Gender Differences in Coaching Behaviors Supportive of Positive Youth Sports Experience

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In the youth sports domain, few coaches are women, masculine ideologies permeate the culture, and coaching practices do not always align with behaviors supportive of positive youth sports experience. The purpose of this study was to examine differences in men’s and women’s coaching behaviors associated with creating positive youth sports experience, including behaviors that create a safe and fun participation environment, a mastery motivational climate, and autonomy-supportive coaching. A total of 219 youth and high school coaches across different sports in one county in a western state responded to the survey—29% of them were women. Along with the overall dearth of women in coaching, we found differences between men and women in the types of coaching positions they hold and the behaviors they bring to their coaching. Female coaches were more likely to be paid, primarily part-time, and they were also less likely to have children. Using a multivariate analysis of variance, significant mean vectors were found between female and male coaches in the four coaching behaviors measured. Women’s ratings were significantly higher on individual measures for autonomy and safety. As the coaching field comes to better understand the approaches that lead to positive youth sports experience, these findings raise important questions about why women and mothers are not a larger proportion of the coaching landscape and how that might change.

**Keywords:** youth sport, coaching, gender, youth development

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**Key Points**

- This study of youth sports coaches in King County, WA, found differences in the types of positions held by male and female coaches and in their self-reported behaviors relative to creating a positive sports experience.

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Coaches play an important role ensuring the youth sports experience is a positive one, physically, psychologically, and socially (Balogh & Trzaskoma-Bicsery, 2020; Merkel, 2013; Vella & Perlman, 2014). The nature of coach “interactions with athletes can markedly influence the effects of sport participation on children and youth” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 40). Specific coaching behaviors across a range of constructs, including behaviors that create a mastery motivational climate and those consistent with autonomy-supportive coaching, affect the quality of the youth sports experience impacting athlete motivation, engagement, retention, and enjoyment (Vella & Perlman, 2014; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). Some coaching behaviors associated with the performance-driven culture of organized youth sports (i.e., pressuring athletes to play while injured, using abusive communication, exhibiting favoritism, pressuring athletes to win, promoting early specialization, and offering contingent rewards) can have a negative impact on athletes and are linked to attrition (Merkel, 2013). Also, most coaches in youth sports are men (The Aspen Institute, 2019a), and “research has shown that coaches’ behaviors and interactions with the athletes they coach are affected by their own and their athletes’ individual difference in characteristics, including gender” (Gosai et al., 2022, p. 222). Yet, gender differences in coaching behaviors of youth sports coaches are largely unstudied. The present study explores differences between male and female coaches relative to select coaching behaviors supportive of positive youth sports experience.

**Background**

**Gender and Coaching Behavior**

In youth sports in the United States, only about 27% of coaches are women, with that number holding steady over the past few years (The Aspen Institute, 2019a). Despite decades of increases in girls’ and women’s participation, sport remains a highly masculinized space where women are underrepresented in coaching and leadership positions at all levels (Gosai et al., 2022; Norman, 2016; Norman & Simpson, 2022; Schull, 2017), including youth sports (LaVoi, 2009, 2014; The Aspen Institute, 2019a). The gendered history of sport means that traditional notions of masculinity are often played out and reproduced on the playing field and masculine notions of leadership are deeply embedded in coaching (Norman, 2016; Schull & Kihl, 2019), making gender a salient construct to consider in sports leadership and coaching (Kroshus et al., 2015; Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; Leberman & Palmer, 2009; Norman, 2016; Schull, 2017).

Furthermore, the majority of youth sport coaches in the United States are volunteers (Fawver et al., 2020), and this volunteer role is filled mostly by parents (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). With it, volunteerism brings another layer of gendered constraints to the context of youth sports coaching.
Women are less likely to be volunteer coaches in part due to gendered divisions of domestic labor that extend into the public world of volunteerism (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Bean et al. (2014) note that sport is a primary domain for fatherhood and masculinity, and the volunteer opportunities for women in sports are not only limited and restricted by expectations of domestic labor and work but also by being less valued.

The prevalence of male coaches and masculinized norms in youth sports may have an impact on the prevalence of certain coaching behaviors in that space. In her overview of gender in the coach–athlete relationship, Norman (2016) advances the following:

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. (p. 195)

We take up this charge, with a focus on coaching practices conducive to youth sporting experiences. Understanding how coaching practice can be conducive to positive youth sports experience is particularly salient in light of growing knowledge about the negative impact of certain types of coaching behaviors on youth (Bartholomew et al., 2009; Carroll & Allen, 2021). For example, coaches who adopt controlling behaviors such as intimidation, tangible rewards, and controlling feedback “have the potential to thwart athletes’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (Bartholomew et al., 2009, p. 2). This, in turn, can lead to attrition, burnout, and other consequences like depression and disordered eating (Carroll & Allen, 2021).

Only a few studies have looked specifically at differences in male and female coaching behavior (many more articles look at coaching behavior based on the gender of athletes and/or gendered interaction in the coach–athlete dyad: e.g., Gosai et al., 2022; Jowett & Nezlek, 2012), and even fewer inquiries have been focused on youth sports. In a study of college coaches, Kroshus et al. (2015) found that attitudes and beliefs were the strongest predictors of coaching behaviors relative to concussion safety and that “differences in attitudes and beliefs were patterned by the sex of the coach and the sex of the team coached” (p. 538). These differences led to gender-based differential behavior in communication behavior regarding concussion (Kroshus et al., 2015). Similarly, an exploratory study of collegiate coaches found female coaches less likely to express respect for athletes who play while hurt and less likely to make them feel guilty about not playing when hurt (Nixon, 1994). Coach gender was a factor in a study of high school soccer coaches and their observed behaviors during competition in which “male coaches were found to engage significantly more frequently in Keeping Control and General Technical Instruction and significantly less frequently in General Encouragement than the female coaches” (Millard, 1996, p. 1). A study of elite female soccer players’ perceptions of male and female coaching behaviors found they thought male coaches to have a more “masculine style of communication and interaction” characterized by screaming and rough language, whereas women exhibited more understanding and caring (Fasting & Pfister, 2000, p. 103). Finally, a study by Jambor and Zhang (1997) explored self-reported coaching behaviors and found that female coaches scored higher than male coaches on a social support subscale.

Positive Youth Sports Experience

This study extends an exploration of gender differences in coaching to coaching behaviors linked to positive youth experience in sports. Given that initial research has shown coaches exhibit gender-based differences in behaviors around athlete safety, communication, and leadership style, there may be gender-based differences in coaching behaviors around other constructs related to positive youth engagement and experience in sport. Notably, most of the research specific to coaching behaviors associated with positive youth experiences in sport has been focused on male coaches by virtue of men’s ubiquity in youth sports coaching roles (e.g., Smith et al., 2007). The specific coaching behavioral concepts chosen for this exploratory study were determined via literature review, reliance on existing coach behavioral scales (e.g., Revised Leadership Scale for Sports—Zhang et al., 1997), and consultation with an expert advisory panel (see Gosai et al. [2022] for an example of a similar process for instrument development). This pilot instrument includes concepts that have received substantial attention in the youth sport coaching literature: mastery motivational climate, autonomy-supportive coaching, athlete safety, and fun (Merkel, 2013; Vella & Perlman, 2014; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstad, 2009). These are not intended to be an exhaustive list of constructs related to positive youth sports experience and are used here to explore both the notion of coaching for positive youth sports experience scale and gender differences on said scale. We briefly describe the four domains around which the positive youth sports experience measure for this exploratory study was created.

Safety

Safety is paramount to creating a positive youth sports experience; in fact, in many programs and contexts, safety training is the only type of behavioral education a youth sports coach may receive (Fawver et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017). As noted above, safety is a domain in which gender differences in coaching behavior have been studied. Behaving in ways that prioritize safety and injury prevention is often at odds with popular heroic narratives that normalize and celebrate playing with injuries and through pain (Kroshus et al., 2015, 2017; Nixon, 1994). Conformity to these traditionally masculine norms can impact care-seeking behaviors for sport injuries among athletes and coaches, particularly pertaining to concussions (Kroshus et al., 2015, 2017). Both the culture and the structure of organized youth sports programs—early sports specialization and extensive competition in pursuit of college and professional opportunities—are oriented around principles detrimental to youth health, safety, and long-term development (Merkel, 2013). This can lead to inconsistent safety precautions, overuse injuries, concussions, burnout, and limited development (Merkel, 2013).

Mastery Motivational Climate

Another “variable that has received a substantial amount of attention for its potential omnipotence in the youth sport context is the motivational climate” (Prichard & Deutsch, 2015, p. 202). A mastery climate is a motivational climate characterized by coaching behaviors that define success as maximizing potential and self-improvement and emphasizing and reinforcing effort, task mastery, cooperative learning, and having fun; it is often associated with athletes’ adoption of mastery goals (Smith et al., 2009). In contrast, athletes tend to adopt ego–goal orientations when coaches behave in ways that facilitate an ego-involving motivational climate:
placing a higher value on winning and outperforming others as the primary measures of success, punishing for mistakes, and giving preferential treatment to better players (Smith et al., 2009). The adoption of an ego-involving motivational climate is associated with negative sport participation outcomes for the athletes, such as “anxiety, low intrinsic motivation, lowered enjoyment, and sport attrition” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180). On the other hand, implementing coaching behaviors that promote a mastery climate is a strategy correlated with greater behavioral and psychosocial outcomes for the athletes (Vella & Perlman, 2014; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). To date, motivational climate studies include some explorations of gender differences in athletes (e.g., Smith et al., 2009); however, we have found none that explore gender differences in coaching behaviors related to motivational climate.

Autonomy-Supportive Coaching

Another key aspect of coaching for positive youth sports experience that has received significant attention in the youth sports literature is autonomy-supportive coaching (Vella & Perlman, 2014; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). Autonomy-supportive coaching draws from the principles of the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which has been used extensively in a sport setting to examine the determinants (sociocontextual factors) of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and its impact on athlete outcomes. Coaches have a choice between behaving in ways that promote self-determination, athlete input, and independent problem solving (autonomy supportive) or compliance, respect for authority, and ego–goal orientations (controlling; Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This choice impacts the satisfaction of basic psychological needs of the athletes: competence, autonomy (a sense of personal initiative), and relatedness. The level of perceived support from the coach for these three needs, in turn, determines the level and type of an athletes’ motivation (Vella & Perlman, 2014). Coaches’ ability to engage in autonomy-supportive behaviors (i.e., providing rationale for their actions, using noncontrolling competence feedback, and acknowledging athletes’ feelings and perspectives) has been shown to predict athlete “intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, prosocial behaviors, and important developmental outcomes such as identity reflection and initiative” (Vella & Perlman, 2014, p.175). To our knowledge, studies on autonomy-supportive and controlling coaching behaviors have explored gender differences in athletes but not coaches. For example, a study of youth swimming and football coaches revealed their behaviors were influenced by a number of factors, including their perceptions of athletes’ gender (Carroll & Allen, 2021).

Fun

Finally, young athletes name fun as one of their main reasons for playing sports (Bailey et al., 2013; The Aspen Institute, 2019a) and continuing their sport participation (Visek et al., 2020). Therefore, fun is an element of youth sports often discussed as paramount to reducing dropout (Visek et al., 2020; Witt & Dangi, 2018) and understanding social motivation (Allen, 2003). However, due to the individualistic nature of sport and the variety of participation contexts, perceptions and definitions of fun can vary for both young athletes (Bailey et al., 2013) and coaches (Bengoechea et al., 2004). For example, Bengoechea et al. (2004) point out the apparent conflict between skill development and fun since the ways many coaches facilitate skill development and competition take away from having fun. Fortunately, certain coaching behaviors such as creating a positive and supportive learning environment, using games and game-like activities, and bringing variety and innovation into practice have been supported through research as viable strategies for promoting fun in youth sports across several theoretical and developmental frameworks (Bengoechea et al., 2004). Yet, the task remains challenging for coaches due to additional structural obstacles, such as the lack of opportunities for free play and access to coaches trained on research-based behaviors (The Aspen Institute, 2019a). Similar to the other domains, perceptions of fun have been studied based on athlete gender (e.g., Visek et al., 2020), but to our knowledge, gender differences in coaching behaviors related to promoting fun in youth sports have not been studied.

The following research questions guided this exploratory study: (a) What descriptive characteristics define the sample population of youth sports coaches in King County, WA, with particular attention to differences by gender? (b) Are there any differences in the types of coaching positions occupied by male and female coaches? (c) Do the factors of autonomy, mastery, safety, and fun emerge as hypothesized regarding a coaching behavior scale? (d) To what extent do male and female coaches report different coaching behaviors? Due to the exploratory nature of this study, no hypotheses were set.

Methods

This study was part of a larger community-informed, mixed methods project that examined the youth sports landscape in King County, WA; the county is the largest in the state and includes a major metropolitan area. Methods for the broader study included youth, parent, and coach surveys as well as interviews with community leaders and focus groups with youth and parents. This study focuses solely on data from the coach survey.

Participants

In total, there were 284 survey respondents, but in accounting for missing data, only 219 cases were analyzed. In the following statistical analysis, the sample size used for gender comparison was further reduced to 215, as four participants identified as other or preferred not to say. Sixty-four of the 215, or 29%, identified as women; 155, or 71%, identified as men. This is similar to national estimates of percentages of female coaches in youth sports and in high school athletics (LaVoi, 2014; The Aspen Institute, 2019a). Participants coached youth between the ages of 6 and 18 years old in school-based and nonschool-based sports. The age of the coaches ranged from 18 to 76 years old with an average age of 42 years old. Race and ethnicity data were not collected in this study. Soccer and basketball, the most popular sports for youth in King County, WA (The Aspen Institute, 2019b), had the most coach respondents, but participants coached a broad range of sports including football, cheer, dance, water polo, rowing, mountain biking, and bouldering.

Procedure

Participants were a convenience sample of youth and high school coaches in King County, WA, recruited in two ways: The first was through the Washington State Interscholastic Athletic Association, which sent the survey to all its coaches in the county. The second was through youth sports programs in King County, WA. Using a database of approximately 750 youth sports programs in the
county, researchers sent emails to program directors asking them to provide the survey to their coaches. Programs were chosen based on geographic location within the county, sport, participant gender, program size, and program type (select/recreational); we sought representation across all five domains. Because the full target population of youth coaches in King County, WA, is not known or quantified anywhere, a convenience sample was used to assess youth sports coaches outside of school sports. Furthermore, few youth programs maintain active lists of their coaches; therefore, the total number of coaches to whom the survey was sent is unknown.

**Measures**

The questionnaire covered a range of topics including years of experience, sports coached, types of trainings, and knowledge of concussion protocol. This paper focuses on a series of questions on participants’ behaviors related to coaching to support positive youth sports experience. The survey items were generated from the literature on the coaching behaviors that create a positive youth sports experience and were vetted by a research advisory team. Where possible, items were developed based on previously validated research including an adaptation of the Health Care Climate Questionnaire (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011), the Revised Leadership Scale for Sports (Zhang et al., 1997), and the Motivational Climate Scale for Youth Sports (Smith et al., 2008). The construct *behaving as a positive coach* was made up of eight individual items—two items each for the four constructs described in the literature review: mastery, autonomy, safety, and fun. The measurement scale was a 5-point Likert-type ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Participants were prompted with “In your coaching, how often do you do the following?” and then given statements tied to the four coaching constructs. For example, one of the fun items was “I think about what would be fun for athletes when planning practices.” Total behavior scores were calculated as a composite of the sum of associated items. See Appendix for a complete list of survey questions. Internal consistency of the measurement was evaluated through Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha > .70$).

**Analysis**

The survey was cognitively tested with seven youth sports coaches prior to launch, and questions were adjusted based on their feedback. Descriptive statistics of the participants were aggregated across four variables, and a series of $Z$ tests were conducted to identify any significant differences in participant sociodemographic characteristics and comparability across genders. To validate the items in the pilot coaching behavior scale, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to provide initial internal structural evidence for the items. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was used to ensure that the correlation matrix was not random, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistic was required to be above a minimum of .50 (Watkins, 2018). After confirming the correlation matrix was factorable, items were submitted for EFA. An iterated principal axis extraction method with initial communalities estimated by squared multiple correlations was employed because of its relative tolerance of non-normality and demonstrated ability to recover weak factors (Watkins, 2018). Parallel analysis and the visual scree test were used to determine the appropriate number of factors to retain (Velicer et al., 2000). Parsimony and theoretical convergence were also considered. Due to the nature of the constructs, it was assumed that factors would be correlated. Therefore, an oblimin rotation was employed (Watkins, 2018). Criteria for determining factor adequacy were established a priori. Given the number of participants in this study, pattern coefficients $\geq 0.37$ were considered salient (Watkins, 2018). Complex loadings that were salient on more than one factor were rejected to honor simple structure, and factors with a minimum of two salient pattern coefficients, and that were theoretically meaningful, were considered adequate (Watkins, 2018). The results from the EFA would guide the next steps in analysis if the factors of autonomy, mastery, safety, and fun emerged as hypothesized regarding a coaching behavior scale with an acceptable internal reliability. These subscales would be used in the following analysis; otherwise, eight coaching behavior items would be employed and analyzed separately.

To explore differences on these eight coaching behavior items by gender, data were analyzed by a one-way independent group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) for the coaching behaviors. Given the unequal group sizes across genders in our sample and the violation of the normality assumption, Pillai’s trace was reported in MANOVA. Follow-up independent group $t$ tests with Bonferroni-corrected alpha were conducted as a post hoc analysis to further examine significant mean differences between genders. Sample characteristics were computed using mean comparisons. Effect sizes were determined in $t$ tests via the use of Cohen $d$ and in MANOVA through the use of partial eta squared ($\eta_p^2$). Small, medium, and large effect sizes for Cohen $d$ are 0.2, 0.5, and 0.8, respectively; and for partial eta squared, the effect size values are 0.01, 0.022–0.059, and 0.083 (Cohen, 1988). Alpha level was set at .05. Data analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 28.0.

**Results**

**Coaches’ Characteristics and Positions**

Descriptive statistics regarding the participants and differences in the sample population by gender are illustrated in Table 1. On average, participants reported more than 10 years of coaching experience. Female coaches were younger and more likely to have coached fewer years than their male counterparts. Female coaches were significantly more likely to be paid part-time coaches compared to their male counterparts. Only 31% of the women were in volunteer coaching roles compared with 53% of the men. Women were also significantly more likely to be coaching the older age groups, 11- to 14-year-olds and 15- to 18-year-olds where more of the coaching roles are paid. Finally, female coaches were significantly less likely to have children.

**Measurement Validation and Internal Reliability**

Univariate skewness and kurtosis were extreme based on the nature of our survey questions. Mardia’s multivariate skew and kurtosis were both statistically significant ($p < .001$). Given this non-normality and the ordinal nature of the items, a polychoric correlation matrix is deemed an appropriate input for the EFA. Results of Bartlett’s test of sphericity indicated that the correlation matrix was not random, $\chi^2(28) = 80.1987$, $p < .001$, and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin test was .59, exceeding the minimum standard for conducting factor analysis. Although the literature indicated that four factors would be present, given the results of the parallel analysis and the scree plot, the assumption of a four-factor structure was untenable. Parallel analysis exhibited that three factors were appropriate: autonomy, safety, and the combination of fun and mastery. This was also in line with the results from the scree plot.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for the Sample Population by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Program Size</th>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Program Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11-14 yrs</td>
<td>10 yrs</td>
<td>Select</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15-18 yrs</td>
<td>20 yrs</td>
<td>Recreational</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>Select</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fun and mastery factors correlated with the safety factor at a rate of −0.11 and correlated with the autonomy factor at a rate of 0.22. Given these results, the three-factor solution was accepted as the most adequate structural representation of the coaching behavior questionnaire with these participants and was subsequently found to be robust across alternative extraction and rotation methods as well as when missing data were deleted. However, Cronbach’s alpha on the three subscales was 0.48 for autonomy, 0.52 for safety, and 0.55 for fun and mastery combined, which were consistently below the 0.70 threshold. Given the concern of the low internal consistency of the measure, the newly created subscales from the EFA were not used in the MANOVA to examine gender differences. Instead, the following MANOVA was executed based on eight separated items regarding coaching behaviors. Results of the imputed data are presented in Table 2.

### Multivariate Analysis of Coaching Behaviors

Given the unsatisfactory level of internal reliability on each subscale, we reported results regarding eight separated items, instead of three subscales. Significant mean vectors were found between the female and male coaches in coaching behavior as measured by the eight items in the scale. Approximately 9% of coaching behaviors were explained by the effect of gender (Pillai’s...
tracing behavior mean score in total than male coaches (\(p < .001\)). In the follow-up post hoc analysis, female coaches had significantly higher coaching behavior mean scores on the first autonomy item than male coaches (\(t = 2.80, p = .006\)), with a small to medium effect size \(d = 0.42\). Female coaches had significantly higher coaching behavior mean score than male coaches on the first safety item (\(t = 2.83, p = .005\)), with a small to medium effect size \(d = 0.37\). In addition, female coaches had significantly higher coaching behavior mean score in total than male coaches (\(t = 3.46, p < .001\)), with a medium to large effect size \(d = 0.52\). While female coaches also had higher mean scores on mastery, fun, and the second items in autonomy and safety, no significant mean differences were found at the item level (see Table 3).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore some characteristics of the coaching population of King County, WA, and the differences between the reported coaching behaviors of male and female youth sports coaches related to creating a positive youth sports experience. Two hundred and nineteen coaches from a large, geographically diverse county in the United States fully completed the survey. Women accounted for only 29% of all respondents. Along with the dearth of women in the sample population, we found some differences between men and women in the types of coaching positions they hold and the behaviors they report bringing to their coaching.

#### Volunteer Coaching and the Missing Mothers

Youth sports programs rely primarily on volunteer coaches. The lack of women in volunteer coaching positions apparent in our study is not an exception; similar data are reported in both international (Hetting et al., 2020) and national (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005) studies on volunteer youth coaches. In our study, 46% of all coaches were volunteers. Of those, only 31% were women. Female coaches were more likely to occupy paid coaching positions: 67% of women were in paid positions compared to 43% of men. Female coaches were also, therefore, largely absent from coaching the youngest athletes, ages 6–10 years old; and there were many fewer mothers who were coaches than fathers, 50% of the women in our sample had children compared to 77% of the men.

Previous research on mother-coaches in youth sports indicates that “notions of being a good mother and reasons for coaching are very similar, including spending time together, developing life skills, and role modeling” (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011, p. 474). Research in other domains also suggests a congruence between motherhood and the development of leadership skills including patience, organization, and tolerance (Leberman & Palmer, 2009).

The confluence of structural and sociocultural barriers in volunteerism and coaching, taken together, means that volunteer coaching is doubly a space that reinforces traditional gender roles and norms (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Thompson (1999) found that “women’s responsibility for domestic labor and child care constrains their full participation in sport, while, simultaneously, the labor they do in these realms facilitates the participation of others” (p. 3). Similarly, in an exploration of gender divisions in youth sports organizations, Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) found that volunteer coaches were typically men and that “team moms,” who facilitated the engagement of kids and coaches through logistical support, were women. Male coaches in positions of power reproduced these gendered divisions of labor in the context of youth sports as they questioned the competence of women as coaches and favored other men and masculine coaching and leadership practices (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). As a result, women are marginalized in the youth sports context (LaVoi, 2009), making the path to coaching that much more challenging.

The absence of mothers as coaches, despite the congruence in skills and behaviors, suggests that balancing social roles, navigating the masculine ethos of sports culture, and overcoming structural barriers and marginalization in the mother-coach domain is complicated and potentially stressful (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; Leberman & Palmer, 2009; Schull & Kihl, 2019). The fact that a significant proportion of female coaches in our study were paid part-time suggests that some financial incentives may be important.

### Table 3  Mean Comparisons of Coach Genders on Coaching Behaviors (N = 215)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Female M</th>
<th>Female SD</th>
<th>Male M</th>
<th>Male SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.a</th>
<th>Cohen d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery I</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery II</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.205</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy I</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.006**</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy II</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety I</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety II</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.233</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun I</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun II</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>0.362</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effect Pillai’s trace | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. | \(\eta^2\)
---|---|---|---|---|---
Intercept | 1.00 | 5754.56 | 8 | 206 | <0.001 | 1.00
Gender | 0.93 | 2.63 | 8 | 206 | 0.009 | 0.09

Note. M = mean; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; UL = upper level; LL = lower level; \(df =\) degrees of freedom; \(\eta^2 =\) partial eta squared was reported as effect size for multivariate analysis of variance.

aAdjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni (Bonferroni-corrected alpha = .05/8).

**p < .01.
to helping women and mothers mitigate the constraints associated with volunteer coaching.

Coaching Behaviors: Boon or Barrier

Our findings illustrate that when women do coach, they report bringing behaviors supportive of autonomy-supportive coaching and safety. Relative to safety, these findings are congruent with previous research demonstrating female coaches may less often communicate the need for athletes to show “toughness” by playing through or with injury (Kroshus et al., 2015; Nixon, 1994). In aggregate, our findings suggest women’s coaching behaviors are generally oriented toward facilitating positive youth experiences. This aligns with previous research on both mother-coaches (Leberman & Palmer, 2009) and female leaders and coaches (Darvin et al., 2018; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Fasting & Pfister, 2000) that shows them to be oriented toward the types of supportive and communal behaviors that facilitate a positive sporting climate. Given that “leadership and gender are both inherently social products influenced by sociocultural factors” (Schull & Kihl, 2019, p. 3), the orientation of female coaches toward an autonomy-supportive, safe, and developmentally appropriate climate is in keeping with prevailing, albeit stereotypical and un-nuanced, gendered distinctions in socialization.

The increased inclusion of women may help shift youth sports culture away from the prevailing masculine ethos of sport leadership and organizational structures (Gosai, Jowett, & Rhind, 2021), especially if they can be valued for these specific—and differing—contributions (Fasting & Pfister, 2000). However, read another way, the differences between men’s and women’s coaching behaviors could be seen not as a blessing but as a barrier of entry for women who find themselves at odds with the prevailing norms of youth sports coaching behavior. As such, the “deeply embedded nature of masculinity in the sport culture” (Schull & Kihl, 2019, p. 6) might be making it more challenging for women to wedge their coaching behaviors into a system that does not highly value them; in doing so, they might face disapproval and stress (Leberman & Palmer, 2009).

This challenge of wedging their behaviors into a masculinized culture aligns with women’s experience as leaders in other sectors: Women are regularly reported to demonstrate leadership traits to the same degree as men and even outperform men in some displays of desired leadership traits and behaviors (Darvin et al., 2018), including higher levels of emotional intelligence, empathy, compassion, and other communal qualities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2018). However, they are still underrepresented in leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2018) in part because of the “cross-pressures on female leaders. They often experience disapproval for their more masculine behaviors, such as asserting clear-cut authority over others, as well as for their more feminine behaviors, such as being especially supportive of others. Given such cross-pressures, finding an appropriate and effective leadership style is challenging” (Eagly, 2007, p. 4).

Women in coaching face this same double bind and can experience disapproval for either staying true to their own beliefs or displaying dominant behaviors. Female coaches are perceived as either competent, when displaying masculine leadership behaviors, or likable when displaying feminine relational behaviors, but rarely both (Gosai, Jowett, & Rhind, 2021). At the same time, as Kroshus et al. (2015) note in their study of coach management of concussion, women often behave in ways consistent with traditional definitions of masculinity to be seen as good coaches and to fit in. The gendered and socialized nature of leadership is also reflected in how coaches are evaluated by their athletes with athletes privileging men and certain masculine values in sport leadership and coaching domains (see Schull & Kihl, 2019). If women do not see their behaviors as aligned with the prevailing masculine norms, they might opt out of coaching, tamp down their behaviors to avoid having to coach against the grain (Kroshus et al., 2015), or conform to prevailing sport and organizational behaviors and norms (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

Impact on Sport and Youth

Whatever the sociocultural or structural constraints keeping women out of youth sports, their collective absence may have a detrimental impact on the experience of the participants. Young athletes exposed to coaching behaviors that reflect a dominant masculine ethos and a performance-driven culture can have negative sport experiences including injury (Kroshus et al., 2015), burnout, and attrition (Merkel, 2013). Furthermore, adherence to masculine norms and behaviors in coaching can also be detrimental to young athletes’ development of a balanced understanding of leadership. Youth sports, then, become a space for reproduction, rather than disruption, of gendered notions of gender, power, and leadership (LaVoi, 2009). For girls, specifically, female coaches serve as positive role models and are key to higher rates of sports participation, retention, and pursuit of careers in coaching (Balogh & Trzaskoma-Bicsery, 2020; The Aspen Institute, 2019a). Creating another type of “blind,” the lack of female coaching in youth sports leads to fewer female coaching in youth sports.

Future Directions and Practical Applications

Leberman and LaVoi (2011) suggest for youth sport to fulfill its potential, “the number of female coaches in youth sport must increase to levels equal to their male counterparts” (pp. 474–475). Further research needs to be done to understand, more specifically, the barriers for women in volunteer youth sports coaching in the United States. In the meantime, some practical ways of increasing outreach and support for women in youth sport include working across the whole sports ecosystem to make changes (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). This includes individual-level solutions, for example, directly asking women to coach and offering options for coaching. On the other hand, more organization-level solutions, such as communities of practice, coach trainings specifically for women (Balogh & Trzaskoma-Bicsery, 2020; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012), and trainings that identify the gendered social processes at play could also be considered. In addition, Leberman and LaVoi (2011) recommend, when recruiting mothers, to highlight the ways mothers’ values and behaviors are aligned with the needs of young athletes and the “transferable skills that mothers are able to bring to coaching” (p. 486).

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, generalizability is limited due to the survey design and sampling technique: Participants represented a relatively small convenience sample from one county in the United States, albeit with a ratio of female-to-male coaches mirroring national estimates of youth sports coaches. Second, the race and ethnicity information of participants was not collected, so it is unknown the extent to which the population of coaches from King County, WA, is represented from the perspective of race and ethnicity. This also prevented us from disaggregating data by race/ethnicity and
examining potential intersection points of race and gender. Third, self-reported data are subject to recall and social desirability biases. Future studies could include field observations and/or athlete perspectives to measure coaching behaviors.

Finally, the psychometric scale regarding coaching behavior in the study was developed by a panel of experts using some previously validated items but was not fully validated itself prior to use in the survey. Although an EFA was conducted, the sample size and Cronbach alpha levels were not sufficient for a reliable structure. The results showed that mastery is no longer distinctly represented; rather, it is combined with fun. This suggests a need for further investigation, especially given that fun is an underconceptualized construct (Bengoechea et al., 2004) with potential overlap with a nonego-involving climate. Furthermore, only two items were used in the creation of these subscales; more items may have helped distinguish mastery and fun. A series of further factor analysis procedures, such as obtaining a sufficient and representative sample for EFA and conducting confirmatory factor analysis, is necessary in future studies.

Conclusions

With over 72% of youth in the United States participating in sports (The Aspen Institute, 2019a), youth sports is an ideal intervention point for challenging assumptions about who can lead. Youth sports are also a space where young athletes should have a safe, positive, and developmentally supportive and appropriate sports experience. As women’s coaching behaviors are, in general, aligned with these objectives, the lack of women in coaching means the sector is missing out on opportunities for transformation. These behaviors are not only important to youth athletes. Athletes at all levels of sport are positively impacted by coaches who strive to create caring relationships with their athletes and facilitate psychologically and physically safe spaces for them (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Gosai, Jowett, & Nascimento-Júnior, 2021; Kroshus et al., 2015; Norman, 2016). Historically, these types of behaviors have been viewed as at odds with the dominant male ethos of sport and less valued in sports leadership (Schull & Kihl, 2019); however, recent research demonstrates the importance of supportive, holistic-oriented coaching behaviors on athlete well-being and satisfaction (Fasting & Pfister, 2000; Gosai, Jowett, & Nascimento-Júnior, 2021; Norman, 2016). Highlighting the way female coaches, in general, are poised to be supportive of positive athlete experience may be a useful strategy for recruiting, retaining, and supporting women to coach.

Acknowledgments

The research was approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board, and all participants consented to participate in the survey.

References


## Appendix: Psychometric Measurement of Coaching Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery I</td>
<td>I tell the athletes that they should try to be better than their teammates. (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery II</td>
<td>I try to make players feel good when they improve a skill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy I</td>
<td>In coaching, I put suggestions made by the team members into operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy II</td>
<td>In coaching, I let the athletes try their own way even if they make mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety I</td>
<td>I teach the proper technique in order to reduce the risk of injury.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety II</td>
<td>I incorporate warm-up and cooldown phases for practice and competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun I</td>
<td>I think about what would be fun for athletes when planning practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun II</td>
<td>I direct our team goals toward having fun rather than winning games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* R = reverse coded.