Realizing Identity and Overcoming Barriers: Factors Influencing Female Japanese Paralympians to Become Coaches

Maki Itoh¹, Mary A. Hums², Akiko Arai³ and Etsuko Ogasawara⁴

¹Faculty of Health and Sports Science, Juntendo University, 1-1 Hiragakuen, Inzai-shi, Chiba, 270-1695, Japan, m-ito@juntendo.ac.jp
²Department of Health & Sport Sciences, University of Louisville, SAC East 104Q Health & Sport Science Dept. University of Louisville, KY 40292 USA
³School of Management, Department of Management, Tokyo University of Science, 1-11-2 Fujimi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, 102-0071, Japan
⁴Graduate School of Health and Sports Science, Juntendo University, 1-1 Hiragakuen, Inzai-shi, Chiba, 270-1695, Japan

[Received October 12, 2016; Accepted February 6, 2018; Published online March 2, 2018]

The purpose of this qualitative study was to (a) determine structural barriers that must be overcome to cultivate female leaders and coaches and (b) study the development of a support system for female leaders and coaches. This study relied on in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting data. Formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven former or currently active female Paralympians, including some who were current coaches. After analyzing the participants’ responses, five distinct themes emerged: (a) social identity, (b) challenges of “double minority status” as women and persons with a disability, (c) underrepresentation of women as Paralympic coaches, (d) athletes wanting to be coaches indicating they needed formal training, and (e) current coaches feeling overwhelmed by task requirements not related directly to working with athletes. The first of these relate to realizing identity and the other four to overcoming barriers. The results offer insight into the career challenges and career perceptions of coaches and also former or currently active female Paralympians. The results provide researchers with insight into the status of careers of women in a segment of the sport industry, the Paralympic Movement, which has not yet been thoroughly explored.

Keywords: coaching career, female coaches, female Paralympians, role theory, career process

1. Introduction

Tokyo will be the proud host city of 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, and from the viewpoint of supporting female athletes, strategies are needed to cultivate women as leaders in sports. The Sport Basic Plan, a law defining sport policy in Japan, outlines suggestions for achieving this. Despite the fact that Japan produces many talented female athletes, few of them, including former Paralympians, become top-level coaches after retiring from competition (JOC, 2016). Few women hold leadership positions in sports organizations in Japan, however, more than 50% of the Japanese national team representatives who participated in the London Olympic Games were women. It is obvious that the sports system of Japan has not been successful in producing a mechanism whereby talented female athletes can develop coaching careers. According to recent reports, the percentage of female head coaches was only 5.5% and female assistant coaches 20.0% in all Japanese Olympic teams at the Rio Olympic Games (JOC, 2016), however, 40% of the female Olympians who took part in the London Olympics were actually very interested in pursuing a coaching career (Juntendo University, 2013). These data demonstrate that barriers still exist that prevent women from holding leadership positions in major sports organizations in Japan.
1.1. Career barriers

A number of authors suggest that females are vastly under-represented in the upper echelons of sport organizations (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Hums, Moorman, & Nakazawa, 1998; Itoh, Hums, Bower, & Moorman, 2013). Researchers indicate that women continue to be underrepresented in leadership and coaching positions in different segments of the sport industry including professional sport (Itoh & Hums, 2016) and international sport (Itoh, et al., 2013). Several barriers prevent women from getting into a coaching career, including work-family conflict and the sense of alienation that arises from the lack of support from their organization (LaVoi, 2013). Previous studies have identified barriers to women’s career development in the sport industry including (a) the old boys’ network (Bower & Hums, 2009), (b) homologous reproduction (Aicher & Sagas, 2009), (c) work-life balance issues (Bruening & Dixon, 2007) and (d) gender role stereotypes and perceptions of gendered opportunities (Burton et al., 2011). Marks and MacDermid (1996) suggested it is especially difficult for women who are required to hold numerous social roles (coach, mother, wife, etc) at the same time to continue coaching careers where they face irregular working hours (Bruening & Dixon, 2007). This study focused on women working in the Paralympic Movement, as the Paralympic Games are a rapidly growing, and under-researched, segment of the sport industry. Few formal studies of careers of women working in leadership positions, including coaching, in Paralympic sport have been undertaken (Itoh et al., 2016). For purposes of this study, a coach was defined as an individual who directly worked training and developing athletes competing in the Paralympic Games.

1.2. Theoretical background

According to Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994), personal and environmental factors can influence career decisions. This could also be the case for Paralympians seeking employment in the Movement as leaders or coaches. For Paralympians, factors such as the work environment can influence their self-efficacy and outcome expectancies related to their careers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to (a) determine structural barriers that must be overcome to cultivate female leaders and coaches and (b) study the development of a support system for female leaders and coaches.

The applicability of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT: Lent et al., 1994) to athletes’ planning was, to our knowledge, first suggested by Demulier, Scanff and Stephan’s study (2013) which identified the determinants of post-athletic career planning based on the SCCT. SCCT explains that personal inputs and environmental inputs influence three central social cognitive variables: (a) self-efficacy, (b) outcome expectations, and (c) personal goals. The SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) was used here to ascertain factors Paralympians deemed to be highly important when making career decisions.

2. Method

2.1. Procedures

This phenomenological qualitative study relied on in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This type of interviewing allows researchers to examine meaningful relationships in an exploratory nature, providing a greater understanding of women’s career experiences (Patton, 2002). Formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven former or currently active female Paralympians until saturation of the data was reached. The methodology for this study utilized a modified three-interview series technique (Creswell, 2013). The interviews took place in one designated time period, with breaks between question sets. The questions for this study were utilized in previous studies examining women’s careers in the sport industry including the Paralympic Movement (Itoh et al., 2016) and the career decision-making process of Japanese Olympians (Arai et al., 2015). The three parts of the interview were (a) personal life history including demographics and career experiences, (b) career perceptions of coaches including coaching experience and coaching skills, and (c) career aspirations and career advice for women interested in coaching. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researchers coded the data using the constant comparative method of analysis to generate themes (Ross and Rallis, 2003).

The participants were asked the following ques-
Table 1 Interview questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Please explain your current career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Have you coached in the past? Have you taught in a child classroom etc.?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  When did you begin to be interested in coaching as a career?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Do you think you have been blessed with coaches in your current competitive life. (If you have any coach who impressed you or influenced you, what was their gender? Were they a person with disability or not etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  What skills do you think are necessary for a coach?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Do you have strengths or weaknesses related to coaching skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Earlier in your life and now, when you thought of becoming a coach, did the image of a &quot;coach&quot; change? What kind of image did you have about the job of the coach? How was the same as or different from what you actually experienced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  What kind of career choice did you consider when retiring from competition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Have you had any work you would prefer to do rather than your current job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Currently there are only a few former Paralympian coaches, what do you think about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Was there any support or assistance from your sport organization or sport association when you were making your career choice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 What kind of support do you think should be provided by sport organizations or sport associations in the future when Paralympian choose their career?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Were any persons role models to you in your past competition life and career selection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Do you think you are a role model?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Please give advice to other female Paralympians on their future career choice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Ethical research considerations

Permission to conduct a study using human subjects was obtained through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researchers’ home institution. Ethical issues as they pertain to protecting participants are of paramount concern (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). Following IRB approval, the researchers contacted qualified participants via email to schedule interviews.

Seven interested participants received a letter describing the purposes and procedures of the study. Next, the researchers scheduled interviews with each participant during the months of February and March. Then, before commencing the interview, the researchers reviewed the information describing the purposes and procedures of the study. The researchers proceeded with the interviews after each participant signed an informed consent form. In addition, to maintain confidentiality, the researchers assigned each participant a pseudonym by which she is referred to in the results of this study. The researchers notified participants that identifying information such as organization, country, or race would not be directly linked to their participation. The researchers informed participants about how the data would be handled, stored, and disseminated. Finally, the researchers described measures taken to ensure the secure storage of research related documents such as interview transcripts, field notes, resumes, or job descriptions.

2.3. Pilot study and expert panel

A pilot study was conducted with one former Paralympian. The wording of interview questions was revised from the results of the pilot study. Since this was an emergent design, questions were added/modified at the completion of each interview. The researchers used an expert panel comprised of sport management faculty members and as well as other faculty members with expertise in qualitative research methods and protocol development. The proposed interview questions were distributed to the panel members, and the researchers asked for their feedback regarding the questions. Their suggestions were incorporated to improve the readability and functionality of the interview questions.

2.4. Participants

Seven research participants were selected using criterion sampling. The researchers contacted former and currently active female Paralympians from the list of official Japanese Paralympic sports organization and from the researchers’ connections within Paralympic sport. The researchers identified seven professionals based on the following criterion: they were former Paralympians, currently worked as a Paralympic coach or with a Paralympic organization, or were active Paralympians who wanted to be coaches. The table 2 shows demographic information of seven participants.

2.5. Data analysis

First, the researchers carefully conducted back
Factors Influencing Female Japanese Paralympians to Become Coaches

Table 2 Demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Active or Retired</th>
<th>Competition event</th>
<th>Competition history</th>
<th>Length of coaching</th>
<th>Interested in coaching career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>50's</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Wheelchair Basketball</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>Interested in coaching career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>50's</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Wheelchair Basketball</td>
<td>38 years</td>
<td>Not interested in coaching career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>30's</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Goalball</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Interested in coaching career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>50's</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Track and Field</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>40's</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Ice sledge racing</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Work for Paralympic organization 2 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>40's</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Para-Alpine ski</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Head coach of team Japan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>40's</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>NF Board member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Themes and number of responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Social identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Double minority status as women and persons with a disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Underrepresentation of women as Paralympic coaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4</td>
<td>Athletes wanting to be coaches indicating they needed formal training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 5</td>
<td>Current coaches feeling overwhelmed by task requirements not related directly to working with athletes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Results

Five distinct themes emerged: (a) social identity, (b) challenges of “double minority status” as women and persons with a disability, (c) underrepresentation of women as Paralympic coaches, (d) athletes wanting to be coaches indicating they needed formal training, and (e) current coaches feeling overwhelmed by task requirements not related directly to working with athletes. The first of these relate to realizing identity and the other four to overcoming barriers. These themes are listed in Table 2 and discussed in more detail below.

**Theme 1: Social identity.** Social identity influences the self-concepts of affiliation, attachment, identification, and action to reflect “multiple selves” (Laverie & Arnett, 2000, p. 227). People enhance their social identities via associations and affiliations with organizations (Underwood, Klein, & Burke, 2001). All seven women in this study identified themselves as being part of the Paralympic Movement. This is consistent with the thought that the concept of self considers multiple identities and draws connections between one’s self and one’s role in society (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). One former Paralympian said, “When I retired... I felt that it is my mission to work for a job related to Paralympics.” Another added, “My underlying desire is to
offer support for this through what I’ve learned from my actual experience in the Paralympics and what I’ve engaged in doing so far.”

Most participants felt a high sense of their own identity and responsibility to the Paralympic Movement, and either had a strong desire to contribute to the Paralympic Movement or to different sports organizations from an instructive position. As one participant said, “The ideal is to have an environment in place where we can spend our whole lifetime in a single Paralympic sport. It is quite attractive to be able to engage in a sport of your profession for a lifetime.”

Theme 2: Double minority status as women and persons with a disability. Four of the participants felt the barriers they faced were doubled because having a disability and being a woman made them a double minority. On the other hand, some said that the knowledge they have from having a disability and their readiness to cope with the barriers they encountered was an advantage for them when they coach.

Of course there were times when I felt that being a woman and being disabled were barriers, although in my current job, I think that I am taking advantage of being a woman and being disabled. Until recently, being a woman and being disabled at the same time seemed to limit the choice that I was able to choose from. (Current coach)

Theme 3: Underrepresentation of women as Paralympic coaches. All seven participants indicated that one challenge of being a woman working in the Paralympic Movement was the current underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. One participant said, “I think that the time for retirement is likely to coincide with life events such as marriage and childbirth, so it is quite difficult to become a coach right after retirement, but it also becomes much more difficult when you try to be one after a number of years after retirement, and this is the gap we are facing.”

Another barrier preventing female Paralympians from coaching was the sense of alienation resulting from the lack of support from organizations. According to one participant who was a current coach, “It doesn’t have to be a full-time job, but at least I want reasonable monetary support from the association as a coach. I am coaching just from a sense of mission toward track and field and for the organization.”

Theme 4: Athletes wanting formal coaching training. All participants indicated the lack of an educational system to support women wanting to become coaches. Participants were able to teach sport skills from their experience as athletes, but they had no knowledge of coaching theory. They were willing to learn these lessons upon becoming a coach. Some said, however, that they were not sure of where they would be able to gain such knowledge.

I myself have never learned about coaching at university or any other places, so I am only able to express everything through the experience that I have had up until now. For instance, I do not have the skill to coach scientifically or theoretically, so I prefer to learn how to do this and develop my ability for this (Active Paralympian)

Theme 5: Current coaches felt overwhelmed by task requirements not related directly to working with athletes. Half of the participants, four women, indicated that coaches were required to do miscellaneous tasks not directly related to coaching and worked in environments where they were unable to concentrate strictly on coaching.

In Japan, it seems like the position of a coach in Paralympic sports is less well-established, and I feel that it is a shame to see the coaches offering to do all the miscellaneous tasks that does not have anything to do with coaching and not being able to concentrate on coaching (Current coach)

The participants indicated being responsible for these types of tasks deflected them from their primary purpose—improving athlete performance.

4. Discussion

The women involved in Paralympic sport related careers had strong social identities as essential members of the Paralympic Movement and wished to dedicate their life to the Movement. While their double minority status was at times advantageous, that status also limited their career choices. The study participants experienced some common career barriers women in the sport industry face (e.g., role conflicts, underrepresentation of women, lack of role models), but some additional fundamental problems were present for those working in Paralympic careers. For example, they lacked the basic training to be coaches. The job description of a Paralympic coach is at times unclear and coaches are often required to do overwhelming amounts of
administrative tasks, making it harder to pursue a coaching career. While elevating the status of coaching Paralympians is a very positive step, one must also be aware of a potential pitfall. Currently, as Japan moves forward to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, many people including the media, are starting to pay attention to Paralympic sports. Some people refer to this rapid increase in awareness of the Paralympic Movement as “Paralympic bubble” (Fukazawa, 2016). The Paralympic bubble may serve to temporarily improve the work environment around the Paralympic sports. It may also help establish more coaching positions for Paralympic sports. For the Paralympians wanting to become coaches, however, this may cause greater competition with coaches who do not have disabilities. This study identified the strong desire of Paralympians to be involved in Paralympic Movement and to pursue Paralympic coaching careers. Without a training program for Paralympians to become coaches, they may lose their coaching opportunities to people without disabilities who may have gained coaching experience in the able-bodied sport realm. This would reflect what happened in the United States after the passage of Title IX. While Title IX greatly increased participation opportunities for girls and women to play sports, the percentage of girls and women being coached by women vastly declined as men moved into what became more respected, and well-paying, jobs coaching women’s teams (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; LaVoi, 2013). Might this happen in Paralympic sport, with able-bodied coaches moving into Paralympic coaching ahead of former Paralympians?

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of this research, fostering an environment where female Paralympians can attain leadership roles in the Paralympic Movement will help overturn barriers female Paralympians face when wanting to become coaches.

Coaching Paralympians needs to be established as a career young female athletes and leaders would value pursuing. Developing and providing an educational system that supports Paralympians to become coaches is necessary. Training elite level Paralympians requires special skills, and at present, coaching theories and scientific evidence for Paralympic sport are not as prevalent as for Olympic sport.

Recommendations to overcome barriers include receiving support from relevant sport organizations such as the Japanese Paralympic Committee, research for professional development, and supporting coaches administratively so that they could focus primarily on their sport and athlete related coaching responsibilities.

Acknowledgments

This research was conducted by the support from MEXT-Supported Program for the Strategic Research Foundation at Private Universities, 2014-2018, Japanese Center For Research on Women in Sport, Juntendo University.

References


55


Name: Maki Itoh
Affiliation: Faculty of Health and Sports Science, Juntendo University
Address: 1-1 Hiragakugerndai, Inzai-shi, Chiba, 270-1695, Japan
Brief Biographical History:
2014-Current Assistant professor at Juntendo University
2011-2014 (Ph.D.) University of Louisville Educational Leadership & Organizational Development Specialization: Sport Administration
2008-2010 (M.B.A.) University of New Haven Master of Business Administration Concentration in Management of Sport Industries
2000-2004 (B.A.) Sophia University Bachelor of German Literature
Main Works:
Membership in Learned Societies:
•North American Society for Sport Management
•Japanese Association for Sport Management