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Women in a man's world: Coaching women in elite sport

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ABSTRACT

Underpinned by critical feminist psychology and in response to repeated calls to explore how the dynamics of gender inform coaching practices, this study aimed to explore the experiences of men and women coaches to better understand the role of gendered expectations in elite sports environments and how these are reproduced within a Western European country's elite sport system. Data were collected over 18 months via fieldwork observations and semi-structured interviews with 10 elite coaches, from five Olympic and professional sports. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Using the concept of hegemony as a theoretical lens to interpret the data, macro (i.e., wider socio-cultural norms), meso (i.e., organizational practices), and micro (i.e., coaches experiences working with women athletes) levels were identified. The findings demonstrate that each level plays a role in actively producing and reproducing the broader power relations between genders within and beyond the sporting environment. 'Moments of intervention' are offered to coaches and sports personnel to create more inclusive environments to provide optimal support for women athletes.

Lay summary: Over an 18-month period of observations and interviews, this research explores elite coaches' perceptions of working with world-class women athletes across a range of sports. Underpinned by critical feminist psychology, the importance of using a holistic approach to understand how multi-level factors impact the support elite women athletes receive was identified.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- The findings demonstrate the need to encourage people working in elite sports to reflect on their underlying gender biases.
- Coaches should be cautious of stereotyping elite women athletes, with an aim instead to understand individuals against the backdrop of a gendered world.
- Gender should be seen as a complex set of social relations that requires open and frequent dialogue to assess and challenge the narrative of how women athletes are viewed, spoken about, and treated within the elite sports environment.

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Elite sport is a unique context with a complex array of interactions between the environment, the athlete, and performance-related experts (Jones et al., 2004). Within this setting, many athletes maintain that top-level coaching is one of the most vital components to their success (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). Indeed, research shows how an effective coach-athlete relationship can improve an athlete's reported well-being and optimal functioning (Felton & Jowett, 2013). However, despite a rise in the number of elite women athletes, it has been suggested that women athletes do not receive optimal support from their coaches; a significant barrier that prevents women from participating, remaining, and progressing in elite sport (MacKinnon, 2011; Norman & French, 2013). With the increase in the number of elite women athletes, contrasted with the continued dominance of coaching by men, it is urgent that the dynamics of gender are better understood to inform practices for coaches and practitioners working with elite women athletes.

Fundamental to investigating gender dynamics is an understanding of culture and power (Blodgett et al., 2015). Researchers have questioned the lack of inclusion of culture within sports psychology for many years (Duda & Allison, 1990) and although other areas of professional psychology have integrated cultural aspects into their work, the field of sport psychology has been slow to embrace cultural factors, such as power, social structure, identity, gender, and religion (Schinke & Moore, 2011). More recently, however, there has been a further push toward advocating for more culturally inclusive sports psychology (McGannon & Schinke, 2015). Known as *cultural sport psychology* (CSP), scholars have begun challenging mainstream sports psychology to encourage contextualized explorations and understandings of marginalized topics (Blodgett et al., 2015). At the heart of CSP research, is cultural praxis, which crystalizes the genre as one that moves beyond an academic endeavor to one that leads to social justice and change (Blodgett et al., 2015). In line with the CSP agenda, this study is underpinned by *critical feminist psychology* (CFP), which aims to critically reflect on the ways knowledge is situated in culture and to expose and resist gendered oppression (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). CFP research challenges essentialist views of what it means to be a woman; gender is considered a social construction that is produced and reproduced by society (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

With a focus on studying gender within our cultural interactions, the extant literature on coaching women athletes in elite sport can be synthesized into three types of research: macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level research. Macro-level analysis explores how broad systems, institutions, hierarchies, and patterns shape society and grounded in CSP and CFP, researchers in this area have focused on societal ideological and behavioral norms around women's sport and women athletes. For example, through engaging with CSP, Fisher and Anders (2020) explored sexual exploitation in USA Gymnastics. By problematizing the Larry Nassar case, Fisher and Anders (2020) argue that abuse, violence, and oppression persist in sports domains because of privilege structures and practices that produce and reproduce power imbalances that marginalize athletes. Building on research that theorizes gender and sexuality as intersecting identities, McGannon and colleagues (2019) explored elite women Canadian boxers' identities in relation to inclusion and marginalization. The study demonstrated how boxing was both empowering, as identities were openly expressed within the team, and constraining, as gendered identities were not always experienced as inclusive. Using a feminist cultural studies framework, Krane and colleagues (2001) explored the relationships between body image, food, and exercise in women. The

women athletes suggested that their ideal body was in line with the cultural expectation for female bodies; one that is shapely and toned, but not excessively muscular (Krane et al., 2001). Other researchers have similarly studied women's experiences with their athletic bodies, showing the paradox they face of having to maintain a muscular physique to support their sporting endeavors whilst trying to preserve the feminine cultural ideal (Krane et al., 2004; Mosewich et al., 2009). De Haan and Knoppers (2019), used a Foucauldian lens to explore discourses drawn upon by elite rowing coaches that inform their thinking and practices when working with women athletes. The findings demonstrated that coaches draw on discourses that constitute their women athletes as inferior to various implicit masculine norms (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019). Kavoura and colleagues (2015) also used Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore Greek women Judokas sports careers and identities. They demonstrated how the gender power dynamics within wider Greek society are reproduced in the sporting experience of female judokas. These macro-level studies highlight the need for sports researchers and practitioners to consider how broader socio-cultural gender relations are infiltrated and reproduced within a sport setting and how they shape the experiences of coaches and women athletes (Kavoura et al., 2015).

Meso-level research examines a specific group, community, or organization, and, within the context of sport, researchers have focused on sports organizations and sports environments. For example, De Haan and Norman (2019) drew on Bourdieu and Foucault's theories to explore gender power dynamics in relation to the female-athlete, male-coach relationship. The findings showed that within elite rowing, there is a hierarchy that positions men athletes as superior (De Haan & Norman, 2019). Norman (2010) explored women coaches' experiences of the structural practices of the coaching profession in relation to their feelings of being undervalued and marginalized. By locating their experiences within the wider context of sport, the findings revealed how the strength of the patriarchy within sport impacts the personal experiences of the coaches. Micro-level research examines one-to-one interactions between individuals, for example, with elite women athletes. At the micro-level of analysis, several different research streams have emerged from the literature relating to coaching women athletes. For example, previous research suggests that women athletes want their coaches to recognize the salience of gender within the coach-athlete dyad (Norman, 2015) and that women athletes feel that men coaches underestimate and trivialize their athletic ability (Norman & French, 2013). Whilst these studies result in several practical implications for coaching elite women athletes, they predominantly provide a single level of analysis.

To connect these levels, Burton and Leberman (2017) proposed a multilevel framework to use when examining women's studies and highlighted the need for research on women in sport to consider socio-cultural (i.e., macro), organizational (i.e., meso), and individual (i.e., micro) factors. In response to this call, De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) used a holistic approach to examine the multi-level factors associated with men coaches working with women athletes within an elite rowing program. Their findings indicate that coaches' personal cultural experiences shape their gendered beliefs and influence their coaching practices toward women athletes. Within the context of an Olympic rowing program, De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) demonstrate how a male hierarchy pervades the environment, which manifests as women's competition not being taken as seriously as that of men (macro-level), an overt inequality in resource allocations

(meso-level) and coaches positioning men athletes as mentally stronger than women athletes (micro-level). Such findings demonstrate how macro and meso-level factors can provide context to coaches' experiences and practices at a micro-level and thus highlights the importance of using a multilevel approach to capture the nuances associated with coaches' experiences working with women athletes.

Whilst previous literature has provided useful insights and practical implications for coaching women athletes, the current study aims to extend research by addressing knowledge gaps in four ways. First, given the often men-dominated contexts in which elite women athletes' train and perform, it has been argued that a single level of analysis may not capture the complexities surrounding gender nor identify the nuances required to develop an effective intervention that challenges the gender hierarchy (De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019). Rather, this change requires a more holistic approach. The current study offers a multi-level analysis of coaches' experiences working with elite women athletes. Second, there have been several calls to explore the women athlete from a socio-cultural and contextual perspective (Norman, 2016; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2015). In line with the CSP agenda, the current study, therefore, considers the individual experiences of coaches working with elite women athletes, within the context of their sports environment and our wider culture. Critical feminist psychology (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) and concepts such as hegemony will be utilized to better understand the dynamics of power. Third, much of the gendered research pertaining to the coach-athlete relationship focuses specifically on the man-coach, woman-athlete dyad (e.g., De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019; De Haan & Norman, 2019; MacKinnon, 2011). However, despite men's dominance in elite coaching (Norman, 2016), the gendered nuances of coaching women athletes are not limited to coaches who are men. Therefore, the participants in the current study include both men and women. Finally, previous work in this area has predominantly focused on a single sport. The participants in the current study represent five elite sports.

Given that coaches are key stakeholders within the culture of sport and play a fundamental role in the reproduction of gender relations within the domain, they are well placed to reflect upon and contribute to a shifting culture that can do things on, for, in, and with women athletes. Therefore, and in line with the above knowledge gaps, the current study explores the experiences of elite coaches to better understand the role of gendered expectations in elite sport environments and how these are produced and reproduced. This is part of a broader aim to support women athletes in realizing their performance goals and therefore also offers practical recommendations. Therefore, the two research questions are: (a) how are gendered expectations produced and reproduced within elite sport environments?; and (b) how can coaches, and sports practitioners, more effectively support their women athletes to optimize their performance?

Method

Theoretical background

Underpinned by critical feminist psychology, this study utilized a feminist methodology, within which there is an unapologetic commitment to inciting change that leads to emancipation from gendered oppression (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). The researcher's philosophical stance is therefore based on ontological critical theory (i.e., the reality is

shaped by cultural views and mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted) and epistemological critical ideology (i.e., knowledge is transactional and subjective) (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical feminist psychology challenges mainstream, or as Wilkinson et al. (1991, p. 7) refer to it, “malestream” psychology’s continued focus on the individual at the expense of the social and political. It acknowledges the relationship of power to knowledge, the bias toward pathologizing women, and the limitations of decontextualizing women’s experiences (Davis & Gergen, 1997).

To expose and resist oppression, critical feminist psychology draws from various other disciplines. Here, we draw upon the theory of hegemony. Hegemony complements the idea of power by coercion with the notion of power by popular, and at its most powerful level, spontaneous consent. As Stoddart (2007, p. 201) argues, hegemony “appears as the ‘common sense’ that guides our everyday, mundane understanding of the world.” Citing Gramsci, he explains it as a view of the world that is “inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” (Stoddart, 2007, p. 201), that serves to reinforce the dominant groups in society. Drawing on sociological interpretations of hegemony, Connell (1995) defines the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a mechanism of domination that is responsive to changes in the conditions of patriarchy. In this way, hegemonic masculinity, and femininity, are not static but are the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). This theory provides a conceptualization of power that is nuanced, thereby allowing recommendations for action that is equally nuanced and actionable in relation to applied settings.

Study design

Following ethical approval from the University’s Ethics Committee, participants were recruited through criterion-based purposeful and maximum variation sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Criterion-based sampling was used to recruit participants within each sport who had first-hand experience coaching elite men and women athletes. Elite coaches were defined as those who work directly with athletes training and performing at the highest level in their sport (Olympics, World Cups, and World Championships; Swann et al., 2015). Maximum variation sampling was used to gather both men and women participants from a range of sports, such as team and individual sports, traditionally men dominated and traditionally women dominated sports and those with successful or emerging elite women’s programs. Maximum variation was chosen to enhance the study’s potential generalizability (i.e., naturalistic generalization, transferability). To clarify, naturalistic generalizability happens when the reader’s personal experiences resonate with the research, whereas transferability occurs when an individual or group in one context considers implementing something the research has identified in another context (Smith, 2018).

The performance directors from five sports agreed that their sport would participate in the study. Ten coaches from across five Olympic and professional sports met the sampling criteria (six men and four women) all of whom had coached elite women and men athletes. In the interest of preserving the anonymity of individual participants, the

sports are not identified, pseudonyms are used and any specific information that could identify them or others they have worked with has been omitted.

With permission granted by the performance directors in each coaching setting, over an 18-month period, the first author engaged in observation, informal-unstructured interviews, and semi-structured individual and group interviews, spending on average one to two days per month in each sports environment. Data collection started with observations, which involves attending to the actions occurring, asking questions, and engaging in dialogue with participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). With an aim to consider the participants within their wider cultural sports contexts, observations were used to become accustomed to the participants' day-to-day schedules and to gain an overall perspective of elite sporting environments. In line with critical feminist psychology (cf. Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) being immersed in the sports environments over an extended period also gives primacy to the centrality of researcher-participant interactions. Spending time in the sports environments provides an opportunity to build rapport with participants, which has been reported as a pivotal aspect in encouraging participation in the interview process (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016).

Methods

Spending around 300 hours in the sports environments, the lead researcher moved through a continuum of observation and participation roles as rapport developed with participants (Gold, 1958); from complete observation to helping set up equipment, sharing mealtimes with athletes, coaches, and staff, and attending team meetings and workshops. Rapport was evidenced through the discussion of sensitive topics, engagement in humorous interactions, and physical touch (e.g., hugs, high fives) with the participants. During this period, the first author engaged in informal unstructured interviews: spontaneous conversations between researcher and participants, and those within the sports environments, on topics related to the research area (Jamshed, 2014). Throughout the research, observations and informal interviews were used to supplement, extend, and provide context for the data collected in the interviews, whether by guiding interview questions, probing or challenging participants, or reflecting on what is being said in interviews compared to observed in practice (Williams, 2016). They were also used to monitor, reflect upon, and refine initial themes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Amounting to ~43,000 words, detailed fieldnotes from observations were recorded in note form as soon as possible on the first author's phone at the sports center and written up at home using a reflexive journal.

Semi-structured interviews were also used, allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences, whilst exploring topics of interest (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The participants were offered the option to engage in group interviews as they have been suggested to provide safety in numbers (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Group interviews can also encourage participants to disclose more and can prompt a range of views (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The decision to engage in an individual or group interview was participant-led based on their preferences and resulted in 15 individual interviews and 1 group interview being conducted in total. Follow up interviews were undertaken with participants who decided they would like to, giving them the opportunity to build upon

what they shared in the previous interview, increasing the likelihood of achieving a deep and comprehensive picture of their experiences (Culver et al., 2003). In total, 10 participants engaged in the study, and 16 interviews were conducted: five participants engaged in one individual interview, three participants engaged in two individual interviews, and two participants engaged in two individual interviews and one group interview together. All 16 interviews were conducted face to face (at the request of the participants, 15 were on the individual sporting premises and one was in a public café). All interviews were audio-recorded to provide a complete account of what was discussed. The interviews ranged from 42 min to 97 min ($M = 69.9$ min, $SD = 16.9$).

An interview guide was developed, which guided by critical feminist psychology included questions that considered gendered relations within a wider cultural context (Crawford & Marecek, 1989). This used the holistic approach as a heuristic device, with questions constructed on three levels: macro (i.e., our wider culture), meso (i.e., the sports environment), and micro (i.e., individual experiences). In line with critical feminist psychology and cultural praxis, the final section of each interview was focused on the participants' perspectives on how to drive a progressive social change (e.g., what do you believe can be done to better support women athletes?; Braun, 2012). The questions asked and the elaboration probes used throughout the interviews were worded in such a way that allowed for complexity and contradiction (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

Throughout the data collection period, the participants were frequently asked their views on transforming the status quo and were invited to share their suggestions for equalizing gender discrepancies in sport (Fine, 2012). Furthermore, at the heart of critical feminist psychology research is reflexivity, which involves an ongoing consideration of how the researchers' values, beliefs, and personal identity interacts to pervade the research process and outcomes (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Throughout the data collection period, the first author kept a reflexive journal, in which she wrote about what she had seen and heard, alongside her reflective thoughts and questions. For example, and to address the call for more transparency within feminist methods (Clarke & Braun, 2019), the first author's reflections focused on the impact of her being a white, middle-class, young, women researcher. The first author noticed that her ability to build rapport with the women coaches felt natural and effortless, compared to the men coaches, in which it felt more difficult. The first author recognized the potential impact on her data collection with the men coaches of being a woman herself, talking about women athletes, at a time when women athlete maltreatment was prevalent in the media. Through spending time in their environments and getting to know them personally, reinforcing her role within the elite sports system, and positioning herself as a student who is there to learn, the first author was able to develop meaningful relationships with the men participants and noticed a shift in their willingness to disclose personal information.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016), allowing analysis that is inductive (e.g., new experiences), deductive (e.g., guided by theoretical concepts), critical (e.g., challenging the status

quo), and reflexive (e.g., situating the first author within the study). The process of doing reflexive TA involved six fluid and recursive phases (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the first phase, the first author familiarized herself with the interview data, which involved transcribing the interviews, repeat reading of the transcripts, and noting down initial ideas. In the second phase, coding occurred by highlighting interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set (e.g., “understanding the individual,” “women more emotional,” and “work-life balance”). Anything that related to feminist thought, wider cultural perspectives, organizational norms, and individual gendered experiences was highlighted. In the third phase, codes were collated iteratively into potential themes (i.e., “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept”; Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). The fourth phase entailed reviewing and refining the themes. A collaborative and reflexive approach was taken between the authors, where provisional themes were discussed at length with coauthors acting as ‘critical-friends’ to the first author to challenge her construction of the themes. In the fifth phase, a collaborative approach was also taken to define the theme’s scope and boundaries and to clarify how each of the three themes relates to the purpose of the research. Finally, the sixth phase involved writing up the report in a concise, logical, coherent manner.

Readers are encouraged to consider several quality indicators for judging the rigor of qualitative research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), including the worthiness of the topic (e.g., timeliness and significance), rich rigor (e.g., appropriate sample), credibility (e.g., thick description), sincerity (e.g., transparency), and significant contribution and coherence of the work. Aligning with these indicators and as an important component of feminist research, reflexivity was used to enhance the study’s methodological rigor and generalizability (i.e., naturalistic generalization, transferability; Smith & McGannon, 2018). The first author kept a reflexive journal (i.e., introspective reflexivity) to situate her own personal identities and to explore the surprises and undoing’s in the research process (i.e., unexpected turns in the research), with herself ultimately becoming the site of analysis and the subject of critique (McGannon & Metz, 2010). This ‘self-situating’ during analysis is integral to cultural studies analysis where it is believed that personal experiences cannot be detached from discussion and analysis of the data (Frow & Morris, 2000).

These ongoing introspective reflections were also shared with the coauthors (i.e., intersubjective reflexivity) at regular intervals. Thus, the first author presented her interpretations of the data regularly to her coauthors who provided a sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations. As part of this process of critical dialogue, the first author was required to make a defensible case that the available data supported her interpretations. For example, the titles of the themes were debated with the coauthors to ensure that they were concise, punchy, and immediately gave the reader a sense of what the theme was about.

Findings and discussion

A reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify three themes that described the participants’ experiences working with women athletes. The first theme, *It’s Bigger Than Sport*, reflects a macro-level analysis of how traditional gendered views and behaviors

impact the sports environments. The second theme, *Women in a Man's World*, reflects a meso-level analysis demonstrating the organization of sport and its institutions in reproducing gendered views. The third theme, *Same Same But Different*, reflects a micro-level analysis of the participants' personal experiences working directly with women athletes. Although the three levels are presented separately, the analysis here demonstrates their dynamic reciprocity, as each plays a role in actively producing and reproducing the broader power relations between genders within and beyond the sporting environment. Where relevant, potential moments of intervention are foregrounded, to construct a more inclusive environment and a more optimal sporting domain for women athletes.

It's bigger than sport

This section demonstrates how, at the macro-level, the hegemony present within our wider society permeates the institution of sport, where it is continually produced and reproduced. Despite recognizing positive shifts that have been made toward gender equality in recent years, several participants suggested that due to ingrained traditional views around women and gender, parity is yet to be reached. Like the coaches in De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) study, it appears that women's sport and competition are not always taken as seriously as that of men. Looking at the experiences of women coaches, Norman (2010) argued a consequence of sport continuing to be a masculine domain is that women coaches are less attracted to and less likely to remain in sport as they feel "second best." From both, interview respondents (coaches) and observations (women athletes, sport science staff, and coaches) across a range of sports, this notion of women athletes being "second best" or "second class" was very much present. For example, Elizabeth asks:

The whole world needs changing in terms of how women are classed and looked at and I think in women's sport, Olympic sport as well, a lot more medals are coming from the women now so why are they always deemed as second class? (Elizabeth, woman)

Elizabeth goes on to argue that this stems from wider society:

You'd like to think that it changes with generation but it doesn't, and yes it's changing but I don't think it'll ever be 100% there, you might get I don't know, equal pay and things like that but there's still a thing within history that's like as I say the woman should be at home and the guy should be out at work... It is changing, changING, it's not changed... So there's always gonna be that the guy is built up in young children's heads to be the strongest or the fittest or they'll protect me rather than the female, so that's why I don't think it will ever change... it's not just sport it's a whole, it's bigger than sport isn't it? (Elizabeth, woman)

This superiority manifests in multiple ways. For example, Lauren suggested that the motivational videos shown to the athletes at major competitions predominantly focus on "how wonderful the boys are," whereas, regarding the women's section, "if you blink you will miss it." During the lead researchers' time in the field, as another example, staff members and women athletes described how, in two sports, head coaches and performance directors had prioritized attendance at a men's event, at the expense of the women's equivalent.

Despite nominal equity in terms of potential outcomes and a significant increase in participation rates for women, these coaches describe a patriarchal culture within sport. They provide clear evidence of a gender order that remains the standard for athletic achievement, a mode of segregation learned early in life, as alluded to by Elizabeth above, and reproduced over time (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). This gender order, which is the way institutional patterns, performed by individuals, creates power relations between genders (Matthews, 1984), is inextricably tied to the history of sport and society itself (Theberge, 2000) and continues to reproduce a hegemonic form of masculinity, and, as with the coaches in Norman's (2010) study, potentially deters women athletes from enduring with a sporting career. That this form is hegemonic, and therefore spontaneously accepted by many, is demonstrated across this study.

Several women participants across the sports identified that despite consciously positioning men and women athletes on the same level, coaches and staff members subconsciously act in accordance with the male hierarchy. For example, Susan (woman) suggested that whilst she had witnessed several coaches make an active effort to work with men athletes ahead of women athletes, she believes that the coaches are unaware of their efforts to prioritize the men, "sometimes they [women athletes] are left a little bit as they [coaches] seem to target the lads more than the females... Unbeknownst to the coaches but I've been there and witnessed it" (Susan, woman). Furthermore, Lauren (woman) suggested that one of their specialist coaches prioritizes men athletes during training: "there is a tendency to put the boys first, like the boys get the best times, the boys always go first and the girls are sorta like 'well we don't get a choice'." However, when describing her confrontation with him she said, "he wasn't aware of that because nobody had made him aware of that" (Lauren). Although many of the men participants did not suggest subconscious gendered behaviors were present, observational data suggests that these coaches were in fact some of the people being referred to when the women participants suggested others unwittingly act in accordance with the male hierarchy. For example, fieldnotes describe how one participant, a man himself, suggested no male hierarchy existed, but appeared to exhibit mutual respect and act on a level playing field with his men athletes, whilst seemingly demonstrating clear boundaries with his women athletes:

There is far more jokey interaction between [the coach] and the two male athletes as opposed to between [the coach] and the females, who just listened to his comments and nodded along. [fieldnotes, February 2018]

This is consistent with De Haan and Knoppers (2019) study, which demonstrated how despite consciously professing to treat men and women athletes the same, the coaches drew on several subconscious gendered biases to guide their coaching practices, such as framing women athletes as the 'other' and making men athletes the norm. The potentially subconscious bias of these behaviors is suggestive of what Gramsci (1971) describes as 'common sense': the received wisdom passed down and sedimented from generation to generation, amplified and accentuated by those with the power to do so and actively and passively reproduced by those who accept and work with it. This 'common sense' contains fundamental ideas about what men and women *are* and therefore what amounts to appropriate and predictable behavior. As Hall (1977, p. 325) explains, "it is precisely its 'spontaneous' quality, its transparency, its 'naturalness', its

refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time ‘spontaneous’, ideological and unconscious. You cannot learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things.”

Despite the enduring power inherent within it, common sense is always contested and contestable, leaving (or producing) space for the development of critique and alternative understandings, such as those provided by Lauren, Susan, and Elizabeth above and the long history of feminist and critical thought. For Connell (1987), gender relations within the gender order and hegemonic practices are regarded as in process and thereby allows for the possibility of social change. Indeed, the data and examples provided demonstrate a contested common sense, with alternative articulations opening the space for change in the sports setting. Using this theoretical lens, we argue that the fact that the coaches are unaware of their efforts to prioritize the men presents a moment of intervention, an opportunity for sports to shift the gender order by encouraging coaches and staff to engage reflexively to consider how their gender biases are influencing their work with women athletes. The potential role of the coach in subverting common-sense understandings of gender relations is thus foregrounded, but it is also problematized. As De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) demonstrate in their study on rowing, elite men coaches’ personal sociocultural experiences shape their beliefs around gender norms. Thinking in these terms, the question, therefore, becomes how to overcome traditional common-sense understandings, which coaches may either actively or passively reproduce.

One channel through which this ‘common sense’ is often said to flow is the media, with studies highlighting the qualitative and quantitative differences in mediation that have historically contributed to the marking out of the gender order (Fink, 2015; Hardin & Hardin, 2005). However, respondents within this study demonstrate the contested nature of common sense and its mediation. Participants from two sports suggested that recent shifts in media attention toward the exploitation of women in the workforce and women athletes reflect attitude changes in the sport. For example, the heightened focus on publicizing harassment claims has made some coaches, particularly the men, more conscious of their own behavior, making them acutely aware of how they interact with their women athletes. Harry shared his internal conflict:

But nowadays because of the sensitivity of female athletes in general, if they start saying that ‘I’m tired, I’m this and that’ you probably, you, you pull back where back in the day with the 2012 we’d say “just get on with it, you wanna win a medal or not?” ... not that you bullied anybody back in the day you just said “look do you wanna win a medal or not?” “yes” boom they go and do it but now it’s, you’re, in my opinion you’re trying to train them as a, but you’re a bit limited sometimes... but you’ve still got to be very aware of the individuals you’re dealing with, you can’t be dealing with people like you did years ago, shouting in their ear with a shitty stick, you can’t be doing that, you won’t get the best out of them. But the media certainly like, um what’s gone on in the outside world in sport and also in the workplace I think it affects what you do in here with the females. (Harry, man)

Like Harry, several of the men participants revealed that they feel there are now unspoken parameters around what they can or cannot say to women athletes following media portrayals of women athletes’ experiences in sport. They explained that they feel a lingering pressure to alter their interactions with women athletes for fear of being branded a bully.

This was in direct contrast to the women coaches, several of whom recognized the ease with which they were able to challenge their women athletes. As one coach shared:

We could say the same thing like we said before and it can come out completely different... maybe things I say, because I'm a female, if a man said it, they could take it in the complete wrong context as well (Susan, woman).

Stirling and Kerr (2014) propose an ecological transactional model of vulnerability, within which they suggest media messages condoning abusive coaching practices help to rationalize athlete maltreatment. Perhaps it is no surprise then, that media messages condemning such behavior are having a different impact on coaching practices. An emerging line of research within sport psychology suggests that thriving in elite sport is characterized by simultaneous dimensions of well-being and the perception of sustained high-level performance, suggesting both should be considered for an athlete to be fully functioning in a sport context (Brown et al., 2018). In the above quotation, the participant alludes to the fact that he believes it is counterproductive to the success of his women athletes as he feels restricted to push them to optimize their potential. This presents a paradox for coaches as society remains a place of the traditional gender order, yet the narrative within the media promotes a disruption to the hegemony. Whilst it is vital that well-being remains a priority, for women athletes to thrive in their sports environments it is also important for men coaches to feel confident and supported in their decisions to help the women realize their sporting goals. This presents a moment of intervention wherein sports may benefit from providing support to coaches and staff members as they navigate their way through supporting their women athletes.

Overall, at a macro-level, the analysis shows that wider socio-cultural beliefs that promote men's superiority impact what becomes the norm in elite sport, a point well understood by many of the respondents in this study. Whether consciously or not, sports environments continue to act in accordance with the male hierarchy by treating men and women athletes differently and using men athletes as the gold standard, which in many ways disadvantages elite women athletes' opportunities to thrive. There is a complex relationship between gender norms, social collectivities, and the individual, as hegemonic masculinity is both "a personal and collective project" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645), a point well represented by the concept of common sense. Although the firmly entrenched common sense of the gender order and hegemonic masculinities appear to function at a more collective (i.e., macro) level they are legitimized and reproduced through social institutions, organization, and infrastructure (i.e., meso-level), and by individuals within these environments (i.e., micro-level). The following two sections will look to these two latter levels, with the conceptual apparatus allowing us to demonstrate plausible interventions for change, targeting individuals and their relations to shift their values and provoke reflection on behavior (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Women in a man's world

This section demonstrates how the broader, gendered norms outlined above are mobilized with repetition in the institutional basis and organization of sport. It shows that coaches work within a domain that actively reproduces common sense gender relations, in what might be regarded as the meso-level, where individuals and structures

interact based on cultural and material norms. The second class, a subordinated status that women athletes are made to represent is continually re-created in the material and infrastructural basis of sport. Examples of this include practical aspects, such as access to facilities, with Susan (woman) describing how the local club gyms “only got one toilet” and “only got one changing room,” both of which were created for men. William (man) suggested that the quality of equipment given to the men athletes far exceeds that which is given to women athletes. Feeding back into the broader consensus of male athletic superiority, William (man) suggested that men athletes are treated like “royalty,” a point he illustrates by explaining that the prime parking spaces are reserved for men’s team captains only, although the women’s team captains received no such treatment. These examples demonstrate the way in which material and cultural dimensions interweave over time and serve to reproduce the dominance of one group over another. ‘Common sense’ ideas of gender relations are generative, embedded in institutional practice and quotidian uses of physical space, which then further delimit or constrain the possibilities for cultural change.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this structuring felt more deeply than in resource distribution more generally within the sport, which, skewed toward men athletes, has a direct impact on an effective system and the ability of women athletes to train and perform at the top level (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). As with the rowing coaches in De Haan and Sotiriadou’s (2019) study, several coaches in this study acknowledged the financial discrepancies in supporting women athletes and this rang true across all five sports. For example, William (man) shared, “we actually traveled with the men and they went in business class and we went economy.” The coaches here, however, more prominently discussed inequalities in financial investment linked to tensions around development pathways. Several participants, specifically from two sports where the elite women’s program is relatively new, discussed the impact on the women of the absence of gradual exposure to the elite level. The participants suggested that given the general lack of investment, the women’s pathway to the elite level is far shorter than their men counterparts. This results in less experience and international exposure before arriving on to an elite program; a program in which they are immediately held accountable for training and performing at the top level. For example, one participant shared:

We’re the closest I’ve ever come across to a group of people working in development and performance at the same time. In the men’s world you’d obviously allow them to make mistakes and grow, get it wrong, get it right, but so you’re trying to do that with this lot [the women] but you’re live on TV and that’s really hard (Edward, man).

Another participant suggested, “you can’t take away the years invested in it etcetera, there has to be a level of patience and understanding as well as you know helping them cope with the extra scrutiny” (William, man). The above quotations suggest that although women’s representation in elite sport is progressing, the longstanding financial discrepancies appear to have a profound impact on elite women athletes as they are expected to navigate their way through elite sport despite receiving fewer opportunities to develop before performing on the world stage. Indeed, in one sport the lead researcher witnessed a handful of women athletes who, fast-tracked through the system, decided to leave the world-class program for reasons associated with not feeling comfortable meeting the demands of the elite program.

As the participants have proposed, perhaps some sport organizations are not addressing the inevitable imbalances caused by unequal opportunities in the development stages. It could be argued that in their attempts to achieve gender equality, by striving toward equalizing the numbers of women and men athletes at the elite level, some sports organizations are overlooking the idea of gender equity. This is an important distinction: although gender equality refers to men and women having equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, gender equity refers to the fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs (International Labor Office, 2000). Although other literature explores the gradual athlete transition from junior to senior level (Hollings et al., 2014), this study demonstrates the qualitative difference in experience between men and women athletes, as embodied within institutional and organizational arrangements. With less time available for development due to the shortcutting to the elite level, and potentially a smaller pool of athletes due to higher rates of drop-out, it can also be argued that women's sport becomes 'naturalized' into a different spectacle, one distinct from the relatively resource-heavy 'pinnacle' that is men's sport (Adams et al., 2014). In certain sports, then, the common sense imaginary or spectacle of what women's sport *is*, in direct reference to what it *is not*, is maintained by this developmental shortcut, which then serves to reproduce the gender order in sport. For example, within the interviews, where certain coaches appeared to question the capacity (e.g., "robustness") of women athletes to train and perform in the same way as men athletes, under scrutiny those coaches would refer back to just such developmental opportunities. This marks a clear space to intervene, recognizing the developmental shortcut faced by women and providing support accordingly should be prioritized by coaches and sport institutions.

Fewer opportunities, such as these, along with the male hierarchies they maintain, inevitably lead to different forms of women's absence in sport: not just in terms of numbers, but also numbers in positions of power or leadership. The women participants acknowledged the prominence of men in leadership positions within their sports organizations and suggested a direct impact on women athletes, for example:

Just knowing this organization as I do, my high-performance coach is quite a strong character and I'm probably one of the few women that he listens to so if you're talking about our organization they [the women athletes] would struggle to get their voice heard because even if they tell those women [women staff members], those women don't have a voice, it's the way it is (Lauren, woman)

A gendered hierarchy, therefore, seems to marginalize the voices, and collective voice, of women athletes. Despite recognizing an increase in women staff working in elite sports, the women coaches maintained that women athlete voices are rarely heard by people in positions of power. Instead, as the coaches suggested and the first author witnessed, the women athletes communicate more with women staff members, who themselves experience a barrier to access the top of the organizational hierarchy. Although there are now more women athletes present in elite sport than ever before, other studies also report an ongoing absence of women in decision-making positions, including management, coaching, and officiating roles (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016), which seems to correlate with women memberships in national governing bodies, suggesting there may be an impact on the number of women athletes retained in elite sport

organizations (Gaston et al., 2020). Fundamental to hegemony is cultural leadership, the capacity to win ‘active consent’ (Hall, 1982), but without these voices in those positions, any challenge to the traditional gender order is forestalled. With more women in leadership positions, there is more opportunity to subvert and disrupt this gender order, through the (re)organization of common sense and the development of channels of communication for voices that are already there but not being heard. Therefore, as a moment of intervention, perhaps introducing more women leaders or direct channels of communication from women athletes to the leaders, are ways that policy makers can shift the power dynamics within elite sport organizations and develop a more robust platform for women athletes’ voices to be heard.

With the opportunity this would offer for greater cultural leadership at the organizational level, it might also be possible to engage with other, more invisible, processes of gendering (Acker, 1990). For example, women coaches’ accounts from across three sports revealed ways banter is used to trivialize women in sport. One coach shared her experiences of trying to voice concerns about being a “woman in a man’s world” (Elizabeth); she explained that when using a serious tone of voice to raise a gender-based issue, her men colleagues often joke about her time of the month, diminishing both her authority and the authority of her utterance. On the other hand, several men participants alleged that banter is lighthearted and that it should not be taken personally or seriously. For example:

What we consider to be banter is just banter it shouldn’t be horrible, malicious, I mean but then we get it back, I don’t go moaning to [the performance director] if someone’s called me a bald-headed old git, which I do get called and I get swore at and I don’t go running to [the performance director], I don’t go to [the governing body] and say “oh he was horrible to me” or “she swore at me” cos it’s just the environment that you’re in. (Harry, man)

On several occasions during the first author’s observational period, she witnessed jokes being made at the expense of women and women’s sports. For example, upon meeting a man participant for the first time, the first author was greeted with “I thought you’d be wearing more biblical clothes, someone told me you were coming to help out with the chicks so I’ve been waiting for my savior” whilst another participant, also a man said, “she’s a woman, there’s something wrong with all of ya.” Within society, banter is an increasingly used form of interaction, which it has been argued, can be used as a way to pass off sexist ideas as a joke without any implications (Nichols, 2018). As Nichols (2018) argues, when derogatory remarks are passed off as ‘just banter’ it signals the normalization of sexist behaviors. In this way, exaggerated signifiers of a particular gender order are operationalized to destabilize emergent ideas of what it means to be a woman, although stabilizing and reproducing the dominant order. Indeed, research into football environments has conceptualized banter as a traditionally masculine discourse, that functioned to sustain masculine identities (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011). Although the men participants proposed that banter in their sporting environments is harmless, the women participants suggested that it was used to marginalize women’s voices. This presents an opportunity to intervene as coaches and those in positions of power within the sport may wish to assess and reassess their boundaries for what type of language is deemed accepted within their environments.

The data described here demonstrate various mechanisms—at the meso- or organizational level—by which the traditional gender order is reproduced. Through unequal funding more generally, but through the impact of asymmetrical development pathways specifically. With the traditional common sense of men’s superiority having already caused development pathways far shorter than in men’s sport, this returns full circle to recreate a common sense that sees women’s sport as in some way diminished as a spectacle. Over time, cultural logics feed into material provision which then serves to reproduce those same cultural logics. A lack of leadership roles and communication channels to leaders, in the very organization of sport, highlights another way in which traditional common sense resists destabilization. However, in this analysis, each of these offers up a moment of intervention and a space of potential resistance for women coaches and their allies, whereby the traditional common sense—as accentuated most crudely in banter—can be destabilized and a more inclusive common sense can be articulated, amplified and practiced upon. In the next section, we look more specifically at the coaches’ practice and experiences of working with women athletes.

Same same but different

Having looked at the role of broader conceptions of gender and how they pervade the organizational basis of the sporting environment, it is useful to look at how these influence the practice of the coaches themselves when working with women athletes. As analysis at the micro-level, this provides insights into how coaches relate to, and have learned to relate to, men and women athletes. Once again, the theoretical insights provided by theories of cultural hegemony are useful here as hegemony can be understood as a form of power functioning at a ‘lived’ level, exemplified by the notion of our engaging with the world, including in our understandings of gender, through common sense.

Similar to previous work in soccer (Navarre, 2011) and rowing (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019), the men participants in this study initially revealed a discourse of absence when talking about gender. Although the women participants almost immediately vocalized differences between their men and women athletes, the men participants, on the other hand, appeared hesitant to reveal differences between their men and women athletes, framing their approach to coaching as “gender neutral.” Such a position is perhaps due to the contested and political basis of gender claims-making; as De Haan and Knoppers (2019) suggest, this is perhaps a default ‘politically correct’ position of ‘everyone is equal’. For example, at the early stages of the interviews, the men coaches maintained that they treat all their athletes the same, with statements, such as “I treat everybody the same, I don’t treat anybody different” (Joshua, man) and “they’re athletes to me, I just train athletes” (Harry, man). De Haan and Knoppers (2019) also argue that self-proclaimed gender neutrality, such as this, is futile if not put into practice. Indeed, whenever a power imbalance is at play, this ‘veil of neutrality’ becomes an instrument of power. As Mouffe (1994) argues, it posits or substitutes the particular (i.e., partial or specific) as or with the universal (i.e., impartial or general). Steeped in the common sense of hegemonic masculinity—as a sport is—this apparently centered position is far more likely to reward the behaviors and practices of the dominant culture. Despite this veil of neutrality, the men coaches subsequently differentiated

between men and women athletes: take, for example, Joshua's opinion about women that "they're just a different animal" and Adam's belief that:

I'm a guy and you know the hormone that predominantly goes through my body is testosterone as it is with the other guys and you know, we are different, we're meant to be different, we've been different since the creation of humans (Adam, man).

Leaning heavily on common narratives of evolutionary history (McCaughey, 2012), what Messner (2011) regards as the 'hallmark' of 'soft-essentialism', the coaches position women athletes as different from ideological heterosexual masculinity, which during the lead researcher's observation period appeared overtly celebrated across sports.

Specifically, the participants from across all five sports reported two interrelated differences in the way women athletes behave that are contrary to this norm. First, the participants alleged that although the men "just get on with it," women athletes display their emotions and allow them to impact the quality of their training. For example, one participant suggested that, unlike men athletes who "can have hassle going on outside in their lives but the minute they get in the [training environment] they just forget about things" (Harry, man), women athletes will "expect you to stand there and have that conversation, which aint such a bad thing but when you've got the whole team to train, I aint, you know coaches haven't got time" (Harry, man). Harry implies that coaching women requires additional time; time that he suggests they do not have. Aside from recent arguments about the need for a more holistic psychological and emotional approach to all athletes' health and wellbeing (Sinden, 2012), if it is true that women athletes (universally) require more time, then this would indicate a sporting environment, once again, representative of dominance by men. Emotional labor and the management of emotions, however, are often reported as features of the gender order: where 'being a man' has been associated historically with the hiding or neglect of emotion and femininity has been historically articulated with excessive emotion, delimiting lifestyle, career and behavioral 'choices' for all (Ellis, 2015; Giazitzoglu, 2020; Nixon, 2009).

Other coaches also tended to use a gender hierarchy describing the ability to "just get on with it" as a desirable characteristic. For example, one participant said, "I'll be honest, they [women athletes] can be harder to work with" (Joshua, man). Another participant shared, "I do value that as a set of characteristics you know I like working with people that are just gonna crack on" (Adam, man) and continued by suggesting that women are less coachable:

From a training perspective, if you considered a robot to be the easiest thing to train so you know, give it an instruction, it will follow the instruction, it will do it the first time you ask it to do it without emotion and then as a coach I can look and go 'that worked, that didn't work, try something else' and keep going until it's as good as it can be ... there is a scale of how effective people are of doing that and you know some people are way closer to that robot for whatever reason and again, I'd say, my experience in the sport of [sport name] the guys tend to be a bit less thoughtful about what they're doing in that respect and so [pause] are a bit more coachable in the sense that they're not probably experiencing quite as many emotions [when performing] and again there are exceptions in both directions but to generalize I would say it. (Adam, man)

The coaches remark upon their preference for working with athletes that do not display their emotions. Similar to Adam's comparison to robots, another participant stated

that the men athletes resemble “soldiers.” In a sense, the robot and soldier comparisons can be seen as a stand-in for the veil of neutrality outlined above: an emotionless, instructible, acquiescent body, seemingly impartial and disinterested, but mirroring the ideals of certain hegemonic masculinity (c.f. Van Gilder, 2019). Less emotion equates to fewer training complications in an environment organized and institutionalized around this ideal, which is easier, and apparently more convenient, to work with as a coach. In this way, the participants reproduce a dichotomy that distinguishes women athlete behavior from that of men athletes (LaVoi, 2007), with the latter positioned as the unemotional and hegemonic ideal. The women athletes are routinely (re)constructed as ‘other’ (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019) in a way that positions them as disruptive and deviant from the ideal (man) elite athlete.

The coaches generally engaged with this differentiation between women and men athletes and suggested that to be most effective, they had to adapt their coaching to accommodate for such differences. Specifically, participants from all sports reported using a “softer” approach when working with women athletes, which was described by one participant as being, “a bit more understanding, a bit more caring, a bit more tuned in.” (Joshua, man). Several participants highlighted the importance of using softer skills, as one participant explained:

I shouldn't say that as head coach, but one man and his dog could come in and do something technical but to actually learn and understand how that person's feeling, how they're getting on in life and stuff, which makes them a better person and a better [athlete] at the end of the day, is massive. (Elizabeth, woman)

The above quotation demonstrates the value the participant's place on using softer skills when working with their women athletes. In some cases, the participants proposed a ‘softer’ approach was used to enhance their working relationships with the women. In these cases, it appeared that the participants used emotional intelligence, characterized as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions (Mayer et al., 2000) to strengthen their coaching practices. Other participants, however, suggested that a ‘softer’ approach was used as “damage limitation” (Joshua, man) to avoid causing emotional responses. It could be argued, therefore, that in some cases the participants are shifting their coaching practices to prioritize acting in accordance with what they feel most comfortable with, that is, hegemonic masculine norms of concealing emotions, rather than what is necessarily best for women athletes. Other studies have shown how men coaches use erroneous perceptions of women athletes' expectations to adapt their coaching practices. For example, when the men coaches in Felton and Jowett's (2013) study worked with men athletes they advocated a ‘winning at all costs’ attitude, whereas when working with their women athletes they tended toward a ‘try your best’ mentality. In suggesting they use a softer approach, there appears to be a fine line between what some participants imply is emotional intelligence and what others refer to as “damage limitation.” Whilst emotional intelligence is indeed linked to effective high-performance coaching (Chan & Mallett, 2011), it is important that coaches do not shy away from having difficult performance conversations, as avoiding emotional encounters can have major consequences for health, well-being, and elite performance.

The second alleged difference was that women athletes request more information from their coaches. For example, one participant suggested, “women want to know the

ins and outs of everything, why? When? What's the purpose of that? Why do I have to do that? Why am I not having that?" (Susan, woman). Again, this narrative is contrary to common sense forms of masculinity (i.e., ideological heterosexuality) within the environment, in which the men "just get on with it" without asking questions. It was perceived that women athletes engaged more in information-seeking behaviors, asking about dates, schedules, plans, the value of certain aspects of training sessions. Several coaches shared that some perceive being asked questions as a threat to their authority, suggesting that they preferred "the old autocratic type of 'you all do this because I said this'" (Harry, man). Others, however, regarded information seeking and reciprocal conversation not as undesirable, but as valuable:

There's nothing coming back from a guy that's why, so it's more enjoyable to have the conversation than it is, and to get true understanding than for somebody to just go "right I'm just gonna do this, coach has told me this" and we're gonna have no discussion or there's no feedback so at least with the coaching women you get feedback... or else it would be boring as hell if you just told, told, told... You know what? It probably is easier, or definitely easier I think um there's not so much drama but that's not a challenge is it? (Elizabeth, woman).

Here, it seems, value for the coaches that Harry refers to, is placed on the traditional model, based on knowledge transmission (rather than knowledge construction) and the expectation of unidirectional power ("just getting on with it") and hierarchy, all of which engender more traditional common-sense notions of gender. For Elizabeth, the value lies elsewhere. The threat to authority that Harry refers to can be seen as a contestation of hegemony, as two different articulations of common sense—ways of being, understood here at the most lived level, the level of identity and security in one's concept of self—are competing for stability. The theory of hegemony is useful here as it allows us to understand the power dynamic of this relationship. It could be argued, for example, that the historically entrenched gender order, described in previous sections, is the most secure, with a common-sense articulation that gives what we call the 'weight of the status quo' to a manner of coaching that is saturated with hegemonic masculinity. Taking seriously Deci and Ryan (2012) argument that individuals will experience high-quality motivation when three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are satisfied, we argue that this socio-cultural, institutionalized setup of the sporting environment causes a reluctance to seek information, thereby reducing autonomy (the drive for ownership over one's own behavior) and *all athletes'* potential for optimal performance.

Despite the testimony regarding women's apparent information-seeking behavior, coaches from two separate sports acknowledged that men also ask a lot of questions and suggested instead that it reflected their younger age, opposed to their gender. As Singh and Dangmei (2016) note, younger generations now prefer independence and transparency, where they expect to be informed and have direct communication with their seniors: a clear shift in ideas around knowledge transfer and the direction of power within relationships. This highlights how broader patterns of cultural change infiltrate, and are reproduced within, the sporting environment and also destabilizes the common-sense argument that it is a woman trait to seek information, as well as to have 'emotional intelligence', and a man trait to 'just get on with it'.

The coaches interviewed for this study can be understood as on the frontline of the interaction between different systems of thought, navigating their way in practice through entrenched and emergent ideas of the gender order. In practice, at a general level, the coaches differentiated between women and men athletes but claimed that they tended toward a position that *individualizes* the athletes. Elizabeth, for example, said, “I think you still have to look at the individual, which is more important than anything.” Furthermore, the coaches frequently acknowledged the danger in generalizing, offering examples of women athletes that are exceptions to their own gendered generalizations, such as Adam, who preempts his discussion with “there are exceptions in both directions but...” Therefore, the participants suggested that generalizations about women athletes should be used cautiously when guiding coaching practices. In this way, in practice and at the micro-level, the coaches actually challenge the broader gender binary, wherein women and men athletes are expected to act in accordance with traditional hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity. Although the power of these views appears to prevail at the organizational level in sport, there are clear signs of acknowledgment of alternative and increasingly embedded articulations of gender, hopefully signifying an environment where further progress can be made.

The micro-, or experiential, level indicates contradictory aspects of experience as the coaches display dichotomizing attitudes toward men and women athletes, recognize alleged traits of each and identify particular coaching practices that are gender-dependent, but also acknowledge the limitations and flaws in these behaviors. This is not at odds with the notion of common sense, which is always a sedimented and fragmented collection of elements and helps to explain how our lives are often a fragmented jumble of positions, stances, and identities. With more women in positions of leadership, as described in the previous section, perhaps this contradictory set of elements can be better organized toward a ‘good sense’ that challenges older, less inclusive logic.

Conclusion

This study is a response to several calls for further examination of the socio-cultural factors that influence the coaching of women athletes in the context of high-performance sport (e.g., Norman, 2016; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2015; Kavoura et al., 2015). To this end, this study supports and extends previous research in at least four ways. First, consistent with the cultural sport psychology agenda (Blodgett et al., 2015), the multi-level analyses framework used in this study adds a layer of context to previous one-dimensional results flowing from the conventional single-level analyses. Cultural competence starts with considering people as cultural beings within their contextually contained backgrounds and experiences (Ryba et al., 2013), and this study demonstrates how broader socio-cultural norms (i.e., macro-level factors) influence the gendered practices of sports organizations (i.e., meso-level factors), which shape the individual experiences of coaches working with women athletes (i.e., micro-level factors). In keeping with the ISSP position stands toward more culturally competent research (Ryba et al., 2013), this cultural praxis project unites theory, research, and practice as they are permeated by culture.

Second, this study adds texture to the underlying agendas of cultural sport psychology and critical feminist psychology with an understanding of power as built on active and spontaneous consent to ascertain the nuances of the gender order in elite sport. The articulation and rearticulation of common sense—as the lived, felt, and practiced basis of hegemony—helps us to understand the (re)production of the gender order and therefore how sport is inextricably tied to historical power relations, within and beyond sport, entrenched within its organization and cultural logics. This provides us with a tentative way of understanding how the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels work in dynamic reciprocity over time, along with how each plays a role in maintaining the male hegemonic status quo within the sport.

The articulation and rearticulation of common sense also, however, provides a level of nuance to establish moments of intervention around which energies can be concentrated. By specifying the potential mechanisms by which hegemony is maintained, it also presents opportunities for resistance and therefore practical recommendations. Most of these can be seen as what Gramsci (1971) would describe as a ‘war of position’: ways of identifying strategic opportunities to disrupt and destabilize the status quo, and through these attempting to legitimize a reorganization of common sense (Zompetti, 2012). For example, the findings highlight the importance of considering women athletes’, often shorter pathways before entering the world-class program. Considering how women’s sporting experiences are inextricably linked to historical power relations, offers an opportunity to provide more individualized support according to their development needs when they reach the elite level. Moreover, by seeking symmetrical arrangements of not just funding but the funding of development pathways, between men and women’s sport, the possibility emerges of moving beyond these current shortcuts that help reproduce a common sense understanding of women’s sport as in some way inferior to men’s sport. Investing into development pathways for women’s sport would not only offer resistance to the hegemony but would also provide women athletes more opportunities to gradually increase their exposure to competitive sport, which as the coaches suggested, would improve their abilities to meet the demands of training and performing at the elite level.

Coaches in this study were also concerned about the lack of women in positions of authority. Pushing for more leadership roles, within coaching teams, senior management, and the broader institutions of sport, would also help in the continued building of institutional positions from which to further legitimize oppositional meanings. These offer opportunities to amplify alternative articulations of common sense along with the chance to develop channels of communication between seemingly isolated voices within the sport. Of course, obtaining such positions is one step of many; the theory of hegemony suggests that embedded organizational pressures will delimit one’s capacity to ‘give voice’ to alternative ideas even if a position is obtained, and therefore efforts will need to be concerted. To build the prospect of resonance around an alternative common sense, for greater inclusivity, it need not be directly based on women athletes. For example, when discussing the apparent information seeking of women athletes, coaches suggested they do not have the time required to offer suitable support that aligns with the athletes’ needs, something that coaches could look to amend at a superficial level. With evidence here and elsewhere, however, of generational changes in expectations

around the direction of power within relationships and attitudes shifting toward dialogue (over knowledge transmission), voice can be offered to *all* athletes, thereby increasing the appeal of the alternative message and athlete autonomy, a well-documented psychological need associated with optimal performance.

A third way in which this study goes beyond current research is in the range of sports included, offering a unique contribution by demonstrating nuances between and among sports. Coaches from across sports within this study acknowledged the underlying basis of their sports as dominated by a traditional gender order. A large number of examples were given as to how this manifests, examples that, as repetition of common occurrences, can be seen as also reproducing that traditional common sense: from the exaggerated signifiers of 'banter' to the physical organization of space, such as differentiated access to the appropriate equipment and other signifiers of prestige, like car parking spaces. The women coaches offered examples of how other coaches and sports practitioners, at times, subconsciously act in accordance with the male hierarchy. This seems to offer a moment of intervention that aligns with the CSP agenda; it has been demonstrated that engaging with reflective practice holds great promise for enhancing cultural sensitivity in the applied sport context (Schinke et al., 2012) and here it appears, that reflexivity may also be used to contribute to a shifting gender order.

The findings across sports, however, were also littered with examples of contestation or of reactions to the conflict between different understandings. Although women coaches were largely vocal about the subordinate position of women in sport, reactions to volatile gender-related events documented in the mainstream media, so long and so often a bastion of a traditional gender order, brought about a reflexive response in all coaches. The general position of the coaches, which appeared to move beyond the, perhaps 'politically correct' veil of neutrality, was that generalizations were dangerous and that athletes should be treated based on their individual needs. This seems to present a fragile hegemony, or evidence of a moment of transition within the sports, partly based on shifts in attitudes outside of sport, with scope to intervene and entrench a more inclusive approach through the activity of coaches.

Finally, the methodological rigor of research focused on gender in elite sport has been questioned due to its over-reliance on cross-sectional, or as Norman (2016, p. 194) put it, "snap-shot" research designs. This study used a multi-method, immersive, longitudinal approach, which has produced in-depth data and provided a more nuanced understanding of elite coaches' perspectives of working with elite women athletes.

The current study has demonstrated the role of gender relations in the sporting environment, and, central here, the important role coaches play in the broader goals of shifting cultural norms within elite sport. As already stated, with their role in the development and as key agents of socialization or cultural conditioning, coaches need to be understood as part of the frontline of gender relations, navigating their way through entrenched and emergent ideas. Although these can be understood at a broader macro-level, we have shown that they compete, are reproduced, disrupted, and modified at the meso- and micro-level, opening up the opportunity for meso- and micro-level interventions too. We argue that there are a great many signs of contestation for power within these levels. As is a pivotal aspect in the drive toward cultural praxis and cultural sensitivity within CSP (Schinke et al., 2012), the findings highlight the need to create spaces

for reflection within the organization of sport and encourage coaches to reflect on their own underlying common-sense views of gender and to consider how their biases are influencing their current coaching practices. The findings also suggest the importance of encouraging people to challenge the narrative of how women athletes are viewed, spoken (or joked) about, and treated within their sports environments and coaches have a vital role in initiating and maintaining this shift.

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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