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Attributions for Success and Failure in Athletic Administration Positions

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The under-representation of women in senior level athletic administration positions continues to attract the attention of scholars in sports studies. The most glaring lack of female representation occurs at the athletic director (A.D.) position, with women holding only 8.4% of those positions at the Division I level. Using the concept of causal attribution and role congruity theory, this project examined perceptions of success and failure of male and female candidates for either an athletic director or life skills director position. One hundred eleven female and 73 male (n = 191) administrators in athletics at the collegiate level participated. Contrary to previous research, which found that male candidates are attributed success because of internal characteristics, findings from this study indicated that both male and female candidates for A.D. were provided internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure. This may be due to the fact that so few women are represented at the A.D. position at the Division I level that an evaluator may attribute her success to internal characteristics because she "must be" outstanding in order to have achieved such a high position in the world of athletics. Results are discussed in light of causal attribution and role congruity theory in the context of such a rare role combination – being female and being an athletic director.

Introduction

Since passage of Title IX, opportunities for women in sport have expanded in some areas, and have been severely limited in others. Sport participation opportunities for women and girls at both the interscholastic and collegiate levels have significantly increased (Carpenter & Acosta, 2010; National Federation of State High School Associations, 2008). However, data regarding coaching and administration opportunities show persistent declines in the representation of women. Only 42.6% of women's intercollegiate teams have women head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010), and the most glaring lack of female representation occurs at the athletic director position, with women holding only 19.1% of those positions. In 2008, at the Division I level, 8.4% of athletic director positions were held by women while women held 68%

of life skills coordinator positions (DeHass, 2007). The life skills coordinator position was designed to help student-athletes foster personal development, balance academics with athletics, provide community service opportunities, and explore career interests (NCAA, 2009).

In an effort to explain this discrepancy in the representation of men and women in athletic administration, scholars have used role congruity theory (see Eagly & Karau, 2002) to help understand how *congruent* a role is with the person who fills it. Role congruity theory is based on the tenets of social role theory, and indicates that perceptions of leaders are more closely aligned with masculine characteristics and therefore men are perceived as more congruent with leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). There has been some support for role congruity theory as a potential framework to understand why there are more men in leadership positions in athletic administration and more women in support roles in athletic administration (Burton, Grappendorf, Henderson, Dennis, Field, 2008: Burton, Barr, Fink, & Bruening, 2009; Lough & Grappendorf, 2007).

In addition, research utilizing causal attribution as a framework suggests that perceptions of success in management differ based on the sex of the manager. Success by men is most often attributed to internal factors (e.g., capacity and preparation of the candidate) whereas women's success is often attributed to external factors (e.g., manager's decision, necessity to broaden diversity of staff) (see Swim & Sanna, 1996). Further, the type of work environment, more male congenial or more female congenial, has influenced perceptions of success and failure for women. When in a work environment more incongruent with their gender role (i.e., female congenial), women's success was attributed to external factors (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; 2009). However, regardless of industry evaluated, men's success was attributed to internal factors (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra). Attributions for failure for both men and women were always the results of external causes except when women were evaluated in male-congruent work environments. In the male-congruent environments, women's attributions for failure were perceived to be the result of *both* internal and external causes (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra).

Theoretical Framework

Both social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000) and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) have been used to examine expectations about the roles that men and women occupy. Social role theory proposes that there are expectations regarding the roles men and women fill in society. Role congruity theory expands on social role theory and examines the congruence between gender roles and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). When gender roles are applied to men and women, certain jobs can be viewed as more appropriate for men or women (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). This can result in prejudice towards women in male dominated fields because of a perceived incongruity that exists between what is expected of women based on their gender role, and the expectations of leaders (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009; Heilman, 2001; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; van Engen, van der Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001). As a result of the gender roles applied to men and women, work environments can become sex-segregated so that certain jobs are deemed more appropriate for men or for women (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). When working in fields incongruent with their gender role, women were perceived as more masculine (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009). Similarly, men

were perceived as masculine when working in fields congruent to their gender role and as feminine in fields incongruent to their gender role (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra).

In addition, women in leadership positions often experience prejudice when evaluated for success in male-dominated work environments (i.e., environments incongruent with the female gender role) (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004; van Engen et al., 2001). Therefore, the prejudice against women's success in the workplace potentially originates from two sources of perceived incongruity: (1) between the expectations of leadership roles and perceived feminine gender roles, and (2) this prejudice is exacerbated for female leaders in a male-dominated industry (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009; Heilman, 2001; Heilman et al., 2004). Therefore, role congruity theory may help explain why women are underrepresented in leadership positions in male-dominated fields such as athletics.

Since intercollegiate athletic administration has typically been a male-dominated field and women's athletics have historically been marginalized, (Coakley, 2004; Schell & Rodriquez, 2000) women may be perceived as only possessing the characteristics necessary to be successful in communal roles and may therefore be perceived to lack the leadership traits defined as masculine or agentic in athletic administration (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Indeed, the Athletic Director role is defined as the person in charge of planning, organizing, leading, and evaluating a program of intercollegiate athletics (Branch, 1990), which consists of agentic, not communal, characteristics (Burton et al., 2009; Burton & Hagan, 2009). It is no surprise, then, that within intercollegiate athletics, the role of athletic director continues to be dominated by men (DeHass, 2007) and women working in intercollegiate athletics tend to be found in support positions, including life skills, academic advising, daily operations (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Raphaely, 2003; Suggs, 2005; Whisenant, Pedersen, & Obenour, 2002; Yee, 2007) and specifically, women are over-represented in the position of life skills coordinator (DeHass, 2007).

Furthermore, it is important to note that even at the higher levels of the administrative ranks, senior woman administrators (SWAs) have indicated they wanted more participation in financial decision making than they were actually receiving. Considering experience with budgets and financial matters has been found to be important for career progression, this is important (Grappendorf, Pent, Henderson, & Burton, 2008). Additionally, Grappendorf and Lough (2006) found that at the Division I level, the main responsibility of SWAs were in the areas of compliance and academic support. Indeed, Hoffman (2010) and Yee (2007) both note that women leaders are hard pressed to avoid caretaking units such as academic support and compliance within the athletic department because those units can "trap" women, preventing them from moving all the way up the ladder to athletic director. The women in Hoffman's (2010) study referred to those caretaking units as the services "ghetto" (i.e., academic advising) that restricts women from advancement out of service roles and to managerial roles. However, compared to advising, the role of compliance director is seen as a less gender-specific job that can often lead to the position of SWA in the future. Thus, based on Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, women still may experience prejudice that varies depending on the congruence between leadership roles and the feminine gender role.

In summary, role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) suggests that traditional gender expectations (i.e., being aggressive, agentic, dominant, self-confident and self-sufficient for men, and being affectionate, helpful, nurturing, and gentle for women) influence whether or not men and women fill management positions "successfully." That is, leadership behavior is

more congruent with masculine traits, which situates women at a disadvantage when attempting to "move up" in the management world, and particularly in athletic administration. In addition, once women are in leadership positions, women are evaluated less favorably than men because such management and leadership roles are more stereotypically associated with men (Eagly and Karau, 2002). This may be particularly salient for women in athletics when women are evaluated by their peers; role congruity suggests that perceptions of success or failure in athletic administration would be very different for men than for women.

Causal Attribution

Role congruity theory and attribution theory are closely linked concepts and are highly appropriate for studying perceptions of women in athletic administration. Causal attribution theory examines how people make causal inferences based on the information available. That is, people try to attribute *causality* when explaining others' behavior by assessing whether or not the behavior is caused by an internal or external source. Typically, behavior of others is ascribed to either the actor (internal locus) or to the circumstances surrounding him or her (external locus) (Scholper & Comprere, 1971). In most cases, tertiary information about whom we are making attributions is available to help formulate causal attributions. That is, if a person acts consistently on one occasion as she does on another occasion, we assume the situational constraints produce the behavior. On the other hand, if tertiary information is unavailable, people will often use "consensus" information to make causal attributions (Wilmot, 1993). That is, the person making the attribution will make assumptions about another person based on whether or not most others would do the same thing in a similar situation (i.e., most people will suffer depression when they lose a loved one). There is a general consensus that A causes B, and that this happens in *most* cases.

In regards to how success and failure is attributed to individuals, success by men is most often attributed to internal factors (e.g., capacity and preparation of the candidate), whereas women's success is often attributed to external factors (e.g., manager's decision, necessity to broaden diversity of staff) (Swim & Sanna, 1996). Deaux (1984) noted that because success by women is not expected as much as it is for men, attributions for women's success are attributed to luck or the task. Similarly, Deaux also reported that when women fail it is commonly attributed to ability and effort (or lack of). The type of work environment has also influenced perceptions of success and failure for women. When in a work environment more incongruent with their gender role, such as the car industry, women's success was attributed to external factors (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009). However, regardless of industry evaluated, men's success was attributed to internal factors (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra). This suggests that when a woman is successful in a setting incongruent with her feminine gender role, the perception is that her success is not something she achieved on her own. That is, there could be a perceived incongruity between the non-feminine environment and the fact that she is a woman, defying traditional gender roles by working in an atypical environment.

Heilman (1983) noted that the perceived fit between a job's requirements and an individual's attributes determines either positive performance expectations or negative performance expectations. If there is a poor perceived fit then failure is expected. Further, if there is a perceived lack of fit between the sex of the person holding the job and the job requirements for that job, discrimination is likely to occur (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Heilman, 1983). In other words, women may be viewed as inappropriate for certain jobs or occupations

because they are not attributed the skills or traits believed to be necessary for the job. Thus, women are less likely to be selected for male-typed jobs (Glick, 1991; Heilman, 1983). Therefore, the more congruent the work environment is to each person's gender role, the more likely the success is to be attributed to internal factors, i.e., viewed as more appropriate internally for the job simply because of sex (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009).

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore attributions of success and failure in athletic administration; a male-congenial environment (Coakley, 2004; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Specifically, based on the type of position held, we examined if reasons provided for men's success and failure in the athletic director position (i.e., leadership position) and the life skills director position (i.e., subordinate position) would be similar or different then reasons provided for success and failure for women in those positions. Our research evaluated the type of work environment in which women are being evaluated (e.g. athletic administration positions) in that it could possibly explain why women are seen as succeeding in certain positions or not. The literature has not examined the area of athletic administration, where there exists a continued underrepresentation even 38 years after the passage of Title IX of women in senior leadership positions (i.e., athletic director) and an overrepresentation in the lower level positions (i.e., life skills coordinator). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to extend this literature to intercollegiate athletic administration, and through the use of a simulated employment setting, examine perceptions of women in an athletic director position *and* a life skills coordinator position using role congruity theory. In addition, this study will explore attributions of success and failure in each position using causal attribution theory.

Thus, based on the research discussed above, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Success in the athletic director position will be attributed to internal factors when the candidate is male and to external factors or social factors when the candidate is female.
H2: Failure in the athletic director position will be attributed to external factors or social factors when the candidate is male and to internal factors when the candidate is female.
H3: Success in the life skills position will be attributed to internal factors when the candidate is either male or female.
H4: Failure in the life skills position will be attributed to external factors or social factors when the candidate is either male or female.

Method

Participants

Participants for this project were athletic administrators working within NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics. A database of administrators was developed utilizing the athletic department websites. The names and email addresses of administrators working as athletic directors, senior woman administrators, compliance directors, marketing directors, and academic support services directors were collected. These positions were selected to generate both a large sample and a sample that would include a relatively equal representation of men and women in administration. Participants were sent an initial email invitation notifying them that an email would be sent in two days inviting them to participate in an online survey. The email invitation to the survey followed two days later. A reminder email was sent to non-respondents one week following the email invitation.

Following the email invitation, some participant emails were invalid while others selected to opt out of the online survey. A final sample of 150 participants were included in the female athletic director scenario, 140 for the male athletic director scenario, 146 for the female life skills director scenario, and 142 for the male life skills director scenario. A total sample of 111 women and 73 men (n = 191) completed the survey for a response rate of 32%. Response rates for each scenario ranged from 25% to 36%. For the female athletic director scenario, the response rate was 36% (n = 54), for male athletic director, 36% (n = 50), for female life skills director, 25% (n = 36), and for male life skills director, 31% (*n* = 44).

In an effort to address the limitation of lower response rate, a wave analysis was undertaken to examine differences between early and later respondents. Wave analysis is recommended as an analytic tool to assess for non-response bias in survey research by examining differences in early and later responders. If late respondents differ from early respondents, this may suggest some level of non-response bias in the survey (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Mean scores for early and late respondents for all dependent variables were compared for significant differences; no significant differences at p < .001 were found.

Procedure

Participants were provided (see Appendix A) a vignette in which a male or female candidate was proposed for a position within the athletic department of a large state university participating in Division I basketball and FBS (football bowl series). The position was either athletic director or life skills director. The participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the four descriptions, which created relatively equal samples for each condition. Based on NCAA (2007) gender equity data, at the Division I level more men are represented in the position of athletic director (92.1% men, 7.9% women) more women in the position of life skills director (66.8% women, 33.2% men).

Measures

Participants evaluated the most likely reason for success in either the athletic director position or the life skills director position based on the following factors: a) an internal cause (capability and preparation), b) an external cause (university administration support), or c) a social cause (acceptance by colleagues in the athletic department). Participants were also asked to evaluate the most likely reason for failure in either the athletic director position or the life skills director position based on the following factors, an internal cause (lack of capability and lack of preparation), an external support (lack of university administration support), or a social cause (acceptance by colleagues in the athletic department).

Results

Table 1 lists the frequencies for internal, external, and social attributions based on the type of position evaluated. To evaluate whether participants differed on their causal attributions about candidate's success/failure based on sex of the candidate and the type of position the candidate was being evaluated (Hypotheses 1-4) log linear analysis was used. The analysis included attributions for success or attributions for failure as the dependent variable and type of

position (athletic director/life skills coordinator), sex of the candidate, and sex of the participant as between-subjects factors.

The analysis for hypothesis 1, that success in the athletic director position would be attributed to internal factors when the candidate was male and to external factors or social factors when the candidate was female, was not supported in the analysis. Reported frequencies indicated that success would be attributed to internal factors for both male and female athletic directors (Table 1). Of interest to note, analysis of the parameter estimates in the log linear analysis indicated that there was an interaction between internal attributions for success and the female athletic director position ($z = 1.66$, $p = .09$) though this interaction failed to reach statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 1 - *Comparisons of Internal and External Attributes, by Scenario (N=191)*

	Success		Failure	
	External	*Internal*	*External*	*Internal*
Female Athletic Director	39.22%	60.78%	94.0%	6.00%
Male Athletic Director	39.58%	60.42%	82.22%	17.78
Female Life Skills Coordinator	20.59%	79.41%	90.0%	10.0%
Male Life Skills Coordinator	30.95%	69.05%	74.29%	25.71%

The analysis for hypothesis 2, which predicted that failure in the athletic director position would be attributed to external factors or social factors when the candidate was male and to internal factors when the candidate was female, was not supported. Reported frequencies indicated that failure would be attributed to external factors for both male and female athletic directors (Table 1). Contrary to what was proposed in hypothesis 2, analysis of the parameter estimates in the log linear analysis revealed that there was a significant interaction between external attributions for failure and the female athletic director position ($z = 1.90$, $p = .05$).

For hypothesis 3, which predicted that success in the life skills position would be attributed to internal factors when the candidate is either male or female, was not supported. However, reported frequencies indicated that success would be attributed to internal causes for

both male and female life skills candidates (Table 1) and analysis of the parameter estimates from the log linear analysis indicated that there was an interaction between internal attributions for success and the male life skills director position ($z = 1.82$, $p = .06$). However, this interaction failed to reach statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level.

Analysis of hypothesis 4, which predicted that failure in the life skills position would be attributed to external factors or social factors when the candidate was either male or female, was not supported in the analysis.

Discussion

Our analyses revealed partial support for causal attribution theory as success for the male candidate in the athletic director position was attributed to internal causes (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006, 2009). However, contrary to previous findings exploring attributions for success for women in "male" positions, our findings indicated that women were perceived as internally successful in athletic director position; that is, her personal characteristics or "inner drive" make her a good fit for management. In addition, our findings also indicate partial support for causal attribution theory regarding failure – male A.D. candidates were perceived to fail due to external causes, or things out of the candidate's control. The same result was found for women in the A.D. position; failure in that role was also perceived to be out of her control as well.

A potential explanation for why our findings failed to support causal attribution theory, specifically for female A.D. candidates, may be the result of a double standard of competence imposed on the female candidate. Research on the double standard of competence indicates that women in top leadership positions could be evaluated as more competent than men in those roles because there is a perception that women must have met high standards or high expectations in order to become successful in that position (Foschi, 2000). This double standard of competence could be based on the information provided to participants in the study prior to evaluation of the candidates for the athletic director position. Within our study, evaluators of the candidates (current athletic directors) were provided information that indicated the candidate had been successful in an associate athletic director position, had the skills to be successful in the athletic director position, and was highly supported by individuals in her previous athletic department (see Appendix A). Given this information, participants in our study may have applied this double standard of competence to the female candidate for athletic director.

When considering attributions for success in the athletic director position, success was attributed to internal causes because of this double standard that our candidate had met very high standards in order to be successful in her previous position and be considered for the athletic director position. Thus, instead of following causal attribution theory, and attributing success for women in male congenial positions to external factors, our participants may have found our female candidates to be successful as a result of internal factors that provided her success in her previous position and consideration as a candidate for the athletic director position (Foschi, 2000; Rosette & Tost, 2010).

A double standard of competence may also have occurred when attributions of failure were applied to the female athletic director candidate. If participants did hold this double standard, perceptions regarding why the female candidate would fail in her position as an athletic director would not be the result of internal attributes, but the result of external attributes. Again, the double standard of competence predicts that women in top leadership positions may be

evaluated as more competent because of the perception that these women have had to "meet or exceed exceptionally high standards to become successful in such positions" (Rosette & Tost, 2010, p. 222).

When evaluating the results for the life skills director position, we hypothesized that success in the life skills position would be attributed to internal factors when the candidate is either male or female, however this was not supported. Yet, in support of Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra, (2006, 2009) the male candidate was provided internal attributions for success in the life skills director position even though this is a position traditionally held by women (DeHass, 2007). Social support appears to be an area that may be accounting for attributions for success for both male and female candidates. In addition, there was no support for the final hypothesis that failure in the life skills position would be attributed to external factors or social factors when the candidate was either male or female. It is interesting to note that failure for the female candidate was attributed to social factors (i.e., acceptance by colleagues in the athletic department) more than internal or external factors, though this finding failed to reach significance. Attributions for both success and failure for subordinate positions in athletic administration is an area requiring further research.

In summary, findings from our research provide partial support for role congruity theory and causal attribution within athletic administration positions. However, success for both the male and female candidate in the athletic director position was attributed to internal causes. In addition, failure for both the male and female candidate in the athletic director position was attributed to external causes. These findings may be explained by the double standard of competence applied to successful women in male dominated positions. Future research should explore whether a double standard of competence is occurring in evaluation of women within male dominated positions in athletic administration. In addition, social support should be explored in greater depth as a potential attribution for success and failure in subordinate positions in athletic administration.

Limitations

There are some limitations within the current study that should be noted. The response rates to the online surveys could be viewed as problematic, as response rates ranged from 25% to 36%. Within social science research, an average response rate for individuals within an organization (e.g., employees in the organization) was 52.7% and for executives within an organization average response rate was 35% (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Athletic directors could be considered as executives within intercollegiate athletic departments and could potentially account for the lower response rate for this research. One means of attempting to handle non-response bias in survey research is to use wave analysis (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). In an effort to evaluate non-response bias in the current study a wave analysis was conducted. The analysis did not reveal any difference between early and later respondents to all surveys.

An additional limitation could have been the utilization of a short vignette and electronic survey as a means to evaluate candidates. The short vignette may not have provided the type of rich descriptions and understanding of a candidate that would be provided in a face-to-face interaction with that candidate.

Recommendations

Future research could explore the proposition of the double standard within athletic administration. This would include evaluating perceptions of women when they reach higher levels of athletic administration, including associate athletic director and athletic director. Further research should also explore social factors (i.e., acceptance by colleagues in the athletic department) as attributions for success and failure in athletic administration positions. Additional research could attempt to examine attributions of success and failure in athletic administration using qualitative research methods. Researchers could use in-depth interviews with subordinates in athletic administration to better understand their perceptions of success and failure for male and female senior athletic administrators with whom they work.

Also, we did not evaluate whether candidates would be likeable in the position for which they were to be evaluated; future research could address this area. It would have been interesting to note whether participants would have provided equally favorable personal ratings for all candidates. Role congruity theory would predict if a female candidate was perceived as competent for such a leadership position, she would be perceived as unlikeable and insufficiently "feminine" (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Conclusion

This research provided an examination of perceptions of success and failure for men and women in intercollegiate athletic departments and utilizing causal attribution, theory and role congruity theory. Contrary to previous research examining attributions for success and failure in male congenial environments, female candidates for athletic directors positions were provided internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure. These findings suggest a double standard could have been applied to the female candidates for athletic director. Participants in the study may believe that in order to reach the level of consideration for athletic director position women have to surpass very high expectations and meet very high standards.

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Appendix A

A large state university (competes in both Division I Basketball and FBS football) is seeking a[n] *[athletic director/life skills director]* for the athletic department.

An applicant for the position, *[male/female],* has been working for 10 years as an associate *[athletic director /life skills director]* at a similar large state university (Division I Basketball and FBS football). In addition to *[his/her]* experience as an associate *[athletic director /life skills director] [male/female]* also has a Master's degree in sport management. This far into the evaluation of *[his/her]* potential as a candidate for the *[athletic director /life skills director]* position, he/she seems to have the needed skills and experience for the position, is cooperative when working with *[his/her]* colleagues, and has the acceptance of those colleagues in his/her current athletic department. Therefore, the search committee has recommended *[male/female]* for the position of *[athletic director//life skills director]*.