Fix the Women? The Effects of Gendered Leadership Training in Sport

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In sport organizations, men’s work is valued over that of women. Likewise, traits deemed masculine—such as toughness and perseverance—hold more value than traits considered feminine (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Discourses of masculinities dominate organizations and define what it means to be a manager (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). This valuing of men/masculinities over women/femininities can help explain the underrepresentation of women in sport, particularly in leadership roles (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003).

One common approach to creating gender equality in organizations is to “fix the women” (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). In this approach, women are considered lacking in stereotypically masculine traits valued in organizations while possessing less valued, feminine traits (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). The solution, then, is to train women to demonstrate the valued masculine traits to achieve success (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). However, women in sport workplaces find that such training is insufficient to overcome gender barriers, as they are penalized both for being too masculine or too feminine (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). As a result, women internalize a need to be stronger than other women and work harder than men, in order to succeed in the sport workplace (Burton, Borland, & Mazerolle, 2012). Thus, gender equity is not accomplished.

Rather than focusing leadership training on fixing the women, why not teach a more gender-neutral approach where all types of leadership traits can be valued? Post-structuralist feminist scholars have called for a disruption of masculinities as the dominant discourse in sport and organizations (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). An approach focusing on the value of masculinities and femininities for all genders would disrupt the current discourse by encouraging all leaders to adopt more stereotypically feminine traits in their management style, with the aim of increasing the value of such traits in sport organizations and creating more gender equity and positive attitudes toward women in leadership.

In this research, we seek to answer the following: How does the type of training (e.g. fix the women) influence future sport employees’ perceptions of women in leadership (RQ1)? To explore this question, we will conduct a pretest-posttest experiment with a MANOVA-based repeated measures analysis. Specifically, current sport management students (N=225) will be randomly assigned to one of three conditions: training focused on fixing women leaders (or traditionally feminine behaviors); training focused on valuing a variety of leadership behaviors (traditionally masculine and feminine); no training (control group). To test the effects of the training, one month prior (late January), we will collect Time 1 dependent variables--Gender Authority (French & Raven, 1959), Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and attitudes toward training (Holladay, et al., 2003)--and a moderator (gender). After the training, we will again assess dependent variables.

The contribution of this research includes providing insight into how gendered training influences future sport employees’ evaluations of women in leadership. Additionally, there has been much discussion of women leaning in, and behaving in more acceptable (i.e., masculine) ways. This research explores what happens when evaluators lean out, and are inclusive to both masculine and feminine leadership behaviors.