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'It's not particularly P.C., you know…' Women coaches' performing gender in strength and conditioning

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Strength & conditioning (S&C) has become a chief part of athletes’ physiological preparation. Despite S&C’s growing presence across sports, women coaches have been generally marginalised and under-represented. This study explores female S&C coaches’ experiences and coping mechanisms in a male-dominated industry. In doing so, semi-structured interviews with 15 female S&C coaches were conducted. Main themes identified from interview data are: organisational politics, impression management, and humour. The findings suggest that women S&C coaches are often in subservient positions and have to adopt some of the traditional, male-generated sub-cultural practices to fit in. They carefully manage their coaching front stage to generate an impression that is expected and accepted in the given milieu. In their efforts to fit in, women often find themselves in a multiplicity of power matrices which involve a continuous negotiation of gender identity, internal politics and managing sexist banter.

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Strength and conditioning (S&C) is a key part of athletes' physiological preparation to improve physical ability and help prevent injuries. It is now expected that athletes ranging from college and university to the elite level receive S&C coaching (Sousa, 2019). The growing recognition of the role in athletic developments has increased the number of people seeking employment in the field (Bishop et al., 2019). However, despite S&C's growing presence across all sports, women S&C coaches remain generally under-represented. In a 2016 survey, conducted by the UK S&C Association (UKSCA) to scan the state of the field, out of 600 respondents only 7% were women (Stewart et al., 2016). According to most recent statistics, within Division 1 of the United States (U.S.) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which represent the highest level of intercollegiate athletics in the U.S., 86.1% of all S&C coaches employed are male (Lapchick et al., 2020). This high percentage of male S&C coaches within the NCAA Division 1 has remained largely unchanged since the 2005/2006 season (Lapchick et al., 2020). Furthermore, within the UK 93% of all the qualified S&C coaches are also male (Medlin-Silver, Lampard, & Bunsell, 2017). Evidently, female S&C coaches are extensively under-represented across the sport spectrum. Therefore, the main aim of this research was to explore female S&C coaches' experiences and coping mechanisms in a male-dominated industry through a socio-cultural lens.

Theoretical Frameworks

Connell's (1987) account of hegemonic masculinity is deployed to make sense of gender imbalances in the S&C profession. Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) explain hegemonic masculinity as a pattern of behaviour that can be characterized by acts which reinforce male privilege, support conformity to an idealized version of masculinity, and subordinate women to maintain a system of patriarchy. S&C, similar to many other aspects of sports coaching, has (almost) been the exclusive preserve of men, predominantly recruiting White, middle class

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53 males, thereby reinforcing traditional Western gender roles and values (Connell, 2005).
54 Sartore-Baldwin (2013) observed that S&C coaches are predominantly White males with
55 similar, Western-based education. Whilst some aspects of modern sports have become gender
56 aware and, to some extent, balanced, mostly due to feminist scholarly work and activism
57 (Toffoletti et al., 2018), male athletes and sports perceived as masculine (e.g., rugby and
58 association football) are still considered dominant and more prestigious (Chalabaev et al.,
59 2013). The presence of women in traditionally male-exclusive spaces continues to threaten
60 established male privilege and gender order (Banwell et al., 2019), and, thus, women's attempt
61 to access or progress in S&C may still be perceived as trespassing and outside of certain
62 cultural norms (Mcgrath, & Chananie-Hill, 2009).
63
64 A way woman may manage gender trespassing and overarching male hegemony, a type of
65 interaction order (Goffman, 1983), can be explained through Goffman's work, especially his
66 concept of impression management. Goffman (1959) viewed society as a metaphorical set of
67 theatrical stages, requiring an individual – performer – to display behaviour deemed suitable
68 and appropriate by the expectations of the audience – setting. In complying with setting specific
69 expectations, the performer displays a certain image of themselves – personal front – in public.
70 Here, 'impression management' refers to how the performer displays an idealised, front stage
71 impression of themselves to manage public expectations. Goffman argued that society
72 generally expects some level of consistency between appearance, setting, manner and front,
73 and subtleties of everyday interaction order can be detected when key aspects of social
74 interactions misalign (Molnar & Kelly, 2012). For instance, in S&C male coaches are expected
75 to train athletes, in various sport settings, all of which are traditionally associated with male
76 hegemony and related behaviours and mannerisms. Women occupying (or aiming to occupy)
77 this male hegemony-informed setting creates a discrepancy in the alignment between

appearance and setting whereby the social dynamics of S&C may be disrupted. It is generally the responsibility of the performer to remedy disruptions in the seamless connections between parts of the interaction order and restore their front stage performance to align with setting specific expectations. As personal front is a performance shaped by both the setting and its cultural context, a combined deployment of hegemonic masculinity and impression management will enable us to explore and interpret how women S&C coaches manage their front stage performance to be in line with their male audience's hegemonic expectation.

Strength and Conditioning Coaching Research

While a large body of literature has examined the underrepresentation of women in sports coaching, specific investigations into the professional challenges facing women S&C coaches have been limited. Lack of experience, family conflicts, high expectations and discrimination have been identified as main reasons for women S&C coaches' absence from the profession (Magnusen & Rhea, 2009). Furthermore, given that strength, power and a muscular physique have been long recognized as essential aspects of masculinity (Wienke, 1998), women entering a domain that specifically focuses on developing muscle and strength directly goes against gendered expectations (McGrath & Chananie-Hill, 2009). Enhancing these essential masculine qualities are associated with sporting success and general social dominance and, thus, are often perceived to be the exclusive domain of men. As a corollary, male athletes are exposed to more S&C training from a much younger age compared to their female counterparts (Reynolds et al., 2012). As young male athletes are more likely to be offered to partake in structured S&C education, developing their bodies' physical capacities can align their identity with male hegemonic perspectives of masculinist embodiment and expression (Anderson, 2009). In doing so, this practice, and related cultural perceptions, preserve society's traditional gendered values, myths, and prejudices around muscle and

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strength being predominantly associated with men and masculinity, and fragility and acquiescence with women and femininity. Within S&C, this has resulted in cultural biases towards certain corporeal architypes.

Edmonds (2018) noted that it is not uncommon for S&C coaches to be hired based solely on their physical appearance. Hence, in an S&C setting, a muscular physique can signal expertise and knowledge, regardless of qualification (Edmonds, 2018). This perception can hinder women's entry into positions where a muscular and large physique is considered essential. Therefore, it can be argued that women entering the field of S&C are transgressing, not only through sport but also muscle, both of which are still often considered to be quintessential components of Western masculinity. To wit, when women enter male-dominated fields, especially those associated with leadership responsibilities such as S&C coaching, they often face a multitude of challenges such as marginalisation, prejudice and the presence of gender stereotypes (Schull & Kihl, 2019), further demonstrating a male hegemonic power structure.

In sports coaching, female athletes also tend to perpetuate gender stereotypes and have expressed preferences for male sports coaches due to assumptions around men having higher qualifications, greater sports knowledge, and better coaching/leadership skills (Schull & Kihl, 2019). These attitudes are also shared within S&C. For instance, male athletes prefer working with other male S&C coaches (Magnusen & Rhea, 2009) and female athletes believe that resistance training is a masculine activity that should be reserved for men (Fischer, 2005). Women's attitude to S&C maybe due to their lack of exposure to S&C coaching programs compared to their male counterparts, which has led to differences in perceptions regarding its preparatory value (Laskowski & Ebben, 2016). In other words, gender stereotypes, lack of

127 access and role models, coupled with female athletes' desire to be coached by men may have
128 deterred women from pursuing a career in S&C (Mullin & Bergan, 2018).
129
130 Despite women being under-represented in S&C, descriptive data and anecdotal evidence
131 suggest that there has been a slow, incremental increase in the number of women in the field
132 during the last 25 years (Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). In addition to, or perhaps as a consequence
133 of, the marginal number of female S&C coaches in employment, academic literature has also
134 paid limited attention to female S&C coaches. So far, only Sartore-Baldwin (2013) has
135 explored the professional experiences of female Division 1 S&C coaches. Sartore-Baldwin,
136 (2013, p. 836) reported that "female strength coaches have no room to move up in the field"
137 and identified mentorship as a key factor responsible for women emerging as successful S&C
138 coaches. Mentors help neophytes navigate challenges associated with a profession. As there is
139 still a dearth of women S&C mentors available, novice female S&C coaches may find that as
140 a barrier for pursuing and/or progressing their career in the field (O'Malley & Greenwood,
141 2018). This observation adds weight to the concept of hegemonic masculinity having an
142 influential role within S&C. Whilst the insights of Sartore-Baldwin, (2013) are relevant and
143 informative, further investigating the experiences of women in S&C positions could prove
144 valuable to the advancement of gender equality in this field.
145
146 The research reviewed indicates the lack of female S&C coaches across the sport spectrum,
147 suggesting men's privileged and dominant positions in S&C as a site of male hegemony.
148 Therefore, informed by a critical sociological lens, we provide an exploration into how female
149 S&C coaches live through and negotiate the social dynamics of a male dominated sport setting.
150
151 **Method**

Research Design

In this study, we followed a constructivist research paradigm that purports that individuals in societies develop their own, subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). In line with this philosophy, a narrative approach was selected to gain an understanding of the thoughts and experiences of the participants (Elliott, 2005). A narrative inquiry helps identify the core story of the data collected and both reveal and explain issues that have had a bearing on participants' narratives (Hennink et al., 2011). Therefore, the narrative nature of this study allowed flexibility in exploring the content of the verbal data and allowed participants' voice to come to the forefront (Elliott, 2005). This approach was chosen to allow meaning to be drawn from the interviews, and then organised into themes to construct the narratives presented below. The participants' experiences as S&C coaches were the central focus of this study, which were explored via semi-structured interviews. Interviews allow for the development of personal connection between the researcher and participants, and permit probing and clarification with follow-up questions when new information appears (Hennink et al., 2011). The meanings of those themes are then interpreted and presented as research findings.

Participants

After gaining institutional ethical approval and informed consent, primary data were collected between August 2017 and March 2019 with fifteen accredited female S&C coaches. Participants were purposively drawn from the population of women S&C coaches by snowball sampling (Patton, 2015) via social media (Twitter). Participants volunteered to take part in the study and their age ranged from twenty-one to forty-one years (*Mean* age = 30.9; *SD* = 6.0), with a minimum of 2 years' experience of coaching men and women (*Mean* = 9.3; *SD* = 6.4). In line with Singleton and Straits' (1999) suggestion, efforts were made to maximise the

variation of the sample by including S&C coaches from around the globe. Participants have worked in the UK (n = 10), America (n = 3) and Australia (n = 2). One participant was of Asian origin while the remaining fourteen participants were White (Table 1). All participants are referred to by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Procedure

An interview guide following Norman (2010) was used to structure the interviews (see Table 2). The interview schedule devised for the purpose of the research focused on: (1) participants' background in and early experiences of S&C coaching, (2) barriers participants had experienced throughout their career, (3) participants' experiences of working as an S&C coach, and (4) participants' advice for aspiring women S&C coaches. At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to provide any further information that they thought would be relevant to the research (Talmy & Richards, 2011). Interviews were conducted by the second author at a time/date chosen by the interviewees and were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission. To accommodate participants' lifestyles and time differences, fourteen of the interviews were conducted via Skype (Hanna, 2012) and one was face-to-face. Interviews lasted 35 mins on average, ranging from 30 – 39 mins. Length of interviews varied based on participants' daily work schedule, commitment, and length of answers. Once the interviews were manually transcribed verbatim, 126 pages of text were generated.

Corresponding with existing literature within sport, themes that emerged from the participants' experiences involved: organisational politics and impression management (Mazerolle et al., 2015; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). However, a novel theme was also identified in the majority of the interviews: the presence of humour in dealing with challenging situations in S&C. To further explore this newly emerging theme, follow-up

interviews were conducted and all participants were invited for a second interview. Due to participants' prior commitments, only four follow-up interviews materialised, specifically focusing on the presence of humour in S&C. Follow-up interviews lasted 15 mins on average and ranged from 12 - 20 mins. Once the second interviews were manually transcribed verbatim, 11 pages of text were generated.

Data Analysis

Interviews were analysed thematically through a combination of both deductive and inductive approaches. We drew on general, relevant ideas from exiting research as well as our own close reading of the interview generated data set. This allowed for the incorporation of existing and novel ideas into the research findings. A six-phase thematic analysis suggested by Braun & Clarke (2019) was followed to identify, describe, and interpret patterns across the dataset. The first step of the analysis process involved all authors becoming familiar with the data by reading each transcript repeatedly and identifying significant statements relating to, and illustrating, the various aspects of participants' experiences as S&C coaches (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The next step involved authors separately identifying and gathering key themes from the interview data. Excerpts from each transcript were organized into themes. Themes identified by each author were collectively reviewed, discussed, and scrutinized in relation to their significance to the research question and relevant theory (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Based on the discussion and re-visiting of transcripts, three key themes were defined and agreed to be included in the discussion. The final step involved choosing evocative quotations which were representative snippets of the entire interview data set selected by the researchers to provide rich insight. Based on both set of interviews and member reflection, what is presented in the findings is our interpretation of the verbal data informed by existing knowledge, social theory, and the voice of the participants.

Methodological Rigor

As part of our data interpretation process, we considered in what ways and to what extent our own positionality may influence our research following Kanemasu & Molnar (2019). The lead author identifies as a white, cisgender, straight male academic and a qualified S&C coach with 9 years of S&C coaching experience. During his S&C coach career, he became aware (through conferences, courses and CPD events) that there were very few women S&C coaches which stimulated an interest in exploring women's absence. This observation led to conversations with both the second and third authors about exploring women's absence in S&C coaching. The second author is white, straight, married female, a mother, as well as a qualified sports coach, and educator. While she had not experienced exclusion or marginalisation in her sports coaching career, she was keen to explore the field of S&C coaching and provide a female coach's perspective in the research. The third author is white, cisgender, straight male academic, a father, as well as a migrant. He considers himself a critical sociologist whose work has gradually become more focused on understanding and empowering marginalized and disenfranchised populations. He has provided a sociological insight to developing the research and exploring the qualitative data. To capitalised on the different individual perspectives, the authors regularly engaged in extensive discussions about the (re)framing of interview questions, data analysis, and interpretation.

In addition to the above, to confirm our reasoning on which the theme selection rested, we employed credibility strategies to ensure methodological rigor. This included member checking where interpretation of the findings and key themes identified were emailed to all participants to provide them an opportunity to comment on potential misreading of the data (Zitomer & Goodwin, 2004). In addition, member reflection took place with a subset of the participants prior follow-up interview completion. At the outset of the follow-up interviews, a

researcher-participant dialogue took place (member reflections) on the data analysis, and interpretation of all findings to help generate additional insight and refine themes (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This was implemented with the view to prioritise participants' voices over the researchers. Member checking and reflection indicated no disagreements and themes identified by the researchers were confirmed by the participants. This process allowed a robust examination and comparison of the participants' narratives as well as the views of the authors (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Findings and Discussion:

Organisational Gender Politics – "It will always be a boys' club"

The emphasis on masculinity in sports serves to marginalise and exclude feminine attributes from entering positions, such as S&C, which are thought to require physical strength, bravado, and strong leadership qualities to excel (Whisenant, 2008). This not only affirms men's power within the sporting realm, but also over women. The concept and existence of 'old boys' club' and the masculinized association with the job role was often cited as a reason for women's lack of social capital in S&C (Mullin & Bergan, 2018). For instance, Elizabeth noted about S&C coaching that 'I think it will always be a boys' club. But you just have to go with it and not try and change that and just be a part of it'. This quote describes men's tendency in positions of power to maintain their privilege by supporting those who have the same values with regard to social status, gender, sexual orientation, etc. This creates layers of power matrices resulting in predominantly White Western men remaining in the centre and women, along with other marginalised groups, on the periphery (Puwar, 2004). The prevalence of the 'old boys' club' was identified across U.S. NCAA Divisions I, II and III to be a limiting factor for women seeking to advance their career (Mazerolle et al., 2015; O'Malley & Greenwood, 2018). Consistent with these findings, our participants noted that the prevalence of male-only-

networks limited or discouraged their job progression. When discussing her interaction with a male S&C coach after a job interview, Grace conveyed:

> There are a number of jobs [where] they couldn't outwardly say because it's a legal issue, that I was not picked because I was female, but especially at an all-boys school those kind of roles, you'd get an interview, but they wouldn't pick you. But they couldn't give you any examples of how you could improve or why you didn't get the role.

A common observation among participants was that men employ/promote men and, therefore, women are at a disadvantage when applying for S&C positions or seek to advance their career. Holly stated:

> There was a pattern of female staff leaving not for career improvement, but leaving because they didn't feel valued and they felt it was like 'jobs for the boys'. And I saw an increase in progression in top heavy males in charge of jobs. It was almost like if all the male members of staff always managed to end in places they wanted to end up.

This quotation clearly reflects the omnipresence of male networks (Lorde, 2003) and their impact on women S&C coaches' career progression. Men appear to enjoy a type of privilege that is taken for granted, but is potentially detrimental to the career prospects of women S&C coaches. For instance, one participant in Sartore-Baldwin's study (2013, p. 836) noted that "a female can only go so high" in S&C coaching. This finding is consistent with existing academic literature around women's marginalisation in sport coaching as a result of the 'old boys' club (Norman, 2010; Norman & Alexandra, 2018). Specifically, in sport coaching women have reported feeling secondary and left out, and having poor working relationships with men and limited opportunities for professional progression (Norman, 2010; Norman & Alexandra, 2018). Although research about women in S&C coaching is still in its infancy, the experiences of women sports coaches and the narratives of our participants reveal extensive

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overlaps and the ubiquity of male hegemony. Sheridan & Milgate (2003) acknowledged that those involved in hegemonic power relations often do not challenge traditional power matrices as those maintain historic hierarchies and associated values. At this juncture, it is important to note that hegemonic power structures are not exclusively sought to be maintained by people in privileged position, but also often by those who are oppressed. Lukes (2005) aptly noted that hegemony is "the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order" (pp. 27-28). Thus, S&C coaching continues to be a site for expressing male hegemony through subtle ideological control. For example, as of October 2020, the UKSCA board of directors are still all White men. In relation to this, Annie states:

> I've kind of withdrawn a little bit away from the UKSCA world, just because it's literally so male dominated and there are so few female voices, so few different voices being heard that it just winds me up. Basically, I just can't cope, so I'm going to spend time with different people from different backgrounds and learn from them than spend time with a load of blokes that have read a load of research journals telling me, you know, what some of them do but there's other ways to do things and… I just get really marginalised.

This is perhaps one of the reasons why, despite significant efforts that have been made to increase female sport participation, it has not been paralleled with a significant growth in the number of female S&C coaches. Evidence indicates that in sporting organisations, women are still assigned roles congruent with their gender and, therefore, frequently relegated to lower status jobs and with little to no leadership responsibilities (Burton et al., 2009). Driven by

hegemonic masculinity, the cultural practices within S&C serve to ideologically validate the dominant social positions of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) which can often result in condescending dialogues between men and women. Many of the participants experienced *mansplaining* when meeting and working with male coaches and athletes. Mansplaining can be defined as verbal expression of male intellectual superiority over women, whereby men, by being men, feel they have both the knowledge and the right to 'educate' women on a specific field (Solnit, 2012). Fearne provided an illustrative example of *mansplaining* by recalling a Tweet by UKSCA:

> UKSCA sent out an awful tweet, it was recommendations for female S&C coaches… well tips for S&C coaches. And it was very condescending and it was just awful, and a couple of my athletes actually came in and commented on it and just said I don't know if you've seen it, but it's absolutely awful. You're such a good coach and all of these recommendations, were like, don't try and coach like a man and all of this kind of stuff.

In order to try to overcome some of these male-only-network erected barriers, participants indicated creative ways to circumvent them. For instance, Alice revealed that when applying for S&C jobs she shortens her name on the application so the name could be interpreted in a more gender-neutral way. By doing so, she recalled 'I ended up getting a lot more responses when I applied for jobs, which was kind of interesting'. Whilst it was observed at the outset of this article that gender equity has progressed across sports, the strategy described by Alice demonstrates how institutional gender discrimination still plays a role in the S&C recruitment process. This has been reported in the sports coaching literature as well, whereby boards of sports organisations and gatekeepers responsible for recruiting coaches perpetuate homologous reproduction (Walker & Bopp, 2011). By analysing how gender stereotypes influence

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recruitment processes within sports coaching, Schlesinger and Weigelt-Schlesinger, (2013, p. 258) highlighted that "the personalisation of recruitment-based decision processes, together with the power that functionaries possess within the organisational structures, and the dominance of men on the decision-making boards" manifest in a disproportionate individual preferences and attitudes during recruitment related decision making. Our findings indicate similarities with the coaching literature, which troubles the notion that women have made appropriate progress towards achieving gender equity. Whilst it may be argued that gender discrimination has become more subtle and less evident, it is far from being absent.

In addition to barriers at entering the field, young female athletic trainers experienced gender challenges, felt restricted and unable to develop due to constricting organisational attitudes (Burton et al., 2012). For instance, Angela recalled: 'the main thing would be being told that I was a distraction, in a male environment'. Many of the participants commented that they were told that they would be a 'distraction' for male athletes. Grace added that the people hiring 'don't want to put their club at risk of having a female in there and have any issues with relationships or whatever'. This homosocial practice, also evident in other sport coaching positions, helps maintain hegemonic masculinity (Norman, 2010) and, in turn, traditionalism; also referred to as homologous reproduction, whereby men capitalize on strategic connections to peers of the same ilk to ensure male dominance (Hoffman, 2011). In this sense, the gender of a head coach continues to influence the gender makeup of the coaching and support staff (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Joules recalls an example when the head coach thought he could use his positional power to his advantage:

> I've had situations where an S&C [head] coach that's a male lead and he's a big ego and he feels like everybody wants him, so he just says: 'You want to go out on a date?' And it's like 'What? You're married!' You know, there's just not that boundary…

Joules' experience points to a self-serving male network created power imbalance which can manifest through harassment. Harassment can be understood as a form of behaviour that is expressed via any comment, conduct or gesture directed towards an individual that is degrading, intimating, offensive, malicious and insulting (Stirling et al., 2011). In sports coaching, many female coaches have experienced harassment from their male counterparts (Kerr, 2012). Similarly, women S&C coaches have storied about receiving sexualised comments in relation to their body and feeling objectified by their male peers (Medlin-Silver, Lampard, & Bunsell, 2017). Our participants also expressed receiving inappropriate comments regarding their physical appearance. In relation to interactions with a head coach Alice recalled:

> He [head coach] would always comment on my butt and things like that. So, the whole thing was just inappropriate really, but when we would go into a meeting or I would have interaction with him on the [gym] floor; it certainly got uncomfortable because you're taking what I know and you're creating this image in front of the athletes… And all of a sudden, I just become this object, which is funny because at the beginning the reason he kept me away from football was because he didn't want people viewing me that way [as an object], but his verbal interaction with me on the floor did just the opposite.

These narratives of the participants indicate that self-serving and self-sustaining male power matrices are ever-present within in S&C. In relation to younger S&C coaches experiencing abuse from their male superiors, Annie recounted: 'I've encouraged them [young S&C coaches] to speak out but they don't want to in case they lose their job, yeah, they feel intimidated'. The abuse discussed by a number of the participants stems from manipulation of

power relations, which are often maintained by the male-dominant organisational culture that silences the female voice (Kirby et al., 2002). Mansplaining, underrepresentation, stereotyping, and traditional gender norms mute and distort the voice of female S&C coaches, which reinforces the gender status quo and strengthens male hegemony (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

Impression Management of gender identity – "I portray myself very differently in a coaching world…"

In the previous section, Alice noted how she had to 'manage' her name on her S&C coaching job applications to be interviewed. In a similar fashion, all participants expressed their need to manage their athletes' and other coaches' impressions of them to gain and maintain necessary professional support. This 'management' frequently involved adopting male behaviour types. Lucy said: 'I portray myself very differently in a coaching world than I do in my personal life, at least I try to, because I don't want to come across as flirtatious, or, I don't know, weak in anyway.' The need to maintain a strong facade is consistent with other female coaches' experiences when coaching males (LaFountaine & Kamphoff, 2016). This concept of impression management, using a dramaturgical framework was identified by Goffman (1959). Goffman viewed society as a theatrical stage on which individuals perform behaviours deemed suitable and appropriate by the expectations of the setting. Molnar and Kelly (2012) emphasised that impression management is used by individuals to present an idealised image of themselves to a selected audience to fit in, avoid embarrassment or express authority. When our participants 'imitated' male S&C coach behaviour they engaged in field specific impression management to both fit in and express authority. Alice recounted: 'I think sometimes female strength coaches, they try too hard … They try too hard to try and fit that male role and it makes them undesirable to a lot of people, athletes included'. When women

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feel a need and/or pressure to embrace male behaviour patterns in an attempt to gain acceptance, they often find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, they may be ostracized for being 'cold' and 'bitchy' (Heilman, 2001, p. 668), largely due to others' uncomfortable perceptions of the discord between how a woman acts and how societal norms dictate a woman should act. On the other hand, they may feel that by not adopting dominant behaviour patterns they may not command sufficient respect and display knowledge confidence. In sports coaching, successfully engaging in the construction of a front stage requires coaches to manage their communication to convince their audience of their knowledge, skills, appropriateness and their compatibility with the organisation's norms and values (Jones et al., 2011). Our participants noted that they often over compensated to establish credibility with their male colleagues and athletes, as they felt they had 'more to prove'. Lucy explained this overcompensation as follows:

> I always make sure I have a [physical] presence… [so] I lift and workout a lot and always express the knowledge that I have. Maybe in one way, I'm compensating. I'm not sure. But as a male, who is 6ft, bench pressing 400 pounds or, whatever, they have a [accepted and expected physical] presence…

Consequently, participants felt that to be successful in S&C, they had to compensate for being female and work harder to "fit in". This finding is similar to what has been reported in the sports coaching literature (Norman, 2010; Walker and Bopp, 2011). Through a continued expression of male hegemony, both women and men have the tendency to believe that male characteristics are essential part of what it means to be a successful S&C coach.

To survive and flourish in male dominant environment, Alice noted: 'You have to really love sport or really 'have some balls'. A tweet from 2014 reinforces that as an S&C coach women need to 'be prepared to evidence… [their] competence more than would be expected of a male coach' (https://twitter.com/UKSCA/status/913448817311272960). This further indicates that

452 female coaches are generally not perceived as authoritative figures and it is, therefore, assumed
453 that they would be incompetent when training and/or disciplining men (LaFountaine &
454 Kamphoff, 2016) or, in doing so, they would be a distraction to male athletes. Claire recounted:
455 'they [men] were apprehensive to work with me because they wanted someone that was loud
456 and motivational in the weight room.' All participants expressed the requirement to be
457 authoritative in their role as S&C coaches, especially when working with both male athletes
458 and colleagues. Fearne explained:

459 With male teams you definitely need an authoritative figure. It's very much getting in
460 the gym and being quite commanding with them and kind of letting them know that I
461 know exactly what I'm talking about, and that actually if they follow everything, that
462 they will get the results if they do what I'm telling them.

463 Previous research identified that perceived lack of assertiveness and leadership style
464 incongruous with athletes' expectations is a barrier for female coaches (Kilty, 2006). Similarly,
465 our participants expressed that they felt the need to present and maintain a particular image of
466 themselves, by developing and displaying a front stage behaviour to provide an impression of
467 confidence to meet role expectations. Elizabeth described:

468 I think it's how you present yourself. So, if you present as a female coach, you'll be
469 presented differently, but, if you present yourself as a strength and conditioning coach
470 then there's no real difference between whether it's a male or female, they're both doing
471 the same job.

472 The juxtaposition between social expectations towards women and leaders create a multitude
473 of challenges for women within sport (Kilty, 2006). Evidence suggests that female coaches are
474 expected to work harder, prove more, have more skills, and higher degrees when embarking
475 on sport leadership compared to men. Norman (2010) reported that female coaches felt they

had to justify their competence when attempting to gain respect, and acceptance. Participants in our study expressed similar sentiments. Sarah noted: 'ultimately if I was [a] female working in male sport, I would kind of have to almost justify my place and my position more'. This continuous job-role-specific impression management often results in feeling undervalued, out of place and marginalised (Norman, 2010). In other words, in the S&C environment (setting) women feel pressured to adopt male behaviour types as their professional front stage to meet institutionalised collective expectations. Their S&C role and related behavioural expectations are part of what Goffman (1959) referred to as the *vocabulary of fronts*, which is essentially a culturally prescribed pattern of behaviour in a specific setting. The vocabulary of fronts is a useful way to understand and navigate a range of social situations. Goffman (1959, p. 16) noted:

> Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance, he [and she] (observer) can place the situation in a broad category … Observers then need only be familiar with a small and hence manageable vocabulary of fonts…

This logic precipitates consistency between setting, manner, appearance, and front. This is why female S&C coaches in their professional setting emulate traditionalist male behaviour patterns as their front stage. However, in doing so, they encounter a discrepancy between their S&C front stage behaviour and the social expectation around the behaviour that is associated with their gender. Therefore, deeply embedded societal gender bias and expectations place women at a disadvantage and in a cultural bind even before embarking on leadership positions. Meister et al., (2017) argue that women leaders feel misidentified at work and that their self-presentation (impression management) is employed to conceal behaviours especially associated with femininity. Despite the strong, confident façade they portray in their front stage, participants frequently mentioned their continuous feeling of lack of confidence compared to male S&C coaches. This results in an incessant conflict between the different front

stages female leaders are expected manage often simultaneously. These conflicting expectations regularly lead to a range of tensions in the work environment, some of which our participants manage through the deployment of humour.

Humour – 'It's not particularly P.C. you know. There's a lot of banter...'

Humour is understood to be multi-faceted and extremely important in the workplace (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humour is a form of communication which is perceived as entertaining. The term humour is derived from Latin meaning 'moisture' or 'fluid' and refers to 'greasing the gears of everyday talk and keeping our interactions working smoothly' (Norrick, 1993, p. 20). Humour was seen to be an essential ingredient to work effectively as an S&C coach. Sophie noted: 'Every single person I worked with was a guy, you've got to have a… sense of humour, bit of banter, but I think if that's your personality then you just fit as part of the team'. This highlights the importance placed on humour, but interestingly extends this to include banter. Both humour and banter are social and interactive, however banter involves jocular interaction which can include mockery and, sometimes, abusive language (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012). Banter is seen as a form of humorous expression, which arguably is the 'lubricant' within the work place through which relationships are created and maintained (Plester & Sayers, 2007). In relation to the environment that S&C coaches operate, Annie commented: 'It's not particularly P.C., you know. There's a lot of banter and it's like I enjoy a bit of banter, like the next person'. However, the expression of sexism can hide under the veil of humour, which can make discriminatory messages and actions more dangerous and difficult to confront as opposed to direct, derogatory remarks (Mallett et al., 2016). Sexist, humorous comments or behaviour can be easily dismissed and neutralised as 'friendly banter' (Jones, 2008). Participants expressed receiving banter in the form of sexual comments and innuendos. When

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asked about her experiences of working with male rugby players, Annie recalls a situation that happened when she first started working as an S&C coach:

> I remember it was kind of a funny story, I don't think [it] had happened before. We had two gyms. We had a gym where the backs train and a gym where the forwards train and the men's showers were in between. I was 22 or something like that and I had to walk between the forwards' gym and the backs' gym through the showers where, obviously, I often, I would get dragged in. You obviously have to have very thick skin and have a lot of banter in this environment.

This type of behaviour is an example of male athletes asserting their dominance and reaffirming their power to maintain a hegemonic masculine environment. As athletes and coaches do not want to be seen as humourless, incapable of taking and understanding jocularity, this type of humour in the form of banter is a powerful way of silencing women (Jones, 2008). Sexist banter provides a cover story of social acceptability for the verbal expressions of male chauvinism (O'Connor et al., 2017). It is supposed to 'soften the blow' of discriminatory remarks, including, but not limited to, sexist and racist comments. Banter, rooted in and manifested through discriminatory tendencies, has a protective property for the discriminating individual by rendering socially unacceptable comments to the level of jocularity. In this sense, if the individual (target of banter) feels offended then it is their lack of humour and/or inadequate reading of the *vocabulary of fronts* that has created the conflict not the banter per se. The disempowering potential of banter and related reading of the situation is two-fold: (a) it can mute women's voices and resistance to male hegemonic oppression and marginalisation; (b) it may keep women at the margins, if not outside, of the sub-culture they wish to join. Both of

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549 these modes of disenfranchisement can have long term effects on women S&S coaches' career
550 either by not being able to challenge dominant cultural norms or not being accepted by those.
551 For example, Alice recounted feeling objectified and disempowered by the head coach's
552 jocular behaviour:
553
554 He was like the boss and I was the only female there, his jokes are one thing but it's
555 almost like persuasion to get you to do tasks. For example, one day I was in his office
556 and he was like: "I want you to show me this movement to complete to teach your
557 athletes". And the movement is nothing like I would normally do. "Get down on the
558 ground on all fours and try this movement for me". He didn't ask anybody else so in
559 his mind it may be funny, but it was completely inappropriate and that is a line where
560 joking and humour is not ok.
561
562 Previous research on interaction and communication in extensively male dominated work
563 environments demonstrates that women 'conformed to the masculine communication norms
564 and the gendered nature of humour in order to fit in' (Lynch, 2010, p. 133). This finding is
565 consistent with the views of our participants who used banter to fit in and become part of the
566 S&C male-dominant subculture with the view to creating and solidifying their relationships
567 with both athletes and coaches. When asked about the use of humour, Claire recounted;
568 I just kind of went in with the attitude of I'm going into this, you don't know who I
569 am, I'm going to create a good impression. Have a bit of banter, especially with the
570 boys, they have a different dynamic they go in like, I don't know how to describe it,
571 its lads' banter. You go in, make jokes but make sure you earn their respect almost at
572 the same time. But mark your territory, like I am here to coach as well as make sure
573 you have a good time.

Moving through the maze of masculinity in sport in order to navigate and negotiate the male dominated terrain is certain a challenge for women. To combat this, Joules believes 'the more I think you have that banter with the coach and with the athlete, the more they really buy-in and that's the way I've been able to break it [gender stereotype]'. However, when the receiver of sexist banter does not challenge that normative behaviour and respond in a critical manner then by acquiescing, they tacitly consent to a shared understanding that is seen as acceptance of discriminatory attitudes in this social context (Ford et al., 2001). Here, women, yet again, find themselves in a precarious position and may be forced to make a potentially career altering decision. They may decide to resist and speak up against sexist banter and humour, specifically, and may lose their hard-earned position, or, they may decide that through acquiescing they themselves become complicit in (re)creating male hegemonic power matrices.

Conclusion

This article explored some of the reasons behind the lack of women in S&C. The exploration of the experiences of women S&C coaches has identified some of the key components of this ongoing gender imbalance and demonstrated that women are, and continue to be, at a disadvantage. The participants' perspectives presented here underpin their challenges before entering and being in this male dominated profession. Organisational politics, specifically the 'old boys club', resulted in many of the women coaches feeling that they were marginalised due to their gender. They implemented creative strategies to secure job interviews and to adapt to the traditionalist, male-centred environment which often prevented them from career advancement through homologous reproduction. Women also felt they had to work harder to prove their coaching expertise and to secure respect. Organisational politics acted as barriers to reaching higher leadership positions or to obtain S&C employment in other sports. The women S&C coaches' expressed the need to take on a masculine persona due to environmental

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599 expectations and to their competency being referenced against their male colleagues'. A coping
600 mechanism that emerged in this respect was the use of impression management. Participants
601 noted that in order to fit in, gain respect, and be an effective coach to male athletes they had to
602 manage their coaching front stage to meet the behavioural expectations of the S&C setting. To
603 do so, they adopted masculine traits which had the tendency to create conflicts between the
604 coaching role and gender specific cultural expectations. This often left participants in a double-
605 bind which was a direct result of the continuous dissonance between the different front stages
606 female coaches were expected to simultaneously manage.
607
608 A way of coping with conflicting expectations was the active engagement of humour,
609 specifically banter to create productive working relations with male coaches and athletes.
610 Although it was noted that the use of banter provided some level of empowerment for women
611 S&C coaches, it also worked to mask exclusion and discrimination, sometimes culminating in
612 a form of abuse. Women, yet again, landed in a precarious situation which required them to
613 walk the sensitive line between acceptance and humour, and abuse and exclusion. Fearing of
614 losing their position, women admitted accepting and participating in banter, initiated by both
615 male coaches and athletes, that was often hurtful, disrespectful and discriminatory.
616
617 In light of the women's narratives presented here, it is prudent to make a few recommendations.
618 First, the field of S&C would greatly benefit from a reconceptualization of what the role might
619 need to entail with the view to embrace a more complete ethic of care (Noddings, 2012) to
620 enable women to view S&C as a viable profession to enter. Second, at an organizational level,
621 women need to be involved in key decision-making processes such as hiring new staff to ensure
622 gender equality and the minimisation of homologous reproduction. Third, providing and
623 delivering educational training around gender would increase understanding of inappropriate

behaviour such as sexist banter and mansplaining, which are currently part of the S&C culture. Here we heed Lorde's (2003, p. 27) note about the limitation of adopting and using masculine traits to fit in: 'Master's tools – they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they never enable us to bring about genuine change.'

To inform future research, the limitations of our study should be acknowledged. The sample is limited to 15 women S&C coaches who were predominantly White and Western. Future research should consider the experiences of women in S&C from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, due to very high demands on S&C coaches, which include long hours, weekend practices, competitions and out of town travel commitments, many of the participants had limited time to share their experiences, resulting in some short initial data production and participant attrition in the follow-up interviews. Therefore, to allow more flexibility in the data production process and to produce richer data sets, alternative approaches to data collection could be recommended. These approaches could include, but not limited to: journaling, written or video diaries and pictural reflections. Finally, to help advance knowledge, future research should be directed at delving deeper into other aspects of female S&C coaches' experiences and adopting participatory research approaches that will offer a more central role for women to problematize and resolve existing gender-based power imbalances in the area under investigation.

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845 **Table 1**

846 *Participant Information*

Pseudonyms	Age (years)	S&C Coaching Experience (years)	Level	S&C Certification
Karen	36	12	Elite	ASCC
Holly	41	25	Elite	ASCC
Sarah	33	11	Elite	BWLA
Alice	34	10	Elite	CSCS
Claire	21	2	University	UKCC
Rachel	26	6	Elite	ASCC
Sophie	31	15	Elite	ASCC
Grace	28	7	Semi-Professional	ASCA
Elizabeth	27	5	Elite	ASCA
Fearne	26	5	Elite	ASCC
Angela	34	3	Amateur to Semi-Professional	ASCC
Lucy	29	6	Elite	CSCS
Annie	41	18	Elite	ASCC/ CSCS
Darcey	23	3	Amateur to Elite	CSCS
Joules	34	11	Amateur to Elite	CSCS / USAW

Note. CSCS = Certified strength and conditioning specialist, ASCC =Accredited strength and conditioning coach, ASCA = A*ustralian Strength and Conditioning Association,* BWLA= British Weightlifting Association, USAW = USA Weightlifting, UKCC = United Kingdom Coaching Certificate

847

848 **Table 2**

849 *Interview Questions*

Questions
1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?
2. How did you become involved in sports?
3. Tell us about your coaching experience?
4. Have you had to overcome any barriers?
5. How do you feel working as an S&C coach?
6. Can you talk through a typical S&C environment?
7. Have you ever felt like you wanted to quit?
8. What do you think people typically think of when they hear the term S&C coach?
9. How do you see yourself as a female S&C coach in elite sport?
10. Why do you think there is such an underrepresentation of women S&C coaches?

11. If you could do it all again would you do anything different?

12. If you could offer any advice to any female S&C coaches what would it be?

13. Is there any think you would like to add?

Follow-up Questions

Thank you for taking the time for a follow-up chat.

We interviewed 15 female S&C coaches and they noted similar examples, for instance, one of them said: ….

"I had to walk between the forwards gym and the backs gym through the showers where obviously I often would get dragged in you obviously have to have very thick skin and have a lot of banter in this environment"

"every single person I worked with was a guy, you've got to have a bit of sense of humour, bit of banter, but I think if that's your personality then you just kind of fit as part of the team"

Have you experienced anything similar?'

If so……. how did you manage the situation?

1. Can you please define banter in your work setting and what that normally revolves around?

2. Can you recall occasions/examples when the banter potentially made you feel uncomfortable?
3. how did you deal with such instances?

4. In the environments you have worked, have you noticed any differences in the humour/ banter between men and women?
5. What happens when women don't 'buy-in' to banter?

6. As you've gained more experience and confidence, how do you now perceive the banter you experienced as a young coach?

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