

Gendered discourses in coaching high-performance sport

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Abstract

One of the most important sources of knowledge coaches draw on to inform their practice is their experience of being coached themselves. These experiences are gendered. To date, however, relatively little research is available that indicates how coaches do gender in their discursive coaching practices. We used a Foucauldian lens to explore discourses drawn on by 12 international elite rowing coaches to legitimate their 'regimes of truth' in their thinking about elite women rowers. Although they professed to treat everyone the same regardless of gender, they drew on discourses that constituted their women athletes as inferior to various implicit male norms. We suggest that coaches are reproducing the discourses about gender into which they were disciplined during their athletic careers and regard these as 'regimes of truth' in their own coaching practice. We discuss the implications of these findings with regard to the perpetuation of the gendering of coaching and conclude that the normalization of men and the gendered hierarchy in sport remains largely unchallenged.

Keywords

coaching, elite sport, Foucault, gender, rowing

Introduction

In 1988 Michael Messner explored how discursive practices embedded in current gender relations were informed by the increasing participation of women into sport at all levels. He concluded that although shifts had occurred, there had been little change in

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the gender hierarchy that constructed men as 'better' athletes. Since he wrote this essay, women's participation in sport has increased significantly at local and global levels. Currently every participating country in the Olympic games has to send at least one woman competitor. Now 30 years after Messner's essay, we examine the discursive practices of coaches of elite women and men athletes to gain insight into possible shifts that may have occurred in the constructed gender hierarchy. We assume that meanings inform and shape what individuals do and that therefore all practices have a discursive aspect. Although a dominant construction of gender in the sport world consists of a categorical binary consisting of men and women, we assume gender is also a process consisting of discursive practices that do and redo masculinities and femininities (Connell, 2005).

A dominant discourse describes sport as a heterosexual male domain and/or as a place where practices associated with desirable heterosexual masculinities are celebrated, although that may vary by context (e.g. Adams, 2011; Connell, 2005; Drummond, 1995; McKay et al., 2000). Kane (1995) and McKay et al. (2000) point to the social construction of differences between female and male athletes as one of the most powerful techniques employed to support male hegemony in sport. These dominant notions of masculinities and of gender differences can become regimes of truth that constitute male athletes and their bodies as the desired norm and practice in sport. Regimes of truth are the discourses that individuals in a specific field such as coaching accept and then make them function as truth.

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 and Messerschmidt, 2005). It is not surprising therefore, that men comprise the majority of coaches of both men and women's sports. Although much of the coaching literature on gender has focused on the underrepresentation of women and the experiences of women coaches working at the amateur and high-performance levels (e.g. Fastang et al., 2017; Norman, 2010a, 2010b), a small body of research explores the gendering of coaching itself. For example, Fielding-Lloyd and Mean (2008, 2011, 2016) and Lewis et al. (2015) explored the gendering of coach education. They found that instructors and male students were complicit in constructing male coaches and male athletes as the norm for the development of coaching methods that emphasized practices associated with desirable athletic masculinity. Adams et al. (2010) found that male coaches and athletes in semi-professional soccer in the United Kingdom used specific discourses to (re)construct themselves and other men according to systematic sets of gendered practices. For example, these coaches frequently used discourses that drew on narratives of war, gender and sexuality to facilitate and elicit aggressive and violent responses that presumably enhanced athletic performance.

Coaches may assume these constructions to be objectively true (Norman, 2016b). They may rely on these 'truths' to inform their thinking and to legitimize their practices when working with women and men athletes. A few scholars have specifically looked at how coaches draw on or use regimes of truth about gender when working with female athletes. For example, Edwards (2007) examined the discursive practices coaches used to construct gender in Japan. Although her specific focus was on women athletes, the results showed that they were continually compared to male athletes. She found that

Japanese coaches constructed male athletes as the norm and female athletes as physically and mentally inferior, emotionally needy and fragile. Navarre (2011) also explored the perceptions of men who coached both women and men's soccer at college level in the USA about gender similarities and differences in coach–athlete and teammate relationships. Navarre found that these US college coaches assumed that male athletes were more performance oriented and therefore required a more centralized leadership style from their coach and needed to receive more personal and harsh criticism compared to female athletes. Her results also showed that although these coaches thought that women were easier to coach and less competitive than men, they asserted that they coached men and women in similar ways. These results not only illustrate the gendered social hierarchy used by these coaches but also suggest that coaches may not critically reflect on or question their own 'regimes of truth' about gender.

The coaches in both these studies (Edwards, 2007; Navarre, 2011) did not, however, work at the elite level. Mills and Denison (2018) have argued that those who coach the elite are the coaches who are most respected and to whom others listen. They are assumed to embody a discourse of expertise. Cassidy et al. (2009) contended that the discourse of expertise exerts a great deal of power in coaching. The discourses drawn on by coaches in high-performance and international sport may, therefore, exert a great deal of power on other coaches as well as athletes. The power of this discourse of expertise may extend to ways gender is constructed and used to constitute athletes. The internationalization of coaching means coaches at the elite level may encounter many variations in discursive practices about gender and coaching, including desirable masculinity that may vary by context. These international experiences may enable them to focus on athletes more as individuals rather than as members of a fixed group circumscribed by their gender. Little is known, however, about the discourses about gender and coaching used by (elite) coaches who have coached in more than one country.

Foucault (1972: 49) contended that regimes of truth are expressed through discourses that create lenses through which individuals understand knowledges, truths and social realities. Discourses are sources of power/knowledge, acting on individuals who reproduce, challenge and resist them. This disciplinary power is exerted through hierarchical observation or experience, processes of (ab)normalization and examination (Foucault, 1977, 1980). Coaching discourses often regulate and discipline coaches by upholding what can be claimed as expert knowledge, that is, a discourse of expertise (Cassidy et al., 2009). Coaches in turn can use this discourse to discipline athletes into regimes of truth about gender.

Michel (2011, 2015) has argued that professionals pass on the theories that form a regime of truth for them to those with whom they work. Similarly, coaches may transmit their notions about gender to their athletes and try to discipline them into those ideas (see also Claringbould et al., 2015; Van Amsterdam et al., 2017). This knowledge, including regimes of truth about gender, can therefore become generative through athletes who later become coaches. Coaches draw on their experience as coach and as a former athlete as an important source of knowledge (Blackett et al., 2018; Cushion et al., 2003). Thus, coaches may be reproducing the discourses about gender and other social power relations into which they were disciplined during their athletic careers and may regard them as regimes of truth and therefore generative.

The discourses about coaching in which regimes of truth are embedded are also beginning to receive scholarly attention. Avner et al. (2017) critically analysed dominant discourses about coaching. They argued that excavation and disruption of dominant discourses are needed if significant change in coaching practices is to occur. Similarly, several scholars have recommended that researchers look at the discursive practices used by coaches to construct gender (Hovden and Tjonndal, 2017; Norman, 2016a). The way elite coaches understand gender could reproduce, produce and/or challenge current dominant regimes of truth about gender in sport and subsequently add to the gendering or redoing of gender in sport. Although some research has explored the construct of gender in coaching (Fasting and Pfister, 2000; Lorimer and Jowett, 2010; Norman, 2016a; Norman and French, 2013), relatively little is known about the regimes of truth that coaches who have coached both men and women at the elite level draw on to constitute their athletes. Earlier we suggested the discursive practices of coaches may have a generative effect and therefore need to be explored since their influence may play a crucial role in the challenging and reproducing of gender relations in sport. The elite athletes they coach may become coaches themselves.

The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore the discourses coaches draw on about gender to create and legitimate their 'regimes of truth' about the behaviour of elite athletes. We focus on elite rowing, a sport in which male and female athletes often train together and coaches commonly gain experience in training both genders. Men's rowing has been present on the Olympic programme since 1896, while women made their debut in the sport in the 1976 Games in Montreal. Elite athletes are defined as those on identified national performance pathways. The research question driving this exploratory study is: Which discourses about gender do elite rowing coaches use to constitute their athletes?

Method

We used a qualitative methodological approach to understand coaches' discursive practices. Specifically, we used a Foucauldian lens to explore the discourses about coaching and gender these coaches drew on to create and legitimate their 'regimes of truth' in their thinking about elite women and men rowers. Coaches were asked to participate in the study if they had experience in: (a) coaching both male and female rowers; (b) coaching rowers at an elite level; (c) coaching at the elite level for more than two years, a time-frame that means the coaches had experienced a major competition cycle; and (d) an appropriate level of spoken English to converse on this subject matter. The World Rowing Coaches Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was used as the platform to invite and recruit coaches with a range of international experiences for participation in the study.

The coaches were selected using a convenience sampling technique. Specifically, conference delegates were informed about the research during the conference registration process and were invited to participate in the study if they met all of the aforementioned criteria. The sample consisted of 12 rowing coaches who agreed to participate in this study. All participants received and signed a consent form prior to the interview explaining the aims of the study and ensuring the confidentiality of their participation. Nine nationalities and both genders (male = 9 ; female = 3) were represented in the

study, with coaching histories in 18 countries. We do not identify the nationalities and countries and assigned numbers as pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the coaches since they are well known in the world of rowing. The gender of the coach was not a consideration in the analysis since the emphasis of the study was on how athletes are constituted by coaches and how those statements perform a certain function to produce discursive practices that are gendered and/or redo gender as Messner (1988) suggested. We did not, therefore, focus on how that varied by gender of the coach.

We used individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were structured around the topics of: (a) definitions of success in rowing; and (b) experiences in coaching males and females. Since this was an exploratory study we used only these two topics and then followed each one with probes about underlying assumptions, clarifications and explanations. Interviews were conducted in English by the first author and an assistant and lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. The audios of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis commenced once all interviews had been completed, transcribed and number coded to ensure confidentiality. Using a process of open coding (Boeije, 2010) we first searched the data for emerging themes that were related to 'regimes of truth' about women and men athletes, labelled them and then discussed them with each other and refined them until agreement was reached. We then used axial coding (Boeije, 2010) to sort the data further. Once the axial coding was completed we compared the resulting three themes and the discourses in which they were embedded to produce conceptual clarity. Specifically, we finalized and placed these themes within wider sport and societal discourses circulating in sport.

Results

In the following sections we highlight how these coaches legitimized their regimes of truth about gender and especially how that pertained to elite women and men rowers. Firstly, we present the results as three separate themes consisting of: (a) the presence of absence; (b) the implicit and explicit use of a standard; and (c) resistance through attrition, and discuss each of these in depth in the context of the scholarly literature. We then discuss the broader discourses and the regimes of truth they represent and their implications for the gendering of sport.

The presence of absence

Contrary to the literature we drew on in the introduction section of this paper that positions the male athlete as physically superior, we noted an absence of a discussion about physical characteristics in the narratives of the coaches in the analysis of the data. This is surprising given that coaching texts tend to emphasize physical differences between men and women (e.g. Grahn, 2014; Kennedy and Bell, 2003; Warmenhoven et al., 2017; Yoshiga and Higuchi, 2003). In general, coaching knowledge and various textbooks on coaching tend to be based on a biomedical framework (Denison et al., 2017) that tends to view gender as a physical binary (Alsarve, 2017; Grahn, 2014; LaVoi et al., 2007). Similarly, chapter 5 of level 4 of the FISA Rowing coaching handbook (FISA, n.d.),

'Women's Issues; problems of high performance female athletes' focuses primarily on physical differentiation between the genders such as anatomical differences, menstrual 'problems', osteoporosis, muscular strength and endurance. It is surprising, then, that our interviewees did not refer to gendered physical aspects of rowing. It is possible that these coaches were not specifically responsible for physical training schemas, that for them physical differentiation was no longer an issue at the elite level or that such training was not their responsibility. Smith (2016) noted a similar dynamic in transnational coaches who worked in English soccer. These coaches assumed that elite players had mastered the needed techniques so that instead of focusing on physical repertoires, transnational coaches worked on fine-tuning team skills. The elite rowing coaches involved in this study may have held similar assumptions or responsibilities.

The analysis revealed not only the presence of an absent discourse of physicality but also a discourse of absence used by the coaches when talking about gender. Gender as a category did not seem to exist when they began the interviews. They framed their approach to coaching as gender neutral, which meant not distinguishing between males and females and treating them 'equally'. As Coach 12 said, 'I don't make any distinction between men and women.' Coach 3 explained that although their club had a specific interest in 'women in rowing', they did not appoint specific coaches just for the women or coach them different from men: 'The club always had a special interest in women in rowing. There was no distinct difference for coaching men or women. There were no coaches just for women, they [athletes] were all treated the same way.' Another coach endeavoured to remove the gender of the athletes altogether by using the term 'audience' to talk about athletes.

A skill of a good coach is knowing the audience and knowing what buttons to push with the audience other than just being pigeon-holed like 'you're a good women's coach or you're a good sculling coach'. If you're smart figuring out how to work with the audience you have, you maximize your potential. (Coach 2)

Although at the beginning of each interview the coaches professed to treat everyone the same regardless of gender, suggesting an absence of gendered discursive practices, we noted that throughout the interview they drew on discourses that constituted the female athletes as inferior to various implicit male norms. As we show below, this claim of sameness does not necessarily mean lack of differentiation based on gender. Similar to the results found by Edwards (2007) and Navarre (2011), our participants relied on their experience (hierarchical observation) to (ab)normalize the behaviour of athletes by creating men as the norm or standard. They did this in various ways.

The implicit and explicit use of a standard

Although the coaches began the interviews positioning themselves as gender neutral, they did differentiate among women and men athletes using a hierarchical binary. For example, as the interview progressed Coach 12 highlighted several differences between male and female athletes: 'They [females] react differently, they behave differently, they are more sensible in certain circumstances and they can resist things that boys don't.' This coach

uses a dichotomy that clearly constructs female behaviour as different from that of male athletes, who are positioned as the norm or the acceptable. 'They' is used as the subject pronoun, invoking a distinction between the male and female athletes. We also note this was the only example of a coach referring to female behaviour in a positive manner. In general, comparative comments tended to describe characteristics as desirable in men and lacking in women, for example, 'men seem to be more confident, women tend to over analyse' (Coach 4), and 'it happens more with girls, that you have to teach them more about themselves, teach them self-esteem but not with the boys' (Coach 7), or, 'it is socially very accepted that men try to excel but for women it's not so obvious' (Coach 9).

This constructed gender difference is also reflected in chapter 5 ('Women's Issues') of the FISA coaching handbook referred to earlier. There are no comparative chapters outlining 'men's issues'. Sub-headings of this chapter include 'Societal Problems', specifically relating to family commitments, and 'Emotional Problems', linked in this case to menstruation. These sections in the FISA book frame women and not men as having commitments to their children (if any) and suggest that being a mother/parent and elite athlete simultaneously is problematic. This framing does not reflect the experience of elite women athletes, however. Palmer and Leberman (2009), for example, reported that the elite women athletes they interviewed emphasized how motherhood and an athletic identity together strengthened their sport aspirations. This discrepancy between assumptions about women athletes and the experiences of women athletes suggests that the regimes of truth about these women are informed by how coaches construct elite male athletes. Elite male athletes are rarely discursively placed in the subject position of fatherhood, even when they may have children.

Women, including elite rowers described in this study, are also discursively subjected to being placed in particular subject positions that are used by others to strengthen a gender hierarchy that devalues them. Coach 6 admits to using a misogynistic construction of gender as a way of motivating male athletes and positioning them as superior: 'Sometimes, when a male is acting in what you'd describe in a fairly weak manner, you might use the expression of "stop acting like a girl" and you know that it's wrong but sometimes it's where I'll go.' This coach is aware that this is a derogatory and stereotypical statement that constitutes women as less and weaker than men but has used it on more than one occasion as a technique to motivate male athletes. Other research has pointed to the use of similar misogynist motivational practices in sport (Adams et al., 2010; for a summary see Fink, 2016). The continued use of these practices confirms Norman's (2016b) argument that coach education about gender falls short when it does not work with coaches to critically reflect on ways they conceptualize about gender, that is, think and do gender in sport.

The construct of female athletes as physically and/or mentally weaker than male athletes has been 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 female athletes the coaches advocated a 'try your best' mentality based on their understanding that female athletes were not as competitive or capable of 'high-level' performance.

A default from the male norm is also highlighted in the following quotation as a coach discusses having to adapt the coaching style to accommodate for differences such as gender: 'Depending on who you are coaching, you have to adapt. It's not only gender, it's cultural and there are so many aspects that you have to recognize, analyse and then adapt to it' (Coach 12). The use of the word 'adapt' suggests there is a norm or implicit rule of conduct for elite athletes. Those who are seen as different, therefore, need adaptations of those rules or need to adapt to conform to the existing rules. Coach 5 described the physical changes to the body as a result of training as being a barrier for women.

When someone talks to a girl about rowing, the first thing that comes to her mind is 'oh I don't want to get big'. Boys don't think like this. Body image for females here [South American country] is a barrier. Body culture is a big part of our culture.

This coach called for the need to develop specific educational resources for coaches of women to help them address these issues. Interestingly, none of the coaches called for educational resources for coaches of men's teams that might help them critically reflect on the ways they use gendered discourses to constitute their athletes. Coach 7 referred to differentiated educational programs aimed at the female athletes.

You have to be aware that women can be more outspoken but self-esteem is a big issue. I try to be aware of it and hold several workshops led by experts that teach them mental routines that they can use. I will do the same with men, the only thing I notice that the lack of knowledge in that area for women has much to do with self-esteem and self-confidence.

A coach explains that there is a big psychological difference between male and female athletes: 'There is one big difference between girls and boys. Girls need to talk about their problems' (Coach 12). The questioning style of communication used by women athletes may be seen not only as a figurative but also as a literal waste of time, as a problem. 'They [women athletes] ask more questions. Women want you to explain why and I have to think more. That's the biggest difference. I don't have a problem answering their questions but it takes more time –that's the problem' (Coach 10).

The coaches not only used a discourse of difference that describes elite rowers as behaving in gendered ways, they also positioned female athletes as deviants and posited that as a regime of truth. The behaviour of male athletes did not seem to evoke any problems for these coaches and was therefore framed as 'the standard' or desirable norm. Female athletes deviated from this norm, however, and did not therefore 'do' the category of elite athlete 'properly' and caused a 'problem'. This constructed abnormality could undermine women being seen as 'real' elite athletes because they do not fit the norm or standard formation of an athlete as a 'subject'. Foucault (1983) argues that individuals are made into subjects by being subjected to control by, and being dependent on, others, all while taking on identities consistent with what they understand themselves to be. This questioning style of communication is not congruent with the identity of an ideal elite athlete as constructed by these coaches.

As we indicated in the introduction, coaching knowledge is generative as athletes who later become coaches draw on their experience of being coached themselves. One of the coaches in our study specifically reflected on this experience and how it informed their current coaching practice.

The biggest source of my curriculum that I use is my experience as an athlete. I was coached by 12 coaches in my Olympic pursuit and I gleaned what I think was extremely valuable, what to do, what not to do. (Coach 12)

As the vast majority of coaches are male, and they themselves have probably been subjected to control by male coaches, it is not surprising their construct of the ideal elite athlete embraces valued practices of masculinity described by these coaches in positive ways: obedience, not quitting and mental toughness.

When these coaches discuss athletes as behaving in gendered ways, the male athletes are positioned as being easy to work with but the questioning communication style of the female athletes is marked as different. These type of comments suggests that these coaches have created a regime of truth that means athletes do not spend much time questioning their coaches. As the following quotation shows, the ideal athlete – the male athlete – just does what the coach asks them to do.

There is difference in attitude [between women and men]. In women's coaching you have to be more open to discussion, to be able to communicate more than in coaching men. Not all the time but males just do what you ask them. (Coach 8)

A consequence of having specialized knowledge and residing in a position of power or leadership is the assumption that the leader or coach is telling the truth (Denison and Avner, 2011). The perceived questioning communication style of female athletes may be seen as a challenge to the coach's position as the expert in knowledge of the sport and the coach-athlete relationship. Foucault (2001) has called this questioning of authority 'parrhesia' (fearless speech). Through deliberate 'confrontation' with their coaches by asking questions, athletes may alter their relation to themselves so as to develop their own capacity for what Foucault calls parrhesia – that is, the ability to state their position at great personal and political risk. A Foucauldian perspective suggests that in general athletes that engage in critical questioning will be disciplined by coaching discursive power. Claringbould et al. (2015) found that the authoritative power of a coach to organize training sessions and to differentiate hierarchically between athletes resulted in young athletes feeling dependent on their coaches and made it difficult for them to resist coaching behaviours with which they at times disagreed. Possibly, then, the questioning in which elite women rowers purportedly engaged, and which the coaches found problematic, can also be seen as a form of parrhesia and thus as a form of resistance. Whereas the athletes participating in the Claringbould et al. (2015) study were worried about being selected for a higher team if they were critical of coaching practices, the coaches in the current study were working with athletes who had already been selected to the highest team possible, which may have enabled them to engage in parrhesia. This critical speech may also function as a form of resistance and/or play a role in attrition as we show below.

Resistance through attrition

Female attrition in sport is of concern across the globe. Similarly, FISA (2014) has noted a higher attrition rate for female than male athletes in rowing. In general, the dropout rate

of females in sport is often framed as a women's problem as the following quotation from Coach 12 indicates.

The coach coaching females has to know the psychological issues of girls. That is one of the biggest issues we have to learn and we have to respect. I always ask at the end of training how everything is going. The day I don't do it with the girls is the day there will be a mess. The day I don't do it with the boys, nothing. The girls need the feedback and they want to be listened to. If girls don't understand they quit.

Coach 2 tries to explain the 'why' of the problem of female retention, implying that women athletes may be distracted by their other 'identities' outside of sport:

For men, their identity is more closely tied to 'I am an athlete and that's who I am'. Women tend to think that this is something that I do rather than ... they just don't want to be labelled as just an athlete or a rower – there are so many other things. The attrition rate is greater for women athletes than for men. A study showed that women are up to more than eight times likely to quit their sport than men; one of the reasons given was that female athletes don't identify [with their sport], they don't have their [whole] identity tied up in their sport, saying, 'I am a rower, I am a basketball player'.

This coach takes the results of a study about attrition and about identity as a regime of truth and uses it to explain women's perceived lack of sport identity that according to these coaches is needed to show commitment. In the following example Coach 11 implies that sacrifice is a price of success and maybe something male athletes are more willing to pay.

I always say when you know what you want to achieve, you know what you must do and then you have to decide if it is worth it. If you do it properly, you go through this process and if it is too much then you quit – if you're not willing to sacrifice things that need to be done to get your goal you're wasting time and maybe men are willing to sacrifice more.

In their meta-study examining narrative and discursive perspectives on athletic identity, Ronkainen et al. (2016) suggest that athletic identity is a cultural construction produced within dominant discourses of gender, age, class, race and so on. In the example cited above, the female athlete is being subjected to a discourse that associates multiple identities with weakness or a lack of focus – men do not quit because their whole identity is tied up with their sport. The interviews suggest that according to the coaches women elite rowers have not taken up the subject position that coaches prefer and that is centred on an athletic identity. Instead, they set boundaries or limits on their experiences and energy devoted to rowing. The idea of a singular focus being the most desirable for elite athletes is, however, questionable. As we showed earlier, women athletes may thrive with more than one focus in their lives (Palmer and Leberman, 2009).

This description of female athletes as quitting when their needs are not met is also reflected in the coaches' observations of their toughness. In the following example a coach attributes women's attrition to their relative lack of toughness.

As soon as a woman does not feel comfortable, she quits. The boy can stay because he's focused on the result. He knows he will go through whatever he has to. The girl is not focused on the [end] result like the boy. As soon as she is uncomfortable with her teammates, the structure, whatever, she quits. (Coach 12)

The above quotation refers to mental toughness. Mental toughness has been described as one of the most used but least understood terms in applied sport psychology (Jones et al., 2002). Researchers and theorists have defined mental toughness in terms of coping effectively with pressure and adversity, recovering or rebounding from setbacks and failures as a result of increased determination to succeed, persisting or refusing to quit, being competitive with one's self and with others, being insensitive or resilient, having unshakable self-belief in controlling one's own destiny, thriving on pressure and possessing superior mental skills (see Crust, 2007 for a comprehensive review on the literature). Many of these qualities are embedded in the rowing coaches' narratives about their athletes. They seem to attribute them to their male athletes and suggest implicitly that they are relatively absent in their female athletes. For example, 'men are less vulnerable than women. With women, if you make a mistake with one of them it becomes very difficult to coach the rest of them' (Coach 11). However, one coach looks beyond a homogenous description of all women behaving in a certain way. Despite identifying what could be classified as a lack of mental toughness, lack of self-confidence and emotional outburst, Coach 7 trusts that this behaviour will not affect performance.

One of my female rowers is incredibly insecure, it doesn't matter that we won one gold in Beijing, she was totally insecure. Before a semi-final she would be a wreck but I didn't have to look after her because I knew once she got onto the water, she knew exactly what she was going to do, so I wouldn't be worried even if she would be crying, but you have to be aware, you have to know the person.

In their study of the institutional context of emotional abuse in elite youth sport, Jacobs et al. (2017: 136) found that the coaches in their study constructed 'toughness' as a characteristic of elite sport and used this as a rationale to justify why they had 'to push and discipline their athletes at certain times'. In this youth sport the coaches were redefining what could be demarcated as emotional abuse as a technology, needed to develop the requisite mental toughness in female athletes that was deemed necessary to perform at an international level (see also Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis, 2014).

While Coach 12 believes female athletes are not as mentally tough as male athletes, they do not position the coach as having a role to play in developing mental toughness through their coaching practices. Instead, this discursive practice of not embodying mental toughness in a specific manner is constructed as an inherent weakness belonging solely to the athlete and as a female deficiency that coaches need to take into account. Coach 12 uses personal observations to assume that for female athletes the process of participating is more important than the result. Furthermore, they devalue the 'process' by referring to it as the 'social part', thereby further disassociating it from any sporting context. As a result, Coach 12 subsequently constitutes women athletes as caring more about the social part of sport than the winning: 'The women (and there are exceptions)

put more emphasis not on the result itself, more in how they finished it – the project. They probably need the social part more, rather than the result.’ This is similar to Navarre’s (2011) finding that college soccer coaches constructed women as less competitive than men. Such constructions seem to function as regimes of truths for these coaches and position women as deficient athletes.

Discussion and conclusion

The regimes of truth that are embedded in the language used by these coaches to talk about gender and gender differences reveal systems of thought and knowledge (Foucault, 1994) that inform how they constitute their athletes. Similar to the soccer coaches studied by Navarre (2011), the rowing coaches in this study positioned themselves as not coaching male or female athletes differently. However, they were not gender blind. Possibly the coaches subconsciously defaulted to the ‘politically correct’ position, of ‘everyone is equal’ at the start of the interview because it is the right thing to say. Indeed, they may well believe that this is the case. However, this self-identified gender neutrality is simply an ‘empty ideology’ if the discourse remains rhetorical and not put into practice (see also Embrick, 2011).

The coaches participating in this study drew on several discourses to describe differences they perceived between their male and female athletes. The framing of men as the norm was also reaffirmed with the explicit deployment of traditional gendered discourses about women being different. For example, the only chapter in the FISA coaching handbook specifically devoted to the female athlete is entitled ‘Women’s Issues’ (FISA, n.d.). LaVoi et al. (2007), who engaged in a content analysis of books that focused on coaching girls, found that the coaching of girls was problematized and that girl athletes were constructed as ‘other’. Fielding-Lloyd and Mean (2011: 351) explain that when these ‘discourses about natural differences, [are] intertextually linked to other powerful discourses such as religion and biology, [they] provide potent resources for practices that construct difference; discourses widely deployed to frame women’s failure as intrinsic and exonerate organizational culpability’. The societal power of these ‘empirical’ yet naturalized discourses makes their deployment significant, suggesting that it is natural for women to have ‘issues’ and to be weaker and therefore less of an athlete than the male ideal who is presented as the norm. A social hierarchy is embedded in this discourse that not only makes men the norm but also values their achievements and ways of doing and thinking about elite sport. This discourse that supports gender hierarchy in sport and sees it as common sense is also evident in the material differences in the financial support for and media coverage of women’s and men’s sports in many countries; these differences are often seen as common sense. Foucault (1972) has suggested that when a discourse is widely used in practices and language, then that discourse is evidence of a discursive formation that in turn supports this combination of regimes of truth (see also Denison, 2010). Such a discursive formation has become a source of power that is difficult to challenge.

With few exceptions, female behaviour was therefore positioned as ‘other’, deviant and disruptive. Women athletes are constructed as athletes who ask a lot of questions, have issues, are not necessarily focused on the results and do not have their entire identity tied up with sport. An elite (male) athlete is assumed to focus on results, does not quit and does what the coach tells him to do without question. These findings suggest these

women are judged for not knowing how to behave as elite athletes, and/or they have not been disciplined into the norm for athlete behaviour that is based on men.

These coaches used several dominant discourses to create a discursive formation that frames female athletes as the 'other' with the male athlete as the norm. The coaches explained that 'women need to talk – male athletes just do what you ask them to do'. Fox (2006), who investigated the importance of coaching control, noted that many coaches believe that an athlete who questions his or her decisions or authority is a problem because the coach should be in control and the absolute leader of the team. This understanding of control reinforces a hierarchal use of power and a traditional view of leadership as imposed, not shared, and ignores how athletes have power, which they can exercise in a number of ways, from not giving their coach any respect to quitting the team (Denison and Avner, 2011). Possibly this view of leadership espoused by these coaches may explain why the attrition rate of elite women rowers is higher than that of men.

Applying a discursive lens to the narratives of high-performance rowing coaches, we have been able to identify regimes of truth they use to constitute their athletes and how together they are part of a discursive formation that may be difficult to change although it may have little validity. Women may resist these discourses by dropping out and engaging in parrhesia. Both these practices can therefore be sites where hegemonic practices are challenged and contested.

We note that the gender hierarchy referred to by Messner (1988) 30 years ago remains structurally intact. Although the coaches try to consciously position male and female athletes on the same level, avoiding reference to physical differences and purporting to coach them the same, this idea of sameness remains an empty ideology as they use discourses that constitute men as 'the' elite athlete and women as being weaker than men. This so-called sameness translates into a social hierarchy. As most coaches are former athletes who are likely to have been disciplined using dominant notions of desirable masculinity (see Connell, 2005), we suggest the 'normalization of men' within the context of coaching continues to be generative and remains unchallenged. These coaches were only able to frame problems or solve them from the position of 'the normalization of men'. Therefore, although coaches could play a vital and visible role in challenging dominant sporting discourses, we conclude that they may in fact often be complicit in maintaining the discourse that positions male athletes at the top of the sporting hierarchy. We concur with Norman (2016a) who argues that coaching education that focuses on difference or on providing equal opportunities may therefore fall short of bringing about a significant change in gendered power relations in sport. The call to explore discursive practices of coaches including those about gender is one that should be taken seriously (Denison and Avner, 2011; Hovden and Tjonndal, 2017; Norman, 2016a).

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