Is there a need for coaches to be more gender responsive? A review of the evidence

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore current research evidence in order to understand whether and how gender influences the coach-athlete relationship. This relationship is an integral part of any athlete or coaches' professional life. However, considering the perceived importance of it, the field still remains under researched and the influences on this relationship require greater examination. Coach-athlete exchanges are shaped by assumptions and ideas about coaching and teaching relationships. Interactions are complex because sport makes a number of (at times competing) demands on participants. Varying individual characteristics increase this complexity. Yet within this multifaceted context, gender relations appear constant and problematic, particularly with respect to coaching. Evidence suggests that while male and female athletes share many similarities in what they want and prefer in terms of their coaching needs and expectations, there are specific nuances and differences that must be understood in order to facilitate an effective relationship. Furthermore, the evidence also suggests that male coaches, unwittingly, play a role in the perpetuation of the stereotype of women as the less able, less competitive and frailer athlete. These findings evidence the need to include a greater focus on gender-responsive coaching. The paper also highlights different coaching styles that may facilitate working with male and female athletes and emphasises the need for coaches to become relational experts in order to empower their athletes.

Key Words

Coach-Athlete relationship; qualitative; gender; women's experiences

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Interaction is an inherent part of coaching. Coach-athlete exchanges in particular, are shaped by particular assumptions and ideas about coaching and teaching relationships. Interactions are complex because sport makes a number of (at times competing) demands on participants. Varying individual characteristics increase this complexity. Yet within this multifaceted context, gender relations appear constant and problematic, particularly with respect to coaching. Markula, Grant, and Denison (2001) define gender as the psychological, sociological and cultural differences between men and women, differentiating gender from biological sex. Within the context of sport, the issue of gender has been well debated within the literature. One of the most common issues is the critique of sport as a patriarchal domain, one in which women have been sociohistorically positioned physically inferior to men (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Yet, women's sporting participation has risen steadily since the health and fitness boom of the 1970s and from recent statistics from the UK, since the London 2012 Olympic Games, it appears that women's participation in sport is growing closer to men's (Sport England, 2013). Furthermore, not only is female participation increasing, but the types of sports that both male and female athletes are choosing to participate in are also changing (Sport England, 2013). Men's participation in more traditionally female dominated sports is now becoming much more socially acceptable (such as netball). This is also coupled with women participating in more male dominated sports (such as football or rugby) (Sport England, 2013). Women are even more likely to access coaching than men and in recent years, the demand for sport from women has increased dramatically (North, 2007). Yet, while participation is becoming more evenly balanced between men and women, one significant barrier that has been cited that prevents more women from participating, remaining and progressing in sport, is the inability of male coaches to understand how to engage their female athletes (MacKinnon, 2011; Norman & French, 2013). Coaching is one area of sport that has consistently remained a male domain; currently 69% of the UK coaching profession are men (Sports Coach UK, 2011). The

purpose of the present paper is to critically discuss how the male dominance of coaching and men's coaching styles impact women's sporting participation and experiences.

Many models and questionnaires have been applied to examine coaching behaviours or facets of the coach athlete relationship, such as the coach evaluation questionnaire (Rushall & Wiznuk, 1985), the leadership scale for sports (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980), coaching feedback questionnaire (Amorose & Horn, 2000), the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q) and the 3Cs + 1 model (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2003). However, attempting to fit such relationships within models or questionnaires risks losing the sense of complexity, spontaneity and the multiplicity of factors that can be present within the coaching context. Moreover, questionnaires and models cannot fully reveal the meanings and dynamics, nor offer an in-depth understanding of the quality of coach-athlete relationships for the social actors involved in such interactions. Nor can positivist approaches adequately analyse the role that gender plays in this relationship, given that gender is understood as more than just biological sex as defined earlier in this section (Markula et al., 2001). Furthermore, Such a dynamic relationship that is influenced by many factors including gender should be explored in more depth and more holistically. For example, an analysis of the coach-athlete relationship requires a sense of the 'natural' setting in which these interactions occur.

A Review of the Evidence

While some research has examined how the coach-athlete relationship may vary according to sex of the athlete, the differentiation between biological sex and gender as a social construction is less understood and unproblematised. The issue of sport as a gendered space and as a male dominated arena is a well debated and documented topic within the sport sociological literature. Although women's sporting participation is growing, it is still considered that gender provides significant barriers and issues. Many sports are predominantly perceived as masculine activities, which can often be a stumbling block for female participants when choosing whether to take part in sport. The perception that sports are for men implies that sports require a certain amount of physical prowess

that is often not associated with femininity (Chelladurai, Kuga, & O'Bryant, 1999). One area of sport that is highly male dominated is sports leadership, particularly coaching. This means that women athletes are more likely to be coached by men and given the prevalence of unfavourable ideologies surrounding male and female athletic abilities this may impact how male coaches train their athletes and thus, their relationship with their athlete (Norman & French, 2013). For women, the consequence of this may be a negative coach-athlete relationship, thus hindering the athlete's progression and development (Norman & French, 2013). With the rise in sporting participation by women, contrasted with the continual dominance of coaching by men and the ideologies surrounding male athlete superiority, it is urgent that the dynamics of gender within the coach-athlete relationship is understood in greater depth.

Various studies have found that the needs of male and female athletes differ and thus, coaches should tailor their coaching programmes accordingly and utilise different coaching practices, which can facilitate athlete performance. Principally and precisely, existing evidence suggests that male and female athletes have different needs and expectations within three key areas: memory (in how past experiences are recalled and the level of detail of these), communication (particularly in response to stressful situations or conflict), and relationships (most related to how men and women prefer to build and maintain relationships) (Hyde, 2014). These three areas are vital for coaches to consider when considering their approaches to working with their different athletes (Gilbert, March, 2016). In a recent case study conducted around teaching professionals on the LPGA when working with female golfers of all ability levels, it was argued that men and women also take part in sport for different reasons (MacKinnon, 2011). Coaches can experience different and particular issues when working with either men or women (MacKinnon, 2011), which may be the result of dealing with the 'intimidation factor' of female athletes/male coaches (Veenhoven, 2008), differing needs for positive reinforcement (Stebbings, Taylor, & Spray, 2015), understanding different motives for participation (Sagas & Ashley, 2001), and a coach's ability and desire to develop a personal relationship with the athlete (von der Lippe, 1997). The research

concluded that male and female athletes have differing wants and needs from a coach, indicating that they both need to be coach differently (MacKinnon, 2011). As early as 1980, Chelladurai and Saleh asserted that if coaches can adopt behaviours and styles to suit their athletes' coaching preferences, then they are more likely to achieve higher motivation levels and also facilitate athlete development/performance. This would indicate that coach education courses should be more individualised for working with male and female athletes, rather than having a 'one size fits all' approach to coaching athletes without a consideration of their personal backgrounds or identity, such as gender. However, an acknowledgement of gender differences, that go beyond just the biological or physical and that do not just normalise male performance as the standard, remain minimal within the UK coach education curriculum (Allen & Shaw, 2009).

The lack of coach education that adequately prepares coaches to tailor their relationships with male and female athletes is evidenced in coaching practice. Felton and Jowett (2013) found that male coaches promote a winning mentality when working with male athletes, however, when working with female athletes the coach promotes a 'try your best' mentality, suggesting that female athletes are not seen to be as competitive or capable of 'high-level' performance. This could be accounted for by the social acceptance that women should participate in sports that are more 'inclusive and sociable' rather than 'physical and competitive' because of the persistent belief of women's physical inferiority (Weiss & Stevens, 1993). MacKinnon (2011) explains that women have a much higher need for enjoyment thanmale participants and want a more personal/democratic relationship with the coach, rather than a traditionally adopted autocratic approach. Longshore and Sachs (2015) also provide various reasons for why male and female athletes prefer different coaching techniques. They explain that female athletes will often request to explore the rationale behind coaching decisions and will often want to be involved with the decision making process more than male athletes. Longshore and Sachs (2015) also go on to support the claims of MacKinnon (2011) that male and female athletes require tailored coaching practices, for example, male athletes required a more autocratic leadership style, whilst female athletes preferred a more

empathetic coaching and communication style. This finding was also supported by the work of Fasting and Pfister (2000). In a study involving in-depth interviews with 38 elite female soccer players, it was found that the female footballers preferred the coaching styles of women coaches, citing their male coach as too aggressive for their needs and they felt that female coaches often communicated their points much more efficiently, providing much more confidence. Such aggressive and negative coaching practices have different effects according to the gender of the athlete. For example, Felton and Jowett (2015) demonstrated that the use of punishment by male coaches had a more detrimental effect on motivation for female athletes compared to male athletes.

Much of the previous research into gender and its influence on the coach-athlete relationship has adopted a positivist and quantitative methodological approach. However, these approaches can then only provide a 'snapshot' of such a dynamic, fluctuating relationship. To overcome this limitation, recently researchers have advocated for the use of qualitative and interpretive methodologies to understand the sociological nature of gender and its impact on the coach-athlete relationship. In my own work we have found that gendered ideologies surrounding the abilities of female athletes and the subsequent views held by male coaches negatively impacted the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (Norman & French, 2013). Compared to their male peers, the participants described being given less strenuous training regimes, less interaction with their coaches, and that the male coaches invested less in their coaching and in their relationship. We concluded that a more '…democratic, personalised and positive relationship' (p.3) can be a significant facilitator of women's sporting performance. This not only increases the potential performance of female athletes, but can also increase participation levels and commitment to the sport if women feel as though they are respected by the coach and receive a large amount of positive reinforcement (Sparkes, 1992).

A further example of qualitative work in this subject area includes my recent work in 2015 around the coaching needs of high performance female athletes (Norman, 2015). The results of the research demonstrated the significance and influence of gender in the coach-athlete relationship.

The women identified particular needs from their coach, including the need to be supported as person as well a performer, coaching to be a joint endeavour, the need for positive communication and finally, recognition of the salience of gender within the coach-athlete dyad. The findings provided evidence that the relational expertise of coaches is at the forefront of these women's coaching needs. However, the findings suggested that women's experiences of coaching were socially constructed and again, gendered ideologies concerning women's sporting abilities negatively affected their relationships with their coaches. The study also revealed that the coach occupies a powerful and often, an over-bearing role in the lives of high performance women athletes. But like my research in 2013 (Norman & French, 2013), a democratic and personalised coach-athlete relationship can prove instrumental in improving women athletes' experiences of performance sport (Norman & French, 2013). Longshore and Sachs (2015) explains that female athletes have a greater need than male athletes for this democratic coaching approach, as they feel a relationship will develop on a personal level through this style of coaching. This assertion is congruent with the work of Stewart and Taylor (2000) in highlighting the centrality of a positive coach-athlete relationship for the impact on women's continued participation in sport. Stewart and Taylor (2000) found that of the women athletes they interviewed who had quit their sport, issues with their male coaches was one of the most common reasons. Balague (1999) also found, this time within the context of elite gymnastics, that male coaches often did not fully understand their athletes and consequently, female athletes described feeling underappreciated and trivialised. Women athletes who remained in their sport and who shared positive coaching experiences, described coach-athlete relationships that were built on encouragement, being listened to, friendship, fairness and knowledge of the sport (Stewart & Taylor, 2000). Qualitative studies have also identified that female athletes display many more characteristics of closeness in the coach-athlete relationship with their coach than male athletes (LaVoi, 2007). However, LaVoi (2007) also notes that this should not be viewed as male athletes not valuing the relationship as higher, but merely that male athletes prefer a different style of closeness with their coach and do not display the

same aspects of closeness that female athletes tend to exhibit. This is further supported by Ladda (2015), who elucidates that the closeness of the coach-athlete relationship can provide great structure for the partnership, especially for women.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Previous research has provided a sizeable amount of knowledge towards understanding coaching behaviours and styles that promote a positive coach-athlete relationship. However, much of the current research has only explored behaviours of the coach rather than a holistic, qualitative perspective of the relationship from both the perspective of the coach as well as the athlete (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Furthermore, much work has failed to focus, sociologically, on the changing dynamics of this relationship between female or male athletes, their potential differing needs, expectations and sporting experiences, and their coach. Given the patriarchal context in which athletes and coaches train, perform and work, the understanding that women are underrepresented at all levels of the sporting structure, and the continual dominance of coaching by men, it is worthwhile to examine whether current (male) coaching practices are conducive to women's sporting experiences. To do this, and given the suggestion that how individuals report their experiences may differ to how they enact these experiences, it is necessary to utilise a different paradigmatic and thus methodological approach. It is clear that there is a need to clarify the research on the debate surrounding whether coaching should be different for male and female athletes and their coaching preferences and needs. Through understanding whether coaches are aware of the differing needs of male and female athletes, this could in turn contribute knowledge to not only the existing literature, but also to the education of coaches, thus enhancing the standard of coaching across a range of sports.

The implications of the salience of gender within the coach-athlete relationship for future research are that there should be greater work into the connection between the social construction of gender and the quality of the coach-athlete relationship (LaVoi, 2007). Suggested future, specific

research, conducted from an interpretive framework, should examine more the (gendered) power relations between women athletes and male coaches as well as the coach-athlete relationship between male coaches and male athletes. Rather than adopting a positivist or post-positivist approach to this research area and to this relationship through seeking to survey or model these dynamics, qualitative approaches are fruitful directions to take to further the understanding of gender within the coach-athlete relationship. A strength of this approach would be the opportunity for the voices of the athletes and coaches to be heard and centralised in the research process. The representation of athletes and their experiences are often secondary to the focus on coaching expertise based upon coaches' cognitions and perceptions (d'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998).Moreover, through combining qualitative methods it can allow the creation of a more in-depth exploration of not just the participants' narrated experiences, but also how these ideas and thoughts played out in the 'real-life' coaching context.

In summary, evidence suggests the need for greater guidance for coaches in tailoring their practices to their athletes, in this case, to men and women, in order to be 'gender-responsive' coaches. Research indicates that there is a need for tailoring coaching to the differing wants and needs of athletes according to gender (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Kenow & Williams, 1999; MacKinnon, 2011). We have a small body of literature (that requires growing) that indicates that the strength of gendered ideologies persist within the athletic and coaching context and may negatively affect the coaching practices of male coaches towards their female athletes (e.g. Norman & French, 2013; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). With such evidence guidelines could be developed with ideas for suggested coaching styles and relational expertise for coaches to enhance their relationships with their male and female athletes. From a UK context, there is the provision of a one-off national training workshop for UK coaches to learn more about equitable coaching practices. However, with the recent removal of this as mandatory for the award of Clubmark for sports clubs and their coaches (the award to demonstrate that sports clubs are 'safe' and welcoming places), this means that coaches in the UK are no longer required to undertake this as a compulsory

component of their professional development. There is an urgent need to put relationship skills on the agenda of coach education. While there may appear some 'mixed' messages within the studies that address gender for its influence on the coach-athlete relationship, there is sufficient evidence to argue for a greater awareness of athlete gender differences – and similarities – within coach education programmes. Through identifying, understanding and redefining gendered ideas, stereotypes and languages, coaches can enhance their interrelations and relational expertise with the different athletes they may coach. However, the recognition of the influence of gender on the lives of the athletes and centralising, in particular, the impact on women's athletic experiences does not imply that women should be treated as 'particular cases' by coaches and that male athletes do not require a change in how practitioners approach coaching them. Rather, more research is required to advance our understanding of how different groups of athletes experience coaching, and to encourage coaches, coach educators and sport policy makers not to approach the coach-athlete relationship gender-blind.

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