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Citation:

DeHaan, D and Norman, L (2019) Mind the gap: The presence of capital and power in the female athlete - male coach relationship within elite rowing. *Sports Coaching Review*. ISSN 2164-0629 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2019.1567160>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Sports Coaching Review* on 28 Jan 2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21640629.2019.1567160>

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Mind the gap: The presence of capital and power in the female athlete - male coach relationship within elite rowing

## **Abstract**

We draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and capital, and Foucault's understanding of power, to examine how gender as a relation of power is exercised in the female-athlete, male-coach relationship. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine international male coaches and female athletes. Our findings reveal a hierarchy within rowing and a perpetuation of the gendering of coaching creating a habitus which positions female athletes below male athletes. The positioning of female athletes effects how capital is defined, used and negotiated by the coaches and athletes. The implications of which need to be addressed by sporting federations in order to support and develop coaches as gender-responsive practitioners, thereby addressing the capital and power gap which is often present in elite sport.

**Key words:** Bourdieu, Foucault, female-athlete, male-coach, rowing

## **Introduction**

Athlete and coach experiences typically occur in contexts that are male dominated and which favour men and masculinity (Author B, 2016). For example, our coaching profession, globally, is overwhelmingly dominated by men. Recent data shows that over the last four consecutive Olympic cycles, the ratio of men to women in high performance coaching is consistently, approximately ten to one (Author B, 2017). And it is not just the coaching pathway that is (gender) unequal; it is widely known that more men than women regularly participate in organised sport. In the UK for example, 41% of men participate in sporting activities at least three times a week compared to 29% of women (Sport England, 2017), men receive significantly more media and sponsorship attention, and organisational culture (norms and

values) within many sporting federations is often more favourable to masculinity, men and their promotion and progression.

Given then the often male-dominated context in which female athletes train and perform, coupled with the persistent domination of coaching by men despite more women accessing coaching more, it is worthwhile to examine whether current (male) coaching practices are conducive to women's sporting experiences both socially and individually. From a psychological perspective, there is no scarcity of research demonstrating a *positive* coach-athlete relationship can greatly improve an athlete's reported satisfaction (Bortoli, Robazza, & Giabardo, 1995), motivational levels (Kenow & Williams, 1999), stimulate positive moods, provide a sense of support and reduce anxiety, and improve wellbeing and psychological functioning (Williams, Czech, & Biber, 2017; Wrisberg, 1996). Positive in this context, referring to a high quality relationship between coach and athlete that helps this interaction become *effective*. A positive coach-athlete relationship is related to enhanced performance (Nicholls & Perry, 2016). For these individually-related reasons, the relationship between a coach and his or her athlete is therefore paramount. For the purposes of this paper, the coach-athlete relationship is understood to mean the partnership between these two social actors in which feelings, thoughts, and actions are inter-related (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Beyond just a psychological perspective, the implications of having a gender imbalanced coaching workforce in favour of men also relate to the wider group (for example, the team or club to which the coach and athlete belongs) and social setting and context in which this relationship occurs. There is an emerging body of evidence showing how different athletes respond to or receive coaching, and research that suggests that gender can create power imbalances between (male) coaches and their (female) athletes and therefore impacts the quality and style of the coaching process (author B, 2012; 2013; LaVoi, 2007; MacKinnon, 2011; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). The premise and value of this research is in revealing the socially

constructed nature of this relationship, the impact of (unequal) gender relations and power, and the significance of gendered ideas and expectations. This adds to psychological arguments as to the impact of a coach on an athlete by interrogating further what aspects of this relationship are influential and the resulting implications on the coaching and athletic context. This sociological approach to the research area of gender and its influence on the coach-athlete relationship is a turn from the more dominant disciplinary and positivist perspectives within this field. More work is needed though to interrogate what gender *means* for the quality and effectiveness (that is, the outcome of this relationship, and impact on performance) of the coach-athlete relationship beyond being just a biological category but instead as a relation of *power*, and how it impacts what the social actors within this relationship expect, need or prefer from each other.

In essence, most of our research to date has been 'gender-blind' or at least gender-neutral, in examining what makes for an effective coach-athlete relationship. The consequence of this is that a sense of context is lost. Yet within coaching sociology, it is well understood that coaching is a social endeavour, often a role involving a great deal of (imbalanced) power, a personal and interactional role that is more about how coaches engage with athletes rather than the physical act of coaching itself, and that it is a socially dynamic relationship (Denison & Avner, 2011; Jones, 2007; Purdy & Jones, 2011). To not consider gender within the coach-athlete relationship as more than just biological sex, to ignore the potential power imbalances between coach and athlete according to gender, or to ignore what it means to be a man or woman removes the social actors within the relationship from the social context thus, excluding the 'bigger picture' in which these individuals compete or coach. And without this, crucial evidence would be lost. For example, the research that shows how male coaches understand social constructions of gender hinders their professional practices and relationships with female athletes, or male coaches having lower expectations of women's physical ability or not investing

sufficient effort into furthering their development and relationship, would not exist (Author B, 2013).

Work from a qualitative, sociological and interpretive or critical approach, is rare. One example study is that of the work of MacKinnon (2011). According to this research focusing on the specific coaching needs of women, it was found that coaches need to pay significant attention to *who* they are coaching, not just what they are coaching. For example, when working with groups of women, coaching practices such as positive reinforcement, developing a personal relationship, and learning in a variety of different formats are particularly effective (MacKinnon, 2011). These findings concur with those of Author B (2015, 2016) and Norman and French (2013) who, through a critical sociological perspective, argued that female athletes desire to be supported as a person as well a performer by their coach. Female athletes want their relationship with their coach to be a more power-equal one, in which coaches communicate positively and take the time to understand that who the athlete is, beyond the training or competition arena, is salient to how they train and perform.

Whether coaches are 'set up' and educated to respond on a more individual basis to their athletes along the lines of gender, with a deep understanding of the issues that different social groups bring to the court, the pitch, or the track for example, is in question. In the UK, coaches have the opportunity to attend workshops entitled "Equity in Your Coaching" to learn more about working with minoritised groups in sport, such as different groups of women, performers with a disability, and / or minoritised ethnic groups. Representing part of the national coaching curriculum offered by UK Coaching (the UK's central coaching agency) to educate coaches on social justice issues, practitioners are offered the opportunity to undergo training to understand how to make their practices more 'accessible'. The precise aim of these national one-off workshops is to educate coaches as to how to identify and deal with any barriers (inequities) to sports participation for minority groups in sport, eliminate practices that make it difficult for such groups to join clubs and compete, as well

as understand how to interpret the legislation relating to equality for their clubs and practice, and develop methods to make coaching sessions more accessible to all their athletes (Sports Coach UK, 2009). However, research has critiqued these workshops for how the concept of 'difference' is constructed, and for the limited impact on the subsequent coaching practice. Coaches were not required to think themselves in relation to others who were 'different' to them (Author B, 2016; 2017). A 'them and us' narrative was found to be the basis of the equity training workshop (Author B, 2017). Rather than interrogating how their own identity could shape their relationship with their athletes, the workshop only required coaches to consider the identity of their participants in a non-relational and abstract manner (Author B, 2016). Further, no discussion of power between coach and participant was had within the workshops (Author B, 2017; 2016).

Other research has highlighted how male coaches may adjust their coaching practices to the detriment of their female athletes based upon erroneous and unequal ideas of women's expectations as performers. When working with male athletes, the male coaches in Felton and Jowett's (2013) study promoted striving towards winning at all costs. However, when working with female athletes the coach advocated a 'try your best' mentality on their understanding that female athletes were not as competitive or capable of 'high-level' performance. MacKinnon (2011) explains that athletes may have different degrees of need for enjoyment, want a different style of coaching relationship, and desire more of a say in the coaching process according to the gender of the athlete. For example, Longshore and Sachs (2015) contend that female athletes will often request to explore the rationale behind coaching decisions and will often want to be involved with the decision making process more than male athletes. They go on to agree that male and female athletes require tailored coaching practices, for example, male athletes required a more autocratic leadership style, whilst female athletes preferred a more empathetic coaching and communication style. This finding was also supported by the work of Fasting and Pfister (2000) who through interviews with elite female footballers, demonstrated that the

players in their research wanted a relationship with their coach in which there was efficient, confident communication and less aggressive or negative coaching practices. The participants explained that this was something they had experienced more with their female coaches and that they had enjoyed a better relationship with women coaches, because of these qualities. While the present study does not seek to perpetuate a 'gender difference' approach when working with male or female athletes, nor seeks to provide evidence that gives the impression of 'special casing' women, we do endeavour to understand how gender may influence this relationship. Based on our understanding that women are under-represented as participants and athletes, it may be the case that their experiences of being coached could be enhanced in order to improve retention and enjoyment of sport. We argue that coaches should carefully consider 'who' it is that they are coaching, considering all aspects of identity (both of themselves and of their athlete), for how social constructed identities may influence how and what individuals want from the coach-athlete relationship.

In summary, previous research has provided a large amount of knowledge towards understanding what particular coaching behaviours or styles of coaching are features of a *positive* coach-athlete relationship (e.g. Becker, 2009; Felton & Jowett, 2013a; Felton & Jowett, 2013b; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). To reiterate our earlier point, positive in this case refers a high quality relationship that is more likely to lead to an effective relationship whereby both athlete and coaches experience enhanced performances. While there is a plethora of research seeking to examine athlete preferences towards coaching, there remains little consideration of this with a specific focus upon women as recognition on gender as a relation of power. Much of the work has failed to adopt a critical and sociological perspective of this relationship between female athletes and male coaches, addressing what it means to be a particular man or woman and how gendered power and relations shape this dyad. Instead, this focus has tended to be on *behaviours* or *outcomes* of these relationships without critiquing the (gendered) context in which

many of these experiences are located. To do this, it is necessary to utilise a different paradigmatic and thus methodological approach to the research area of gender and its influence upon the coach-athlete relationship within the contexts in which these interrelations occur. This formed the impetus for the present study. With the rise in sporting participation by women (Sport England, 2017) and the ideologies surrounding male athlete superiority, contrasted with the continual dominance of coaching by men, it is urgent that the dynamics of gender within the coach-athlete relationship is understood in greater depth. Therefore the aim of this study was to examine how gender as a relation of *power* is exercised in the female-athlete, male-coach relationship.

## **Method**

### ***Theoretical position***

In order to examine how power is exercised in the context of the coach-athlete relationship we firstly draw on the work of Bourdieu, specifically his notions of 'habitus' and 'capital'. Whilst we acknowledge that Bourdieu's work is not synonymous with gender focused studies and his work has been criticised by some feminist scholars as being ostensibly androcentric in his placement of social class over gender relations (Hargreaves, 1994; Laberge, 1995; Thorpe, 2009), we highlight that there are links between habitus, practice and gender in some of Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu, 1990). Further, we suggest that Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a means of understanding how corporeality and gender are interdependent as we focus on the practices of positions and position taking. For example, athletes and coaches take different positions informed by the organisational structure of sport and associated distribution of capital. Therefore whilst the habitus of a female athlete or a male coach will develop as a result of their interaction with each other and others involved in the sport of rowing, the construction of an athlete's habitus is likely to be different from that of a coaches.



The concept of capital resides at the centre of Bourdieu's (1985, p. 734) construction of social space: "The structure of the social world is defined at every moment by the structure and distribution of the capital and profits characteristic of the different particular fields". The distribution of capital is not however linear. Indeed Bourdieu (1988) understood society to be structured along differences in the distribution of capital with individuals striving to maximise their own personal capital. With regards to capital acquisition and gender in the field of sport, male agents predominantly preside higher up the hierarchy than females. Indeed the ability of an individual to accumulate various forms of capital is proportionate to their position in the social space. In the context of Olympic rowing for example, more medals have traditionally been available to male rowers, (Tokyo 2020 will be the first time equal medal opportunities will be offered) and the men's eight is considered the most prestigious of all the Olympic events. An athlete that finds himself in a gold medal crew is likely to acquire symbolic (e.g. prestige), corporal (e.g. physical attractiveness) and possibly social and economic capital. The coach of the successful crew would also acquire capital through position taking embedded in the dominant organisational structures which associated a successful coach with a successful athlete, crew or team.

According to Bourdieu, women are not typically capital-accumulating objects, rather they are capital-bearing objects, whose value accrues to the primary groups in which they belong (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). In theory female coaches could accrue capital through their association with successful male athletes but in the Olympic context only 11% of all coaches at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games were female (author B, 2017) and in general 74% of all rowing coaches are male (FISA, 2014). Female athletes have the potential to accrue symbolic capital by showcasing their ability and commitment, by demonstrating legitimate physical prowess, skill, risk-taking and courage (Thorpe, 2005, 2008, 2009). Thorpe (2008) explains that in contemporary sport such as snowboarding, this type of symbolic capital can be converted into economic and social

capital. The amount of capital that can be accumulated by an individual makes a significant contribution to determining the range of available choices open to that individual (Bourdieu, 1989). Purdy, Jones, and Cassidy (2009) explain that in this context capital becomes the capacity to exercise power over ones' own future and the future of others. Whilst Bourdieu's ideas about habitus, capital and position taking can be used to understand practices in the field, we believe the use of Foucauldian perspectives are needed to contribute to an understanding of power relations between an athlete and coach.

Foucault assumes individuals are responsible for their own actions and commit themselves to moral obligations within power relations. He argued that supervision is a regulatory technique used to teach individuals how to behave in what is perceived to be a normal manner. In sport, it is often the coach who is responsible for defining normal and appropriate behaviour. Coaches tend to control and discipline their athletes using mechanisms of reward or punishment, be that through access to or withdrawal of physical resources, for example the best rower may have access to the best boat, or through verbal encouragement or chastisement. These disciplinary techniques are often expressed through hegemonic discourses (Claringbould, Knoppers, & Jacobs, 2015). Reflecting therefore, regimes of truth of masculinity in sport in general, coaching ideologies and discourses appear to be orientated towards male needs and ideals making it at times difficult for women to adapt themselves to these norms and values.

To understand how power is exercised within the male-coach, female- athlete relationship, we therefore combined Foucault's insights with the work of Bourdieu. While some scholars reject such synthesis of theories for the potential risk to the potency and clarity of arguments, others note that the combination of Foucault and Bourdieu can be done in a productive way, specifically combining Foucault's insights on discourse and Bourdieu's use of practice (Light & Kirk, 2000). Using a variety of perspectives and reworking concepts such as habitus, capital docility and discipline to fit a new understanding of the relationships between (male) coaches

and their (female) athletes, it can lead to the production of some novel and provocative empirical findings. This is at the same time as remaining grounded in critical perspectives. Both Bourdieu and Foucault, within their concepts of habitus and discipline, conceive social spaces as interrelated processes and structures as the overarching way of life for individuals, and that this space is enforced by rules and the threat of punishment (Schlosser, 2013). The relationship of the habitus and the disciplines in Bourdieu's and Foucault's work presents a unique perspective of cultural existence that highlights ways of ordering and regulating the social, without formal explanation (Schlosser, 2013). Both Bourdieu and Foucault share similar views on the individual's role within this too – individuals are seen to accept their potential for action and often remain loyal unconsciously to the everyday boundaries of their lives (Schlosser, 2013). In both works of these theorists, subjectivity is reproduced on a large-scale by the individuals practicing it, and strengthened within the boundaries of established order through the modes of habitus and discipline (Schlosser, 2013). Within a sport coaching context, using Bourdieu can enhance our understanding of how the relationship between structures, and the actors within it; in this case, the male coach and the female athlete, are constructed (Townsend, Huntley, Cushion, & Fitzgerald, 2018). This relationship between coach and athlete is not value-free nor objective (Townsend et al., 2018), and therefore, by combining Bourdieu with Foucault, we can interrogate with much more depth, the power that is at play that determines how coaches and athletes behave and interact with each other within the overarching structure of sport. In this context, a coach's continued engagement in a specific social context (a particular sport for example and its culture) prompts a particular way of practicing, or way of physically being. It is within this context that this paper examines how power is exercised in the female-athlete, male-coach relationship in the context of elite rowing. This is drawn from speaking to coaches and athletes as it was important to gather these experiences to represent a more complete picture of this interaction between individuals.

## ***Sampling and Procedure***

Primary data was collected via semi-structured interviews with nine elite level male rowing coaches and nine elite level female rowers. For the purpose of this study, selected coaches were required to have had experience in (a) coaching both male and female rowers, (b) coaching rowers at an elite level (within the context of this study, we define elite athletes as those on identified national performance pathways), (c) coaching at the elite level for more than two years (a timeframe which would indicate the coaches had experienced a major competition cycle), and (d) an appropriate level of spoken English to converse on this subject matter. The World Rowing Coaches Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was used as the platform to invite and recruit coaches with a range of international experiences. Coaches were selected using a convenience sampling technique. Coaches included in the study were from seven different nationalities with experience coaching at elite level in twenty different countries.

We wanted to include a similarly diverse group of international athletes. We therefore used a snowball sampling technique to recruit athletes for face-to-face interviews if at all possible or alternatively skype or telephone interviews. For this study, selected athletes were required to be (a) female rowers at an elite level (those on identified national performance pathways), and (b) an appropriate level of spoken English to converse on this subject matter. Athletes included in the study are from nine different nationalities. It was not the intention of the study to find specific coach-athlete partnerships. All participants received and signed a consent form prior to the interview explaining the aims of the study and ensuring the confidentiality of their participation. Participants have remained anonymous to create freedom for openness about their relationships with their coaches or rowers, given the high profile nature of some of the participants included in the present study.

The sample size in this study allowed for an in-depth and breadth of information in exploring coaches' and athletes' experiences and helped sufficiently answer the research question

(Marshall, 2000). An interview guide was developed to provide a formal beginning to the interview with identified topics used to guide the conversation. Both coaches and athletes were asked at the beginning of the interview to briefly describe their sporting careers to date, topics for both then included (1) coach education, (2) coach-athlete relationship, (3) coaching style. These themes provided a degree of structure whilst also allowing the participants some freedom to explore areas of their choice. For example, whilst discussing their sporting careers some athletes focussed on periods of transition, career highlights or even periods away from the sport. We would ask them to elaborate on this, to understand the role of the coach in any of these periods. Interviews were conducted in English by the lead author and another member of the research team and lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. The audio of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis commenced once all interviews had been completed, transcribed and number coded to ensure confidentiality. Qualitative analysis is inevitably guided and framed by pre-existing ideas and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Gibbs & Flick, 2007). Both deductive and inductive reasoning guided the data analysis. Using the constructs of gender relations (boundaries, negotiation and consciousness) as the relevant conceptual framework and a point of departure in this study, deductive reasoning was used to identify pertinent and relevant data to understand how power shaped and was shaped within the coach-athlete relationships. Accordingly, the data were analysed using a constant comparative method of thematic analysis which allowed the recording of patterns (or themes). An inductive approach was used to look for patterns in the data, working to develop a theoretical framework that could explain those patterns.

During data analysis, the research team identified emergent properties within the codes which were used to compare them with other properties to refine the number of codes and create

categories. Throughout the analytic process each code and category was assessed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to ensure that the meaning units were distinct and appropriately categorised. When a code could not be grouped with another, it formed a new category. Rules of inclusion for each category were written and connected to similar categories to show relationships and patterns across the data. Through the data analysis process, recurrent categories were located across the transcripts involving continually connecting the data back to the research question and grouping these categories together to form larger, over-arching categories.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***The view from the field (or in this case, the water): habitus and hierarchy in elite rowing***

Bourdieu's concept of a 'field' refers to the social system 'within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources' or access to such resources (Jenkins, 2002, p. 84). In this case, the sport of rowing constitutes a partially autonomous field within the broader field of high performance or elite sport. Each field has its own historical norms, which include the fields' explicit and formal rules and regulations, alongside informal, tacit and implicit customs, ceremonies and etiquette that are collectively known as practice (Bourdieu, 1990). A field is structured internally in terms of power relations with individuals' position depending on their access to the resources or capital which are valued within the field (Jenkins, 2002). In the following quotation from a female athlete, she describes the male hierarchical structure and 'field' of elite rowing:

*In sport, discrimination against female athletes is everywhere. From the way that you're praised, through to the way that the race order takes place. The men's eight is the ultimate race...every decision that is made, is focussed on the men's eight. And the only way to operate within that system, is how we do it, is the women remove themselves*

*from that second order. Because you cannot underestimate the slow negativeness that being in that environment.... being permanently in the shadow, has an effect, on performance. I think once you're out of the shadow, you can get on with who's the best.*

According to Bourdieu (1990), 'position taking' or individual agency is the result of one's disposition or habitus. This female rower describes her understanding of the world of elite sport, an understanding that contains conscious and unconscious ideological and normative assumptions. Her habitus, her understanding of the world of elite rowing and her embodied experience of it, has developed as a result of her interactions with others in the field, including her fellow crew members and those in position of power / decision makers. She has experienced the position of male power, as understood through symbols and practices that place the men's eight at the top of the hierarchy of her sport. Based on the desire to gain symbolic capital, the female athletes in this narrative chose to 'remove themselves' from the system, to the extent of 'isolating' / differentiating their own practice / position.

As briefly discussed, the rowing habitus develops through practical engagement with the rowing culture. As such, the distinctive practices of a rowing habitus are imprinted and encoded in a socialising process that commences during early entry into the rowing field. From the example above, it is evident that the female rowers are aware of a male hierarchy within their sport. They are aware of the difference between their positioning and that of the male athletes.

The male coaches in the study first gained access to the rowing field as athletes. It is during this early socialisation period that their construct of the culture of rowing will have been formed, influenced by the 'practical transmission' of rowing 'knowledge' via coaches (statistically more likely to be male), and peers' comments, observation, rowing artefacts, sports coverage etc.(Ford & Brown, 2006, p. 123). Interestingly, the male coaches all began their interviews by explaining that they did not make any distinction between men and women in the way they approached coaching their athletes: *'It doesn't matter if I am coaching a girl or boy I get the*

*same result – I coach them the same*'. However, as the following quotation shows, the coaches then went on to discuss several differences between the genders:

*'Of course there are differences such as communication, in training allocations, the concept itself...they [females] react differently, they behave differently, they are more sensible in certain circumstances and they can resist things that boys don't. Their psychological behaviour is different'.*

Analysis of the coaches' narratives shows that the dominant discourse of gender for them was constructed along psychological lines of difference. They described the relationship they have with, and the needs and expectations of their female athletes in a sociocultural way. Author B (2016) reported that women's experiences of coaching were socially constructed and that gendered ideologies concerning women's sporting abilities negatively affected their relationship with their coaches. Such gender ideologies are formed in a patriarchal coaching context in which athletes and coaches train, perform and work, a context where women are underrepresented.

A Foucauldian perspective assumes individuals are responsible for their actions and commit themselves to moral obligations within power relations (Claringbould et al., 2015). Indeed, it has been argued that professionals pass on the theories that form a regime of truth for them to those with whom they work (Michel, 2011, 2015). This suggests that coaches pass on their notions about gender to their athletes and try to discipline their athletes into those ideas. This knowledge, including regimes of truth about gender can therefore become generative through athletes who later become coaches (Michel, 2011, 2015; Van Amsterdam, Claringbould, & Knoppers, 2017). Specifically, one of the most important sources of knowledge coaches draw on is their experience as coach and as a former athlete (see Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Jacobs, Claringbould, & Knoppers, 2014). Thus, coaches may be constructing their habitus by reproducing the discourses about gender, and other social power relations, into which they were



disciplined during their athletic careers and may be regarding them as regimes of truth. The regimes of truth articulated by the male coaches that position the male athlete as the ideal embodiment of the sport of rowing create a gendered habitus:

*As soon as the woman does not feel comfortable, she quits. The boy can stay because he's focussed on the result. He knows whatever he has to go through he will. The girl is not focussed on the result like the boy. As soon as she is uncomfortable with her teammates, the structure, whatever, she quits.*

As demonstrated in the above quotation the male athlete is the ideal athlete and the female athlete is incapable of reaching this ideal state and failure to do so may result in her leaving the sport. As with the majority of sports, there is a higher attrition rate for female than male athletes in rowing (FISA, 2014). In this example, female retention is positioned as the female athlete's problem because they are not tough enough. Male athletes are tough and they do not quit.

Taylor and Garratt (2010) explain that within particular sports, the more pronounced and articulated is the habitus, the more immersed agents are likely to become in its maintenance and replication. In the following quotation, one coach tries to explain 'why' there is a problem of female retention in rowing, implying that women athletes may be distracted by their other 'identities' outside of sport:

*For men, their identity is more closely tied to "I am an athlete and that's who I am". Women tend to think that this is something that I do rather than...they just don't want to be labelled as just an athlete or a rower – there are so many other things. The attrition rate is greater for women athletes than for men. A study was shown that women are up to more than 8 times likely to quit their sport than men and one of the reasons was they don't have their identity just tied up in "I am a rower [or] I am a basketball player".*

By drawing on Foucauldian perspectives in addition to those of Bourdieu, we are able to understand the process of internalisation of ideologies such as ‘female athletes are not as tough as male athletes’ presented by the coaches. Foucault (1972) contended that dominant discourses are constructed as ‘truths’ that enable individuals to identify themselves as normal as long as they behave in accordance with these dominant discourses. Individuals therefore transform themselves through practices of compliance with these discourses. Within the field of high performance rowing, the value of the male athlete supersedes that of the female.

### ***Position, privilege and power***

LaVoi (2007) explains that one of the most powerful techniques employed to maintain male hegemony in sport occurs by socially constructing differences between female and male athletes which thereby establishes men as the universal ideological norm and females as ‘other’. In the case of elite rowing, the ideal embodiment of hegemonic masculinity comes in the form of the men’s eight. However, beyond specific boat categories, coaches used several dominant discourses to frame female athletes as the other with the male athlete as the norm, resulting in coaches creating homogenous groups of male and female athletes. This construction negates the fact that there is likely to be more difference between two female athletes than between all female and male athletes in general.

Othering through discourse is a way for one group to exclude, oppress or marginalise another group in a way that carries over to how the dominant group represents others, especially through stereotypical images and discourse. In the following quotation taken from a coach interview, he constructs female rowers as weak which is an unattractive characteristic and presented to the male athletes as an undesirable behaviour:

*'You need to sometimes, and not in a condescending way, but when a male is acting in what you'd describe in a fairly weak manner, you might use the expression of "stop acting like a girl" and you know that it's wrong but sometimes it's where I'll go'.*

The coach is aware that this is a derogatory and stereotypical statement which positions the female as less than the male but it is obviously an expression they have used on more than one occasion. Dominant groups often stereotype non-dominant groups because they are afraid of losing power and privileges. This is also an example of how physical and social capital is taken away from the female athlete. In the following example of 'othering', a coach attempts to sidestep the stereotype label by including the pre-emptive 'not all the time but...': *'not all the time but males just do what you ask them'*; the implication being that women do not 'just do what you ask them' to do. This positions male athletes' behavioural response as standard and women as deviant.

It is important to note that production of homogenous groups and the position of 'them' and 'us', was not solely a discourse presented in the narrative of coaches. Many of the female athletes referred to the perceived 'value' of men's rowing over women's and discussed the dominance and prevalence of men within the sport. For example one female athlete explains:

*'I think we as women felt that we were not a priority. We felt that the men...all of the decisions were made for the men, and we were second.'*

Bourdieu believed that the existence and functioning of a field creates a belief in the participants about the value of the capital or the goods which are at stake within it. In the previous quotation, the female athletes believed the male athletes needs were positioned above theirs. Wacquant (1998) argues that holding a position in a field depends on the volume and composition of the capital possessed. In the following interview excerpt, it is evident how a

perceived male hierarchy affects access to practical resources within the field, ultimately privileging the male athletes:

*'If for example we had made a decision to go to a certain training camp, in a certain location, and the men then chose to go there. We would be removed, for them to be able to have that.'*

As Purdy et al. (2009) explain, such capital is not infinite and available to all. Some fields or the actors which inhabit them possess more autonomy than others, they are more ready than others to compromise when their capital is at stake. Despite being elite athletes, the female rowers were unable to convert their physical ability to physical capital as they failed to measure up to the ideal male norm. In turn, this led to a reduction in their social capital. However, as we discussed at the beginning of this section, some female athletes chose to separate themselves from male athletes in order to establish a position which would allow them to gain access to symbolic capital. However not all athletes felt this way. Indeed one athlete explained how she did not like being separated from male athletes during a training camp as she felt this created an unhealthy gendered power relationship between the female athletes and male coaches:

*'the male coaches thought that they had a harem – a harem of women that followed them around and did everything they said, and they got a bit carried away with that'*

This is evidence that the privileged group, the group with the power, is not the male athlete but the male coach. Again in this situation, the female athlete is aware of the unequal relations of power and privilege and feels the only way to gain empowerment (or requisite capital) is to reposition herself or remove herself from the all-male coaches – female- only athlete training camp.

### ***Control and communication within the coach-athlete relationship***

Evidence suggests that while male and female athletes share many similarities in how they like to be coached, there are specific nuances and differences that need to be understood in order to facilitate an effective coach-athlete relationship (author B, 2016). One such area is communication. Longshore and Sachs (2015) noted that female athletes will often request to explore the rationale behind coaching decisions and will often want to be involved with the decision making process more than male athletes. This was supported by both the coaches and athletes involved in the current study. The following quotations, first from a coach and secondly from an athlete represent a common theme across all our interviews:

*There is one big difference between girls and boys. Girls need to talk about their problems. As a coach if they are talking to you, you only have to listen and you don't have to even give an answer. Boys want immediately an answer and a solution. But the coach coaching females has to know the psychological issues of girls. That is one of the biggest issues we have to learn and we have to respect that. I always ask at the end of training how everything is going. The day I don't do it with the girls is that day there will be a mess. The day I don't do it with the boys, nothing. The girls need the feedback and they want to be listened to. If girls don't understand they quit.*

*I certainly wanted rationale, I wanted to know the reason behind my coaches' decisions. And when I questioned him, he was very upset because it was like I was questioning his decision. But no I wasn't really questioning his decision, I just wanted to know the reason behind it, so that I could support it or not, or maybe end up supporting it more.*

Coaches have created a 'regime of truth' that females ask more questions than men. In the context of athletes behaving in gendered ways, this is seen as a 'problem'. In the first quotation from the coach, suggesting 'girls have problems', there is no reference to 'boys having problems'. Girls have 'psychological issues', there's no mention of 'boys having psychological issues'. Girls 'quit' whilst again there is no reference to boys 'quitting'. From the athlete

perspective, she believed the fact that she asked questions was perceived as a problem by her coach. In general the female athletes involved in the current study wanted a lot of information and detail from their coaches, an explanation as to how decisions were being made. This was not necessarily to question the coaches' decisions but to enable the athletes to understand how and why decisions were made.

The concept of truth-telling is often associated with access to specialised knowledge, the ability of an individual to trump or rebuff the claims of another. Indeed, critics of authority have often suspected that claims to speak truthfully are veiled invocations of power. Luxon (2004, p. 464) argues that Foucault's later work recasts this problem "by developing a dynamic for the establishment and testing of authority that sets aside the search for certain truths", to do this, "Foucault turns to ancient ethical practices of parrhesia (fearless speech) whose purpose is to establish and assess claims to truth-telling through a combative exchange between speaker and audience". Through the use of Foucault's contemporary model for truth-telling, it is argued that the audience – in this case the female athlete – should not be required to have more or better access to truth, to have any specialised knowledge, or to be in a position to trump the claims of the speaker – the male coach.

To build his model of truth-telling, Foucault paid close attention to evaluating relationships of trust in parrhesiastic practices. In doing so, Foucault directly responds to the suspicion that claims to truth are but claims to power. By consequence, the content of parrhesiastic speech becomes secondary to the structures that encase and promote it (Luxon, 2004, 2013). Through deliberate 'confrontation' with their coaches, athletes alter their relations to themselves so as to develop their own capacity for parrhesia – that is, the ability to state frank moral positions at great personal and political risk. In this situation, Foucault argues that risk is not something to be overcome or to be managed. It attests to the sincerity of educators – in this case the coaches - that they have something to lose – while testing and reinforcing the cultivation of athletes'

autonomy. Indeed, Foucault would argue that letting go of risk threatens athletes with either a fall into dependency or an abuse of power.

In the present study, several athletes discussed their need to 'trust' their coach and this was based on receiving adequate information. However, the athletes believed their male coaches often felt challenged / threatened by this, something that this athlete's former coach, a woman, did not feel:

*My first coach, at an international level was a female coach, and she realised that I needed to believe what my coach was saying. I didn't just do what my coach was saying. I needed to believe and trust them. And sometimes it was a technical aspect, and she knew I was a very visual learner, and so we would literally stop, put the boat on the grass in the middle of the training session, and start looking at the video. And it would take me 20 seconds to look at the video and to realise what to trust, and to realise what she was saying was right. I could get straight back in the boat and we could make the change like that. So what was great about her as a female athlete, as a female coach, is she was able to very clearly know how I liked to learn, and how to trigger my learning at a much faster rate, than any of the male coaches.*

As the female athletes have already identified themselves as being in a lower position of privilege and power, we could draw the assumption that they already feel they have nothing to lose by engaging in parrhesiastic speech, indeed, as Foucault suggests, this may be an opportunity for them to regain power. The athletes remain sensitive however to the fact that the male coaches interpret this communicative engagement as a challenge to their authority.

Trust and respect were not only associated with communication but were also linked to the dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship as demonstrated in the following quotation from an athlete: *'I've learnt that you don't want to be too friendly with your coach, because you do need*

*to have that respect. They do need to be the boss because that's why they're the coach and you're the athlete'. All female athletes involved in the study agreed that the power in the coach-athlete relationship resided with the coach, regardless of the gender of the coach. However the athletes still felt there should be a level of mutual respect in the relationship, but this was not always the case and was often linked to the perceived male hierarchy in the sport. Norman and French (2013) explain that female athletes are aware of the distribution of power and its association with gender in the coach athlete relationship; they "understood their coaches to be gatekeepers to their athletic development and experienced frustration when they felt the coaches paid them [as opposed to male athletes] insufficient attention" (Norman & French, 2013, p. 19).*

## **Conclusion**

The present study builds upon previous research that has found that the male-coach, female-athlete relationship is influenced by the gender of these social actors and of the importance of interpersonal relations in sport, by highlighting the ways in which power is manifested and negotiated in these exchanges. The findings suggest that, in the case of elite rowing, these female rowers were in the shadow of their male counterparts; a reflection of the wider context of sport. The wider expectations and ideologies surrounding gender and of men and women's capabilities that exist in sport were reflected in the stories of these female rowers. They experienced feeling socially constructed as inferior, psychologically and physiologically, compared to male rowers and these feelings were experienced through their relationships with their male coaches. The male coaches and their ideas and approaches towards their relationships with their female athletes were also a product of their context. Often progressing into coaching from rowing themselves, they had 'absorbed' and been socialised into an understanding that women have particular needs and expectations that male rowers do not, and that they are inferior as high performance athletes. This evidences the conclusion that broader



unequal gendered ideas within a sport infiltrate and transfer into the most micro of exchanges, for example, the male coach-female athlete relationship. The value ascribed more broadly within rowing to male competitors and the discourse surrounding this, is communicated to the coaches who adopt these beliefs in their coaching ideas, philosophies, and practices with their male and female rowers.

Based on the interviews, it is a fair conclusion to state that these male coaches often communicated unequal and sometimes discriminatory views towards the capabilities and potential of their female rowers. It was suggested that those who lead and make decisions for the sport at an operational level also direct their attention, value, and resources towards men's elite rowing. Women are not blind to or unaware of these practices or how they are considered within their relationships with their male coaches. Instead, the female rowers interviewed were cognisant and *made* to feel aware of their secondary position within the sport. This marginal position in comparison to male rowers translated into tangible outcomes too such as less opportunities to train or compete, or access to resources. This is further evidence of the way that power is not an abstract, intangible, or inconsequential issue within sport or more specifically, the coach-athlete relationship. It is real and it has consequences for the social actors entangled in this web of power.

The coaches interviewed demonstrated an awareness of gendered needs and differences between the men and women rowers that they coached. These were often defined along psychological lines, to the detriment of the female rowers, and yet, when the nature of their relationships was discussed, the coaches did so in sociocultural ways. Further, women's preferences and expectations as athletes were 'problematized' by the coaches; experienced as challenges to coaches' authority in a way that male athletes' were normalised and not scrutinised. Issues related to performance were attributed to the women themselves, such as the higher dropout rate amongst female rowers in comparison to male rowers. A sense of wider

context and why this may be the case, grounded in an awareness that the sporting landscape is a gender unequal one, was not demonstrated by the coaches. Instead, it was almost a case of 'victim blaming' towards these women as athletes.

The aim of the study was not comparative; the findings are not intended to imply that the coaching needs are entirely different for women than they are for men. Rather, the findings evidence the need for coaches to be 'gender-responsive' practitioners (author B, 2016) and to understand that the gender of their athletes will have implications for their relationships. The present study also provides strong evidence that coaches need to be aware of their views and expectations of their male and female participants, and in the case of unequal views, to interrogate the origin and outcome of these ideas. A sense of context is needed; different groups of men and women participate, compete, coach, and lead in a sphere of society that historically has been built on often gender discriminatory ideals. And that some of these ideas still pervade sporting institutions today. Sporting federations and governing bodies should not be gender blind and understand, more fully, what it *means* to be a particular individual within their sport and what background and experiences they bring. Practitioners, such as coaches, should be helped to understand the ways in which differences are constructed and how these may lead to unequal experiences within sport.

The sport of rowing is dominated by white European / American / Australian and New Zealand participants. Elite coaches tend not to be confined to geographic boundaries, may have experience in coaching both women and men and may have been confronted with experiences and ideologies that challenge dominant regimes of truth about gender. In order to fully understand what it means to be an individual in sport we believe it is important to further investigate the gendered hierarchies present within sport. We suggest that further research should focus on the intersections of whiteness, ethnicity and gender reflected in the ways elite coaches construct their practices with high performance athletes, how they narrate their

experiences with men and women athletes from different cultural contexts, and this impacts the athletes themselves.

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