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## Is Same-Gender Mentorship Important for Division III Female College Athletes?: An Application of the Mentor Role Theory

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### ABSTRACT

*In the last 20 years, opportunities for women in intercollegiate athletics have grown exponentially. Unfortunately, women still represent a small number of head coaches in intercollegiate athletics, creating a disparity in numbers between female college athletes and female head coaches. This disparity has led to an imbalance for female college athletes searching for female role models and mentors. This study investigated the mentoring experiences of NCAA Division III female college athletes based on their lived experiences with both male and female head coaches. Using Mentor Role Theory (MRT), a set of qualitative responses were collected and analyzed. The participants highlighted career and psychosocial functions of MRT, with responses emphasizing positive and negative experiences with their past and present head coaches. Overall, female college athletes noted the importance of both career and psychosocial functions in their experiences with both male and female coaches. However, the college athletes' experiences with their female head coaches predominately were positive, whereas the participants were found to hold mixed experiences (both positive and negative) with their male coaches. The authors discuss the implications of these findings for Division III athletics, mentor role theory, and the importance of the coach/athlete relationship.*

**Keywords:** Coach/Athlete Relationship, Division III Athletics, Mentor Role Theory

The role of mentoring in education, personal, and career development has been well studied over the years (Allen & Eby, 2004; Avery et al., 2008; Bloom et al., 1998; Bower, 2009; Lough, 2001; McKeen & Bujaki, 2007; Park et al., 2017; Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999; White et al., 2017) with consensus suggesting the importance of mentorship for individual growth. According to the National Mentoring Partnership, “quality mentoring partnerships have positive effects on young people in a variety of personal, academic, and professional situations” (MENTOR, 2020, para. 1). The ‘young people’ highlighted above represent protégés, or rather, those in the mentoring relationship who gain invaluable knowledge and are the recipient of mentoring. Positive mentoring relationships have a broad reach for both the mentor and the protégé, yet mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all proposition as men, women, and individuals from marginalized groups experience mentoring relationships in different ways (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Additionally, mentors come in many different forms. They may take on the persona of teacher, parent, guardian, religious leader, supervisor, and in the context of the present study, coach. Similarly, protégés can be children, adults, students, employees, and in this study, athletes. Mentor/protégé relationships can form in a variety of contexts and each relationship is unique and specific to the individuals involved.

The literature on mentorship has developed multiple definitions across fields, highlighting upward of 50 different versions (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). However, in context to the coach/athlete

relationship, Weaver and Chelladurai's (1999) definition of mentorship is the most applicable. They define mentorship as, "a process in which a more experienced person (i.e., the mentor) serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (i.e., the protégé), and sponsors that individual's career progress" (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999, p. 25). This definition also ties strongly to Mentor Role Theory (MRT), the theoretical lens being utilized in this study. The MRT framework allows for a deeper understanding of mentoring relationships, as it breaks down to the actual lived experiences of mentors and protégés through both career and psychosocial functions. These functions help explain the behaviors and experiences of individuals in mentoring relationships and place emphasis on the outcomes of said relationship (Kram, 1985). In the case of the coach/athlete relationship, the coach, considered an expert in their sport, serves as a mentor to the athlete, who is less experienced in their respective sport and who is looking to grow athletically and personally. The context of this study will focus on the coach/athlete mentoring relationship, specifically in the NCAA Division III context.

The coach/athlete relationship in sport holds importance, with potential positive outcomes including performance accomplishments, success, and satisfaction (Jowett, 2017; Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). A quality coach/athlete relationship also can include off-field positive benefits, including enhanced well-being, academic success, and future employment (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002; Misasi et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2018). While there are known benefits, a critical aspect of the coach/athlete relationship that needs further examination is understanding mentoring relationships of female athletes by coaches of different genders. For female athletes, the coach/athlete relationship can be both cross-gender (male coach and female athlete) or same-gender (female coach and female athlete). Either way, the gender of both coach and athlete does play a factor in the lived experiences of the protégé (Avery et al., 2008; Jowett & Nezlek, 2011). While there is an argument for examining the coach's sex (biological) instead of gender (social construction), the focus of this study is understanding the social construction of mentoring relationships by coaches and athletes; therefore, it was determined the term gender was more appropriate.

The social construction of gender allows for pre-determined stereotypes across gender to exist for coaches. For example, agentic traits (e.g., self-assertion, independence, control) are highly associated with leadership and males, while non-leadership communal traits (e.g., caring, nurturing, understanding) are associated with females (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, 2018). These traits also align with past leadership theory studies conducted at Ohio State University and University of Michigan, where they found managers are either people-oriented (consideration) or task-oriented (initiating structure; Lowin et al., 1969). People-oriented managers are best described as employee, human capital, and motivational-focused leaders. Whereas task-oriented (initiating structure) managers focus on structure, roles, tasks, and results (Lowin et al., 1969). These traits allow for socially constructed pre-determined traits and leadership styles for males and females that may impact the experiences of female college athletes. In practice, female college athletes have been found to form more positive relationships and mentorship experiences with same-gender coaches and may be more apt to attain a career in sport after competition when females are present in leadership roles during their playing experience (Bradley, 2020; Lough, 2001). Specifically, it has been found that same-gender mentors in sport can address more career and psychosocial functions, leading to a more positive experience for protégés (Bower, 2011; Bower & Hums, 2014; Misasi, 2016).

A more recent investigation of Division I female college athletes by Park et al. (2017) found athletes did not identify career functions in their mentorship relationship, suggesting that coaches (both male and female) may not be formulating positive mentor/protégé relationships. This disparate finding from previous research brings into question the role of the coach as a mentor in the mentor/protégé relationship. Therefore, this study expands on the work from Park et al. (2017) who focused on Division I college athletes from one institution, by expanding the sample to include NCAA Division III athletes from multiple institutions, competing in various sports, and in different years in their athletic programs. This population is notably different and an under-researched

population. With this in mind, this study seeks to examine the mentorship experiences of current NCAA Division III female college athletes, focusing on their lived experiences with male and female head coaches.

### **Division III Athletics**

The Division III athletics model is unique in the NCAA governance structure. Currently, Division III is recognized as the largest athletic classification within the three divisions, sponsoring 37 championships, with approximately 39% of the entire NCAA college athlete population (NCAA, n.d.a). It also holds 445 active member schools across 43 voting conferences (both the largest amongst divisions). NCAA Division III member schools also have unique demographics. The schools usually are smaller and mostly private colleges (80%; NCAA, n.d.a). For example, in Division III the median undergraduate enrollment is 1,740, with the college athlete population equating to around 17%. In comparison, Division I institutions have a median undergraduate enrollment size of 8,960, with college athletes only representing 4% of that population (NCAA, 2020a). While Division III schools are relatively small, each school averages 19 different sport offerings within their respective athletic departments (NCAA, n.d.a). The Division III athletics model also provides college athletes with shorter practice sessions (in-season and out-of-season), fewer out-of-season games/matches, and more regional competitions than their NCAA Division I counterparts (NCAA, n.d.b.).

Additionally, the Division III athletics model differs from that of other NCAA divisions with their scholarship rules. While NCAA Division III athletes may receive scholarships based on academic merit (80% of students receive some type of grant/scholarship; NCAA, 2020a), institutions are not allowed to award monetary scholarships for athletic ability. In comparison, Division I and II institutions can offer college athletes athletic aid (NCAA, n.d.b.). The lack of focus on athletic aid allows Division III athletic departments to align their athletic mission with their school's academic mission, which usually emphasizes fostering a well-rounded college environment for college athletes focused on holistic student development, rather than athletic success (Katz et al., 2015).

The alignment of academic missions allows Division III college athletes to become more active within their campus communities (i.e., participating in clubs, study abroad programs, and engaging in research opportunities with faculty; NCAA, n.d.a). These experiences may lead to heightened overall college experiences, as Paule-Koba and Farr (2013) found all former Division III college athletes surveyed rated their athletic, academic, and college experiences positively. Burgin (2011) also found that Division III college athletes hold high levels of academic achievement and motivation. These heightened student identities may be due to lower required commitments to athletic endeavors (e.g., less practice time and shorter season length), and increased emphasis on the holistic student experience (Sturm et al., 2011). However, these heightened academic experiences may lead to a decreased interest in entering the coaching ranks. For example, Swim et al. (2021) found Division III female college athletes held little desire to attain a college coaching career. While the focus on academic success is evident in past studies at the Division III level, there currently lies a lack of knowledge on the athletic experiences of Division III college athletes. Yet, these experiences still are instrumental to better understand the holistic student experience that defines Division III.

Head coaches are an important group in the college athlete experience at the Division III level (Bullard, 2021). Head coaches in Division III typically rely heavily on themselves and their own expertise in running their programs due to the lack of funding for assistant coaches (Thys, 2015). This especially is true for women in Division III sport teams, who have significantly fewer women assistant coaches. In 2020 at the Division III level, there were 5,764 women assistant coaches, compared to more than 13,164 male assistants (NCAA, 2020b). However, most assistant coaching positions are under-funded, leaving the head coach to serve as the college athletes' main contact in the athletic setting and is vital to the overall experience of the college athlete. While all these reasons

highlight the importance to better understand Division III sport, little research is conducted on this population, especially regarding the relationship that exists between coach/athlete.

### **Coach/Athlete Mentoring Relationships**

The centerpiece of a positive athlete experience lies in holding a positive coach/athlete relationship, as it can lead to better communication and interpersonal constructs (Jowett, 2017). While not all coaches are mentors, coaches significantly can influence athletes' experiences. For example, coaches have a significant presence through all stages of a college athlete's college experience, including recruitment (Czekanski & Barnhill, 2015), playing time (Wang et al., 2004), retention (Weiss & Robinson, 2013), and post-career support (Harry & Weight, 2021). In these multiple stages, coaches are in a position to build strong relationships with their college athletes, including providing mentorship. Mentorship long has been present in coaching (Bloom et al., 1998). Most people who become coaches experienced positive mentorship during their playing career, increasing their level of expertise in their sport field. In turn, they mentor their athletes as they once were mentored (Bloom et al., 1998). When coaches engage in mentoring relationships with their athletes, the athletes report positive sport experiences (Lough, 2001; Misasi et al., 2016).

While mentorship relationships are vital for both genders, distinct differences emerge as to how different genders may experience these relationships (Allen & Eby, 2004). In 1990, Ragins and MacFarlin argued females and males required different levels of support to create positive mentoring experiences, and therefore, the gender of mentor and protégé influenced the experience of mentoring relationships. The effectiveness of the coach/athlete relationship also may be mediated by the gender of the head coach (Rima et al., 2019). As male coaches emphasize on-field aspects, female coaches highlight the importance of both on-and-off field components while focusing on the athletes' holistic experience. For female college athletes, it has been shown that same-gender mentoring leads to positive experiences (Murray et al., 2018). However, the literature suggests that female college athletes at the college level prefer male head coaches (Caron et al., 2015; Greenwalt, 2012; Kalin & Waldron, 2015). Regardless of the gender of the head coach, for female athletes, participating in mentoring relationships creates enhanced experiences, leading to positive career attainment (Bower et al., 2006).

Given the high number of men in leadership positions in sport, women face an uphill battle connecting with potential female mentors, leaving male mentors as the only option to help women advance their careers (Hancock et al., 2018). While cross-gender mentoring relationships do exist and can be beneficial, they occur less frequently than same-gender mentorship relationships (Bruening et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Avery et al. (2008) indicated cross-gender mentoring relationships potentially may create impediments to career development and less positive attributes due to the lack of career-related mentoring in the relationship (career functions). Looking at this from the coaching perspective, Murray et al. (2018) suggests that cross-gender coaches can be successful, but they need to be cognizant of their relationships, tailoring their coaching style to best fit the dynamic make-up of their team and athletes, not just their long-standing leadership style. To best encompass the mentorship experience for female college athletes (protégés), this study relies on mentor role theory, which has been used to better understand mentoring relationships across a multitude of roles in the sport setting.

### **Mentor Role Theory (MRT)**

In 1985, Kram introduced MRT to analyze the mentor/protégé relationship and its implications for career advancement and job satisfaction for protégés. Through investigating mentoring through MRT, researchers gain a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of mentors and protégés, based on the outcomes of the relationship. The two key constructs associated with MRT also are described

as the mentoring characteristics that guide the MRT framework – career functions and psychosocial functions – and are used to describe the actions mentors perform to assist their protégés (Bower, 2011). These functions help sustain the relationship between mentor and protégé, which impact the lived experiences of both individuals (Johnson et al., 1999). To better understand how mentor/protégé relationships form and sustain in sport, researchers have used the MRT functions to investigate experiences and characteristics of mentoring relationships between protégés and mentors (Bower; 2008, 2011; Bower & Hums, 2014; Bower et al., 2006; Park et al., 2017; White et al., 2017). The career functions focus on building professional attributes to assist protégés in their career path and future advancement. In total, five separate functions fall under the career function, including coaching, sponsorship, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging assignments (Kram, 1985). In the context of this study, career functions will be focused on careers in the sport setting, as the head coaches (mentors) hold expertise in the field of sport based on their current position. The psychosocial functions address the interpersonal or social aspects of the mentor/protégé relationship and are broken down into four categories: acceptance and confirmation, counseling, role-modeling, and friendship (Kram, 1985). Mentoring relationships occur when both career and psychosocial functions are present in the coach/athlete relationship (Bower, 2011; Bower & Hums, 2014; White et al., 2017). See Table 1 for a full outline of functions and examples.

**Table 1**  
*Mentor Role Theory – Career and psychosocial functions*

MRT Functions		Definition	Example
Career Functions	Coaching	mentor provides knowledge, expertise, and necessary feedback while introducing new skills to advance performance	a coach who teaches a player a new technique for a sport-specific skill exhibits the coaching function
	Sponsorship	mentor highlights potential strengths and build the protégés’ reputation	a coach provides a distinct designation for a player such as captain
	Exposure & Visibility	mentor advances the protégé’s professional network	a coach may help an athlete who wants to work in athletic administration attain an internship within the department
	Protection	mentor can shield a protégé from taking on too many responsibilities and understanding when mistakes are made	a coach recognizes that a college athlete is receiving a large number of media requests, and limits the number of requests granted
	Challenging Assignments	mentor promotes leadership advancement and gives the protégé heightened responsibilities	a coach could be demonstrated through a coach giving an athlete a challenging sport-specific game strategy or skill to learn
Psychosocial Functions	Acceptance & Confirmation	mentor connection to protégé through expressed confidence, mutual trust, confirmation, and encouragement	a coach demonstrates acceptance and confirmation when they trust and acknowledge an athlete’s on- and off-field decisions
	Counseling	mentor investigates and helps solve a protégé’s personal issues	a coach assisting athletes with family-related matters such as dealing with parents or siblings
	Role-Modeling	mentor provides protégés with observable positive behaviors, attitudes, and values of performing tasks	a coach who praises athletes for good performance rather than berating them when they struggle offers a positive image
	Friendship	mentor engages in the social interaction of sharing personal experiences	a coach creates a relationship between the player and themselves, which moves outside of sport after the player no longer is on the team due to graduation or end of eligibility

Identifying career functions in mentoring is vital to the growth of women in sport. Bower (2008) found women who held entry-level positions and experienced coaching and challenging assignments exhibited higher task-related competency. Bower (2011) later found the career functions of exposure and visibility and coaching were essential to the professional growth of female assistant coaches. The participants in the Bower (2011) study also highlighted the importance of having their head coach endorse (exposure and visibility) and push them to future head coaching positions. Hancock and Hums (2016) found similar results for women in high-level athletic administrator positions. Administrators who experienced a mentor relationship emphasizing career functions reported high positive career progression benefits. Bower et al. (2019) confirmed these findings for women athletic administrators, highlighting the exposure and visibility function as vital for women to grow their network and gain recognition in the field.

The psychosocial functions of MRT also may help explain improved experiences for female protégés in same-gender mentorship relationships. Allen and Eby (2004) indicated female coach mentors provide stronger psychosocial mentoring functions than male coaches. Further confirming this, Bower (2009) stated female mentors were more apt to provide psychosocial functions to protégés. The emphasis on psychosocial functions in same-gender mentorship relationships align with the needs of female college athletes who have reported having higher perceptions of sentimental and emotional characteristics with their female head coaches (Bebetsos et al., 2017).

Park et al. (2017) were the first to investigate the mentor-protégé mentorship relationship between Division I female college athletes and their coach using the lens of MRT. The Park et al. (2017) findings contradicted past research on MRT, as no differences emerged between cross-gender and same-gender mentorship. Additionally, only psychosocial functions were vital in positive and successful mentoring relationships. However, the small homogeneous sample size ( $n = 7$ ; participants all attending one school) does significantly limit the generalizability of their findings. Hence, as suggested by Park et al. (2017), there is a need to widen the investigation to a new sample population and to incorporate Division II and III institutions. Therefore, the present study differed from Park et al. by examining Division III female college athletes from multiple schools, participating in various sports, and in different years in school. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the coach/athlete relationship of Division III female college athletes utilizing the MRT framework. This study addresses the unique and understudied population of Division III female college athletes and their mentoring experiences. The following three research questions guided the study:

**RQ 1:** What mentoring characteristics of female head coaches were most frequently identified by Division III female college athletes?

**RQ 2:** What mentoring characteristics of male head coaches were most frequently identified by Division III female college athletes?

**RQ3:** What mentoring characteristics do Division III female college athletes perceive to be different between female and male head coaches?

## Method

In a recent publication, Huml et al. (2020) reported using one data set for multiple publications, helping foster transparency and consistency across the sport management field. Thus, following this direction, the sample population utilized for this study emanated from a larger project with a focus on the experiences of Division III female college athletes. The larger project was broken into two distinct studies. Study one examined the perceived coaching self-efficacy of NCAA Division III female college athletes, and study two (the current study) examined the experiences and perceptions of Division III female college athletes with their male and female head coaches, respectively (male college athletes were not included in this study as the majority of college athlete males participate on teams with male coaches, thus providing limited opportunity for cross-gender mentoring examination).

## Procedures

First, the researchers received university Human Subjects approval. The survey was focused on two parts: (a) demographic information, and (b) open-ended responses. The demographic information included age, race, class in school, and sport played. Next, the survey included open-ended questions. A panel of experts examined the survey to make sure the instrument displayed content validity and avoided biased items and terms. The open-ended question survey included three questions, focusing on (a) experiences with female head coaches (e.g., Describe your experiences with female sport head coaches), (b) experiences with male head coaches (e.g., Describe your experiences with male sport head coaches), and (c) perceptions of differences in gender of head coach (e.g., Do you feel the relationship with the head coach is different when dealing with a male or female head coach?). The open-ended qualitative responses provided information about the mentoring characteristics of both male and female head coaches most frequently identified by the female college athletes without explicitly identifying mentoring in the question. By not specifically asking about the mentoring experiences of the participants, the participants were not led to think about mentoring specifically. Instead, their responses were unbiased, unique, and provided an in-depth perspective of their experiences with their coaches. This allowed the career and psychosocial mentoring functions to emerge naturally. The respondents' comments ranged from one-word answers to two paragraph responses.

## Participants

An email was sent to 683 Division III college coaches from 71 New England schools asking them to forward a survey to their female college athletes. Within the first two weeks, 50 coaches agreed to send the survey to their college athletes. A reminder email was sent to all non-respondents, which yielded an additional 10 coaches. The survey was open for four weeks. In total, 60 Division III college coaches from 34 schools (some had multiple coaches) agreed to send the survey to their female college athletes. Approximately 1,110 Division III female college athletes received the survey.

Of those 1,110 female college athletes who received a survey, 123 responded ( $n = 123$ ). The response rate was 11%. While this response rate is lower than desired, similar studies in the sport management field have found low response rates with online surveys (Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Sattler, 2018; Swim et al., 2021). Past studies also have argued the reliance on a middle person to distribute surveys may contribute to lower response rates (Lopez & Levy, 2013; Swim et al., 2021). Past studies also have suggested the response rate is not a solid indicator of data quality, as there may not be a direct correlation between response rate and reliability and representativeness (Lambert & Miller, 2014; Morton et al., 2012). Furthermore, the participants' demographics closely aligned to that of the overall Division III female college athlete population, as our participants reported being 88% Caucasian, and the NCAA reported 79% Caucasian (NCAA, 2020b). Therefore, given these considerations, the response rate was deemed sufficient.

On average, the majority of participants in this study were (a) freshmen (34.9%), (b) age 19 (28.4%), (c) Caucasian (88%), (d) played softball (27.6%), (e) had a female head coach (71.5%), and (f) had a male athletic director (56.0%). Additionally, a large percentage (63%) of participants identified being in either their first or second year of college. While there is an argument that the data could be skewed toward experiences with their current college coaches or previous high school coaches, this does not invalidate the sample since the purpose of the study is to examine the coach/athlete relationship through the experiences of Division III female college athletes. Thus, it was at the discretion of the participant to identify their experiences as current Division III college athletes, including any previous coach/athlete relationships they may have formed. Furthermore, no time-specific verbiage was utilized in the open-ended questions, allowing the participants to identify



their own experiences. Therefore, this sample was deemed appropriate. Table 2 provides additional details on the demographics of the female college athletes.

**Table 2**  
*Demographics*

Classification	Freshman	43	34.95
	Sophomore	35	28.45
	Junior	16	13.00
	Senior	27	21.95
	Graduate Student	2	1.62
Age	18	32	26.01
	19	35	28.45
	20	21	17.07
	21	14	11.38
	23	1	.81
Race	Caucasian	108	87.8
	Hispanic or Latino	5	4.06
	Asian/Pacific Islander	1	.81
	Other	4	3.25
	More than one race	5	4.06
Sport	Softball	34	27.64
	Field Hockey	21	17.07
	Lacrosse	15	12.19
	Soccer	12	9.75
	Volleyball	11	8.94
	Cross Country	11	8.94
	Track & Field	9	7.31
	Basketball	4	3.25
	Tennis	3	2.43
	Ice Hockey	3	2.43
Head Coach Gender	Female	88	71.54
	Male	35	28.45
Athletic Director Gender	Female	54	43.90
	Male	69	56.09

### Data Analyses

The qualitative data were analyzed using Wolcott's (1994) four-step content analytic procedure. First, the data were organized by downloading the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions. Second, the researchers read and reread the participants' qualitative responses. Third, using constant comparative analysis and the MRT framework, each researcher coded the data. In the constant comparative analysis, the researchers utilized open coding to develop inductive codes that categorized the participant's responses as similarities and differences emerged (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Next, the inductive codes were compared with verbiage from the MRT functions to develop deductive

codes. For example, a participant stated the following about their female coach: “Relatable and supportive, know when to push you.” During the first round of inductive coding, this phrase was coded as supportive, relatable, and wants you to get better. Then, during the deductive coding process, the codes were identified as acceptance and confirmation and challenging from MRT.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

Multiple strategies introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data. First, credibility (internal validity) was established with the use of constant comparative analysis where researchers established categories, which eventually evolved into themes based on the theoretical framework. Second, transferability (external validity) was established by using “thick descriptions” of the comments provided by the female college athletes (Erlandson et al., 1993). Sample comments are found in the results section of the paper. Third, dependability (reliability) was supported by researcher debriefing. The researchers examined the data separately and met to discuss themes and/or categories. Following multiple meetings, the researchers agreed upon the themes and/or categories. Finally, confirmability (objectivity) was based on the researchers’ ability to limit bias and premature conclusions about the themes and/or categories by using constant comparative analysis, reading and rereading the data, and researcher debriefing.

**Results**

The researchers identified several key themes from the participants’ open-ended responses and MRT. Aligning both with MRT and the study’s research questions, female college athletes frequently identified both psychosocial and career function experiences with both female and male head coaches. Table 3 provides an overview of the results found in conjunction with research questions 1 and 2.

**Table 3**  
*Themes and frequencies for research question 1 and 2*

Research Questions	Themes	
	Psychosocial Functions	Career Functions
#1: What mentoring characteristics of female head coaches are most frequently identified by Division III female college athletes?	Acceptance and confirmation (n = 49)	Coaching (n = 16)
	Role modeling (n = 12)	Challenging assignments (n = 15)
#2: What mentoring characteristics of male head coaches are most frequently identified by Division III female college athletes?	Acceptance and confirmation (n = 32)	Challenging assignments (n = 16)
	Counseling (n = 18)	

**Mentoring Characteristics of Female Head Coaches**

To address the first research question, a majority (78%, n = 88) of the interview responses from the female college athletes positively described the mentoring characteristics of their female head coaches. Contrastingly, 10% (n = 11) of the female college athletes’ responses negatively described

mentoring characteristics, and 12% ( $n = 13$ ) were deemed neither positive nor negative. With an overwhelming majority of the participants' responses being described as positive, the MRT functions discussed in this section will focus on those positive responses. Of the 112 responses received for describing experiences with a female head coach, more than half (63%) of the respondents highlighted either a career or psychosocial MRT function. Notably, psychosocial mentoring functions were described more frequently by respondents than career functions, 56% to 31% respectively.

### *Psychosocial Functions of Female Head Coaches*

Of the 112 responses, each of the four psychosocial mentoring functions was identified at least once. The most frequently identified psychosocial functions were (a) acceptance and confirmation and (b) role modeling.

**Acceptance and Confirmation.** Multiple respondents ( $n = 54$ ) described their female head coaches using the terms “understood,” “acceptance,” and “relatable.” The female college athletes made comments such as, “they understand better with physical and mental issues” or “I have had amazing female head coaches. I feel that they are more understanding with school, work, etc.” Other respondents noted their female coaches had been encouraging and supportive. One respondent stated: “My head coach taught me how to be strong and make good decisions based on the situation. She was a strong advocate for female athletes and took good care of my team.” Respondents also noted how their female head coaches showed a personal interest in and respected the individual abilities of their players. As one respondent noted: “All of the female head coaches who have taken a personal interest in my sports career were always doing what they thought was best for me as I was not a stand out athlete.”

**Role Modeling.** Similarly, many of the participants highlighted the role-modeling psychosocial function in their responses about female head coaches ( $n = 25$ ). Several respondents used the term “role model” in their comments describing their female head coaches. For example, one respondent stated: “All my female coaches have been not only a support, encouragement, and role model during season but outside of season, too, including academics.” Another respondent described her experience with female head coaches as role models and more, describing a strong sense of connection with her female head coaches. Her coach not only was a role model, but she also developed a connection and bond with her female coaches. She stated:

I have grown extremely close with all of my female head coaches and have created a strong bond on and off the field. They are all women I can look up to at any time and they are much easier to connect with as they understand communication between young women.

In addition, many respondents discussed a level of empowerment they received from their female head coaches. One respondent stated, “truly amazing, incredible role models, empowered self-assured women who lead without harshness or cruelty.” Another female college athlete described her experience with female head coaches, stating “supportive, strong female presence that emphasizes women's strength, individuality, and abilities.” These comments describe how the female college athletes recognized the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the female head coaches, seeing themselves in them.

### *Career Functions of Female Head Coaches*

In addition to psychosocial functions being present in the female college athletes' comments, the respondents also used verbiage that themed into the five career functions of MRT. Even still, the females expressed career functions at a much lower rate in comparison to the psychosocial functions. The two most frequently identified career functions were (a) coaching and (b) challenging assignments.

**Coaching.** Coaching was found most frequently with 16 of the 35 responses (46%) relating to this function. The female college athletes acknowledged that their female head coaches were knowledgeable, not only about working with female athletes generally, but also about their sport. One respondent shared, “in comparison to the number of male coaches I've had, female coaches have been very few. With that said, I have learned A LOT more from my female coaches and have felt a greater connection to them.” Additionally, the respondents felt the female head coaches had the relevant skills to be effective guides. For example, one respondent stated:

Have had mostly hard-ass female head coaches. Know the game really well because they have played it. Know how to encourage and spark a fire in players. Can still be a hard-ass on the field but develops a nice relationship with players off the field.

Respondents also noted that their female head coaches provided effective feedback. One female college athlete said, “The female coaches I have had included a lot of constructive criticism, but they have always brought me up rather than down.”

**Challenging Assignments.** The female college athletes provided comments suggesting their female head coaches provided challenging assignments ( $n = 19$ ). In alignment with challenging assignments, the female college athletes noted how their female head coaches knew how to push them. One respondent said, “I loved my female coach. Always understanding and gets where I come from and always pushes me.” Another female college athlete described how her female head coach pushed her into leadership development and prepared her for greater responsibilities. She stated: “My head coach taught me how to be strong and make good decisions based on the situation. She was a strong advocate for female athletes and took good care of my team.”

### **Mentoring Characteristics of Male Head Coaches**

In addressing the second research question, participants provided a total of 115 responses to the question regarding experiences with male head coaches. Of their responses, the female college athletes indicated having positive experiences with male head coaches only 39% ( $n = 46$ ) of the time, while 36% ( $n = 41$ ) were coded as negative experiences, and 24% ( $n = 28$ ) of the responses were deemed neither positive nor negative. Therefore, when coding MRT functions for RQ2, both negative and positive experiences were represented. More than half of the responses demonstrated at least one MRT function. Specifically, career functions were described 39% and psychosocial functions were described 38%.

### ***Psychosocial Functions of Male Head Coaches***

Of the 115 responses, each of the four psychosocial mentoring functions was identified at least once and in total, 44 responses were linked to one of the four psychosocial functions. The most frequently identified psychosocial functions were (a) acceptance and confirmation and (b) counseling.

**Acceptance and Confirmation.** The female college athletes' responses were coded as experiencing acceptance and confirmation ( $n = 35$ ) by using the word ‘understanding.’ For example, participants stated, “I feel as though they are tough but at the same time are very understanding” and the “best coach I have had to this day, fun, understanding, and very determined.” The female college athletes also highlighted the ability of the male head coaches to express ‘respect’ toward them as individuals. This was demonstrated by participants who stated, “I have had many very successful male coaches that I got along with and trust and respected” and “I enjoy having someone treat us like athletes and not based on my gender.”

Although negative in nature, responses also were coded as acceptance and confirmation when respondents highlighted male head coaches' lack of ability to ‘connect.’ Multiple responses were coded as lack of connection from female college athletes with their male head coaches. For example,

participants stated, “harder to connect with on a personal level, which can ultimately affect you as an athlete” and “In my experience, male coaches aren’t able to connect with their female players and don’t know how to get across to them effectively.” The respondents also highlighted the lack of understanding from the male head coaches, as one respondent stated: “Most of them were in their heads. Always judging us. Whatever we do wasn’t good enough.” The female college athletes also described negative experiences with relatability to their male head coaches, as one participant stated: “I do find that they do not have the same experience that female athletes have and, therefore, cannot relate to their players in certain situations.”

**Counseling.** In addition, responses from the female college athlete also were coded in the counseling function ( $n = 20$ ). However, most of the counseling function were coded with negative experiences, as participants highlighted male head coaches’ inability to properly communicate and help solve problems. For example, one participant stated: “I think male coaches tend to yell more and disregard emotions.” Another female college athlete described this as: “Most of the time, male coaches don’t understand the way that their female players perceive and handle situations.” The participants also identified negative experiences with coaches handling athlete image as well. For example:

My experience with male sport head coaches has been extremely negative. The experiences I have had with male coaches is that they constantly were demeaning me and my athletic ability. Specifically, I was discriminated against by male coaches because of my size and stature. Another female college athlete stated: “My college coach is a male. He told me that I needed to lose weight in order to be healthier. This was very difficult for me to hear because I have struggled with eating disorders.” These comments demonstrate how the MRT function of counseling potentially could lead to negative experiences for female college athlete.

### *Career Functions of Male Head Coaches*

In addition to the psychosocial functions the female college athletes identified, they also provided comments coded as career functions. Each of the five career functions of MRT was coded at least once, however, only challenging assignments emerged as a theme.

**Challenging Assignment.** Respondents provided comments aligned with the career function of challenging assignments ( $n = 17$ ). Similar to findings from RQ1, the female college athletes discussed the ability of their coach to push them to be successful. This was illustrated by comments such as, “they tend to push the players more to do better” and “I liked my male coaches a lot. They always push me to be the best I can.” Another female college athlete stated her male coaches were “tougher, say it how it is, make you work harder” and one described male coaches as being “supportive and challeng[ing] their athletes.”

### **Difference of Experiences**

To address the final research question, the survey asked female college athletes to discuss their perceived differences between female and male head coaches. In total, 117 responses to this question were collected, with 62% of respondents indicating a difference in experiences with the gender of head coach, while only 38% indicated no difference.

### *No Differences*

Those who noted no difference in experiences based on the gender of head coaches focused on the ability of the coach, not their gender ( $n = 45$ ). For example, female college athletes stated, “A male coach can have social qualities females tend to express and vice versa. Gender shouldn’t define the personality of a coach” and “I don’t think there is very much difference between genders. All

coaches vary in coaching styles and techniques and it's the job of the player to adjust to the variances." Additionally, the participants indicated as long as the coach wanted to win, gender was non-significant. For example:

In my opinion, though I don't really care as long as my coach takes practices seriously and knows when to be stern and serious or even if they need to yell, because at the end of the day, I want to win games so do whatever it is you need to do to make me better.

Overall, female college athletes overwhelmingly identified career function traits when describing their lack of perceived differences with head coaches of different genders.

### *Differences*

Contrastingly, participants consistently highlighted psychosocial functions as to why differences emerged from experiences with female and male head coaches ( $n = 72$ ). The respondents found female head coaches more frequently exhibited psychosocial functions than males. For example:

I feel it is easier to have a relationship with a female coach, mainly because we are both females and have similar "problems" that I could talk about and be open with. I feel the connection is easier to make, but I have also had a good relationship with male coaches. More with females than males.

Furthermore, another female college athlete stated: "I feel like female head coaches are more approachable with personal and athletic problems than male coaches. Have no problem going to my female head coach's office but feel much more anxiety when it's a male coach."

They also discussed the ability of female head coaches to be powerful figures. One participant stated:

In my many years of playing, male coaches have always been less understanding. Female coaches are more nurturing and can relate to the struggles that us female athletes face every day. Female coaches have always helped us fight these battles, whether it be discrimination on the bus or with male sports teams. Female coaches tend to fight for us, but male coaches tend to act like these problems don't exist. Female coaches coaching a female sport offer a perspective into the athlete's life that male coaches often miss.

The differences noted for female college athletes in regard to experiences with the gender of the head coach partially can be explained through MRT functions. Specifically, psychosocial functions foster a more inclusive mentoring environment for female college athletes.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the mentoring experiences of Division III female college athletes with their male and female head coaches by utilizing the MRT framework. Expanding on Park et al.'s (2017) work with Division I athletes, MRT was utilized to identify mentoring characteristics of both male and female head coaches as identified by the Division III female college athlete participants. The results suggested several themes. In total, four main findings emerged from the results: (a) participants expressed differences in their mentoring experiences with male and female head coaches, (b) participants identified psychosocial mentoring functions most frequently, regardless of the gender of the head coach, (c) participants strongly identified with the acceptance and confirmation function regardless of gender, and (d) participants identified career functions less frequently regardless of the gender of the head coach.

First, participants reported primarily positive mentoring experiences with their female head coaches, but both negative and positive mentoring experiences with their male head coaches. Aligned with past studies, Division III female college athletes described more positive experiences with same-gender mentorship (Avery et al., 2008; Lough, 2001; Masssengale & Lough, 2010). However, this finding contradicts the more recent work of Park et al. (2017) whose results indicated both male and

female mentors were evaluated equally. While some past studies have indicated women working in athletic administration report positive overall experiences with both male and female mentoring relationships (Bower, 2011; Bower et al., 2019), this study suggests the benefits of having female coaching mentors for female college athletes far outweighs that of a male coaching mentor in the Division III sport setting. The female college athletes in the present study also indicated feeling less connection with male head coaches, a possible result of negative experiences with those coaches (Allen & Eby, 2004; Rima et al., 2019). This lack of connection was extremely evident in the differences between head coaches highlighted by participants. The participants reported that female coaches had a greater commitment to understanding the athlete personally, not just on the playing field. This may highlight the unique experiences of Division III female college athletes, who seek support in not only athletics but other on-campus engagements as well.

Another potential reason for this difference is female coaches usually are former college athletes themselves, which allows them to further connect with the experiences of their current female college athletes (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Bloom et al., 1998). While male coaches also may represent the former college athlete population, their athletic experiences may be mitigated based on the differences in sport participation between female and male college athletes (Tudor & Ridpath, 2019). This was explained well by one participant in describing her female coach in this way: “The coach that recruited me as a player was young and a Division I pitcher and first baseman. This allowed her to understand the position we were in because she had been there not long ago.” Thus, the sponsorship of young female coaches to the coaching profession, especially head coaching roles, may be extremely beneficial for the female college athletes at Division III universities.

Secondly, the female college athletes in this study highlighted psychosocial functions more frequently than career functions, or rather, female college athletes expressed a need for interpersonal connection with coaches more than a need for on-field guidance and support. This contradicts most past mentorship literature on MRT principles, as career functions usually are emphasized more than the psychosocial functions of mentorship (Bower, 2008; 2011). However, the present study aligns with the findings from Park et al. (2017) who also found female college athletes placed a higher emphasis on psychosocial characteristics in their mentoring relationships, which could demonstrate a potential shift in needs for female college athletes.

The female college athlete’s desire for a strong inter-personal connection aligns with the mission of Division III athletics. Given that athletics may not be the sole priority for Division III college athletes, it is understandable that the interpersonal connection with their head coach holds more importance to them (Katz et al., 2015). When comparing experiences between gender of head coaches, Allen and Eby (2004) found female head coaches provided more positive interpersonal relationships for female athletes (psychosocial functions). These findings also highlight how female college athletes described negative psychosocial functions (lack of inter-personal relationships) with male head coaches. The differentiating experiences the female college athletes describe between male and female coaches represents a concerning finding in regard to mentorship, as it demonstrates a lack of connection in the cross-gender mentorship between male head coaches and female college athletes. As Reznia and Gurney (2014) found, coach behaviors impact college athletes’ commitment to their respective coaches. Hence, Division III male head coaches may need to engage in stronger psychosocial functions moving forward to improve the overall experience of their female college athletes.

Third, participants reported strong identification with the psychosocial function of acceptance and confirmation, which appeared substantially more frequently in participant responses than other functions. This contradicts work from both Park et al. (2017) and Bower and Hums (2014) who found counseling to be the most identified/important psychosocial function for the women participants in their studies. This contradictory finding helps further the understanding of the needs for female college athletes and their relationships with coaches. For example, in the Division III sport structure, female college athletes may hold multiple competing interests (academics, clubs, internships, etc.),

which coaches must be cognizant of during their interactions and support. As highlighted, this study differs from past literature as it focuses specifically on female college athletes, and not women in sport leadership roles (Bower & Hums, 2014). Thus, these findings suggest Division III female college athletes need to experience more acceptance and confirmation from their coaches (male and female) during their college careers.

Fourth, participants identified career functions less frequently when describing experiences with their male head coaches. This could prove detrimental to the development of female college athletes, as Bower (2008) found female employees who experienced career functions expressed higher task-related competency. Similarly, Ragins and Cotton (1999) found career functions are important because male mentors may provide greater career outcomes for female protégés due to their power within organizations. However, this study's results suggest female college athletes may not be receiving or value the career function support from male head coaches. One potential reason for the lack of identification from participants of the career function could be the assumption that college athletes will choose careers in their academic major, rather than the sport setting (Park et al., 2017). For example, a coach's expertise lies in their knowledge of the sport they coach, therefore the mentoring career functions most likely expressed are associated with the respected sport or sport industry. As stated prior, most Division III college athletes will not enter or have a desire to enter sport leadership positions (Swim et al., 2021), as they hold more engagement with academics. This may lead to a lack of identification with career functions (career in sport) from female college athletes, potentially leading to the lack of women in sport leadership roles, as they may over-look careers in sport and their coaches engaging in these mentoring functions.

### **Practical Implications**

This study indicates Division III female college athletes could benefit from a balanced mentoring approach by their head coaches. While the head coach position may only be one of multiple mentors on a college campus for college athletes, they still represent an important role in the college athlete experience. First and foremost, Division III female college athletes need to experience intentional mentoring relationships that focus on collaborative and understanding relationships (psychosocial functions) with their head coaches. These coaches also need to ensure they engage their athletes across a wide range of experiences (athletic, academic, social, etc.), as Division III female college athletes are looking to engage in all these opportunities. Thus, coaches need to formulate a mentorship relationship focused on balance and commitment to the holistic college student experience.

Furthermore, this research indicated female college athletes experience more positive outcomes with same-gender mentoring relationships. Therefore, athletic directors at the Division III level should actively work to recruit, hire, and support young female head coaches for their women's teams, as well as actively seek to diversify their assistant coaches and support staff. The more diversification in the hiring process among athletic departments, the more likely female college athletes will be able to gain potential mentorship relationships. At the current moment, the Division III level represents the most gender diversity in its leadership from member schools in the NCAA, however, with such small athletic departments, there could be less females to connect with. Therefore, creating conference mentorship programs for female college athletes may enhance experiences and diversify networks, potentially even creating stronger opportunities for female athletes to enter the coaching or athletic administration field.

This study also suggests male head coaches need to be more active in creating and exhibiting positive mentoring functions. Male head coaches at the Division III level may need to become more cognizant of their mentorship and leadership style toward their female college athletes. Most female athletes with male head coaches in this study expressed negative experiences, a troublesome finding to the development of the next generation of female sport leaders and head coaches. Thus, it is



imperative for athletic administrators to monitor the programs and provide support and coaching to male coaches to ensure female college athletes have a positive experience with their male coach.

Lastly, the results from this study suggest Division III female athletes possess a strong desire and passion to grow both athletically and personally through a mentorship relationship with their head coach. This represents a potential difference from other NCAA Divisions, therefore both male and female head coaches need to be more intentional in how they engage within their mentoring relationships. In doing so, coaches positively may impact female college athlete experiences, as this study shed light on their need for support. A greater commitment to mentoring relationships from coaches may allow for their female college athletes to build personal and professional connections with them. At the Division III level, coaches must be active in their mentorship and recognize this mentoring relationship may not specifically revolve around sport. Acknowledging this may create a more inclusive environment for all female college athletes at the Division III level.

### **Future Research**

The findings of this study present several future research opportunities. First, as this study focused on the protégé experiences, examining the mentor perspective also might shed light on mentoring relationships between players and coaches. Secondly, the mentoring experiences of male college athletes with their respective head coaches at the Division III level are warranted. Next, this study specifically focused on NCAA Division III female college athletes, therefore an investigation of Division I and II female college athletes is warranted. Comparing the experiences found in this study to the other two NCAA divisions may lead to a better understanding of the current experiences of all-female college athletes and mentoring relationships. Lastly, a further investigation into the negative experiences of female college athletes with male coaches may provide further insights.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations to this study. First, the researchers already addressed the low return rate and provided justification and support of why the number was low, yet acceptable. An increase in the number of participants may provide additional insights and representation. Second, the study was limited to Division III female college athletes within one region of the country. Finally, these results were part of a larger study on female college athlete experiences, which may have influenced participant bias in responses. Since no mention of the word “mentorship” was included at all during the study, the researchers feel any response bias present in this study was low.

### **Conclusion**

Coaches play an important role in the personal and athletic development of their athletes. They are positioned well to be mentors to the young people with whom they work. Some coaches may embrace this role while others may not. What this study shows, however, is that those who decide to provide mentorship must understand what behaviors they model are most beneficial, keeping in mind that not all protégés will interpret behaviors the same. The gender of both the coach and the athlete can play a role in the ultimate success of the mentoring relationship, and coaches need to be aware of these differences so they can best help their athletes develop into productive citizens once their sporting careers conclude.

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