

# Relational Demography in Coaching Dyads

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## Abstract

*The decline in the proportion of female head coaches in the intercollegiate ranks is one of the most significant issues in the realm of women's sports today. To extend the body of research that has studied this topic, we investigated the impact relational demographic effects on the work attitudes of coaches, which differs from previous research that has generally studied only categorical demography (e.g., gender effects). Current assistant coaches in four intercollegiate women's sports teams (basketball, volleyball, softball, and soccer) were surveyed (N = 400). The impact of six different relational demographics was assessed on the two important work-related outcomes of perceived supervisor support and head coaching aspirations. Results indicated that with regard to relational demographics it appears that demographic diversity in dyadic relationships does not appear to be hindering the careers of assistant coaches as relational effects were not found in either of the outcomes.*

One of the most critical issues in the study of athletics today is the steady decline in the proportion of females serving as head coaches of women's teams, a phenomenon which might be the most disappointing effect of Title IX (Washington & Karen, 2001). Specifically, the proportion of females serving in head coaching roles is at an all time low (44%), down from over 90% in 1972 the inception year of Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2002). As the percentage of females in the collegiate coaching ranks has decreased, a subsequent increase in the research on coaches of women's teams has also occurred. In an attempt to explain the decline in female coaches, much of this research has focused on

gender differences on important organizational behavior and work attitudes. The range of organizational behavior and work attitudes for which sport studies have analyzed a gender effect is quite broad including, job satisfaction (Pastore, 1994); valence for coaching (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998); work experiences (Pastore, Inglis, & Danylchuk, 1996), occupational turnover intent (Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, & Forrest, 1991; Sagas & Ashley, 2001), and career aspirations (Knoppers et al., 1991; Sagas, Cunningham, & Ashley, 2000), to name a few. However, a dearth of research has indicated the impact of other demographic variables (e.g., age, tenure, marital status) when studying outcomes related to this trend. This is surprising given the large amount of attention that a variety of individual demographic variables have received in organizational research outside of sports (see Tsui & Gutek, 1999 for a review of 25 such studies).

Tsui and Gutek (1999) have described three classifications of demography research in organizations—the categorical approach, the compositional approach, and the relational approach. The categorical approach is concerned with discovering the effects of demographic characteristics on an individual's own behaviors or work attitudes, or on how others react to this individual (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). As described, researchers using the categorical approach in women's coaching studies have generally assessed how gender impacts work attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, intent to leave coaching, work experiences). The compositional approach to organizational demography research is concerned with how demographic characteristics impact the structural property of the social group. In essence, compositional demography refers to the distributional characteristics of an

organization (e.g., sex composition, racial composition) (Pfeffer, 1983), and how these distributions affect the experiences of individuals or the functioning of groups in the organization (Tsui & Gutek, 1999). Virtually no studies related to the decline of female coaches have used this approach. One exception, however, is a study by Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing, and Forrest (1993) which assessed the impact of gender ratios on outcomes and found that an increase in women in the male dominated profession of coaching was associated with a rising gender boundary for female coaches and sex segregation.

The last classification of organizational demography research, relational demography, refers to how an individual's demographic characteristics interact with those of others in the group. Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) were the first to coin the term relational demography and defined it as "the comparative demographic characteristics of members of dyads or groups who are in a position to engage in regular interactions" (p. 403). Tsui, Egan, and O'Reilly (1992) revised the original definition to eliminate the need for interpersonal interaction for demographic effects to occur. Tsui, Porter, and Egan (2002) have described the basic tenets of the concept as "demographic similarities invoke an attraction dynamic whereby demographically similar individuals accentuate the positive attributes of each other and derive a positive social identity . . . demographically dissimilar individuals tend to view and treat each other less favorably" (p. 901). Surprisingly, we found no research related to the relational demography perspective with regard to the decline of female coaches, as most have focused solely on the categorical approach. Thus, very little is known of the impact that comparative demographic characteristics have on group members in the context of women's team coaching. The purpose of this study was to begin to fill this void in the literature with respect to the study of relational demographics. Specifically, we aimed to assess the relationship between the relational demographics between the women's team head coach and

assistant coach dyad on the important work-related outcomes of perceived supervisor support and head coaching aspirations.

### *Conceptualization of Study Variables*

To meet the purposes of the study, we established the impact of relational demographics between head coach-assistant coach dyads on two important work-related outcome variables: supervisor support and head coaching aspirations. The two variables were selected because of their importance on the career outcomes of individuals, and particularly coaches of women's teams.

### *Supervisor support*

Supervisor support has been defined as the support given by a supervisor to a subordinate that results in the subordinate experiencing a positive contribution to his or her career development (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Jiang & Klein, 1999-2000). Baird and Kram (1983) have contended that an employee's career can be enriched through a supportive relationship with a supervisor, which can take the form of career guidance, the assignment of challenging work assignments, and feedback on performance. Greenhaus (1987) has proposed that the assignment of nonchallenging and routine tasks and a lack of interest by the supervisor toward the career aspirations of an employee can seriously stunt the professional growth of the individual. Based on this information, we see that when applied to the coaching context supervisor support from a head coach to an assistant coach can be critical to the career success of the assistant coach, while a lack of such support could prove detrimental to the careers of coaches.

### *Head Coaching Aspirations*

The basic merit for studying the head coaching aspirations of assistant coaches rest on statistical information provided by Acosta and Carpenter (2002). For example, as previously asserted, the proportion of female head coaches has continued to decline over the years; however, females hold

the majority of assistant coaching positions (55.1% in 2002). Further, Acosta and Carpenter (2002) reported that the majority of head coaching positions in recent years have been secured by males (90% between 2000 to 2002). Hence, since females occupy a majority of assistant coaching positions and thus comprise a large pool of potential head coaches, an analysis into their attitudes toward head coaching is paramount.

The underlying question guiding the research in this area has been to ascertain why females are less likely to secure head coaching positions as they arise. One possible answer to this question is that females do not apply for the positions as they arise. It is this contention in which the early work on ascertaining the career aspirations of assistant coaches began. Thus, the conceptualization of the career aspirations construct used in this study draws greatly on this recent work, much of which has been drawn from that of Sagas and his colleagues.

The first study related to assistant coach career aspirations toward head coaching positions was by Sagas et al. (2000) on 112 Division I assistant coaches of women's teams. The researchers operationalized aspirations toward head coaching by what they termed a desire/interest in head coaching, and measured it with a single-item on an 8-point Likert type scale. The study results indicated that females possessed a much lower score on the scale than males did. A follow up study by Sagas (2000), attempted to validate the outcome that females had fewer head coaching aspirations than male assistant coaches. Sagas conducted the study of occupational turnover intent and organizational commitment and what he termed as the desire to head coach on a Division I sample of 188 assistant coaches. While the conceptualization of the desire to head coach construct remained the same, Sagas operationalized the construct using three different questions. The three-question measure tapped the coaches' intentions toward pursuing a head coaching position (likelihood of applying), the interest in a head coaching job (how often they

thought of a job), and their desire in a head coaching job. The development of the three questions was based largely on the operationalization of turnover intent used by Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). The study indicated a high internal consistency for the three-item measure and that females again indicated significantly fewer aspirations toward becoming a head coach than men.

Based on the review of the supervisor support and head coaching aspirations, we see that both outcomes chosen for analysis in this study can be vital to the well-being and career success of assistant coaches and possibly the decline of female coaches. That is, a lack of supervisor support for assistant coaches can possibly stunt the career development of assistant coaches and subsequently hinder them from achieving upward mobility. Further, a lack of head coaching aspirations among assistant coaches may lead to limited applicant pools, as low aspiring coaches are not likely to apply for head coaching positions. Consequently, the possible impact of relational demographics on these two important outcomes may contribute greatly to our understanding of the decline of female coaches, both conceptually and practically.

## Methods

### *Sample and Procedure*

As part of a larger study on relational diversity in coaching, we used a questionnaire to collect data using a stratified random sampling technique. Assistant coaches (N = 1245) were selected from the women's team sports of softball, women's basketball, women's soccer, and women's volleyball (n = 415 from each NCAA Division). The final usable sample for the study consisted of 400 assistant coaches (female = 269, male = 131) for a response rate of 32.1%. The participants provided their gender, age, organizational and occupational tenures, marital status, and parental status. The coaches provided the same demographic information for their respective head coach. The occupational tenure of the sample

averaged 4.83 years ( $SD = 3.00$ ) and the average organizational tenure of the participants was 3.03 years ( $SD = 2.00$ ). A total of 53 (13.25%) coaches indicated living with a significant other while 102 (25.5%) indicated they were married. A majority of the participants did not have children living in their household ( $n = 348$ ).

### Instrumentation

#### *Dependent Variables*

As described, two outcome variables were chosen for the study. The scale scores were computed by averaging all items for each measure. Each measure employed a 7-point Likert-type scale.

*Supervisor Support.* The eight-item measure used to assess the perceived supervisor support of the assistant coaches was adopted from a scale written and tested by Greenhaus et al. (1990). Greenhaus et al. conceptualized the measure as “the degree of career support they received from their immediate supervisor” (p. 72). Two example questions, as they were worded for the study, read “my head coach makes sure I get credit when I accomplish something substantial on the job” and “my head coach cares whether or not I achieve my career goals.” The original version of the measure was reported to have good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ) (Greenhaus et al., 1990). A six-item version of the scale was used to assess supervisory support in information system employees and also reported an acceptable level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ) (Jiang & Klein, 1999-2000). Jiang and Klein also assessed the validity of the measure through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The discriminant validity of the measure was found to be acceptable, as was the convergent validity of the measure.

*Head Coaching Aspirations.* A two-item measure was used to assess the head coaching aspirations of the assistant coaches. The measure is conceptualized by an aspect of social cognitive career theory from the work of Lent, Brown, and

Hackett (1994). Lent et al.’s framework includes a concept they term as choice goals, which is an outcome of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interest toward a career behavior. Lent et al. (1994) assert the basic tenets of a career goal as “such concepts as career plans, decisions, aspirations, and expressed choices are all essentially goal mechanisms” (p. 85). They further define what they term as career choice goals as, “intentions, plans, aspirations to engage in a particular career direction” (p. 95). The present study attempted to capture this concept as it is expected to lead to career choice behavior. One of the items used in the study has been used in previous literature (Sagas, 2000) and read “How likely is it that you will search and apply for a head coaching position during your remaining coaching career?” The second item was written for the study to better operationalize the concept of career choice goals and read, “Becoming a head coach is one of my career goals.” The first item has been found to be highly related to items assessing the interest and desire of becoming a head coach (Sagas, 2000), and thus appears to operationalize the concept of what was termed career aspirations for the study well, at least with regard to the Lent et al. framework.

#### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables in this study consisted the various demographic variables collected. The demographic variables that were used in all analyses included the coaches’ gender (0 = male, 1 = female), occupational tenure in years, age in years, children in the household (1 = yes, 0 = no), and marital status (married or significant = 1, single = 0).

Consistent with previous research, we operationalized the relational demography scores by taking the absolute value of the difference between the head coach and assistant coach continuous scores (i.e., age, tenure). Thus, a high value indicated greater dissimilarity for the demographic in question. For the dichotomous variables of marital status, parental status, and gender,

the relational scores were represented by a set of dummy variables (1 = head coach and assistant coach were of the same gender/marital status/parental status; 0 = coaches were of a different gender/marital status/parental).

### Control Variables

Because previous research has failed to produce divisional or sport differences when studying assistant coach populations, the extent to which the variables could confound the results is unknown. Thus, the Division of the participant and the sport coached by the participant were used as control variables, as a block, before all analyses. The division variable was dummy coded. Both Division I and Division III schools received a dummy variable of one and were coded into a new variable. Thus, Division II schools were the omitted category. For the four sports, basketball, soccer, and volleyball coaches received a dummy variable, and softball was the omitted category.

### Data Analysis

Both constructs were subjected to a reliability analysis (Cronbach alpha). Descriptive statistics

for all of the study variables were also established. Although this data was not central to testing the hypotheses, we attempted to make the descriptive data more meaningful by subjecting the data to analysis of variance by the gender, division, and sport variables. A correlation matrix was also produced to assess the basic relationships between the study variables. Hierarchical regression analyses were used to assess the relational effects. Control variables were entered in the first block for all analyses. The second block of variables for the main analysis represented the block of assistant coach demographic variables with the final block of variables representing the block of six relational scores.

### Results

Both outcome variables indicated acceptable and high Cronbach reliability estimates. Specifically, the reliability estimate for the supervisor support variable was  $\alpha = .95$  while head coaching aspirations variable alpha was .92. Table 1 depicts the descriptive data (means and standard deviations) for the two dependent variables overall, and by division, gender, and sport. There were a few significant findings as a result of the analyses of

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for outcome variables overall and by gender, division, and sport

	Overall (n = 400)	Males (n = 131)	Females (n = 269)	Division I (n = 178)	Division II (n = 132)	Division III (n = 90)	Softball (n = 159)	Basketball (n = 130)	Soccer (n = 47)	Volleyball (n = 64)
Supervisor support	5.22 (1.46)	5.21 (1.42)	5.22 (1.49)	5.26 (1.38)	5.19 (1.57)	5.19 (1.48)	5.21 (1.48)	5.17 (1.48)	5.45 (1.43)	5.15 (1.42)
Head coaching asp.	5.45 (1.85)	5.76 (1.81)	5.31 (1.86)	5.44 (1.82)	5.51 (1.89)	5.41 (1.88)	5.14 (2.06)	5.88 (1.51)	5.93 (1.54)	5.02 (1.93)

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses.

variance tests. The results of the gender analysis of variance indicated that gender did not have a significant direct effect on supervisor support,

which indicates that male and female assistant coaches perceive equitable career support from their respective head coaches. For the gender

difference analysis of head coaching aspirations, females ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ) indicated significantly fewer head coaching aspirations than their male counterparts ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) ( $F = 5.39$ ,  $p = .02$ ). This finding appears to support previous research, which has reported similar findings using very similar scales (e.g., Sagas, 2000; Sagas et al., 2000). The analyses assessing differences on the outcomes between the three NCAA divisions were not significant. However, the analyses for the sport variables did produce a significant effect on the head coaching aspirations variable ( $F = 6.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The analysis of the means for head coaching aspirations by sport indicated that the means for the basketball coaches

coaches ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) and soccer coaches ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) were higher than the softball coaches ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ) and volleyball coaches ( $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.93$ ). Utilizing a Sidak post hoc test we discovered that the differences expressed toward head coaching aspirations by basketball and soccer coaches were indeed significantly greater than those of assistant coaches of softball and volleyball teams.

A bivariate correlation matrix ( $\alpha < .05$ ) of the 19 study variables, including the two dependent measures, the control variables, the demographic variables of assistant coaches, and the relational scores were compiled and are presented in Table 2. A few important relationships should be noted,

Table 2. Bivariate correlations of study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Outcome variables																			
1. Supervisor support																			
2. Head coaching aspirations	.04																		
Control variables																			
3. Volleyball	-.02	-.10																	
4. Basketball	-.02	.16	-.30																
5. Soccer	.06	.10	-.16	-.25															
6. Division I	.02	-.01	.09	-.19	.14														
7. Division III	-.02	.02	.00	.24	-.06	-.63													
Assistant coach demographics																			
8. Gender	.00	-.12	-.04	-.03	-.03	.01	-.01												
9. Age	-.05	-.18	-.03	.00	-.11	.04	-.02	-.36											
10. Organizational tenure	.06	-.18	.01	.02	-.12	-.06	.07	-.10	.45										
11. Occupational tenure	-.06	-.09	.03	.10	-.10	.10	-.01	-.17	.63	.66									
12. Marital status	-.07	-.04	-.05	-.01	.00	.05	-.14	-.22	.27	.08	.08								
13. Children	-.05	.06	.06	-.03	-.02	.07	-.03	-.19	.30	.13	.17	.38							
Relational demographic scores																			
14. Relational gender	-.09	.01	.10	-.04	.14	.04	.06	-.20	.09	.01	.05	.05	.10						
15. Relational age	.00	-.01	.02	.04	-.06	-.03	.00	.11	-.11	-.08	-.13	.01	-.05	.07					
16. Relational organizational tenure	.07	.05	-.03	.08	-.06	.02	.02	.04	.07	.12	.16	-.01	-.02	.04	.38				
17. Relational occupational tenure	.06	.04	.03	.08	-.08	.07	-.03	.17	-.10	.03	-.02	-.04	-.04	.04	.57	.60			
18. Relational marital status	-.07	.02	.06	-.04	.06	-.03	.04	-.02	-.03	-.07	-.04	-.22	-.11	.12	-.03	.04	.01		
19. Relational children	-.02	-.01	.05	.08	.01	-.06	.01	.01	.05	.09	.00	.09	.31	.19	.12	.06	.04	.19	

Note: All values of .10 or greater are significant at the .05 level.

most significant of which are the relationships between the outcome variables. Most notably, supervisor support variable was not significantly related to the head coaching aspirations, although the relationship between the variables was positive. A second noteworthy finding from the correlation matrix that should be noted is the lack

of any significant relationships between the two outcome variables and the six relational scores. This finding indicates that dyad relational demographics do not appear to have a direct effect on the work-related variables under study in the present sample.

The results of the regression analysis used to assess the impact of relational demographics on the two outcomes are presented in Table 3. The final block of relational scores failed to explain a significant amount of variance beyond the two

Table 3. Hierarchical regression of relational scores on outcome variables

Variables	Supervisor Support	HC Aspirations
	B	B
Step 1- Controls		
Volleyball	.013	-.366
Basketball	.013	.564
Soccer	.349	.515
Division I	.092	-.021
Division III	-.059	.043
Step 2- Assistant Coach Demographics		
Asst. coach gender	-.195	-.779***
Asst. coach age	.003	-.070***
Asst. coach org. tenure	.089**	-.113**
Asst. coach occ. tenure	-.069*	.061
Asst. coach marital status	-.308	-.186
Asst. coach children	-.020	.430*
Step 3- Relational Demographics		
Relational gender	-.283	-.038
Relational age	-.007	-.013
Relational org. tenure	.026	.023
Relational occ. tenure	.005	.015
Relational marital status	-.268	.049
Relational children	.017	-.045
Step 3 $\Delta R^2$	.026	.008
$R^2$	.060	.149***

Note: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

prior blocks for supervisor support ( $\Delta R^2 = .026$ ,  $p = n.s.$ ) and head coaching aspirations ( $\Delta R^2 = .008$ ,  $p = n.s.$ ), thus indicating that relational demographics did not affect the outcomes.

### Discussion

Women's team coaches have been the subjects of great deal of research by sport scholars because of the continued decline in the proportion of females serving in the capacity of head coach. A majority of the research that has analyzed work

behaviors and attitudes of women's teams coaches have only focused on gender differences between various experiences, or the categorical approach to organizational demography research. We undertook the present study to begin to fill the apparent void in our understanding of how other important demographic variables may also shape important work attitudes and behaviors of women's team coaches, particularly when analyzed from a relational demography perspective. Specifically, we aimed to assess if relational demographic dissimilarity (similarity) between a head coach and assistant coach served to shape how the assistant coach (a) perceived supervisor support from the head coach, and (b) indicated aspirations toward becoming a head coach.

Our findings suggested that the relational scores not only failed to provide a significant amount of variance in any of the outcomes in the regression analyses, the scores also failed to produce any direct significant relationships when subjected to a correlation analysis. Therefore, an argument can be made that coaching environments are quite unique in that demographic differences do not appear to impact the working relationships in head coach-assistant coach dyads. From an applied perspective, this finding indicates a promising environment for assistant coaches of women's teams in that they can pursue working situations with head coaches regardless of the demographic similarities or dissimilarities that may exist between them and be assured that they will received equitable supervisor support and will not alter their career aspirations to become head coaches. Furthermore, we found no support for more attractive dyadic relationships suggesting that coaches are not seeking out particular similarity (e.g., female with female) or dissimilarity (e.g., young coach with older coach) relationships.

Beyond the relational demographic findings, the descriptive data did provide a few interesting findings that should be noted. As mentioned, we found that female assistant coaches did express fewer aspirations toward head coaching positions

than their male counterparts. This finding is indeed in line with recent research, which has indicated similar findings. Thus, although the present study did not analyze actual behavior patterns of searching for a head coaching position, aspirations toward a behavior are expected to predict the behavior (e.g., Lent et al., 1994). Therefore, given the shortage of females currently serving in the capacity of head coach, a lack of aspiration to that position by female assistant coaches when compared to their male counterparts is alarming, and should be of concern to those involved in intercollegiate athletics. The between sport differences for head coaching aspirations also provided an interesting result worth noting, and an avenue for future research. This data indicated that basketball and soccer coaches aspired to head coaching positions at a greater intensity than those in volleyball and softball. While understanding a reason for this finding is beyond the scope of our study, we suggest that any subsequent research in this area should be cautious in not controlling for this possible extraneous variable, in that aspirations may be sport specific. Additional research may also aim to ascertain why such a phenomenon exists between these major team sports.

We would also like to suggest another avenue of future research in this area. Following much of the previous research in the area of relational demography, future endeavors should investigate the impact of work group demographic diversity as opposed to only dyads. For example, the potential impact of coaching staff demographics on the well-being of both head and assistant coaches could prove to be a fruitful investigation. Along this line, any subsequent research at the dyad level should investigate the impact of work group diversity on the dyad. That is, does dyad diversity (e.g., male head coach—female assistant coach) have a differing impact on an outcome than if the dyad is in a homogeneous group (e.g., an all-female assistant coaching staff) with respect to the assistant coaches' gender, or a heterogeneous group (e.g., one female assistant

with an all-male assistant coaching staff, or a mixture of genders, etc.)? The recent work of Tsui, Xin, & Egan (1995) and Tsui and Gutek (1999) outlines numerous potential propositions along this line of inquiry that could guide this subsequent research.

#### *Limitations and Summary*

As with any research project, it is important to note and frame the limitations of the study. Because we only examined women's team sport dyads, this study was clearly limited in its sample. Thus, we unable to conjecture our lack of relational demographic effects to other sports or samples (e.g., women's team individual sports, men's sports). Future research may prove fruitful in supporting or disputing the effects in other sport samples and thus furthering our understanding of relational demographics effect on dyads in coaching. Our study may also be limited further by the low response rate in that our findings external validity may be threatened. However, our sample does appear to be representative of the population of coaches with regard to gender (67% female in our sample compared to 61% female for the four sports used in this study according to Earle, 2000). Nonetheless, because similar comparisons cannot be made with regard to the other demographic variables, we can be certain that our sample is representative of all coaches with regard to occupational tenure, age, marital status, parental status, and organizational tenure.

In summary, the decline in the proportion of female head coaches in the intercollegiate ranks is a significant issue in the realm of women's sports, one that merits the numerous research endeavors that have been attributed to understanding the phenomenon. In an attempt to add to this body of research, the present study investigated the potential impact of relational demographics, as opposed to prior studies that have only suggested categorical demographics to the line of research. The findings in the present study provided evidence to suggest that gender differences in aspira-

tions toward head coaching may exist. Further, we also found that the lack of head coaching aspirations for the assistant coaches under study could not be attributed to a lack of supervisor support received, as this variable appeared to be unrelated to the construct. With regard to relational demographics it appears that, based on the evidence from this sample, demographic diversity in dyadic relationships is not hindering the careers of assistant coaches. However, future research is encouraged to more fully understand the potential impact of both relational demography and compositional demography on the well-being of coaches with particular emphasis on the assistant coaches of women's teams, an important group of coaches on which little research has been conducted.

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