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# Gendered microaggressions towards the “only” women coaches in high-performance sport

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## ABSTRACT

For women, being underrepresented in high-performance sport coaching is endemic. They also often report a sense of minoritisation, and incidents of discrimination. The purpose of the present study was to understand, using a gender-microaggressions perspective, how sexism manifests for women in elite coaching who report to be the “only” woman in their context, how they respond to such experiences, and how such discrimination is enabled. Through interviews with nine high-performance female head coaches globally, the prevalent type of microaggressions experienced were gendered microinvalidations. But findings also demonstrate that these women attempted to resist sexism. Nevertheless, being the “only” women restricted their resistance because they could not form collective power that led to transformations in the coaching culture. More action is required to build critical, evenly distributed masses of women across the coaching pathway. Future research must also address the features of organisational contexts that provide fertile grounds for exclusionary cultures.

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## KEYWORDS

Gender; equity; sports coaching; organisational culture; Sexism

## Introduction

The gender and sports coaching literature evidences that all groups of women are more likely to experience discrimination in the coaching workplace than men across most sports, performance domains, and at all points on the coaching pathway (Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Carter-Francique & Olushola, 2016; Kenttä, Bentzen, Dieffenbach, & Olusoga, 2020). This work has revealed a number of commonalities in how such gender discrimination manifests itself. For example, lower salaries for women coaches which leads to higher turnover, poorer job security for women, and a lack of organisational support for women coaches (Cunningham & Sagas, 2003; Kubayi, Coopoo, & Morris-Eyton, 2015, 2017; Sagas, Cunningham, & Pastore, 2006). Other research has revealed relational as well as structural manifestations such as fewer opportunities for women,

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poorer working relationships between men and women, unequal ideas of women's coaching competence, poorer working conditions, and homophobia (e.g. Norman, 2010; 2012; Allen & Shaw, 2013; Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2011; Hovden & Tjønndal, 2019; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Women coaches are often left out of (predominantly male) networks to learn about educational and promotional opportunities, report poor working relationships with men and being excluded from decision making roles (Allen & Shaw, 2013; Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2011; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). However, as women have gained more rights and opportunities in wider society over recent years, it has become less acceptable to maintain or vocalise biases (Nadal, 2019). In this way, sexism in coaching has become less overt and seemingly less directed at individuals, and more *covert* and ambiguous, embedded in structures. Through this, it has also become more difficult to identify (Goldberg, 2010). In the present study, we sought to illustrate that sexism remains prevalent in sports coaching even though particular manifestations have become more difficult to recognise (Burdsey, 2011). For this, we privilege the voices of those who are most often the recipients of such discrimination because such behaviours can be difficult to identify and therefore can easily be dismissed by the perpetrators (Burdsey, 2011). We centre our paper on how sexism has become a *discourse* in sport coaching; principally, manifested in and as the effects of gender microaggressions (Burdsey, 2011; Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue, 2010). Specifically, we focused upon understanding how such microaggressions manifest when coaches are the “only” women (exacerbating visibility and therefore, power and scrutiny) in a high-performance sporting context. We sought to understand how the coaches experienced these microaggressions, and evidence the structural conditions that may cultivate such discrimination. For this paper, we define high-performance coaching to mean working in environments that place an emphasis on competition within an organised structure along with an intense dedication to preparation programmes centred around competition goals (Lyle, 2002).

Women coaches commonly report experiencing marginalisation and minoritisation (Norman, 2021). One consistent research finding is that for most women, coaching remains an *isolating* profession and that this is a key stressor particularly at high performance levels (Didymus, Norman, Hurst, & Clarke, 2020). The impact of this, as we have learnt from other industries, is that senior women who are the “only” women in their working environment are more likely, compared to women who work with other women, to feel pressure to work more and to experience sexism, including greater pressure to prove their competencies (Coury et al., 2020). Isolated senior-level women are more likely than men in similar roles to experience burnout due to feeling such pressure (Coury et al., 2020). Such isolation leads to

restrictive access to social relations which in turn limits women's ability to accrue social capital in order to manoeuvre their way into higher roles or networks of power or influence (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, women's ability to accumulate capital is hindered by their marginalised and isolated position in sport as a social space (de Haan & Norman, 2020). A specific focus, therefore, on how discrimination is related to women's "onliness" is crucial and novel because women in such roles may be more vulnerable to sexism. Being "tokens" and "onlys" amplifies women's visibility and thus the burden of representation they carry for women's capabilities more generally (Norman 2021; Puwar, 2004). In not being seen as the "natural" occupants of such leadership roles, there is a burden of doubt associated with the coexistence of women in these spaces. As Puwar (2004) asserted from her seminal study of women and Black and Asian members of parliament in the UK, such individuals are conceptually, "space invaders". Women's very presence in such historically male-dominated spaces serve as a source of ontological anxiety and disruption to (White) male power. They are not automatically expected to embody the relevant competencies and are judged accordingly. Women's every gesture, movement and utterance is then put under observation, supervision, or surveillance, and thus, more vulnerable to discrimination (Puwar, 2004).

We have a reasonably large body of literature that focuses on women's coaching. Nevertheless, we are lacking a focus beyond the "why" women are underrepresented. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to understand, using a gender-microaggressions perspective, how sexism manifests for women in elite coaching who report to be the "only" woman in their context, how they respond to such experiences, and how such discrimination is enabled. To answer this, we drew on the concept of *gendered microaggressions* as a way of understanding the microstructures of the everyday impact and location of experiences of being the "only" woman (Capodilupo et al., 2010). This framework supported our view that the seeds of power are sown in the everyday, in the interactions and relations between men and women which in turn are based on gendered ideas that then become the basis of imbalanced power relations, behaviours and practices.

### ***Theoretical perspective: gendered microaggressions***

Microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative ... slights and insults towards members of oppressed groups" (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). Such messages are often built upon discriminatory ideologies and stereotypes, and thus, microaggressions are often invisible whilst reproducing oppression at a interpersonal level (Nordmarken, 2014). They are not limited to

human encounters alone but may also be systemic or environmental (Sue et al., 2007). The transmission of microaggressions rely on the fact that they can often be so covert or unconscious that they are difficult to identify, making them powerful mechanisms of minimising or dismissing discrimination by powerful and dominant groups. For the present study, we sought to how gendered microaggressions manifest, how are they experienced, and where are they located, through the accounts of women coaches. Our analysis of the everyday through the stories of the women was deliberate; women represent an acute minority within high-performance coaching and historically in sport, have been subject to the most restrictive notions and norms (Knoppers & McDonald, 2010).

Within sport sociology, microaggressions, as a theoretical lens, have been facilitated to examine sexual orientation discrimination within athlete populations (Waldron, 2016), race and ethnicity in elite sport (Burdsey, 2011), as well as mental health and athletes (Comeaux, 2012). Only one study exists that has examined microaggressions within sport coaching, interrogating how different forms of discrimination (along racial, gendered, religious, and sexual identity) intersectionally impacted relationships between coaches and athletes (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). It was observed by Gearity and Metzger (2017) that there is a notable absence of focused research on how gendered microaggressions are enacted within the coaching workplace and by coaches. This is despite evidence of such macro-level environmental microaggressions existing within sport coaching (for example, women coaches' underrepresentation compared to men, unequal gender pay between coaches, and the invisibility of women coaches and women's sport in clubs and organisations). The authors called for more empirical research to evaluate the prevalence and impact of microaggressions in sport coaching (Gearity & Metzger, 2017).

Nadal (2010) proposes that gendered microaggressions differ from other forms of sexism in the way that they are subtle, like everyday sexism, but they are different because they can be categorised into three groups: (a) gender micro-assaults (e.g., blatant and overt sexist speech or behaviour); (b) gender microinsults (e.g., often unintentional yet sexist statements and behaviours that convey men are superior than women); and (c) gender microinvalidations (e.g., subtle communication that dismisses or devalue women's thoughts or feelings). These three forms vary in their degree of subtlety, with gender micro-assaults being the least subtle, and in their level of harm, with gender microinvalidations most harmful (Yang & Carroll, 2018). In the case of racial microaggressions, Sue et al. (2007) proposed that incidents must meet one of the following categories: (a) assumptions that a person of colour is not a true person of that country; (b) assumptions of lesser intelligence; (c) statements that convey colour-blindness or denial of the importance of race; (d) assumptions of criminality or dangerousness; (e)

denial of individual racism; (f) promotion of the myth of meritocracy; (g) assumptions that one's cultural background and communication styles are pathological; (h) the experience of being treated as a second-class citizen; and (i) environmental messages of being unwelcome or devalued. These are specific to the types of microaggressions experienced by individuals because of race or ethnicity. In relation to gender, Capodilupo et al. (2010) explained how microaggressions typically manifest themselves including: (a) sexually objectifying women, (b) the treatment of women as second-class citizens, (c) assumptions of inferiority and lesser capability, (d) a denial of the reality of sexism, (e) assumptions of traditional gender roles, (f) use of sexist language, and (g) environmental microaggressions which are macrolevel aggressions that occur at the systemic level.

As discussed earlier in this paper, a consequence of unequal gendered power in sport which results in a lack of structural diversity in sports coaching, heightens the negative surveillance of those in the minority, such as women coaches (Puwar, 2004). They are, therefore, more vulnerable to gendered microaggressions in all forms and manifestations if outnumbered (Puwar, 2004). From a psychological perspective, isolation already is known to be a key source of stress and threat to wellbeing for women coaches (Didymus et al., 2020). We extend this research by taking a sociological and gendered microaggressions lens to further to understand how gender discrimination manifests itself for those women are the “only” woman in their role within a high-performance coaching context. We focus then on how these microaggressions are experienced, and what structural conditions cultivate this. In this way, we seek to connect personal experiences of individual microaggressions to environmental microaggressions. This represents only the second example of research that has used such a perspective to understand such sociocultural aspects in sports coaching and the first to do so specifically focusing on gender and on connecting personal to environmental microaggressions. This is so that we can bring greater awareness and understanding of how gender discrimination operates in sport coaching, the impact it has on women as the recipients, the interaction between those in power and those marginalised, and how environmental factors may facilitate such discriminatory behaviours.

## **Methodology**

### ***Sampling and participants***

For the present study, we sought the experiences of all groups of women who were working as (a) remunerated head coaches, (b) within a high-performance sport context (see the introduction for our definition of high-performance), (c) coaching at the elite level for more than two years (a

timeframe which would indicate the coaches were immersed within their club and organisational context), and (d) an appropriate level of spoken English to discuss their experiences. We opened recruitment globally as not to bias one context or sport. For this, we partnered with the Female Coaching Network (FCN), a UK-based women in coaching advocacy organisation with global reach. Adverts for study recruitment were shared with the FCN and then disseminated across their coaching network. Nine coaches, who met the inclusion criteria for the research, declared an interest in participation and so received information about the nature of the research and a formal invitation to take part. [Table 1](#) (see below) profiles each of the nine coaches. To provide participants the freedom for openness during data collection, whilst protecting anonymity and confidentiality given that they are some of the “only” women in such high-profile roles, pseudonyms were used throughout. Primary data was then collected with the coaches utilising semi-structured interviews.

### **Data collection**

Following institutional ethical approval by the University Ethics Committee Board, in-depth semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 45 to 150 minutes, were conducted with the participants either face-to-face ( $n = 2$ ) or via Skype call ( $n = 7$ ) by a member of the research team who was an experienced qualitative researcher. Interviews were held at times convenient to the schedules of the head coaches. The design of the interview schedule was based on a review of previous literature exploring the experiences of women sport coaches as well as existing gendered microaggression literature (e.g. Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). The schedule was aimed towards

**Table 1.** Participant Profile Table.

Participant pseudonym	Sport	Role	Country	Ethnicity	Coaching experience (years)
Candice	Tennis	Head Coach (Full-Time)	USA	White American	20
Jill	Rowing	Head Coach (Full Time)	UK	White British	15
Jackie	Swimming	Head Coach (Full Time)	Australia	White Australian	30
Josie	Football/Ice hockey	Head Coach (Part-Time)	Canada	White British	25
Katie	Netball	Head Coach (Full Time)	Australia	White Australian	30
Morgan	Tennis	Head Coach (Full-Time)	USA	White British	12
Rebecca	Volleyball	Head Coach (Part-Time)	USA	White American	40
Sophie	Volleyball	Head Coach (Full-Time)	USA	White American	15
Violet	Football	Head Coach (Part-Time)	UK	White British	14



collecting any evidence of gender microaggressions all in a participant accessible way and if present, how and where such incidents present themselves, and the women's response. The focus of the interview included questions on the following (1) the participants' background in and early experiences of coaching (to build rapport), (2) what their role as head coach entailed, (3) understanding how their gendered identity had shaped their career journey (including, asking about experiences of any gendered microaggressions [e.g. assaults, insults, invalidations] and if/how any discrimination showed itself (to collect evidence of manifestations), (4) how coaches experienced their relationships within coaching and their engagement with their NGB (to understand what environmental factors shaped their gendered experiences), and (5) and how gender equity can be improved in sports coaching. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the research team.

### ***Data analysis***

On completion of the interviews, all data were transcribed, and number coded to ensure confidentiality. Following transcription, we utilised reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to make sense of the interview data. Analysis was guided by both deductive (using microaggression theory) and inductive reasoning. Deductive analysis included coding the data utilising microaggression theory (analysing the data for microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) and the microaggression classification system adapted for gender (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue, 2010) to understand if incidents or experiences could be considered a microaggression (as they are often difficult to identify or define). Using a deductive and inductive approach allowed us to empirically ground our findings in existing theory while at the same time, unpack any initial assumptions we held about the data to expose our interpretations to "new possibilities of meaning" (Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, & Ng, 2012, p. 86). The analysis followed five stages, applying abductive reasoning (Kovács & Spens, 2005). To elaborate, this abductive and reflexive approach involved familiarising ourselves with the data, developing inductive codes which were grouped together to represent the participants' experiences, and then generating themes which were connected between the guiding literature and the coaches' experiences. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data and the guiding literature from the microaggression literature. Second, we developed emergent properties within the data that were coded and grouped with other potential codes. Third, this created a set of initial themes that were constantly compared to other themes to refine further (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Fourth, we revisited and revised the initial themes according to the microaggression literature to reach a consensus on a final set of

themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Fifth, we dialogically reflected on our analytical process with a “critical research friend” who was an experienced qualitative researcher but outside of the immediate research team. We repeated data analysis to see if independently, we reached consensus on the final themes generated by the primary researchers. The purpose of engaging with a critical friend in this way was to utilise collaborative thinking to test and critique ideas (Loo & Sairattanain, 2021). This process did not create any changes to the analytical process, or to the final themes generated.

### ***Ethical research practice***

One of the principal objectives of the research was to provide a platform for women’s voices to be heard and their experiences shared in recognition that women coaches are broadly invisible and marginalised in their everyday contexts. We held the view that the participants’ experiences were morally significant. In this way, we ensured the research was ethically sound throughout to ensure potentially sensitive data was collected and managed correctly. We considered the participants as experts on their experiences and considered women’s stories as primary sources of evidence. This meant that trustworthiness and respect of the participants was needed, and this was achieved through reflective member checking and reflective questions (i.e., how did you feel the interview went? Could you share all of your experiences?) at the end of the interviews. Upon examination of the interview transcripts, only minor additions and grammatical edits were made by the interviewees to ensure an accurate recollection of their experience.

### ***Findings***

The focus of section one details how gendered microaggressions manifested themselves in the form of *microinvalidations* for the coaches who described themselves as the “only”. Section two addresses the coaches’ response in experiencing such forms of discrimination. Finally, we present the accounts of the participants to outline what may be exacerbating such microinvalidations in the lives of the coaches as the “only” women in their roles.

### ***Gendered microinvalidations in the lives of the “Only” women head coaches***

From a gendered microaggressions perspective, the participants’ stories of discrimination predominantly took the form of gendered *microinvalidations*. Jackie, an Australian full-time, high performance swimming head

coach with over 30-years in the sport told of her frequent experiences, as the only female head coach, of feeling undervalued in her communication with either parents or male coaches:

I would have a father approach me and [say] “I want to speak to who’s in charge here”, [and I say], “Well, it’s me” [and the parent will respond], “No, I want to speak to who’s in charge” [and I have to respond again] “Sorry, you’re speaking to the person in charge”, you know, those sort of things, [like] “You don’t understand because you’re not a man, you haven’t been there, you don’t understand what it’s like to be at the top” so they’re probably the things that [have] affected me the most. (Jackie)

Jackie did not fit the ideal of who is the leader in that space and when she advanced further in her career, this increased visibility only served to intensify the scrutiny and surveillance of her coaching credibility because of her “only” status. Jackie explains this surveillance was primarily from her male colleagues:

So, just before I was about to go away to [the] Beijing [Olympic Games] . . . I had one of the [male] coaches from the football club . . . he goes “So, what do you do?” and I said, “I’m a coach” and he goes “Oh, well, you must be just learning how to do it. It’s a great sport but you don’t know what it’s like. We work at the top with all these elite athletes, you’re probably just working with the younger ones”, and he saw me put my bag in the car and he said, “Where are you off to?”, I said “I’m going to a swimming camp. I’m going to the Beijing Olympics”, and you should have seen his mouth drop. It was just so funny . . . How these coaches just think women aren’t capable of coaching at an elite level. (Jackie)

Subtly, gendered microinvalidations show themselves in the questioning of the abilities of certain groups, in this case, high-performance female coaches (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Violet, a UK-based, part-time head club coach in football with over 14 years of coaching experience and who is a rare example of a woman coaching in an English professional men’s club, was also subjected to questions as to her expertise through her “only” status:

I know that [historically] the club have only ever had two female coaches work within their boys’ programme since its run . . . So, it’s still not the norm in a lot of environments . . . we are behind with lots of things . . . I find it quite weird having gone from breaking down all the barriers [abroad] to come home and then to be on a pitch [as the only woman]. I remember one of the coaches asking me if I knew what transition was. And I was like, “yes, yes I do”. (Violet)

For some of the participants, this invalidation of their competency and the subsequent increased level of scrutiny as the “only” woman led to an exclusion from further employment opportunities. Candice, who is a full-time tennis head coach with 20 years of coaching experience, shared her story of missing out on coaching a promising player because of being the “unknown” coach:

I volunteered to help with [another programme] and one of the Mums came up afterwards and she said, “[my daughter] would like to do a private lesson with you, she really had fun on the court”. [So, I booked the lesson in] our court book and when I came back the next day, another [coach] took my name out and put his [name] in and he said, “you don’t do that lesson, I do that lesson”. That is when I learned that it could be a tough road. Because he had no respect for my ability ... He may have been right; maybe I wasn’t going to be a good coach. I don’t know, I was a very new [high performance] coach, but the way it was done; I just got a message right away [that I wasn’t good enough because I was a woman]. (Candice)

The disheartening aspect of Candice’s story was that she had consequently questioned her ability as a coach, her own form of “self-surveillance”. Similarly, Jackie experienced such treatment with a male coach as well as other male colleagues, with whom she worked closely. This invalidation of her ability served to exclude her from a coaching appointment:

One of our senior males here ... he actually said it to me “Why would I pick a female? What would you know?” so there were those barriers from men constantly all the way down the [coaching] path ... I know with some of the smaller teams I put my name in the hat for [to coach], we had a female administrative assistant and I’m like “I didn’t get [the job], can you tell me why I didn’t get it?” and she goes “I don’t think they even looked at your application”. I’ve got no tangible proof for that, but you sort of go “Okay, alright”. (Jackie)

Jackie reported feeling as if she was an “alien” in the all-male coaching world for most of her career. As the only women in her space, she represented the unknown and an outsider. Jackie believed her feelings were partly the product of the culture of high-performance coaching. Being an “only” amplifies surveillance in an already “hyper-surveillant” culture. Jackie described a culture of blame and scrutiny within such environments. This then becomes amplified if a coach represents one of the “onlys”; in this case, the only woman, as Jackie described in her interview:

It’s all performance driven. And I know everybody wants to win but ... , if you’re in a workplace you don’t sack somebody because they make a mistake on the first go ... But we’re not doing that with [women] coaches. We’re not helping them learn or get better. It’s like “Hey, you’re the coach, why didn’t you do this?” So, I just think the clubs are the cause of a lot of these issues. (Jackie)

Sophie, a full-time head coach in elite volleyball in the USA with over 15 years of coaching experience, reflected on a similar culture within her sports organisation and described a power imbalance between men and women as the underlying cause of the invalidations:

[As the only woman, I] just [experience] more distrust [than men] and not a lot of faith in what I'm doing or support [from my federation], or always maybe looking for reasons that we're not doing well instead of looking for the positives [compared to men] . . . [There is this feeling of] "I'm going to exert power over you" instead of "we're all in this together, let's work for solutions". (Sophie)

Sophie described how this extra scrutiny towards her coaching ability was a characteristic of organisational culture in which power is "everywhere" rather than episodic. This tangibly can impact job security for women coaches, as Josie, a part-time head coach based in Canada, found. She described how the idea that football is a "man's sport" led to invalidations of her coaching ability, causing her to lose her role:

I was a technical director at one of the clubs here [and the only woman]. They came to me [to offer me a coaching job]; I didn't apply for it. [But] within eight months the guy had gone to the board and slagged me off and basically took over the whole thing and that was the end of that . . . They cancelled my contract and . . . I ended up taking them to court, because it was illegal what they did but . . . and that's kind of how it works a little bit here, so that's quite frustrating, because that was a good job and I definitely felt like I could do something in that environment, but it was short lived. (Josie)

### ***Gendered power struggles and challenges to gendered microaggressions***

The second section addresses how the "only" women experienced and responded to such invalidations. There was a sense of struggle and challenge from the women to their discrimination. In using the term resistance, we conceive this as women, through coaching, possessing a position from which to challenge the oppressive ideologies and unequal power relations that govern sport.

Jill, a full-time head coach in rowing within the UK, was the only woman in her club and the first woman to lead the rowing programme. She experienced her "onliness" and sexism as a lack of appreciation of her ability. However, other incidents of discrimination were more overt including her male colleagues as well as parents directly opposing her appointment. Nevertheless, she resisted such opposition to take up the position:

So, the biggest challenge is being a female head of sport . . . [The club has] never had a female head . . . They've never [even] had a female coaching boys sport. So, I've faced quite a lot of antipathy from [male colleagues] . . . they were anti-me . . . I have run a successful programme in my previous club . . . I know what I'm doing. These are my ideas [but they] went down like a lead balloon . . . There was a little whispering campaign [about me] amongst the parents. I mean it was pretty awful actually . . . I had the backing of the [board] who wanted to see a change. Unfortunately, I was the one who bore the brunt of it, but I'm still here because I'm damned if they're going to

win basically because we're in a programme now where it's working . . . I know that there's a lot of younger women out there who struggle with the male politics and the fact that a man will be listened to in a sporting environment, whereas under younger women might not be, because attitudes are so entrenched . . . I think if I'd been a bit younger, I'd probably would have just left and found another job, but because I was a bit bloody minded [I have stayed]. (Jill)

Age as well as gender intersected Jill's story. Being an older female coach increased Jill's sense of confidence and fight against sexism. Her sense of resistance stemmed from the obvious success of her coaching programmes. Jill, as a successful female head coach, represented a form of resistance to gendered ideas and male power. Morgan, who coached tennis as a full-time head club coach in the US, was equally dogged in her attempts to intentionally resist the invalidations she experienced from male coaching colleagues. She gave the example of being dropped from a conference line-up after refusing to speak about the topic of gender in coaching:

Am I going to get caught up on the fact that the guy in my own town dropped me . . . ? Do you think I'm going to lose sleep over this dufus that doesn't want me to speak at his conference? No, I'm going to lose sleep over [it] . . . I'm just going to keep plugging away and I'm going to show them I'll prove them wrong in ten years' time once I've got my own club and I'm building a big business. (Morgan)

Morgan's anxiety but defiance led to her own act of resistance. That was, to create her own sports club. This was how she aimed to challenge the gendered discrimination she experienced. Nevertheless, while creating a separate women's club may "shelter" her from the constant microinvalidations by her male peers, whether this will prove to be a transformative act to challenge the masculine culture of coaching is questionable.

These challenges by the "only" woman varied in intensity and in form. Katie, in her capacity as netball coach worked alongside a football team within a team of 17 coaches in which she was only the woman. She had witnessed other, previous women coaches' resistance that was met with counter-resistance by the men who governed the club. In seeing the lack of success of this resistance strategy, she adapted her way of challenging the masculine culture of the club:

The female football coached team came into the club five or six months before we did, and I watched [her] and how [she] set them up and the fights [the coach and the team] tried to fight. And they came in all guns blazing, "We're equal. We should have this; we should have that. It is sexist." . . . [It was] just really aggressive in the way that they approached it. And I watched it fail, and I watched the club and the sporting department hate it. And they got nothing, and . . . got . . . removed from the main building and pushed out. So, my experience in that respect is that as a female I had to play being a female to get what I needed out of the men, to get the resources. So, I stepped lightly. I appealed to their gentlemanliness . . . Deferring to them . . . asking for their advice . . .

I think it's pretty sad that I had to strategically do that to get resources and get time and space for these elite players coming in, but as a female I felt uncomfortable many times just because there was [only] one of me and 16 of them. (Katie)

This compliance strategy was successful in the short-term in enabling Katie to access the immediate resources and support she and her team needed. Nevertheless, as the other participants noted earlier in this section, this way of resistance has not been transformative of the powerful, male-dominated culture.

### ***Fertile grounds: identifying organisational conditions that cultivate “Onliness” and gendered microinvalidations***

The final section centres on the working conditions or cultures that are likely to intensify gendered microaggression of all types particularly when women are the “only” coaches in their environments. We describe the fertile grounds and locations where such discrimination may be cultivated.

One particular feature of high-performance coaching is the amount of power that the head coach possesses as the single person in that role (Potrac & Jones, 2009). When individuals are the “only” type of person in this “only” role in a space where power imbalance between men and women is rife, it can further heighten the visibility and isolation of that individual. For Katie, having a team of coaches instead would have alleviated the surveillance and loneliness of her role as the one woman in a team of 17 coaches:

I was the only female in the sport department . . . I'd have to say it's one of the loneliest times in my life in the last two years [being head coach] . . . someone said to me last year, “Everyone's reading your reaction and your emotional response to everything, and they will feed off what you give them.” And that is a very strange feeling. That people are watching you and you don't even know how you feel yourself, and it is really lonely at the top. (Katie)

For Jackie, she located her isolation in the lack of diversity amongst those in decision-making roles in her sport. In her case, the board were mostly White, non-disabled men. Her experience was that this all-male collective restricted access to resources and opportunities to her as a woman and acted a form of social closure:

So, when I first started applying for higher level coaching jobs, I think I got knocked back probably more so because I was a female, I wasn't one of the boys' club so to speak . . . so on many occasions I'd have to go to meetings because otherwise I'd never know what went on [in the club]. So, that sort of made me get involved with the coaches' association so now I'm on the Board as well . . . because being a female, I was neglected. Nobody would tell me [what was going on in the club]. (Jackie)

The danger of such collectives, in this case all male-coaching teams and boards, is that they restrict access to capital accrurement opportunities to those outside of such networks. The “only” women in head-coaching, high-performance roles are even more restricted because of their acute minority status. All-male collectives become fertile grounds for gendered microinvalidations because they alienate and disempower women through the denial of opportunities to progress which in turn allows the perpetuation of gendered roles and stereotypes that are the basis of gendered microinvalidations. This was the case for Jackie:

So, probably the biggest [challenge] that it was very big boys’ club, and I was basically not spoken to, [I was] left out on the side-lines and it was only through showing my success that I was incorporated into their club. Some of the negative comments [were] “So, you’re the coach? I thought you were a mother” ... So, I think that would probably have been one of the most difficult times [as the ‘only woman’]. (Jackie)

The proliferation of same-sex networks, in this case all White men, also exacerbated gendered microinvalidations of the only female coach because she was seen as the “other” rather than the norm. This led to questions surrounding her coaching competencies, so Jackie felt she had to “bypass” them to seek additional learning opportunities (such as becoming part of the coaches’ association) just to be seen, heard, or involved in club affairs. This placed extra burden on her workload.

Another important consideration lies in how the current structure and associated resources such as funding and central governing body support can potentially cultivate gendered microaggressions. For Rebecca, a part-time head coach with over 40 years of experience coaching volleyball in the US, little had changed during her coaching tenure because of a lack of organisational recognition and support:

I’ve been involved [in the sport] since 1970 [and] it’s still run by men. The junior girls [team] brings in more money, probably double [the] boys’, but yet we’re still giving grants to [the] boys’ team ... How about the women? You say has it been [difficult being a woman]? Absolutely it’s been and it still is ... The reason why they (the governing body) have [this women’s club] is because they had to ... It’s like, quit giving us a compromise and let us have a team. Give us what we need to be successful. (Rebecca)

Sport federations and clubs play a significant and underestimated role in promoting and supporting women coaches. However, through a lack of investment in and the under-resourcing of many women’s teams and sports can then risk invalidating the careers and value of women coaches who mostly are recruited to coach women and girls (Norman & McGoldrick, 2019).



## Discussion

Despite progress in the acceptability of women into sport and physical activity spaces, and growing numbers of women as sport coaches, our research evidences the assertion that women still continue to experience covert, ambiguous, and subtle manifestations of discrimination (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2013). The present study offers the first known empirical examination of gender microaggressions in sports coaching, offering valuable insights into the subtle challenges that women still have to negotiate in the workplace, and validates Sue's (2010) contention that microaggressions are not limited to race. Our findings suggest that the most prevalent form of gendered microaggressions within sport coaching may be gendered microinvalidations (Sue, 2010). Our research also evidences that such microinvalidations, in the case for the participants, are acute when women are isolated within their roles as the "only" women. This can exacerbate the difficulties "women as only" have in integrating within their working environment. These invalidations are consistent with Sue's (2010) general taxonomy of gender microaggressions and lend weight to understanding the challenges that different disenfranchised groups may experience within the coaching context using a microaggression lens (Basford et al., 2013). Often difficult to identify, such microaggressions manifested themselves as women coaches being perceived as second-class citizens, assumptions of traditional gender roles, assumptions of inferiority, and increased scrutiny of coaching ability. The power and impact of such microinvalidations were that they (re)asserted male power, maintained patriarchy and ultimately, as the participants experienced, they led to the tangible exclusion of women (such as the loss of or short-lived employment). Women coaches often operate in hostile environments in which many men are unreceptive and suspicious as to their presence. The greater surveillance of an "only" places extra pressure on these individuals to be successful. The impact of the presence of these "onlys", Puwar (2004) contends, causes disorientation, amplification and ontological anxiety in white male contexts, particularly at the most senior levels of organisational hierarchies (such as high-performance coaching). This in turn leads to the social dynamics of super-surveillance, infantilisation, a burden of representation and a burden of doubt, as discussed in the opening sections of this paper (Puwar, 2004). These methods resonated with the women interviewed in the present study as all had some experience of being invalidated and controlled in this way.

Through our data analysis, there was evidence of resistance by women against these microaggressions. Women in elite coaching roles represent an act of resistance by their very occupation of a powerful role and implies that women have agency. In this way, gendered discourses have scope to be

evaded, subverted, or contested. However, the stories of the coaches point to the need for strengthening *collective* resistance amongst women coaches. While women attempted to resist the microaggressions directed towards them in the present study, microaggression theory suggests this may be an immediate and active *coping* strategy rather than a deliberate act to subvert their marginalised position (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Hunt, 2013). To transform coaching environments into inclusive workplaces, individuals need to come together to think and operate as a group to form a *collective will* (Tosel, 2017). Being the “only” woman restricts the potential and strength of women’s resistance because they cannot form collective, organised forces. Women must have more power within the workplace (Lewis et al., 2013). Our argument is consistent with other sociological microaggression research into other workplaces that highlight the importance of the dynamics of individual and societal power between groups in the coping process (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1993; Lewis et al., 2013). The power of action can only be generated when there is a coherent and united will of a social group. Our findings suggest there is the will on the part of the women to resist conformity, but they lack the united grouping to do so. Alongside incongruent organisational responses to deal with such issues, female coaches may also not recognise their own worth and ability, as we documented in the earlier section of the findings. While the present study differs from other microaggression research that suggests women may become desensitised to their discrimination and remain silent, our research was congruent with some previous work in documenting how women coaches are constantly involved in an iterative process of choosing which battles to fight (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Lewis et al., 2013). To cope with their everyday microaggressions, the participants discussed the need to prove themselves, internalising a form of coaching “superwoman” schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010): self-reliant, and more qualified and knowledgeable than their male counterparts.

The value of the present study was in connecting personal microaggressions to the environmental. There is little research within sport that has examined organisational conditions and the impact on women coaches (e.g. Allen & Shaw, 2013; Norman, Rankin-Wright, & Allison, 2018). Existing work has described the organisational structures that are supportive of women coaches’ retention and progression, such as cultures of learning, vertical and horizontal working relationships, the provision of continued, supportive, and flexible professional development opportunities, and supportive leadership structures (Allen & Shaw, 2013; Norman et al., 2018). What remains is a lack of research focusing on environmental microaggressions. These are located in sport organisational culture and are harmful breeding grounds for gender (in this case) discrimination. Research

from other disciplines and sectors highlight mechanisms such as employee performance review processes, recruitment processes, and same-sex networking that create inequalities between men and women through the perpetuation of biased, cultural beliefs about gender (Heilman, 2012; Ng & Hau-siu Chow, 2009). Our research particularly points to the urgency of addressing the proliferation of all-male collectives in sports organisations to improve the power balance between men and women through allowing women greater access to collective learning and capital accrument opportunities. Such imbalances of power are a cause of the gendered microaggressions as experienced by the participants in the present study. Puwar (2004) claims that as men move through organisational hierarchies, they create layers of networks, forming “all-boys together” environments that marginalise and control women (p. 85). The effect is the exclusion of all women and is a form of negative role modelling. In this way, a culture of gendered microaggressions (and other discriminations) becomes embedded, persistent, and enabled. Previous research has shown a relationship exists between higher incidence of cross-sex networks in organisations and the advancement of women leaders (Ng & Hau-siu Chow, 2009). Same-sex male networks have the reverse effect and can be damaging for women’s progression through the closure of opportunities to accrue power and capital. It is such capital that has been found to be the deciding factor in head coaching appointments in women’s elite football clubs (Norman & McGoldrick, 2019). Our research shows too, such closures to opportunities add to women’s existing workload because they “bypass” them to access other chances to be even more “qualified” and internalise a form of coaching “superwoman” to challenge the microaggressions they experience.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the present study was to understand, using a gender-microaggressions perspective, how sexism manifests for women in elite coaching who report to be the “only” woman in their context, how they respond to such experiences, and how such discrimination is enabled. We adopted a microaggression perspective to understand how such subtle discriminations are experienced, and what organisational conditions are cultivating or exacerbating gendered discrimination. Future research must address the “how” (the mechanisms) of discrimination, such as the features and cultures of working environments for women coaches, rather than just the “why”. We need more research that details the cultural nuances of the organisational contexts that provide fertility for a lack of diversity amongst our coaching workforces. We must turn our attention away from focusing just on increasing the numbers of women coaches for this can lead to

focusing on the individual. Instead, we must adopt a broader, environmental perspective to ask, “what can organisations and coaching systems do to support inclusive coaching workforces?” Our research has demonstrated that gender discrimination is still pervasive within the coaching workplace, and by failing to tackle the cultural and systemic conditions of this will do little to challenge the microaggressions evident in the present study.

For future research, more knowledge is also needed on the interaction between multiple relations of power in the lives of coaches and how this influences the culture and structures of sports organisations. The sample of participants in the present study reflects the lack of diversity amongst women coaches more broadly. All were White and non-disabled. Future research should also be directed towards gathering different male coaches’ experiences so that we can understand what experiences are gendered and what is contextual or job-related.

Coaching can be an isolated profession for anyone, even more so for women due to their marginal status in high-performance roles. Our research demonstrates that it is important to recognise that “one” woman in a highly visibly, powerful role is not enough. We must look beyond tick-box diversity strategies to build critical masses of women at every stage of the coaching pathway to create *collective will* and thus, *action*. Previous research has shown that not only are the *numbers* of women represented at every level of leadership vital but the *distribution* of representation is also crucial to support the progression and pipeline of women at every stage using a talent development framework to nurture high potential women coaches (Norman & McGoldrick, 2019; Simpson, 2000). This will also grow the potential for collective power which should lead to transformative acts of resistance amongst women to overturn their marginal status. We must seek to deconstruct all male-dominated spaces; we need to make maleness “strange” (Dyer, 1997).

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