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# How the Perceived Effectiveness of a Female Coach is influenced by their Apparent Masculinity/Femininity

Paula Murray<sup>a</sup>, Rhiannon Lord<sup>b</sup>, & Ross Lorimer<sup>b</sup> (<sup>a</sup>Loughborough College, UK, <sup>b</sup>Abertay University, UK)

*Corresponding Author:*

*Dr Ross Lorimer*

*Abertay University*

*Dundee, UK, DD1 1RG*

[Ross.Lorimer@Abertay.ac.uk](mailto:Ross.Lorimer@Abertay.ac.uk)

+44 (0)1382 308426

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study was to investigate how the apparent masculinity/femininity of a coach influenced others' perceptions of their ability to interact successfully with their athletes. Seventy-three participants (44 males, 29 females,  $M_{age}=23.8$   $SD=\pm 8.41$ ) watched four videos depicting a coach working with a group of athletes. Each video was the same but featured the four combinations of masculinised/feminised coach and male/female athletes. Participants rated the coach on perceived relationship quality, empathy, and competency. There was a main effect in relationship quality (closeness) and three of four subscales of coaching competency, with the masculinised coach rated higher than the feminised coach. There was also a non-significant trend for the feminised coach to score higher in relationship quality and competency when working with male athletes compared to female athletes, and the masculinised coach to score higher with females. For affective empathy, there was a main effect for athlete sex, with both coaches rated higher working with male athletes. There was also a non-significant trend for both coaches' cognitive empathy to be rated higher when working with male athletes. The perception of the masculinity/femininity of a coach influences how others understand their interactions even when the behaviors of that coach are similar across situations. Coaches need to be aware that gender-based stereotypes may influence how others perceive their competency. This could potentially affect coach effectiveness and career progression.

**Key words:** Coaching, Perceptions, Relationship quality; Masculinity, Femininity

## INTRODUCTION

Research exploring coach effectiveness has often focused on identifying efficacious coaching behavioral patterns that enable an athlete to develop higher levels of performance that they may not otherwise be able to achieve (20). However, it has been shown that identical coaching behaviours or similar leadership styles do not always elicit the same response from individual athletes or across different athlete groups (14). This is likely due to differences in how athletes both perceive and recall those coaching behaviours (19). A range of environmental factors (e.g., sport type) and individual characteristics of both the coach and the athlete can influence this process (e.g., age, experience). Potentially, one of the major factors is the gender of the coach (14).

Gender can influence the perception of leadership roles such as sports coaching. It has been demonstrated that women in leadership positions, such as sports coaching, tend to be rated as less effective in comparison to men in the same position (4). Additionally, based only on initial impressions, athletes normally perceive female coaches as less capable than male coaches (13), while when shown a description of male and female strength and conditioning coaches, male athletes are more comfortable with a male coach and exhibit negative attitudes towards female coaches (12). However, it has been suggested that females possess a greater insight and sensitivity into the feelings of others than men (8), and that female coaches are consistently rated higher than male coaches for relationship quality and empathy with their athletes (14).

When interpreting the behaviours of coaches, athletes draw upon mental schema on which to base their perceptions (14). These schemas potentially contain a range of biases and stereotypes based upon specific social groupings such as gender, race, and nationality (22). Therefore, the influence of coach sex on how athletes both perceive and recall specific coaching

behaviour and therefore assess coach effectiveness, is likely based somewhat on the stereotypes associated with males or females (18) and the characteristics associated with masculinity (e.g. independence, leadership, and assertiveness) and femininity (e.g., cooperation, empathy, and sensitivity). Sport tends to be associated more with the ideal form of masculinity that emphasises power and competitiveness (2) and sport coaching aligns itself more naturally with society's ideas of masculine behaviours such as authority and dominance (7). However, Epitropaki and Martin (2004) identified four key leadership qualities; sensitivity, intelligence, dedication, and dynamism and while these are predominantly masculine traits, sensitivity has a greater association with femininity than masculinity (5).

Femininity in sport could be interpreted as both a positive or negative attribute. While females in sports are associated with masculinity (10) they are still typically expected to display feminine qualities (1). Female coaches have been associated with improved relationship quality and empathy (14), and feminine females in sport tend to be viewed more positively than masculine females (9). Yet, women in positions of leadership who demonstrate agentic traits, more in line with the traditional role of a coach, are often viewed as less likable (17) and female coaches are often seen as less effective (13).

While research has shown being coached by a male or female coach can influence how identical coaching behaviours are perceived (14), the stereotypes surrounding masculinity and femininity may potentially be just as influential on how coaching behaviours are perceived and recalled, and therefore how effective a coach is believed to be (9). The purpose of the current study was to explore how the perceived masculinity or femininity of a female coach affected how others interpreted the effectiveness of their observed behaviours. It was hypothesised that a more masculinised coach would be perceived to be more competent (13) while a more feminised

coach would be perceived to have a better quality relationship with the athletes while also displaying greater levels of empathy (14).

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Seventy-three participants (44 males, 29 females,  $M_{age}=23.8$   $SD= \pm 8.41$ ) were recruited from a range of team and individual sports. Participants had been involved in their sport for an average of 13 years ( $SD= \pm 8.13$ ) and covered a range of performance levels (recreational = 36%, regional = 38%, national = 20%, and international = 6%). Participants were approached using a variety of means including telephone, letter and email, and were invited to take part in an investigation examining how coaches and athletes interact.

### **Procedure**

The institution's Research Ethics Committee granted full approval before the study commenced. All participants were fully briefed and completed an informed consent before progressing. Data was collected in a range of private locations with the participants being shown the videos on a laptop with headphones. Each participant was shown four videos in a random order, each depicting a similar coaching session but with either male or female athletes and a masculinised or feminised coach. At the conclusion of each individual video the participants were asked to rate the coach using the three psychometric instruments to assess perceived relationship quality, empathy, and competence. After watching all four videos, participants were fully debriefed.

### **Creation of Videotape Stimulus**

Nine actors were recruited to depict a female coach working with either a group of four male or four female athletes. Footage was used to edit create 'identical' 3-minute long videos

which depict a coach leading a conditioning sprint training session. In two of the videos, the coach worked with a group of male athletes and in the other two videos, they worked with a group of female athletes. The actor playing the female coach was filmed twice with clothing and body language manipulated to display more masculine (e.g., baggy tracksuit, hair tied back, wide stance) or feminine characteristics (e.g., leggings, hair down, narrow stance). This gave four possible combinations of the masculine/feminine appearance of the coach working with either male or female athletes. Prior to the study commencing the four videos were piloted with five individuals who rated the consistency of the videos and the perceived masculinity/femininity of the depicted coach.

## **Measures**

*Perceived relationship-quality.* Participants' perceptions of the quality of the relationship between the coach and the athletes depicted in each video was measured using an adapted version of the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (6, 14). The modified questionnaire reflected an inference about the depicted coach's beliefs about the athletes. The questionnaire is made up of eleven statements scored between 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) that assess three subscales: *closeness*, liking, trust and respect for the athlete; *commitment*, the intent to continue working with the athletes; *complementarity*, the responsiveness and cooperation with the athletes. For this sample, the Cronbach's alpha for closeness, commitment, and complementarity was 0.92, 0.88, and 0.91 respectively, with an acceptable threshold set at 0.70 (21).

*Perceived empathy.* Participants' perceptions of the empathy of the coach towards the athlete depicted in each video were measured using an adapted version of Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (16). The modified questionnaire reflected an inference about

the depicted coach's empathy ability. The questionnaire is made up of eleven statements scored between 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) that assessed two subscales: *perspective taking*, a measure of cognitive empathy (how well an individual understands what others are thinking and feeling); *proximal responsivity*, a measure of affective empathy (how an individual's emotions mirror those they interact with). For this sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0.93, and 0.89 respectively.

*Perceived coaching competency.* Participants' perceptions of the competency of the coach was measured using the Coaching Competency Scale (15). The questionnaire is made up of 24 statements scored between 0 (complete incompetence) to 4 (complete competence) that assess four subscales: *motivation*, the ability of the coach to influence the athletes; *game strategy*, the ability to be a leader during competition; *technique*, the ability to give instructions on technique; *character building*, the ability to develop an athlete personally. For this sample, the inter-item reliability was 0.94, 0.91, 0.88, and 0.79 respectively.

## **RESULTS**

Each dependent variable was analysed using a 2x2 between-subjects ANOVA with the factors Coach Gender Bias (feminised/masculinised coach) and Athlete Sex (male/female athletes). The mean and standard deviation for each subscale are shown in Table 1 while Table 2 shows the effect sizes (*d*) between each pairing of videos across all variables.

### **Relationship Quality**

For the variable closeness, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Gender,  $F(1, 71) = 0.12, p=0.73$ , a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias with the masculinised coach being rated higher,  $F(1, 71) = 4.81, p=0.03$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 2.16, p=0.15$ . For the variable commitment, the

analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex,  $F(1, 71) = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.93$ , no significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias,  $F(1, 71) = 3.10$ ,  $p = 0.09$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 1.00$ ,  $p = 0.32$ . For the variable complementarity, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex  $F(1, 71) = 2.15$ ,  $p = 0.15$ , no significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias,  $F(1, 71) = 0.49$ ,  $p = 0.49$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.48$ .

### **Empathy**

For the variable affective empathy, the analysis revealed there was a significant main effect for Athlete Sex with the coaches working with male athletes being rated higher,  $F(1, 71) = 9.53$ ,  $p = 0.00$ , no significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias,  $F(1, 71) = 2.99$ ,  $p = 0.08$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 0.72$ ,  $p = 0.40$ . For the variable cognitive empathy, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex,  $F(1, 71) = 1.61$ ,  $p = 0.21$ , no significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias,  $F(1, 71) = 0.11$ ,  $p = 0.74$ , no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 1.39$ ,  $p = 0.24$ .

### **Coaching Competency**

For the variable motivation, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex  $F(1, 71) = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.66$ , a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias with the masculinised coach rated higher  $F(1, 71) = 6.37$ ,  $p = 0.01$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 9.6$ ,  $p = 0.33$ . For the variable game strategy, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex  $F(1, 71) = 1.54$ ,  $p = 0.22$ , a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias with the masculinised coach rated higher  $F(1, 71) = 4.17$ ,  $p = 0.05$ , and no significant main effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 2.51$ ,



$p=0.19$ . For the variable technique, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex  $F(1, 71) = 2.57$ ,  $p=0.11$ , no significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias  $F(1, 71) = 6.35$ ,  $p=0.14$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 2.43$ ,  $p=0.12$ . For the variable character building, the analysis revealed there was no significant main effect for Athlete Sex  $F(1, 71) = 2.90$ ,  $p=0.09$ , a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias with the masculinised coach rated higher  $F(1, 71) = 5.60$ ,  $p=0.02$ , and no significant interaction effect between these two variables  $F(1, 71) = 1.93$ ,  $p=0.17$ .

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore how the perceived masculinity or femininity of a female coach would affect how others interpreted the effectiveness of their observed behaviours. It was hypothesised that a more feminised coach would be perceived to have a better quality relationship with their athletes while also displaying greater levels of empathy, while a masculinised coach would be perceived as more competent.

It was expected that the feminised coach would be rated higher across all three subscales of relationship quality. Female coaches have previously scored higher than male coaches using the same methods and measures of relationship quality (14), and feminine females in sport tend to be viewed more positively than masculine females (9). Additionally, women in positions of leadership who demonstrate more masculine traits are viewed as less likable (17). However, the results only showed a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias in the subscale closeness, with the masculinised coach being rated higher than the feminised coach. The results previous from male/female studies are not directly equitable to the masculinisation/feminisation of a single female coach. It may be that as the same actor was used in this study for the masculine/feminine coach, that participants in this study focused on invariant information such as the content of the

coach's communication and coaching session structure/tasks. This would explain the lack of difference in the commitment and complementarity subscales. It may also be that in this the masculinised coach aligned more the stereotypical views of sport coaching being more about masculine behaviours such as authority and dominance (7) although this differs from previous findings (17). Further investigation is needed to separate out the interrelated influences of sex and gender on perceptions of sports coaches.

There was also a trend in Athlete Sex, with the masculinised coach being rated higher when working with female athletes, and the feminised coach being rated higher when working with male athletes, across all three relationship quality subscales. Previous research has shown that male coaches are rated higher when working with female athletes, a relationship that reinforces both traditional coach and gender roles (4) and this may have been partially the case here for the masculinised coach working with female athletes. It has previously shown that male athletes tend to be more comfortable with a male coach (12) and so it was unexpected that the feminised coach was rated higher with male athletes. However, the trend observed in this study was not significant and needs further investigation to establish if this is an actual pattern.

It was expected that the feminised coach would be rated higher than the masculinised coach in both affective and cognitive empathy. This was based on the findings that previous research has shown that women as a group as perceived possess some inherent ability/skill that makes them more empathic than men (8). However, no main effect was observed. This again may be due to participants being focused on invariant information such as the content of the coach's communication and coaching session structure/tasks. There was also a main effect for Athlete Sex in affective empathy, with both coaches being rated higher when working with males compared to females, there was also a non-significant trend in cognitive empathy for the

same pattern. Previous research has shown that female coaches are rated higher when working with male athletes (14). In mixed-gender situations, individuals have been perceived to adjust their behaviour to be more accommodating (3). It is possible that participants were influenced by stereotypes of gender interaction and therefore perceived the coach to be more accommodating when working with a male athlete group regardless of the genderisation of the coach.

It was hypothesised that a more masculinised coach would be perceived as more competent than a feminised coach. It has been demonstrated that women in leadership positions, such as sports coaching, tend to be rated as less effective in comparison to men (4), while athletes normally perceive female coaches as less capable than male coaches (13). While these previous studies were based on comparisons of male and female coaches, it was expected that this would also be seen when comparing a masculinised and a feminised coach. There is a significant main effect for Coach Gender Bias, with the masculinised coach being rated higher in three of the four coaching competency subscales (motivation, game strategy, and character building), and while not significant, the masculinised coach was also rated higher in the fourth subscale, technique. This is in line with previous findings, however the measure of coaching competency only covers a limited amount of the varied roles a coach may have to fulfil when working with athletes of different ages and abilities. For future studies, it would be worthwhile to be more specific about specific coaching roles that are being evaluated and potentially including qualitative elements to help understand how these perceptions are formed.

The results of this study offer a greater understanding of how the perceived masculinity/femininity of a sports coach and the athletes they are working with may influence how others perceive the effectiveness of those coaches. However, the scenario depicted in these

videos (a sprint conditioning session) was fairly sport neutral, which means the influence of sport-type, while controlled for, was not explored. Each sport has a level of perceived inherent masculinity or femininity (11). It may be where the perceived masculinity/femininity of a sports coach aligns or conflicts with this, that the coach may be seen more positively or more negatively. For example, in an artistic sport such as gymnastics, traditionally perceived as more feminine, it may be that a coach is perceived more positively when they are seen as demonstrating qualities that are more feminine. It would be useful for future research to investigate how sport-type, particularly highly masculine and feminine sports, influence how coaches are perceived.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of the present study highlight that the perceived masculinity or femininity of a coach plays a key role in how the behaviors of that coach is interpreted by others. The main findings demonstrate that a more masculine female coach is perceived more favorably than a feminine coach is, when the quality of their relationship with an athlete and their coaching competency is assessed. The findings also show that the results of previous research examining male/female coaches are not directly equitable to the masculinisation/feminisation of a single female coach. Additionally, the discussion highlights the probable influence of the setting of the coach-athlete interaction and other contextual factors (e.g. sport-type). It is therefore likely that the sex of a coach, how they are genderised, the sex of their athletes, and any gender-stereotypes of their sport form have complex interdependence that influences how the behaviors of that coach, and therefore their effectiveness, are perceived.

## **APPLICATIONS IN SPORT**

This study has implications for coaching practice and coach effectiveness, as the perceived masculinity/femininity of a coach has an effect on how their behaviors are perceived by others. In particular a more masculine female coach may be perceived as more competent than a more feminine coach. The results also demonstrate that coaches are perceived more favorably when their perceived masculinity/femininity is in contrast to the sex of their athletes. Coaches need to be aware of how their perceived masculinity/femininity may potentially affect athletes' perceptions of them or how others view their effectiveness (e.g., parents). Additionally, those in official roles that involved interpreting the value of a coach's behaviours, such as coach educators and managers, need to be aware of their potential biases in making judgements about the effectiveness of coaches.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None

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