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The Forensic Professionals' Dilemma: Do the Tensions between Coaching Responsibilities and Marriage and Family Commitments contribute to Coaching Exit Decisions?

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This journal reflects the values of its supporting organization, *Pi Kappa Delta*, which is committed to promoting *the art of persuasion, beautiful and just*. The journal seeks to promote serious scholarly discussion of issues connected to making competitive debate and individual events a powerful tool for teaching students the skills necessary for becoming articulate citizens. The journal seeks essays reflecting perspectives from all current debate and individual events forms, including, but not limited to: NDT, CEDA, NEDA, NPDA, Lincoln-Douglas debate, as well as NIET, NFA, and nontraditional individual events.

Reviews of books, activities, and other educational materials will be published periodically (as submitted), and those submissions are also sought. Potential authors should contact the Editor regarding the choice of materials for review.

All works must be original and not under review by other publishers. Submissions should conform to **APA guidelines** (5th edition). Authors should submit **3 print copies AND a PC-Compatible disk version** (for editing purposes) or **E-mail submissions are acceptable with prior permission from the editor provided they are in Word format with no specialized formatting**. Manuscripts should not exceed 25 double-spaced typed pages, exclusive of tables and references; book reviews and educational materials should be 4-5 double-spaced pages. Submitted manuscripts will not be returned. The title page should include the title, author(s), correspondence address, e-mail address, and telephone numbers. The second page should include an abstract of 75-100 words. The text of the manuscript (including its title) should begin on the next page (with no reference to author), with the remaining pages numbered consecutively. Avoid self-identification in the text of the manuscript. Notes and references should be typed and double spaced on pages following the text of the manuscript. Tables should be clearly marked regarding their placement in the manuscript.

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The Forensic Professionals' Dilemma: Do the Tensions between Coaching Responsibilities and Marriage and Family Commitments contribute to Coaching Exit Decisions?

JACK E. ROGERS, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
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Abstract: *The literature has long reported the tensions associated between balancing forensic coaching duties with marriage and family commitments. Long hours and extensive travel schedules often take their toll not only 'burning out' coaches, but too often leaving dysfunctional or disarticulated familial units in their wake. This paper compares data collected from both current and former forensic coaches seeking insights into how the tensions between coaching responsibilities and family commitments impacted their personal and professional lives. Specifically, did those tensions contribute to coaching exit decisions? The majority of former coaches reported that family commitments contributed significantly to their decisions to leave coaching.*

The Pushmi-Pullyu, introduced in Hugh Lofting's absurdist children's classic *Dr. Dolittle*, is a mythical beast that most closely resembles a llama with a head at each end facing, and therefore pulling, in opposite directions. A great deal of tension is created because each head is presented with equally attractive and yet equally competing directions for travel. As a result, the only way to make progress in any one direction is through carefully balancing the competing demands of each head. Ultimately, a great deal of compromise may be required to ensure even basic survival. If both heads obstinately pull in opposite directions against the middle, the Pushmi-Pullyu achieves nothing and could ultimately starve itself to death.

The Pushmi-Pullyu's dilemma was intended by Lofting to serve as a metaphor for the social obligations and pressures which often pull us in opposite directions. Even a somewhat cursory examination of the literature, however, proves the utility of the Pushmi-Pullyu as a metaphor for such diverse applications as economic market theory (Nolte, 2005), physics (Newton's Third Law of Action/Reaction), automotive design (Nissan's Pivo: The Cabin that Rotates 360 Degrees,

Sept. 30, 2005), internet management theory (Gleick, 1997), biology (Seigfried, 2002), communication technology (Communication Technology, 1998), advertising (Tanner, 2005), and theories of education (McFarland, 2005). In each of these applications, the central metaphor is one of two forces pulling in nearly equal proportions against one another creating a central tension which threatens the well-being of the whole. Without balance and compromise between the competing forces, too often the unchecked tensions result in disaster.

How does Lofting's Pushmi-Pullyu transpose itself into the world of competitive forensics? For many forensic coaches, the answer was articulated by Jensen and Jensen (2003) when they observed that "a positive coexistence of forensic and family time requires a great deal of effort that may often frame family time and forensic participation as competing and not complimentary goals" (p. 2). The forensic literature would seem to support this pessimistic view of the tensions associated between balancing forensic coaching duties with marriage and family commitments (Bartanen, 1996a, 1996b; Dickmeyer, 2002; Gill, 1990; Gilstrap & Gilstrap, 2003; Jensen, 1998; Jensen & Jensen, 2001, 2003; Jones, 1997; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; McDonald, 2001; Olson, 2000; Preston, 1995; Venette & Venette, 1997; Whitney & Johnson, 1996; Williams & Hughes, 2003). Too often, the long hours and extensive travel schedules take their toll not only "burning out" coaches but leaving dysfunctional or disarticulated family units in their wake.

The impetus for this study was provided in a paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association by Scott and Gina Jensen. Jensen and Jensen (2004) entered their study expecting to validate previous findings within the literature that "forensic professionals feel frustration at what they see as a difficulty in balancing forensics with family and personal relationships" (p. 12). Their goal was to increase the validity of the negative perceptions of stress reported within the literature by forensic professionals by providing stronger statistical analyses than the anecdotal evidence upon which previous researchers had relied. They were "surprised by the results of their study" (p. 12). Jensen and Jensen reported that the respondents seemed generally neutral to the concept that forensic duties and family relationships competed with one another or created significant stress in their personal or professional lives. As a result, Jensen and Jensen argued that previous conclusions linking forensics with negative impacts on relationships should be viewed with caution and the methodology used to advance those linkages subjected to careful scrutiny (p. 12-13). They also recommended further research.

During subsequent discussions with the Jensens, it was discovered that their research sample had included only respondents currently serving as coaches. No former coaches had been included in the respondent pool. Concerns regarding attitudinal or situational survey bias emerged. Had the active coaches been coaching long enough to

encounter relational pressure and, therefore, engender relational or professional burn-out? What would former coaches have to say regarding the reasons for their decisions to leave the coaching ranks? Had marriage and family commitments finally won out over the pressures of their coaching duties? Finally, had the active coaches discovered a way to effectively circumvent or alleviate the professional and relational tensions that the former coaches had not?

If we revert to the metaphor, does the Pushmi-Pullyu of forensics even exist, and if it does, why does the tension between family and forensics tear some coaches apart resulting in burn-out and/or relational dissolution and not others? In any case, the "further research" called for by Jensen and Jensen (2004) would seem justified.

Review of Literature

The forensic literature generally reflects the perception within the coaching ranks of significant tensions between career and family. Given the state of marriage within the U.S. working force this should not come as a surprise. In the more general research literature dedicated to studying the U.S. workforce, Lauer and Lauer (1997) argue that divorce rates are closely tied to marital crises which result from job-related stress. Individuals who work in high-stress career fields report higher than average divorce rates, including physicians (Sotile, 1997), police officers (Came, 1987), firefighters (Noran, 1995) and Wall Street employees (Kaplan, 1996). In addition to high levels of job-related stress, Staines and Pleck (1984) examined the effects of non-standard work schedules (defined as working other than a standard, fixed day schedule), upon family, conflict and quality of life. They concluded that "non-standard work schedules do have adverse effects including lower levels of family adjustment, less time in family roles and higher levels of specific types of interference between work and family life" (p. 521). Researchers report a positive relationship between the number of weekends or holidays worked and the level of conflict between work and family life (see Bast, 1960; Drenth, Hoolwerf, & Thierry, 1976; House, 1980; Jamal & Jamal, 1982; Mann & Hoffman, 1960; Maurice & Mantiel, 1965; Shamir, 1982, 1983). Baba & Jamal (1991) concluded that the majority of problems associated with non-standard work schedules may be due to these employees finding themselves out of line with society's established physiological and social rhythms.

In more current work, Jamal (2004) studied employees who work weekends as a regular part of their jobs. His study concludes "employees involved with weekend work reported higher emotional stress than those not involved with weekend work" (p. 117). Fenwick and Tausing (2001) reported findings from the *National Study of the Changing Workforce* that concluded employees on non-standard work schedules experienced significantly higher rates of burn-out and work-home conflict than employees that did not work weekends.

In summary of the workforce literature, high levels of job-related

stress and nonstandard work schedules have been found to be strongly associated with pervasive personal, marital, social, health, and organizational consequences (Blau & Lunz, 1999; Bohle & Tilley, 1998; Fenwick & Tausig, 2001; Jamal & Baba, 1992, 1997; Krausz, Sagie, & Bindermann, 2000; Presser, 1995).

There can be little argument that the majority of forensic coaches work non-standard schedules, which include numerous weekends and holidays. The stresses to self and family are further exacerbated by working, for most, Monday through Friday juggling the additional commitments of teaching, research and service. How, then, do these deleterious impacts of non-standard work schedules manifest themselves within the lives and families of the coaching community?

The forensic literature has long reported the tensions associated between balancing forensic coaching duties with marriage and family commitments (Bartanen, 1996a, 1996b; Dickmeyer, 2002; Gill, 1990; Gilstrap & Gilstrap, 2003; Jensen, 1998; Jensen & Jensen, 2001, 2003; Jones, 1997; Littlefield & Sellnow, 1992; McDonald, 2001; Olson, 2000; Preston, 1995; Venette & Venette, 1997; Whitney & Johnson, 1996; Williams & Hughes, 2003). Jones (1997) found a significantly higher incidence of divorce among coaches involved in forensics, largely due to the time demands required to successfully coach debate students and the excessive travel schedules in a competitive season that stretches across nine months, not including summer camps and workshops. Of the divorced respondents, Jones found that almost half (45%) reported that coaching duties had created a strain on their marriages or had led to numerous conflicts regarding the coaches' absences from home, and claimed that forensics was directly involved in the break-up of their marriages. Bartanen (1996b), weighing in on the question of relational breakdowns for forensic educators, found one in five reported "work in forensics had contributed to the end of a marriage or significant relationship" (p. 7). Olson (2000) argues that coaching forensics can easily become what many refer to as an all-consuming activity, leaving little time to devote to a successful family life. Interestingly enough, a study by Cronn-Mills (1999) found the top ten individual events programs in the United States were coached by single coaches. Deaton, Glenn, Milsap & Milsap (1997) reported a negative impact on family life for those involved in debate. Bartanen (1996b), who conducted a comprehensive national survey, reported 74 percent of forensic professionals responded that forensics detracts from quality family or relationship time. In summary, perhaps Jensen (1998) puts it best when he argues "there are enough common characteristics of forensics at the end of the 20th Century that lead to a categorization of the director of forensics as an at-risk population" (p. 28). Further, Jensen and Jensen (2003) argue the "parallel relationship between increased value of forensics and increased value of family times creates a need for balance that must be addressed" (p. 6).

Given the overwhelming negativity of the forensic literature, it is clear that coaches perceive the forensic Pushmi-Pullyu as contributing

significantly towards a critical imbalance in work-style / life-style for forensic participants. These findings would seem to be at odds with the recent findings of Jensen and Jensen (2004). Further research is justified.

In view of the methodological limitations noted by Jensen and Jensen (2004), and through subsequent discussions, this study seeks to include respondents who have elected to leave the forensic coaching ranks as a comparison group to those who are currently engaged in the discipline. This study collected data from a national sample (N=60) of forensic professionals who have left the active coaching ranks and compares that data set to the Jensen and Jensen (2004) sample. These researchers are looking for statistically significant differences which may provide further insight into the relationship between coaching duties and personal/family relationship commitments. Toward that end, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: Are there differences in perceptions between former and current forensic educators with regard to the impact of forensic activities upon their familial relationships?

RQ2: Will former coaches perceive that the pressures of their forensic coaching duties had a negative impact on their familial relationships?

RQ3: How will a heterogeneous sample perceive the challenge of balancing the duties of a career as a forensic educator and the commitments of marriage and family?

Methodology

Jensen and Jensen's (2004) survey instrument was replicated with minor wording changes. Since the target respondents were all former forensic educators, where appropriate, survey statements were modified to reflect a past relationship (e.g. "My forensic career negatively impacts my relationship with my children" was changed to "My forensic career negatively *impacted* my relationship with my children"). The survey instrument was designed to ask former forensic educators a variety of questions concerning the nature of the program they coached, the history of their non-platonic relationships, and their attitudes concerning a number of potential relationships between forensics and family. Analysis of the data set was conducted in two steps. *Study one* is directed towards Research Questions 1 and 2. In *study one* statistical analysis focused on the perceptions and attitudes of former forensic educators. *Study two* uses statistical analysis to compare between groups (current and former forensic educators) to provide insight into Research Question 3.

Study One: Results

A sample of convenience (former coaches known to the researchers and referred to the researchers by officers in the various forensic organizations) was identified and 64 surveys were mailed. Sixty surveys

were returned. Of the 60 respondents in the data pool, 45 had coached individual events, 53 had coached debate. Many had obviously coached both. The respondents had a mean of 4.83 years of coaching experience¹ prior to exiting the discipline, with 6 former Directors of Forensics and 54 former Assistant Director of Forensics / Debate Coach / Graduate Assistants. Fourteen had coached CEDA, 7 NDT, 31 Lincoln-Douglas, and 26 National Parliamentary Debate. Some had coached more than one format of debate. Both American and National Forensic Associations were represented in the sample. Rank was dispersed with 6 associate professors, 36 assistant professors, 16 graduate assistants, and 2 adjunct instructors at time of coaching.

The first set of data will follow the methodology of Jensen and Jensen (2004) reporting means, standard deviation and percentages. All data in *study one* and *two* were analyzed using two-tail t tests, with a minimum 95% confidence level unless otherwise reported. Further, a Pearson's correlation analysis was performed on the nine attitudinal variables, and all results are reported with level of significance.

Program Demographics -

To gain a better understanding of the kind and type of program the respondents coached, several questions were asked to gather descriptive information. The average program had at least one full-time staff member (.70) while the remaining programs had two full-time staff members (.30) for a mean of 1.30. Less than a quarter of the programs had part-time staff (.22 mean), and even fewer enjoyed the help of graduate assistants (.17 mean). Slightly over half (51.7%) of the respondents were in a tenure-track position while over one-third were not (38.3%). The mean for the squad size was 9.33 with 66% of the programs having had between 7 and 10 students. The respondents also represented a broad base of forensic events with 75% participating in Individual Events (IEs) and 88% participating in debate. Finally, in reporting the number of annual weekends committed to tournament travel, the greatest number of weekends traveled was 8 (n=19), 10 weekends (n=18) and 12 weekends (n=13). A closer examination of program demographics is provided in *Appendix A*.

Respondent Demographics -

Respondents had participated in coaching forensics for a mean of 4.83 years with a *SD* of 2.55. Fully 50% of the respondents had left coaching after only four years, and between the fourth and seventh year another 28.3% had exited the activity. There was little diversity in duty titles among the respondents. Ninety percent reported their coaching position as Assistant Director of Forensics. Sixty percent reported the title of Assistant Professor, 26.7% were Graduate Assistants and 10% were Associate Professors. Respondents reported that they were primarily occupied in teaching (19.63 hours) during the typical week, while the remaining bulk of time was devoted to coaching (17.95 hours). The remaining time commitments were dis-