Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership: A review of research



Laura J. Burton*

University of Connecticut, Educational Leadership, 249 Glenbrook Road, U-3093, Storrs, CT 06269, United States

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ABSTRACT

Despite increased participation opportunities for girls and women in sport, they are underrepresented in leadership positions at all levels of sport. The objective of this review is to provide a multilevel examination of available scholarship that contributes to understanding why there are so few women in leadership positions within sport. From a macro-level perspective, scholarship regarding the institutionalized practices of gender in sport is examined. The meso-level review includes stereotyping of leaders, issues of discrimination, and gendered organizational cultures. Finally research reviewed at the micro-level explores women's expectations in leadership positions, occupational turnover intentions, and the influence of symbolic interactionism on women's career advancement. In addition, the author identifies new research areas and additional recommendations for how best to increase the number of women in leadership positions in sport.

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1. Introduction

Female athletes now have greater opportunities for participation both in the U.S. interscholastic and intercollegiate system (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012) and internationally (Smith & Wrynn, 2013); however, there is still progress to be made in terms of equitable participation opportunities for girls and women throughout the world (Smith & Wrynn, 2013). Despite increased sport participation opportunities for girls and women, they are underrepresented in all facets of leadership at all levels of sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2012; Lapchick, 2012; Smith & Wrynn, 2013). The objective of this review is to examine scholarship that has made contributions toward understanding why there are so few women in leadership positions within sport. In addition, areas for new research and additional recommendations for how best to increase the number of women in leadership positions in sport will be addressed.

Fink (2008) noted research examining gender issues in sport are “situated in multi-level, sometimes subtle, and usually taken-for-granted structures, policies, and behaviors embedded in sport organizations” (p. 147). Therefore, a multi-level perspective will be used to examine the lack of women in leadership positions in sport (Cunningham, 2008, 2010; Cunningham & Sagas, 2006; Dixon & Cunningham, 2006). A multilevel perspective can help to better understand the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership, as “sport organizations are multilevel entities that both shape and are shaped by myriad factors” (Cunningham, 2010, p. 396).

* Tel.: +1 617 777 3391.

E-mail address: laura.burton@uconn.edu

From a macro-level perspective, I explore scholarship regarding the institutionalized practices of gender in sport, including social expectations and stakeholder expectations of leadership and the gendered nature of leadership expectations within the domain of sport. At the meso-level I explore stereotyping of leaders, issues of discrimination, gendered organizational cultures, including those unsupportive of work-family interface, and paradoxical practices of gender normalcy that influence hiring and retention of women in leadership positions. Finally, at the micro-level I focus on women's expectations in leadership positions, occupational turnover intentions, and the influence of symbolic interactionism on women's career advancement. This review allows for examination of theoretical frameworks scholars have employed to analyze the underrepresentation of women in sport organizations. However, in doing so, it is difficult to do justice to the depth and breadth of scholarship within this area. Further, in an effort to capture the most current research advances in this area, the majority of work presented in this review has been published in the last 15 years. Finally, it is important to note that scholars have approached research examining the lack of women in leadership positions in sport from both positivistic and post-positivistic approaches, and as such have used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

1.1. Sport leadership as masculine

Prior to beginning this review, it is important to situate sport as a gendered space. Anderson (2009) has argued that sport "actively construct boys and men to exhibit, value and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity" (p. 4), and that competitive sport serves as a social institution principally organized around defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable, while denigrating others. Further, sport operates as a space to define and reproduce hegemonic masculinity, in which one form of masculinity (i.e., exclusively heterosexual and physically dominant) maintains dominance by suppressing all other forms of masculinity and subordinating women (Connell, 1995). This is important to note, as women are often situated as 'other' in the social institution of sport, and the presence of women in sport, as athlete, coach, manager or leader, is under constant scrutiny (Kane, 1995).

Connell (2009) advances an understanding of gender that moves beyond a focus on sex differences. She describes gender as a social process and advocates for an examination of gender from a relational perspective. When considering organizations and how organizations operate, scholars have recognized that gender can influence organizational practices, such that images, cultures, interactions, and gender-appropriate behaviors are linked to socially constructed masculine or feminine ideals within organizational operations (Acker, 1990, 1992; Britton & Logan, 2008). Ely and Meyerson (2000) highlight that masculinities, or behaviors, actions and associations that are most often associated with men are perceived to be superior to femininities, or those behaviors most often associated with women.

Therefore, any discussion of women's leadership experiences in sport must include positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social processes. This aids the understanding of how and why gender is a powerful factor in the social and organizational processes that define organizations, including sport organizations (Kihl, Shaw, & Schull, 2013). Further, Shaw and Frisby (2006) noted the importance of recognizing that gender not only shapes identities but also operates as an axis of power, playing an influential role in interactions, structures, and processes of sport organizations.

2. Macro-level research on women in leadership

A macro-level approach to examining the lack of women in leadership positions in sport recognizes that sport is a gendered institution and that all processes in sport operate within a hegemonic masculine norm. As Acker (1990) described in her work on gender and management, there is an assumption that work and organizational practices are gender neutral; however, this assumption serves to reinforce masculine dominance including in the domain of sport. Noting how institutionalized practices can reinforce discrimination, Cunningham (2010) described how agreed upon ways of operating within an organization can become institutionalized and accepted. Sport organizations have institutionalized masculinity as the operating principle within sport, identifying male activity as privileged, and reinforcing masculinity and masculine behavior as the appropriate leadership qualities required in sport (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). As such, gender inequality has operated as an institutionalized practice within sport organizations (Cunningham, 2008).

2.1. Organizational demography

Ely and Padavic (2007) call attention to the role organizational demography plays in perpetuating notions of who is appropriate for particular positions, and therefore appropriate to perform particular work, within an organization. If organizational demography is such that women generally perform some jobs and men others, for example, the stage is set for communicating that women have aptitude and preferences for some kinds of work and men for other kinds (Ely & Padavic, 2007, p. 1136).

Men dominate leadership positions in sport organizations in the U.S. and internationally (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; International Working Group on Women and Sport, 2012; Lapchick, 2012; Smith & Wrynn, 2013). At the intercollegiate level in the U.S., men hold the most powerful leadership position, that of athletic director of Division I Bowl Championship Series (BCS) universities, hold a greater percentage of head coaching positions of women's sports, and are nearly the exclusive coaches of men's sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). Women hold fewer than 25% of senior leadership positions across all U.S. professional sports leagues (Lapchick, 2012). The one exception is the Women's National Basketball Association; however,

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