

High performance sport and the place of gender in the coach athlete relationship

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Within the sport-specific context of rowing, athletes compete at elite level in sex-segregated competition but male and female athletes may be trained together and coaches often have experience coaching both male and female athletes. With regards to their high performance athletes, in a recent report on Women's Development within Rowing, FISA identified larger dropout rate for female rather than male athletes and whilst the report acknowledges 'highly motivated and committed coaches prepared to work with female teams', it also concluded that there was a 'lack of mental preparation for coaches to train female athletes (as they are mostly prepared to train men)' (FISA Report on Women's Development Survey, 2014; p.18). Indeed within the field of High Performance Sport (HPS), details on female specific needs and gender specific pressures during their careers is rather limited leaving high performance managers and coaches unable to adopt and advance their educational and professional development activities and practices accordingly (Sotiradou & de Haan, 2015). Therefore the aim of this paper is to review the place of gender in the coach athlete relationship within rowing. This study adopts a management approach to conduct a gender analysis in order to understand the relationships between men and women coaches and athletes and the environmental factors that face relative to each other. The research question driving this investigation was: "What makes a success coach of female elite athletes?"

A staged approach to data collection that included four phases was used to collect data for this study. Phase 1 was a systematic literature review to identify themes that need further exploration in Phase 2. The result of the systematic review pointed toward 13 themes including cultural or country specific influences, coach education needs, physiological and social characteristics. These themes were further discussed in a focus group (Phase 2) with representatives (4 national level coaches and 3 female Olympic athletes) of the Dutch National Rowing Federation. Analysis of the focus group data resulted in 6 higher order themes: (a) Defining success, (b) Coach education, (c) Communication, (d) Socio-cultural issues, (e) Coach-athlete relationship, and (f) Role of the coach. Using these themes, the research team designed an interview schedule for Phase 3 and Phase 4. Phase 3 included semi-structured in-depth interviews with elite rowing coaches, a total of 15 coaches, 4 female and 11 male coaches who represented 9 nationalities and had coaching experience in over 18 countries were interviewed. The final stage of the data collection Phase 4 involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 elite female athletes from 12 countries.

Results from both phase 3 and 4 show that coaches and athletes primarily refer to 'an individual approach to coaching rather than a gendered approach to coaching' for example one coach stated "there are no gender differences in coaching. There are different persons with different problems. The

approach is always individual...the difference is not because of gender it is because of their problems..." and from an athlete perspective "my coach doesn't treat us any differently, as far as I've experienced. He runs the same programme for males and females, and expects the same from both of us." However, both the coaches and the athletes discussed specific gender differences that effect the athlete coach relationship, specifically (a) female attrition rates, (b) communication style, (c) the role of gender from a socio-cultural perspective, (d) the structure of the sport and the 'valued' success of female and male competition. The data were analysed using thematic analysis which allowed the recording of patterns (or themes). The coding involved familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Whilst the findings of the study are clustered under these four themes, the experience of these are not always the same for the coach and the athlete. The results show that the female athletes experience of the coach athlete relationship are socially constructed and that despite both coaches and athletes referring to 'an individual rather than a gendered approach to coaching' gendered ideologies concerning women's sporting abilities can negatively affect this relationship.

References

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