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An analysis of the multi-level factors affecting the coaching of elite women athletes

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ABSTRACT

Rationale/Purpose: High-performance sport systems offer athletes access to a range of experts including excellent coaches. This study examines the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors associated with coaching elite women athletes within a high-performance sport system.

Design/methodology/approach: This research was underpinned by constructionism and critical feminism. The data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 international male elite rowing coaches with experience in coaching men and women athletes and analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: The data shows that at the micro-level, coaches differentiate their practices based on the gender of the athlete. These practices are influenced by meso-level factors (perceived value of sport participated by women) and shaped by macro-level factors (socio-cultural background of the coaches).

Practical implications: Coaches' socio-cultural experiences influence their construct of gender and affect their approach to coaching women athletes. Hence identifying macro-level factors can help managers understand coaches' perspectives, philosophy and practice at a micro-level.

Research contribution: The use of a multi-level approach to examine the factors associated with coaching elite women athletes offers a unique holistic approach to understanding how multi-level factors affect the coaching of women athletes.

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Introduction

To achieve elite sporting success, athletes gain access to a plethora of performance-related experts including nutritionists, psychologists, physiotherapists, exercise scientists, and world-class coaches. The management of high-performance sport (HPS) is an all-encompassing umbrella term that is inclusive of macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that contribute to elite sport success, including the services

provided by these performance-related experts (Smolianov, Gallo, & Naylor, 2014). Within this complex, multi-disciplinary team, athletes continue to maintain that access to excellent coaching is the most important support service they could receive (Sotiriadou, Gowthorp, & De Bosscher, 2014).

Recent data shows that over the last four consecutive Olympic cycles, the ratio of men to women coaches in HPS is approximately 10

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to one (Norman, 2017). Therefore, women athletes in HPS are more likely to have a male coach. Research shows that coaches draw on their experience as coach and as a former athlete, as an important source of knowledge (see Blackett, Evans, & Piggott, 2018). Therefore, a male coach is likely to draw on his experience as a male athlete who was most likely coached by a male coach. Thus, coaches are likely to continue to reproduce the discourses about gender and other social power relations into which they were disciplined during their athletic careers (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019). Within this gender biased context, De Haan and Knoppers (2019) question whether coaches are sufficiently prepared to respond on a more individual basis to their athletes along the lines of gender, with a deep understanding of the issues that different social groups bring to the court, the pitch, or the track.

The way elite coaches understand gender may produce and/or challenge current dominant ideologies about gender in sport (Stewart, 2016). However, as de Haan and Knoppers argue (2019), coaches are themselves products of the sport system and are unlikely to be advocates of equality, or agents of social change, if they are not part of a gender-inclusive organisational culture. In their study on elite sport culture and policy interrelationships, Sotiriadou et al. (2014) drew comparisons between organisational culture and sport-specific culture. In both these contexts, culture is likely to be an environmental factor that could influence coaches' experience. With this in mind we decided to position the current study within a single specific sport culture; rowing.

As one of the oldest International Federations (IFs) recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Rowing Federation (Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d' Aviron, FISA) has evolved from an explicitly male-dominated sporting culture but has made a concerted effort to achieve a gender inclusive organisational culture. For example, unlike several IFs, FISA reaches the

IOC recommended 30% female board membership, and by Tokyo 2020 they aim to have a gender-balanced Olympic programme of events and improve female participation across all aspects of the sport including participation, umpiring, and coaching. In 2012, the FISA council, in a bid to achieve gender equality, decided to explore the role coaches can play in facilitating women athletes' attraction, retention and development. Even though men and women rowers often train together, and coaches often have experience training both genders, elite rowers compete in sex-segregated competitions. FISA (2014) identified that highly motivated and committed coaches are prepared to work with both men and women crews. However, their report concluded that there is a lack of "preparation for coaches to train female athletes (as they are mostly prepared to train men)" (FISA, 2014, p. 18).

The unequal gender divide within sport has been extensively discussed in the literature but what remains less understood is the connection between gender equality within a multi-level framework. Recently, Burton and Leberman (2017) proposed a multilevel framework to use when examining women's studies and stressed the need for research on women in sport to consider socio-cultural (i.e. macro), organisational (i.e. meso) and individual (micro) factors. The current study is therefore a response to this call to address the gap in our understanding of the gendered experience of HPS sport from a multi-level perspective. More specifically, the objective of this article is to offer a holistic multi-level analysis of the factors affecting the coaching of elite women athletes with the view of informing policy and practice associated with HPS management.

Conceptual framework and literature review

Constructivism and critical feminism underpin this research designed to explore the multilevel factors that affect the coaching of women

athletes. Following on from Norman's (2010) work that investigated elite women coaches' experiences, we too employ Gramsci's theory of hegemony in this critical feminist study. However, in a departure from Norman's (2010) work and indeed from the majority of critical feminist work in this field, our focus is not on women coaches' experience but rather men coaches' experience of coaching women athletes.

A constructivist ontology will inevitably have epistemological implications. How one learns about the social world is framed to some degree by how one defines that world. Thus, the constructivist elements of a critical feminist study are associated with the lived experience and agency or agency-orientated accounts of how subjects make sense of their world. Coaches for example will, to a degree, construct their own world while they also inhabit social spaces pre-structured by earlier actions, and by the language used in the prior description. The use of a multi-level analysis will allow us to gain insights into processes of construction and to the coaches' perceptions of the structures at the macro- meso- and micro-level.

According to Gramsci's hegemony theory, cultural leaderships are secured through the naturalisation and articulation of ruling ideas into the mass consciousness and willing consent of those marginalised by ideologies (Bennett, 2006). In sport, a prevailing ideology defines sport as a heterosexual male domain and/or as a place where practices associated with desirable heterosexual masculinities are celebrated. The discourses about desirable (masculine) bodies in sport not only pertain to performing bodies but also regulate which bodies become and are seen as leaders in sport, such as coaches (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Social dominance combined with subtle control is therefore secured by an interplay of social forces that infiltrate organisations and individual lives (Krane, 2001). These infiltrating forces may not always be visible. Indeed, the process of gender construction in an organisational setting is complex and multi-layered

(Sotiriadou & de Haan, 2019). Acker (1990, 1992) has argued that the gendering of organisations is the consequence of often invisible processes. For example, definitions/images of who is the best fit for a task or position often creates a gendered division of labour. Such processes can reinforce hegemony. With regards to this, Shaw and Slack (2002) described how organisational practices in national sport organisations were devalued and seen as 'soft' when associated with femininity and valued when they were linked to desirable masculinity.

Even when organisations, such as an IF, commit to equality, fairness, and introduce changes on by-laws, regulations and policies, such invisible regimes of inequalities tend to prevail and continue to exist, (re)produce social relations based on gender and remain the norm (Acker, 2012). For example, Knoppers and Anthonissen (2001) and Claringbould and Knoppers (2008) used Acker's approach to study how men and women in senior positions in sport governance in the Netherlands negotiated gender and concluded that such interdependent processes produced regimes of gender inequality that were invisible, tended to be legitimised and accepted as normal or common sense; this invisibility helped explain how men could dominate positions of leadership in sport organisations.

Similarly, in the context of coaching, Norman (2010) noted that senior national women head coaches' experiences were limited due to structural practices. Their oppression was not overt discrimination but more subtle, insidious ideological based oppression that contributed to women's continued underrepresentation. For these reasons, Gramsci believed that sociological analysis should involve not only an analysis of public institutions but also the organisation of consent (Parry, 1984). We believe the ontological and epistemological approach taken in this study will therefore enable us to identify factors affecting the coaching of elite women athletes whilst enabling us to understand how gender is played out in and affected by cultural interactions.

Much of coaching research to date, focusses on coaching techniques (e.g. Côté, 2006; Potrac, Brewer, Jones, Armour, & Hoff, 2000), mental training of athletes (e.g. Williams, Czech, & Biber, 2017; Wrisberg, 1996) and an understanding of the social contexts of coaching (e.g. Jones, Armour, & Potrac, 2002; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005). There is however, a small yet emerging field of study that examines coaching from a sport management perspective. Examples include studies reviewing coach compensation and athlete or team performance (e.g. Garner, Humphrey, & Simkins, 2016; Soebbing, Wicker, & Watanabe, 2016), the length of coach tenure and organisational performance (e.g. Gómez-Haro & Salmerón-Gómez, 2015; Roach, 2016), the effect of formal qualifications on the income of elite sport coaches (Wicker, Orłowski, & Breuer, 2016), coach migration (e.g. Borges, Rosado, & Oliveira, 2015; Orłowski, Wicker, & Breuer, 2016), and the effects of coaching culture on elites success (e.g. Sotiriadou et al., 2014).

On further analysis of the literature pertaining to gender and coaching from a managing HPS perspective, we note that macro-level factors, such as the social and cultural position of men and women, influence how male coaches approach coaching athletes of a different gender. Fasting and Pfister (2000) interviewed 38 elite female football players from Germany, Norway, Sweden and the USA and noted that the 'old-fashioned gender stereotypes' mirror the traditional gender order of the nations involved in their study. The athletes' and coaches' broader experience of gender was grounded in political, social, and cultural ideologies that informed the construct of gender in the context of their sporting experiences. What is less understood in the literature on macro-level factors is how socio-cultural environments influence the coaching practices of those involved in coaching elite women athletes (Norman, 2016).

At a meso-level, several different research streams emerged from the literature relating

to (a) studies that focus on nations and national sport systems and consider factors that influence national success or policies (e.g. De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Truyens, 2015b), (b) sport's specific culture on coaching practices (e.g. Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2001; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010), (c) coach education and coach development programmes (e.g. Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015; De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & van Bottenburg, 2015a; Norman and French (2013)), and (d) the coach-athlete relationship (e.g. De Haan & Norman, 2019; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005).

At the micro-level of analysis, Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, and Roberts (2012) examined the careers of two successful female elite athletes who later stagnated, with the aim of identifying possible factors that might have led to their demotivation. In this Norwegian based study the authors suggested that being a coach in a HPS environment is a complex social and dynamic endeavour. In this environment, coaches have to interact with athletes, other coaches, parents and national governing bodies and National Olympic Committees. Hence, coaches are expected to coordinate the communication between these various parties and to plan and prepare for long-term development and participation in elite competition (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). In their study on understanding elite women athletes' experience of coaching, Norman and French (2013) concluded that the social construction of gender influenced the assumptions and actions of both the coach and the athlete. This UK based qualitative study included 16 women athletes from four different athletics clubs/training groups and their corresponding four head club coaches (three men and one woman). The paper focused on the athletes' accounts of how they experience the coach-athlete relationship, with athletes describing their coaches "to be gatekeepers to their athletic development and experienced frustration when they felt the coaches paid them [as

opposed to male athletes] insufficient attention” (Norman & French, 2013, p. 19).

Whilst these studies result in practical implications for managing HPS coaching, they predominantly provide a single level of environmental analysis. From a management perspective we argue that real structures exist (sport policies, organisational hierarchies, medal opportunities at the Olympics etc), however, the impact of these structures on the coaches’ behaviour may be something the coaches are not conscious of. In line with a constructivist ontology, we therefore support the idea that what exists in the world is socially constructed, however, it may be constructed differently by different groups. Men’s experience of sport maybe different from women’s. Men coaches experience of coaching men athletes may be different from coaching women athletes. We argue therefore that a single level of analysis, may fail to identify nuances of construction associated with the experience of male coaches, coaching women athletes in a HPS environment.

Given the often male-dominated context in which women athletes’ train and perform, coupled with the persistent domination of coaching in HPS by men, and invisible regimes of inequalities noted in sporting organisations, we believe that disruption of dominant ideologies cannot be theoretically, empirically, or practically facilitated using a single level analysis or intervention. Rather, we suggest that this disruption requires a holistic understanding of how environmental factors affect the coaching practices of those involved in coaching elite women athletes.

Materials and methods

A crucial component of a study adopting a critical feminist lens is to explore how social and cultural forces shape personal experiences (Krane, 2001; Norman, 2016). In support of this rationale, we used a qualitative approach to understand the social construction of coaches’ experiences (Lincoln, 1995). Specifically, the

focus was to analytically disclose the meaning-making practices of coaches of elite women rowers (the why, how, or by what means the coaches do what they do), while showing how environmental factors influence those practices.

Interview participants

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 10 elite level male rowing coaches who were selected using a convenience sampling technique at the World Rowing Coaches Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The coaches were required to have had experience in: (a) coaching both male and female rowers; (b) coaching rowers at an elite level (for the purposes of this study, elite athletes are those on identified national performance pathways); (c) coaching at the elite level for more than two years (a timeframe which would indicate the coaches had experienced a major competition cycle); and (d) have an appropriate level of spoken English to converse on this subject matter.

The coaches were informed about the research during the conference registration process and were invited to participate in the study if they met the above criteria. The 10 coaches who agreed to participate were from eight nationalities, with experience coaching in 12 countries. Nine of the coaches were former elite rowers and one of them had experience in coaching another sport. Whilst we wish to provide context relating to the background and experience of the coaches, we do not wish for them to be individually identifiable. Therefore, we do not provide specific information about the nationalities and countries and we have chosen to assign numbers as pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the coaches.

Procedure

To capture the coaches’ meaning-making practices, their “experiences” were collected using

one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews. Following Patton's (2002) recommendations, an interview guide was developed to provide identified topics to guide the conversation. The interview guide focussed on (1) the coaches' background in and early experiences of rowing and any other sport, (2) the coaches' perception, definition, and experience of success, (3) the coaches' experiences of coaching men and women rowers, (4) their personal coaching style, (5) coach-athlete relationship, and (6) support from their National and International Rowing Federation. The two researchers conducted all the interviews in English. These interviews lasted between 50 and 120 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants signed a consent form prior to the interview explaining the aims of the study and ensuring their confidentiality.

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study the research team addressed the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research proposed by Guba (1981): (a) credibility (in preference to internal validity); (b) transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability); (c) dependability (in preference to reliability); and, (d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity). Specifically, the research team attempted to present a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Interviewing coaches from various countries helped establish a level of transferability and the level of detail provided in this section aids repeatability of the study associated with dependability. Finally, to achieve confirmability, the research team documented the procedure for checking and rechecking the data during the entire process, aiding comparable objectivity.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. In the context of exploring coaching experience, thematic analysis is useful because it enables us to examine the meanings that people attach to

their experience as a coach, the significance it has in their lives, and, more broadly, their social constructions of it. At the same time, it also enables us to examine how these constructions might reflect the "reality" of participants' lived experiences, the material or social contexts in which they coach, and which constrain and enable their opportunities within HPS. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns and themes within the data. This began at the stage of data collection and continued throughout the process of transcribing, reading, and re-reading, analysing, and interpreting the data. We used the six-step approach (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) to conduct the thematic analysis. First, the data were transcribed verbatim and the authors read and re-read transcripts to familiarise themselves with the content. A reflective segment was also used at this stage by the authors to record initial impressions and note similarities and differences. Second, we separately identified features in a systematic manner using general codes across the data set, writing these codes in the margins of each transcript. Third, the researchers met and discussed the preliminary codes and collated interpretations into further themes. Fourth, the coded data were developed by consensus into a thematic map, whereby the researchers considered the alignment of themes and sub-themes. Fifth, to refine each theme, clear definitions were derived for each label. As thematic analysis can go beyond organising and describing to interpreting, Braun and Clarke's sixth step were employed to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications beyond a surface level. This sixth step comprised selecting compelling extracts and relating these back to the research aim and the literature. Finally, a results table (see Table 1) was created to provide a relational understanding of how the environmental factors affect coaches of women athletes in HPS.

As Table 1 shows five themes, organised under the macro-, meso- and micro-level, emerged from the data analysis. The findings

Table 1. Identified themes and example quotations.

Level of analysis	Themes	Example Quotation
Macro	Cultural norms and gender ideologies (non-sporting)	In countries like the Netherlands we have more normal [environment]. Men and women can do the same stuff. [If you are a female] in Italy, if you graduate from high school there are three things you can do, either marry, get a job, or study. In the end you are always married. So [in Italy] there is a very “traditional” way of looking at things (Coach 7)
	Cultural norms and gender ideologies (sporting)	Egypt that has decent rowing [programme] but a weak women’s programme and according to me, women in general there are a kind of extra to the men. Basically, you can tell that in countries where there is an open culture, teams work together, like in New Zealand, then women’s rowing is strong (Coach 8)
Meso	Financial investment in supporting female athletes	In Italy it’s a profession. [Male] rowers they get paid either by the state or they get paid by a club, but only boys because they are not interested in women rowers (Coach 7)
Micro	No gender difference – coach the individual	I don’t think there are great differences in coaching men and women, it’s about how you approach the individual (Coach 4)
	Retention of female athletes	Maybe men just want to be coached more and maybe women have had enough after a certain amount of time and they do something else like having children. I always say you have to know what you want to achieve, you have to know what you must do and then you have to decide if it is worth it. If it is too much then you quit – both male and female. If you’re not willing to sacrifice things that need to be done to get your goal you’re wasting time and maybe (I’m just guessing) men is willing to sacrifice more (Coach 1)

in these themes are discussed in detail in the section that follows.

Results

In this section we present the results and concurrent discussion and interpretation firstly from the individual macro-, meso- and micro-levels, then from an inter- and intra-level perspective.

Macro level analysis

Coaches’ broader sociocultural ideologies and experiences reflected the ways they were pre-conditioned in what the “norm” in relation to gender is, within either sporting or non-sporting contexts. For instance, coaches often referred to their own cultural upbringing and experience of gender equality as a reference to “normal” or “discriminatory” gendered ideologies: “I was brought-up in ‘normal’ education in Germany where boys and girls are the same, 50:50. But in Mediterranean countries, there is a slight difference, like Spain. From my German education it was very clear, equal opportunity for everybody” (Coach 1). Such attempts to

understand or promote social equality are often based on very different basic assumptions about what equality might consist of and how it might be reached (Lusted & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017). In this instance, the quote reflects coaches drawing on the liberal idea of social equality. Fundamentally, liberal feminism advocates women’s greater involvement in organised activities such as education or sport by enhancing their opportunities to join existing institutions and structures. Coach 1 believed that because men and women have equal access to the schooling system in Germany it is by default a system that promotes and supports equality. This perspective lacks consideration of institutional gendered relationships that may occur within such an organisation. In general, critics of liberal feminism point to a lack of critique of basic gender relationships, a focus on state action, which links women’s interests to those of the powerful, a disregard for the intersection of class or race and a lack of analysis of ways in which women are different to men. In short, equal access to a given phenomenon such as schooling or sporting activities does not automatically equate to a homogenous experience.

Whilst most of the advancements in women's sports over the last 40 years can be characterised as liberal feminism, the practice of redistributive feminism, does little to challenge or radicalise the gendered culture of sport as an institution. Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) argued that a liberal approach appears to simply reinforce rather than challenge institutional male power. From a constructionism and critical feminist perspective, we are interested in how gender is played out within pre-existing structures. In the following quotation, we note how a gender hierarchy is played out in the context of the Olympic programme as the coach refers to the male dominance in rowing from a structural perspective: "In the Olympics there are more men boat classes than women. Rowing coaches know that they have more chances in men's" (Coach 1). Since the interviews were conducted, there have been some changes to the Olympic programme to the extent that at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, women and men will for the first time have equal medal opportunities. However, this institutional gender bias has broader consequences, as Coach 5 claimed:

Many small countries don't have the possibility to create female crews, if you want to create something you have to qualify for the Olympics. So, if you want to create a movement you need role models; if you want to create role models you need results. If you need results, you need women's championships that are taken seriously.

From a social constructionist perspective, we note that the coaches experienced a male hierarchy within sport. Their reality was that women's competition is not always taken as seriously as that of the men. Their lived experience of the social and material context of sport suggests that coaching women athletes offers fewer opportunities for success. Overall, the results of a macro-level analysis show that whilst the male coaches involved in the study are aware of the need to be inclusive, their personal experiences of gender ideologies from a

wider socio-cultural construct influence their perspective of gender equality within a sporting context.

Meso level analysis

At the meso-level, the inequalities in financial investment in supporting women athletes was a common theme across many of the coaches' narratives. At times, this was linked to practical aspects such as access to basic facilities: "If you have a club you have to have different bathrooms [for females]. Sometimes there is only one bathroom." (Coach 10). Other times, it was linked directly to developing coaching resources: "From the national Federation it is clear that they have to put in the same money and resources [into coaching] from both men and women sport which is not always the same" (Coach 1). As Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2013) discuss, financial investment in HPS is a driving force for international sporting success. Furthermore, in their analysis of resource configurations and the ways sports and countries channel financial support to their HPS system, Truyens, De Bosscher and Sotiriadou (2016) demonstrated vast diversity in resource allocations, especially in relation to athlete development. The present study shows that male rowing coaches perceive that funding is predominately directed toward men athletes, which may undermine the development of women athletes in HPS.

Hoeber (2007) argued that despite organisations' overt commitment to gender equality, revenue generation quickly becomes the foremost priority and the bottom line subsequently becomes the rationale for unequal allocation of resources. Applying a critical feminist lens to the discourse of Coach 4, we can expose the underlying gender arrangements they experienced, which prioritises male power and hegemonic control of resources within one specific national team:

It doesn't surprise me that the first time we ever took on a coach for the whole of the

Olympic cycle was into the 2000 Olympics and that was the first time Great Britain [women's rowing] won a medal at the Games and up until then, it had always been [for the female crews] a part-time coach and then they'd come in for one year, the Olympic year, and then they'd be part-time again. Whereas for the male crews, we had professional coaches all the way through. So the biggest thing we have to do is get the women equality in terms of [access to] coaching. As a federation, when we have money to spend, put it into quality coaching [for women crews] – we don't put in for women as much as we do for men.

Whilst Coach 4 has experienced the benefits of redistribution of resources, the actions undertaken by this national federation are conducive to an approach that “manages inequalities” rather than eliminates them (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2016). In line with a critical feminist position, Shaw (2007) would argue that the lack of sustained equality reflects the organisations deep structure or as Rao, Stuart, and Kelleher (1999, p. 2) put it, the “collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the unquestioned “normal” way of working within an organisation”.

In an analysis of the presence of capital and power in the male coach – female athlete relationship within elite rowing, De Haan and Norman (2019) noted a male hierarchy within the sport which resulted in an unequal distribution of capital and power which manifest themselves in gendered coaching practices. De Haan and Knoppers (2019, p. 6) also noted the presence of gendered discourses in elite rowing, which position women athletes as “inferior to various implicit male norms”. We argue that these examples constitute what Acker (1990, 1992) refers to as the invisible processes which may result in the gendering of organisations. Indeed, at the meso-level, these accepted cultural norms reinforce dominant gender ideologies of men superiority over women. Even within an organisation, which is overtly supporting gender equality, the deep

structures of the organisation influence the gendering of organisational processes.

Micro-level analysis

All the coaches involved in the current study had experience coaching both men and women athletes. When asked if they approached coaching the genders differently they said they did not, and that they coached individuals as opposed to genders. In the following example from Coach 10, the individual approach was linked to problem-solving: “The difference is not because of gender, it's because of their problems and maybe their problems can come from their gender, but it is not my business”. However, according to Coach 6, fixing the “problem” requires a gendered approach:

Girls need to talk about their problems. As a coach if they are talking to you, you only have to listen, and you don't have to even give an answer. With boys, it is not this. Boys want immediately an answer and a solution. That is one of the biggest issues we have to learn and we have to respect that.

The coaches also positioned men athletes as mentally stronger than women athletes and associated this with retention:

Men don't quit as quickly as women, they're [men] more focussed on results. As soon as she is uncomfortable with her teammates, the structure, whatever, she quits. (Coach 8)

The construct of women athletes as physically or mentally weaker is highlighted in other studies that showed male coaches adapting their coaching practices based upon erroneous ideas of women's expectations as performers. For example, the male coaches in Felton and Jowett's (2013) study promoted striving towards winning at all costs when working with male athletes. However, when working with women athletes the coaches advocated a “try your best” mentality based on their understanding that women athletes were not as com-

petitive or capable of “high-level” performance. This was evident in our study, as Coach 1 believed that women are not as focused on results as men:

People look at sport and say there should be no difference between men and women but there is a difference. You need to have more incentive for female athletes because you have the biological clock ticking and there are other issues so you have to adapt to that.

Here we come back to a constructivist ontology and an understanding that the world may be constructed differently by different groups. At a micro-level we note dominant discourses used by male coaches’ position women athletes as “different” from the ideological heterosexual masculinity which is overtly celebrated in sport. As De Haan and Knoppers (2019) note, these dominant discourses that construct women athletes as “other”, disruptive and deviant and different in comparison to the ideal (male) elite athlete, become accepted as regimes of truth. According to Gramsci’s hegemony theory, these regimes of truth become embedded into the mass consciousness if they remain unchallenged by those marginalised by the ideologies.

Inter- and intra-level analyses

Having analysed the data at an individual level, further inter- and intra-level analysis revealed several interrelationships between the themes that led to an understanding of the possible ways that environmental factors affect coaches of women athletes in HPS. One key intersection occurred between the macro-level construct of gender and the micro-level, style of coaching. In the following quotation, a coach explained how the views that are shaped at macro-level have a direct influence on coaching women at a micro-level:

If you go to different countries and you see the role that women play in that culture... It’s about cultural behaviour and that is a limiting factor basically in sports. We see in many countries, girls cannot swim, put on a swimsuit.

There are many limiting factors that are cultural due to society. If you think they [female athletes] behave like boys or like you (if you’re a man), it’s wrong. Then you have to adapt to the circumstances. You have to know how they [women athletes] think, how they act in certain circumstances. You have to learn. You have to adapt your coaching style. What you can say and what you can’t say. (Coach 1)

Communication is a fundamental part of the coaching. However, as Coach 8 summarised, certain topics of conversation (such as those related to the female menstrual cycle) depend on the wider macro-level context: “I don’t discuss it [menstruation] with the females in Ireland as it is a catholic country and so I do it through female coaches but in Denmark there would be absolutely no problem”. The link between the macro-level construct of gender and the micro-level coaching style was also emphasised in the following quotation:

It is socially very accepted that men try to excel but for women it’s not so obvious. [Women] prefer to stay in the group and not to excel to avoid envy and things like that... you have to be aware of that and that’s an area you need to give more attention, teach people that it is not wrong to excel. (Coach 7)

In another quotation, a coach captured the intersection of the three levels of analysis including at a macro-level the role of women in society, at a meso-level the structure of sport, and finally at the micro-level the sport/life balance, as follows:

Women have different roles in society outside of sport. You need to have more incentive for women because you have the biological clock ticking, women need a sport and life balance... so you have to adapt to that. The Danish elite sport commission is different to the Irish one where the Danish totally support childcare to ensure that women get the education, can work, sport whatever. The Irish [sport] setup is very much related to politics, related to the minister. (Coach 8)

Having employed Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, we conclude that there is evidence of

the role of culture in legitimising ideas (hegemonic masculinity) that become heavily embedded in contemporary society (sport), and we support the notion that these ideas transect and are supported as de facto practices into leadership practices (coaching women athletes). Indeed, our analysis revealed that the practices of coaches working with elite level women athletes are influenced by country-derived cultural and social influences on gender ideologies at the macro-level, coach development at a meso-level, and the coaching practices at the micro-level.

Study implications

The findings in this study respond to several calls for further examination on the factors that influence the coaching of women athletes in the context of HPS (e.g. Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006; Norman, 2016; Sotiadiou & de Haan, 2015). At a single level of analysis, the study identifies the macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that influence coaches of women rowers. The multi-level analyses then rectify several reductionistically biased results flowing from the conventional single-level examinations. Furthermore, the application of multilevel analysis, and inter- as well as intra-level considerations offer a significant innovation and a main theoretical contribution of this study.

The results of this study also offer several managerial insights and help draw practical recommendations. Specifically, policy makers and sport managers tend to overlook macro-level factors, such as political, social, and cultural ideologies; because these are factors they cannot control (De Bosscher et al., 2015a). However, the results of this study show that coaches' socio-cultural experiences influence their construct of gender and affect their approach to coaching women athletes. Hence, identifying macro-level factors can help managers understand coaches' perspectives, philosophy, and practice at a micro-level. This understanding can offer background knowledge needed to

inform both policy makers on coach development and sport managers on designing curriculum for coach education/professional development opportunities (i.e. meso-level interventions). These interventions can be organised in such ways that would allow coaches to reflect on their pre-shaped gender ideologies and equitable practices.

Existing research shows that people within sport organisations need to understand that gender cannot be used as a basis for discrimination or an add-on of an individual's identity (Acker, 2012). Instead, gender should be seen as a complex set of social relations enacted across a range of social practices (Norman, 2016). Therefore, even though policy makers and sport managers may not be able to influence macro-level factors directly, the socio-cultural construct of gender should be taken into consideration.

However insightful this study findings maybe to policy makers, sport managers and coaches in HPS, this exploratory study touched upon the surface of a very complicated issue. The study presents several limitations that offer an opportunity to embark on future research. A limitation is that the data represent the views of coaches only. This leaves room for future studies to be inclusive of women athletes. It would be of interest to explore elite women athletes' perceptions of the ways the macro, meso, and micro factors manifest themselves in their relationships with coaches and then examine how these data would correspond with the coaches' experiences. Further to this, it would be of great value to examine whether similar findings would emerge at a pre-elite level and how pre-elite findings would transcend later at the elite level. That examination may help avoid creating a picture of elite coaching levels independently from previous developmental stages and coaching approaches of elite women athletes.

We also wish to draw caution to generalising the finding. As this study was conducted in the context of elite rowing, it is likely that other sport, coaches, and athletes face different

environmental issues. This may depend on how the sport is perceived in various countries (macro-level), how the sport is structured at a meso-level and how coaches' philosophies manifest themselves during their relationships with athletes (e.g. gymnastics, as an early specialisation sport requires working with younger aged athletes who have different needs at the individual level).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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