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Review

Gender and Diversity Responsive Coaching: Building Capacity Through Relational, Feminist-Informed, Intersectional, Transdisciplinary, and E/Affective Coach Development

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Abstract

Attempts towards achieving gender equality are widely considered to be ‘wicked’ problems and continue to be a global priority in line with other United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In sport, longstanding gender inequities are reproduced and perpetuated through problematic heteropatriarchal, ableist, and colonial sporting structures and cultures. These negatively impact women and girls and gender expansive people, as well as their access to quality sporting experiences across different pathways. As key actors within sporting ecosystems, sport coaches have a critical role to play in terms of supporting the development of inclusive, ethical, and equitable sporting environments and, more broadly, in the mainstreaming of quality sporting experiences for all. Therefore, the development of a gender and diversity-sensitive, -responsive, and -transformative coaching workforce should be a critical concern. This position paper builds on previous empirical work which has identified gaps in coaching knowledge alongside a range of problematic understandings and assumptions which currently shape coaches’ ‘gender-responsive’ coaching practices. It does so by identifying challenges and ways forward for enhanced coach learning and development strategies targeting the development of a more gender and diversity-responsive coaching workforce.

Keywords: gender and diversity-responsive coaching; intersectionality; transdisciplinary learning; e/affective coach development



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1. Introduction

Attempts toward achieving gender equality are widely considered to be ‘wicked’ problems (Eden & Wagstaff, 2020) and continue to be a global priority in line with other United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG, 2030). Wicked problems can be defined “as global challenges that often involve many societal groups and social systems, have unpredictable consequences, and do not lend themselves to straightforward, traditional solutions” (Vaughan et al., 2019, p. 2). Due to their high degree of complexity, wicked problems need to be considered through a more holistic lens by bringing together varied disciplinary insights and perspectives, putting these to work to generate innovative and creative solutions (Toohey et al., 2018; Vaughan et al., 2019).

In sport, longstanding gender inequities are reproduced and perpetuated through problematic heteropatriarchal, ableist, and colonial relations and derivative sporting structures, cultures, norms, and practices. These negatively and variously impact women and

girls and gender expansive people, whose gender identity falls outside of society's current gender binary, influencing access to quality sporting experiences across different pathways (E. Denison et al., 2021; de Haan & Norman, 2020; Hargreaves, 1990). Such problematic sporting structures, cultures, norms, and practices include but are not limited to the current sex segregation of sport, which naturalises a gender/sex binary logic while marginalising and excluding non-binary, trans, and intersex people and justifying their scrutiny, policing, and discrimination (Erikainen et al., 2022; Travers, 2008, 2022); the enduring male-stream of sport as a male-centred and -centric institution which naturalises and justifies women and girls' continued marginalisation, mistreatment, and exclusion (Bowes & Culvin, 2021; Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024); and the abnormalisation, scrutiny, and policing of women's racialised bodies (Liao & Markula, 2016; Rankin-Wright et al., 2019; Tredway, 2019).

Gender inequity in sport is a complex and multifaceted problem which requires holistic thinking and approaches targeting multiple levels, from societal norms and expectations to institutional and organisational cultures and practices; interpersonal interactions; and finally individual beliefs, knowledge, and practices (Stodter & Dane, 2024). Furthermore, it requires centring intersectionality to understand how different aspects of people's identities combine to produce unique forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989) and diverse participant voices, recognising that gendered inequities are exacerbated for women and girls and gender expansive people along different lines (e.g., ethnicity, sexuality, age, class, disability, gender identity) (Rankin-Wright & Hylton, 2020; Thorpe et al., 2023). Lastly, meaningfully addressing gender inequity in sport requires problematising and disrupting the modernist social forces (e.g., scientific rationalism, discipline, capitalism, etc.) at work within sporting contexts. Specifically, this entails problematising these social forces' tendencies to homogenise, normalise, binarise, hierarchise, and objectify—thus erasing or marginalising different thinking, different practices, different bodies, and different cultures (Coakley, 2021; J. Denison, 2019).

As key actors within sporting ecosystems, sport coaches have a critical role to play in enabling, supporting, and centring difference through the development of inclusive, ethical, and equitable sporting environments. Coaches are instrumental in mainstreaming quality sporting experiences for all (i.e., ensuring that quality sporting experiences are normalised and accessible to all regardless of participants' gender, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, etc.). Therefore, the development of a gender and diversity-sensitive (i.e., considering and acknowledging gender and diversity), -specific (i.e., intentionally targeting and benefitting specific groups), and -transformative (i.e., challenging harmful gender roles and relations) (Pederson et al., 2015) coaching workforce along a continuum of gender and diversity responsiveness should be a critical concern.

This position paper builds on previous empirical work, which has identified gaps in coaching knowledge alongside a range of problematic understandings and assumptions which currently shape coaches' 'gender-responsive' coaching practices (Avner et al., 2025; Jones & Avner, 2021, 2024; Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024). It does so by identifying challenges and ways forward with regards to the development of improved coach learning and development frameworks targeting the development of a more gender and diversity-responsive and -transformative coaching workforce.

2. The Current State of Play: Contemporary Discourses of Gender Responsive Coaching and Power Effects

Examinations of gender responsiveness in sport coaching have centred around four key foci. The first stream focused on understanding whether and how gender impacts the coach–athlete relationship (see Norman, 2016; de Haan & Norman, 2020; de Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019). This body of research has drawn attention to the ways in which

gendered power relations shape and influence important dynamics between coaches and athletes. The second stream of research has focused on examining women athletes' needs and preferences when it comes to their coaches' behaviours and practices. This included the need for coaches to recognise the salience of gender within the coach–athlete relationship and the need to be considered as both a person and a performer, amongst a range of other considerations (see [Norman, 2015](#); [Stewart, 2016](#)). The third stream focused on mapping and critiquing the gendered assumptions and discourses which shape coaches' understanding of how to effectively coach women and girls (see [Avner et al., 2025](#); [Gosai et al., 2021](#); [Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024](#)). As these researchers demonstrated, examining the impact of discourses on coaches' understanding of gendered differences and the practices of gender-responsive coaching is important because these discourses or ways of knowing ([de Haan & Norman, 2020](#); [Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2006](#)) can either broaden or restrict the range of practices that coaches draw upon to effectively meet the wellbeing, developmental, and performance needs of their athletes. This growing body of literature also identified the need for further critical research into the impact of current gender-responsive coaching behaviours and practices on women athletes' health and wellbeing, their sporting participation, and performance capabilities. Finally, the fourth stream has focused on the generation and evaluation of coach development 'interventions' (see [Clarke et al., 2024](#); [Goorevich et al., 2023](#)) to promote coaches' awareness of gender stereotypes and/or outline specific theoretically and empirically informed strategies to support the development of more gender responsive coaches (see [Jones & Avner, 2024](#)). It is to this smaller burgeoning body of research that the current position piece seeks to contribute, supporting a move from the important work of mapping and critiquing towards initiating and actioning theory-informed change.

So, what is the current 'state of play'? How do coaches presently understand and practice gender-responsive coaching? A growing body of evidence (e.g., [Gosai et al., 2021](#); [Hamer & Giles, 2024](#); [Jones & Avner, 2021, 2024](#)) into coaches' current understandings of gender effective/responsive coaching has identified a range of discourses at work in shaping coaches' related practices. These discourses encompass (a) a *gender essentialist* discourse, which relies on an understanding of gendered differences as natural, inherent, and fixed; (b) a *gender-neutral* discourse, which advocates for individuality over gendered differences and closely aligns with contemporary rhetoric around athlete-centredness; and (c) a *social constructionist* discourse, which relies on an understanding of gendered differences as socially constructed and reproduced through problematic norms, cultures, structures, and practices. These various discourses position gender responsiveness in sport coaching respectively as (a) responding and being responsive to natural, inherent, and fixed biological, physiological, and psychological differences; (b) treating everyone the same and/or centring individuality over gender; or (c) identifying and challenging problematic gendered norms, cultures, structures, and practices. Importantly, gender-responsive discourses are not monolithic or fixed. Rather, they overlap and combine to produce specific understandings, practices, and power effects ([Allin et al., 2024](#); [Kempe-Bergman et al., 2020](#)).

Examples of sport coaching and athlete development practices informed by an essentialist perspective include well-intentioned practices that seek to build women and girl athletes' confidence. This could be through the intentional use of positive reinforcement and praise to provide something that girls are perceived to need:

They [girls] need encouragement. If they make a good pass, you tell them they've made a good pass. If they score a good goal, you tell them they've scored a good goal. (Coach interview, [Avner et al., 2025](#), p. 11)

A further example promotes coaching practices that emphasise and centre social connections over competition/competitiveness:

Girls are more collaborative and like doing things together...boys are more aggressive in their competitiveness. (Coach interview, [Avner et al., 2025](#), p. 11)

These practices are derived both from a *negative* essentialist framing of women and girl athletes as being less confident, experienced, and competitive and a corresponding *positive* essentialist framing of women and girl athletes as being more collaborative, better at listening, and more open to instruction and feedback than men and boy athletes. This paradoxical framing simultaneously positions women and girl athletes as more ‘coachable’ yet, by the same token, as requiring additional care, psychological astuteness, and, where necessary, a lowering of performance expectations ([de Haan & Norman, 2020](#); [Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024](#)). Whether gendered differences are positively or negatively framed, essentialist discourse and derived practices need to be challenged. If a coach’s understanding of gendered differences is predominantly shaped by an essentialist discourse which views gendered differences as static, fixed, homogenous, and natural, then they are more likely to adopt static, fixed, and ‘blanket type’ practice approaches and coach behaviours designed to effectively coach different populations (e.g., women and girls vs. men and boys), rather than viewing gender as relational, dynamic, and fluid and athletes as highly adaptable individuals with unique characteristics and motivations. This static binary understanding of gender can limit athletes’ sense of self and performance capabilities, irrespective of the gender they identify with ([Jones & Avner, 2024](#); [Gosai et al., 2021](#)).

Examples of sport coaching and athlete development practices informed by a gender-neutral perspective include not modifying approaches or practices based on gender, treating all athletes the same, and/or centring individuality: “it’s really about training the individual... I coach who is in front of me” or “gender does not come into play for that sort of thing” ([Avner et al., 2025](#), p. 14). However, this second discourse and derived practices can also be problematic. Indeed, while gender neutral and individualised approaches and practices may seem positive and progressive on paper, research has highlighted unintended consequences ([de Haan & Norman, 2020](#); [Goorevich & LaVoi, 2024](#)). Such depoliticised approaches and practices can lead to forms of gender ignorance and a disregard for the impact of unbalanced gendered power relations which overwhelmingly disadvantage women and girls and gender expansive people across most sport and social settings. Treating all athletes ‘the same’, regardless of their gender is, given how relations of power situate individuals differently within societal structures, not the inclusive approach that many coaches often report as their personal means of advocacy ([Avner et al., 2025](#)).

Finally, examples of sport coaching and athlete development practices informed by a social constructionist perspective include lobbying for equitable access to sporting and coaching resources and systematically challenging gendered norms and stereotypes (e.g., the stereotype of women and girls as being more emotional or not as good athletes as men/boys):

Well, I think—and this is a broad generalisation, but I think people like to generalise and put people into categories, so they like to say, ‘females won’t be as good as male athletes in football specifically.’ Well one, we’re not trying to play men’s football to start with, but two, if you give female athletes a full-time pay, really good coach, great facilities, yeah they are going to be just as good. It’s the lack of understanding around the impacts that all of those things have. (Coach interview, [Avner et al., 2025](#), p. 10)

This discourse and derived practices are more promising than the previous two in terms of transforming the gendered landscape of sport and challenging inequitable cultures

and structures. However, a social constructionist discourse has also been critiqued for insufficiently accounting for the diverse material and physical needs of moving and (high)-performing athletic bodies (e.g., [Schofield et al., 2022](#); [Thorpe et al., 2021](#)).

Perhaps symptomatic of the enduring marginal status of women and girls and gender expansive people in sport is the paucity and ‘ad hocness’ of coach education and development opportunities both targeting the development of a gender and diversity-responsive coaching workforce and equipping coaches with the necessary knowledge, skills and confidence to coach in more gender and diversity-responsive ways ([Alsarve, 2018](#); [Barker-Ruchti et al., 2021](#); [Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2013](#)). It is therefore unsurprising that coaches have limited awareness of research-informed knowledge translation related to gendered considerations for coaching women and girls and gender expansive athletes and, given the previously outlined discursive dominance of an essentialist gendered perspective, that what limited awareness they have mainly centres around biological and physiological considerations (e.g., menstruation, ACL injury prevention, [Avner et al., 2025](#); [Schofield et al., 2022](#)).

There is no doubt that current efforts to counterbalance decades of ‘sex/gender-ignorant’ sport science research is a welcome development ([Cowley et al., 2021](#); [Schofield et al., 2022](#)), nor do we dispute the importance of sex/gender-specific physiologically informed knowledge translation informing coaching practice. However, we are concerned by the artificial fragmentation of coaching knowledge, which leads to siloed biologically and culturally informed perspectives that do not speak to each other ([Thorpe et al., 2021](#)). This siloing makes it extremely challenging for coaches and coach developers to appreciate and account for the complex entanglements of biology and culture in shaping moving and (high)-performing gendered sporting bodies—in turn negatively impacting their ability to holistically understand and effectively address many of their athletes’ participation- and performance-related challenges.

Of equal concern is the absence or marginalisation of more relational ways of knowing within current coach education curricula and coach development and the continued privileging of bioscientific positivist research knowledge and its quest to generate objective and generalisable knowledge about various population groups. An unintended consequence of this enduring paradigmatic lineage and dominance is the naturalisation of gender essentialism and of binary ways of thinking about gender and other relations in sport coaching research and practice.

Lastly, because it still remains the case that the majority of coach education courses tend to be generic and predominantly male-centred and -centric in their structure and content ([Barker-Ruchti et al., 2021](#); [Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2013](#)), the fragmentation of knowledge domains is further compounded by retroactive efforts for inclusive practice (for example, add-on and stand-alone considerations or modules regarding the coaching of ‘special’ populations, e.g., women and girl athletes, athletes with disability). Taken together, this artificial fragmentation, be it with regards to knowledge domains or the coaching of different populations, is an obstacle to coach education’s effectiveness and the development of more inclusive and ethical coaching and athlete development practices.

Up to this point, we have sought to illustrate how various gendered discourses overlap to produce different gendered ‘truths’ and ‘best practices’ when it comes to coaching women and girls. As [J. Denison and Avner \(2011\)](#) caution, coaching discourses are never neutral, as they go on to shape how coaching and sporting problems are selectively framed, named, understood, and addressed and, as they express,

Until the process of framing and naming problems is recognised as value-laden, coaches will continue to believe that their problem-solving approaches are fair, just, best, and unproblematic, making it unlikely that they will ever consider the

possible shortcomings or unintended consequences that their problem-solving approaches have on their coaching (p. 211).

With that in mind, it is important to consider the unintended consequences that derive from different ways of knowing and understanding gendered differences. For example, the problematic homogenising positioning of women's bodies as being 'at risk' and of coaching women athletes as being "as rewarding as it is challenging" (Stewart, 2016, p. 417) derived from a bioscientific and essentialist perspective. Or the problematic ignorance or relegation to the background of the materiality of gendered moving and (high)-performing bodies—bodies that leak, bleed, and have diverse physical and material needs (Thorpe et al., 2021) derived from a socially constructed understanding of gendered differences.

Our position therefore is that to truly become a gender and diversity-responsive coach requires much more than learning about and integrating various gendered considerations into a set of 'best practices.' Of equal if not further importance is to identify and address the *legacy* of different ways of knowing and their respective *unintended consequences*. So, given the present 'state of play' and the various issues and intricacies identified in the above sections, what might be some ways forward to support the development of a more gender and diversity-sensitive, -responsive, and -transformative coaching workforce? How does one avoid dis-entangling and compartmentalising knowledge into disciplinary siloes for easy digestion and instead move towards educating coaches to think more critically, ethically, holistically, carefully, and responsively? Furthermore, how can coaches draw on different knowledges and perspectives while remaining critical of those knowledges and perspectives by problematising everything that they do?

3. Towards Relational, Feminist-Informed, Intersectional, Transdisciplinary, and E/Affective Coach Development

To begin to address the many long-standing artificial divides across sport coaching and their unintended consequences, we believe it is critical in the first instance to focus on the professional learning and development of coaches. We have identified various re-orienting approaches, theories, and concepts (i.e., relational, feminist informed, intersectional, transdisciplinary, and affective) that we believe offer a useful starting point to address the current challenges to the development of gender and diversity-responsive coaching practices identified in the previous section and further detailed within Appendix A.

These largely draw upon the work of scholars across the sport and social sciences (e.g., Heywood, 2011; Pavlidis et al., 2025; Thorpe, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2021, 2023; Wheaton et al., 2020) who have turned to feminist transdisciplinary approaches to examine the complex entanglements of biology and culture, the human and nonhuman, matter, and discourse within the context of various sport-, health-, and exercise-related inquiries. In so doing, these inquiries have generated new, arguably more ethical and complex understandings of gendered health and performance—for example, by repositioning "all humans as biocultural creatures and creatives" (Thorpe et al., 2021, p. 8). Taken together, we believe these re-orienting approaches offer an innovative and robust 'toolkit' to inform curriculum content and strategies and support coaches, coach developers, and coaching researchers alike to think and practice differently. However, we also recognize, as Brighton et al. (2021, p. 394) expressed, that "imaginative theorization is only one of the ingredients required for praxis for radical change." Moreover, considerable 'knowledge mobilisation' efforts will be required given the seismic challenge that these re-orienting approaches, theories, and concepts offer to the enduring language and practices of discipline, capitalism, humanism, and scientific rationalism within sports coaching (Mills et al., 2022). Therefore, in this next section, we attempt to map the ways in which these radically re-orienting approaches, theories, and concepts could be materialised and actualised through specific

coach development curriculum content. While we focus on five key re-orienting approaches and ‘entry points’ to do so, it is important to appreciate that these are very much entangled and integral to the relational shift more broadly called for within this manuscript. Moreover, our aim is not to produce another model for efficacy in coaching but rather to encourage a continual unravelling of assumptions while embracing a range of dynamic re-orientations that have the potential to challenge striated dominant gendered understandings and coaching practices.

The first approach we suggest is relational problematisation. To begin to bring to life a more dynamic, relational, feminist-informed, intersectional, transdisciplinary, and affective approach for coach learning and development with a view to supporting the development of a more critical, agile, and gender and diversity-responsive coaching workforce, we believe it is important to first problematise the ways in which existing coach education offerings reproduce and/or challenge the current male-stream and heteropatriarchal and colonial project of sport (Theberge, 1987; Thorpe et al., 2023). As a key critical coaching skill, problematising allows for a destabilisation of coaching truths and best practices and a critical appreciation of all that coaching knowledge and practices do, inclusive of their unintended consequences. It therefore promotes flexibility and innovation, allowing for new viewpoints, perspectives, and practices to emerge that have the potential to be more ethical, equitable, and socially just (Gerdin et al., 2019). Gender and diversity-responsive curriculum content and strategies should be designed to promote “thinking outside the box” (J. Denison, 2019), alongside challenging existing gendered and intersecting coaching truths and best practices. Jones and Avner (2024) suggest that this could be achieved through problematizing activities that encourage coaches to (1) ‘problematize the myth’ (i.e., that it is true that women athletes are different and a special population with their own inherent limitations), (2) ‘problematize their past’ (i.e., how coaches’ previous experiences within hypermasculine sport and social contexts may have consciously or unconsciously shaped the gendered assumptions that they import to coaching women and girls), and (3) ‘become an intentional ally’ (i.e., develop both new ways of talking and new coaching practices that are underpinned by a different nonbinary logic following the problematization of ‘myth’ and ‘past’). Evidence suggests that ‘challenge’, which could be underpinned by disjuncture or cognitive dissonance, presents a moment of opportunity for coaches’ learning. Here, an uncomfortable feeling might arise for coaches where the gap between their individual beliefs, values, or assumptions and new information becomes recognisable and significant (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Muir & North, 2023).

Our second approach involves adopting a feminist-informed (anti-essentialist) re-orientation and is strongly connected to the first approach of relational problematisation and to poststructuralist-informed feminisms (see Avner, 2024; Markula, 2018). Poststructuralist feminist approaches recognize the need to move away from essentialist and binary logics and to re-centre the material and physical needs of women and girls and gender expansive athletes without falling prey to biological determinism/essentialism. As one of few examples of studies which have moved beyond mapping and critiquing to initiating change, Goorevich et al. (2023) developed and evaluated a coach development intervention to support coaches’ move away from essentialist understandings and practices related to the coaching of women and girls. The seven online and self-paced modules they developed were underpinned by theories of positive youth development, ecological systems, self-determination, and intersectionality, covering various topics from challenging gender stereotypes to eliminating barriers for girls, and showed promise in terms of supporting coaches’ enhanced reflexivity.

While the re-orienting approaches, theories, and concepts advocated for in the current manuscript overlap with and seek to build on Goorevich et al. (2023) in aiming to promote

anti-essentialist perspectives, they differ in content, underpinning logic, and practical implications. Specifically, while our ideas similarly seek to mobilise and mainstream an anti-essentialist gendered discourse, they do so by drawing on a *relational* ontology which emphasises the complex entanglements of biology and culture as inextricably intertwined, rather than separate inter-acting domains (Thorpe et al., 2021, 2023). This is a critical distinction which has important implications for thinking about, speaking about, and designing gender and diversity responsive curriculum content and strategies, as we discuss next.

Our third suggested lens for re-orienting coach development is that of intersectionality. As previously expressed, re-centring intersectionality and diverse participant voices is critical since gendered inequities are frequently exacerbated for women and gender expansive people along different *relational lines* (e.g., ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability, gender identity). Alongside building capacity to meaningfully address intersectional gendered inequities, diversifying the voices that inform, shape, lead, and deliver coaching curricula and coach learning and development is essential to ‘futureproofing’ sport coaching and promoting innovation and effective and sustainable change that will benefit all (Callary & Gearity, 2024; Jeanes et al., 2024). However, this will require moving beyond a liberal feminist approach of “add women and stir” to address complex forms of discrimination and inequitable relations of power-knowledge that are shaping understandings and practices in sport coaching contexts (Jeanes et al., 2024, p. 217). Associated strategies could include the use of diverse imagery, case studies, and storytelling (Joseph, 2024) which illustrate and sensitise coaches to how sport participant and coaching workforce experiences are shaped by intersecting relational lines (Burgess et al., 2024) and serve to disrupt the current male-stream of traditional coach education (Norman, 2010; Stangl, 2013). Promoting gender and broader inclusivity in this way could also entail inviting coaches to reflect on how their own sporting/coaching experiences have been shaped through forms of privilege and/or marginalisation derived from these intersecting relationalities.

Our fourth suggestion involves adopting a transdisciplinary approach. An important point of entry to facilitate this new way of thinking would be to redesign coach education/development frameworks to allow for transdisciplinary dialogue to take place, avoiding introducing gender-specific coaching information and research evidence in siloed manners as discrete entities (e.g., physiological vs. sociocultural considerations for coaching women and girls). Moreover, it would entail drawing attention to the problematic unintended consequences of different knowledges and perspectives (e.g., the legacy of positivism and the tendency of bioscientific knowledge to essentialise and homogenise gendered differences). Such coach development would need to be flexible and co-designed with and for coaches across the pathway from community to high-performance sport and work to re-complexify rather than reduce or ‘dumb down’ coaching knowledge and practice.

Derivative curriculum content and strategies could include the use of ‘reflective conversations and problem- or issue-setting based on Schön’s (1983) conceptualisation to support coaches in problematising and moving beyond go-to, default gendered practices and explanations for the various participation and performance problems they face (J. Denison & Avner, 2011; Stodter et al., 2021). For example, rather than rushing towards problem-solving, J. Denison and Avner (2011) encourage coaches and coach developers to take a step back and consider four key questions related to their understanding and representation of problems/issues in sport (Figure 1 J. Denison & Avner, 2011).

Through various issue-based scenarios (see examples in Figure 1), they invite coaches to critically reflect on how they understand and typically address various common performance problems or issues they encounter and “to consider the possible shortcomings or unintended consequences that their problem-solving approaches have on their coaching and the athletes they coach” (p. 211). This coach development strategy has been

effectively drawn upon to underpin various coach development collaborations (see [Avner et al., 2024](#); [Konoval et al., 2019](#); [Kuklick & Mills, 2023](#)). For example, [Konoval et al. \(2019\)](#) worked closely with an endurance-running coach over a period of six months to explore this coach's default problem-solving strategies and support the problematisation of the docility-inducing effects of various spatial, temporal, organisational, and evaluative practices. Together, they then co-designed a range of 'next' practices to counter these effects and challenge power-knowledge relations within that specific coaching context.

'Next' tools to think and practice differently

- Problem-setting

- What do I believe represents a **problem** in sport and why?
- What does my representation of problems in sport say about my **knowledge and understanding** of people and relationships and the body and performance?
- What other knowledges or perspectives are **marginalized** as a result of the way I represent problems in sport?
- What potentially **problematic relations of power** or limiting effects, including that which gets left unproblematic, are produced by my privileged representation of problems in sport?

(Denison & Avner, 2011, p. 215)

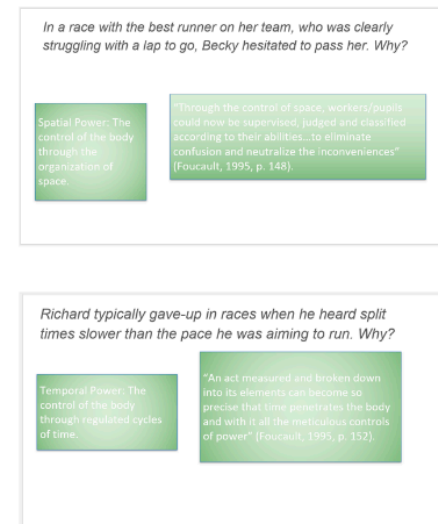


Figure 1. Problem/issue-setting ([J. Denison & Avner, 2011](#), p. 215).

Likewise, through reflective conversations with a coach developer, [Stodter et al. \(2021\)](#) worked with coaches to spend time issue-setting as an important stimulus for dialogue, thinking and questioning more deeply, and more fully appreciating then reappreciating their existing knowledge practices. This helped coaches to narrow theory–practice disconnects in their learning and development. Reflective conversations that privilege problem/issue-setting over problem-solving have the potential to positively impact the development of gender and diversity-responsive practices by drawing coaches' attention to (a) their privileged understanding of gender and gender and diversity-responsive coaching, (b) how this privileged understanding, in turn, shapes their practices, and (c) to the various unintended consequences of these privileged understandings and practices. In so doing, problem- or issue-setting opens possibilities for coaches to both broaden their problem-solving repertoire and to devise new, more ethical and contextually effective problem-solving strategies.

Supported audio and video feedback and peer coaching could also be used as powerful tools for coaches to reflect upon the gendering, quality, and impact of the language, practice designs, and coaching behaviours they adopt and, in turn, support them to identify, challenge, and change problematic gendered and intersecting understandings and practices. Lastly, gender and diversity-responsive formal and informal learning opportunities should include quality mentoring from women and gender expansive coaches or from men who have extensive experience working with women and girls and gender expansive athletes; networking events; and access to critically informed gender-specific research evidence in a digestible format (e.g., short resources, podcasts, videos).

Our fifth recommendation for re-orienting coach development is to embrace an understanding of the affective elements influencing the field of practice. Our use of this concept draws on [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1987, p. 257\)](#) theorisation and their concern with 'what bodies can do.' As a fluctuating "capacity to affect and be affected", affect

can be understood as a relational force or intensity that circulates within and amongst bodies, both human and nonhuman. According to [Chadwick \(2021, p. 517\)](#), “affects are not just sociomaterial effects or products, they also ‘do’ things [...]—they mobilize actions, representations, decisions, meanings and interpretations”.

Recognising the affective dimensions of any change process requires thinking about points of stickiness and how people are variously oriented towards different discourses, practices, and human and nonhuman bodies ([Ahmed, 2010](#)). With that in mind, a starting point could be to focus initially on coaches who are already affectively oriented towards promoting gender equity and social justice and the ‘moveable middle’ ([Kanter, 1977](#)), that is, coaches who are neither committed nor opposed. Such a strategy could help create a critical mass and serve to mainstream gender and diversity-responsive considerations and practices. When considering change, it is helpful to, as [Deleuze and Guattari \(1987, p. 160\)](#) express, “use a very fine file, not a sledgehammer.” Such cautionary words point to the need for strategies that serve to build coaches’ knowledge, competence, and confidence around coaching women and girls and gender expansive athletes in supportive and generative ways.

Reframing coaching and coach development work as affective encounters ([Charteris et al., 2019](#)) can support the development of coach education and development approaches that support coaches and coach developers’ critical attunement to the atmospheres of places and people ([Hickey-Moody, 2013](#)), the increasingly subtle ways in which sporting inequalities are reproduced and materialised within different sporting contexts, and to the workings of power “that are often invisible and unheard, yet intensely felt in sporting contexts” ([Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2018, p. 459](#)). As one example, [Pavlidis et al. \(2025, p. 3\)](#) worked with 11 strength and conditioning coaches in the context of a “feminist research intra-vention” which re-centred affect to open up gender differences and work towards more inclusive knowledge practices. The strategies they deployed included drawing gendered bodies as an arts-based practice to make visible assumptions held about gendered bodies and exploring the tensions that coaches experience when working with women. In so doing, they re-centred the following affective lines of questioning:

how does attuning to affect including an affective politics of dis/comfort open up a generative space to think and know otherwise, to move beyond static representations of coaches and athletes and towards a more generative conception of bodies, sport, and sport coaching? [...] and how can educators use an affective pedagogy to support learners to attune to discomfort and defensiveness. To ask: when do I feel uncomfortable and defensive in relation to questions of gender and the athletes I am coaching? How can I be open to other ways of being, relation, and feeling in this context?

[Pavlidis et al. \(2025\)](#) described the value of re-centring affect in terms of de-individualising feelings of blame, shame, or inadequacies and fostering an atmosphere of “suspended judgment” (p. 6). However, they also recognised the challenges of affective work and the feelings of discomfort, unmooring, and at times defensiveness this generated for them as researchers and for the coach participants. While not always easy, dis/comfort nonetheless acted as a productive force to think and practice differently and showed much potential as a feminist praxis and affective pedagogy.

4. Conclusions and Further Considerations

While the re-orienting approaches presented in this manuscript focus on the professional learning and development of sport coaches, they recognise that coaches do not operate in a vacuum; nor are they lone, independent actors exercising agency discretely and autonomously. Any effort to coach in more gender and diversity-responsive ways will

be both enabled and impeded by the set of human and nonhuman relations that shape fields of practice (Camiré, 2023; Carroll et al., 2021). Recognising this necessitates attending to the sociomateriality of sports coaching and the ways in which material constraints (e.g., inequitable access to training grounds, facilities, coaching equipment, officiating, injury prevention and recovery supportive technologies, athlete development practices, coaching remuneration) and discursive constraints (e.g., norms, codes of conduct, privileged policies, knowledges, discourses) intra-act to produce various affects and to privilege and/or marginalise and ‘other’ different human and nonhuman bodies, ways of knowing, and practices.

Such a critical and relational attunement invites us to consider points of stickiness and sociomaterial challenges to coaching in more gender and diversity-responsive ways. These are numerous and range from the paucity of women and other minorities in sports coaching, coach development, and sport leadership roles to policies and practices that support the status quo and limit women and other minorities’ retention and career progressions and to the global Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) pushback or its discursive positioning as a “nice to have” add-on but fundamentally falling outside of the “core” business of sport and sports coaching. However, more hopefully, it also invites us to consider how the content and expression of sport coaching may be assembled differently, be it through the re-orienting approaches outlined in this manuscript, which have already been productively put to work within different coach development contexts (e.g., Konoval et al., 2019; Kuklick & Mills, 2023; Pavlidis et al., 2025), or others to generate different affects and more ethical, sustainable, and socially just outcomes.

What is clear is that new ways of thinking and practicing are needed if we are to challenge and disrupt the modernist ‘iron cage’ of sports coaching (J. Denison et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2024) and its disciplinary/extravictist logic and related numerous unintended consequences, including the unproblematic reproduction of athlete and coach docility and of unethical and harmful athlete and coach development practices (Blackett et al., 2019; Gerdin et al., 2019; McMahon & Penney, 2013). Engaging individual coaches, coach developers, and more broadly working in partnership with sport governing bodies at a system level in the context of a global push back against Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) initiatives is a challenge worth addressing for now and for the future of sport coaching.

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Appendix A

Towards a relational, feminist-informed, intersectional, transdisciplinary, and e/affective approach.

Current Challenges to Gender and Diversity Responsive Coaching	Why Is this a Problem?	Suggested Approach/Curriculum Content and Strategies
Challenge #1: Artificial fragmentation of coaching knowledge and dominance of bioscientific and essentialist ways of knowing in shaping understanding of women's moving and (high)-performing sporting bodies	<p>Ignores the complex entanglements of biology AND culture in shaping women's sporting bodies and the impossibility/unethicity of disentangling these when it comes to understanding and addressing various (gendered) participation and performance problems.</p> <p>Leads to (gendered) participation and performance sporting problems being selectively named and framed through a narrow bioscientific lens leading to partial and/or limited understandings and problem-solving solutions</p>	<p>Promote transdisciplinary dialogue through the integration of diverse perspective and ways of knowing that work to de-centre and complexify bioscientific knowledges and practices (e.g., Thorpe et al. (2021) theorisation of human bodies as "biocultural creatures and creatives")</p> <p>Use strategies such as problem-setting and critical reflective conversations (J. Denison & Avner, 2011; Stodter et al., 2021) to encourage holistic and relational rather than fragmented and partial approaches and problem-solving strategies that more accurately reflect the complexity and contextuality of coaching</p>
Challenge #2: Siloing of coach development dedicated to learning about women's moving and (high)-performing sporting bodies (i.e., as add on modules and coach development training)	Contributes to naturalising the problematic notion of women and girls as 'special populations' necessitating additional considerations and astuteness as opposed to the straightforward 'default' coaching knowledge required for coaching men/boys	Re-centre, 'infuse', and mainstream 'women-related' coach development content alongside other 'minority-related' coach development content (e.g., coaching athletes with disability) (Townsend et al., 2022)
Challenge #3: Importation of problematic assumptions/stereotypes when transitioning to coaching women and girls with little emphasis placed on criticality and understanding the various unintended consequences of gendered 'best' coaching practices	Reproduction of limiting and/or harmful coach and women and girl athlete development practices	<p>Re-centre critical coaching knowledges that trouble established coaching 'truths' and 'best' practices and re-open these to ongoing critical examination (e.g., Foucault's Power-Knowledge-Practice and concept of problematising, see for example Avner et al., 2023)</p> <p>Promote reflective conversations with diverse critical friends/mentors to challenge problematic assumptions/stereotypes</p> <p>Use of audio and video feedback to identify and confront problematic gendered coach behaviours and practices</p>

Current Challenges to Gender and Diversity Responsive Coaching	Why Is this a Problem?	Suggested Approach/Curriculum Content and Strategies
Challenge #4: Coaches and coach developers' limited knowledge and confidence around coaching women and girls and other historically marginalised participant groups in sport	Widespread apprehension around coaching different populations. Perpetuation of stereotypes around the challenging nature of coaching women and girls and other historically marginalised groups in sport (e.g., athletes with disability)	<p>Re-centre, 'infuse', and mainstream 'women-related' and other 'minority-related' coach development content (e.g., coaching athletes with disability)</p> <p>Draw on a diversity of examples that highlight intersecting relations (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class) and how these shape and impact sport participation and performance</p> <p>Use reflective conversations with diverse critical friends/mentors to build coaches' knowledge and confidence of coaching women and girls and other historically marginalised groups while challenging normative assumptions and binaries that privilege white, able-bodied, heterosexual, male athletes.</p>
Challenge #5: Coaches and administrators' affective dissonance/rejection of ED&I work and perspectives	<p>Homologous replication of coaching workforce (Blackett et al., 2019, 2021)</p> <p>Less diverse teams, worse performance.</p>	<p>Focus on the 'moveable' middle (Kanter, 1977)</p> <p>Draw on feminist-informed andragogic strategies that promote participants' attunement to instances of discomfort and defensiveness as important moments of (un)/learning. Such strategies require skilled facilitators and the formation of heterarchical (i.e., non-hierarchical) communities of learning/relations where participants feel more comfortable expressing vulnerability and openness and where all participants are active in the materialization of knowledge (see Pavlidis et al., 2025).</p>

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