It's Time to Woman Up!:

A Psycho-Social-Cultural Exploration of Women Athletes in Elite Sport

Thesis submitted by:

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Abstract

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Despite the rise in the number of elite women athletes succeeding in sport, sport continues to be critiqued as a patriarchal space that is infiltrated with hegemonic masculine norms that positions women athletes as inferior to their male counterparts. Recognizing this disparity and the potential for more women's sporting success after the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, coaches, and sport practitioners from across Great British sports sought a rigorous program of research to explore how they could optimize the performance potential of their women athletes. While this PhD is within the field of sport psychology, informed by this rationale and underpinned by critical feminist psychology, the purpose of this thesis was to provide a rich, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the psycho-social-cultural experiences of women athletes and their coaches within the Great British elite sport system and therefore draws from sociological theory to interpret the data. Data were collected over 20 months via 300 hours of fieldwork observations and 39 semi-structured interviews with 19 elite women athletes and 10 elite coaches, from across five Olympic and professional sports. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative dataset and findings are presented as realist and confessional tales. Using the concept of hegemony as a theoretical lens to interpret the data, it was identified that macro-level factors (e.g., socio-cultural attitudes around women's sport inferiority) permeated the sport environments in the ways that women athletes are viewed and treated. At the meso-level, the gendered structures of sport organizations influenced the norms, practices, and interactions that marginalize women athletes within the sport environments. These factors influenced the practices at the micro-level whereby coaches differentiated their practices based on the gender of the athlete, and the women athletes navigated the competing demands of being women in Western culture and elite sport. The findings demonstrate that each level plays a role in actively producing and reproducing the broader power relations between genders within and beyond the sporting environment. 'Moments of intervention' are offered to coaches and sport personnel to create more inclusive environments to provide optimal support for women athletes.

Contents

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Overview of this Thesis

1.0 What is this PhD about?

Despite the rise in the number of elite women athletes competing and succeeding at the elite level of sport, sport continues to be critiqued as a patriarchal space that is infiltrated with hegemonic masculine norms that positions women athletes as inferior to their men counterparts. Recognizing this disparity and considering how elite sports might better support their women athletes, the purpose of this PhD is to provide a rich, nuanced, and contextualized account of the psycho-social-cultural experiences of women athletes and their coaches within five Great British elite sport environments. Underpinned by critical feminist psychology and drawing from Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, a longitudinal, immersive, mixed-methods approach is used to situate the athletes' and coaches' experiences within their sport environments and our wider culture. This thesis presents the findings in three parts. The first perspective is that of the coaches who work directly with women athletes. These coaches share their experiences of working with women athletes within their elite sport environments. The second perspective is from the women athletes themselves, who share their experiences of being women in the world of elite sport. In line with critical feminist research, the third perspective is my own. In addition to integrating my observations and reflections throughout this thesis, I also use the genre of the confessional tale to share my experiences of doing feminist research within elite sport environments. These three perspectives are brought together to offer a holistic analysis of the experiences of women athletes and their coaches, situated within their sport environments and our wider culture and provides practical recommendations for coaches, and sport personnel on how to create more inclusive environments that enable their women athletes to thrive.

1.1 Setting the Scene

Since the health and fitness boom of the 1970s, women's participation in sport has risen steadily and has continued to grow closer to men's participation ever since (Norman

2016). Team Great Britain (GB), within which this thesis is based, has not only seen a steady increase in women's participation, but has also witnessed women's athletic success augment in recent years. For example, at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, of those who returned home with a medal for Team GB, 45.4% were women (BBC Sport, 2016). Despite the success for Team GB at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, of the countries that placed in the top four of the medals table, Team GB were the only country who won fewer medals from their women, compared to their men, athletes. This result sparked interest across the Team GB system.

The women athlete became a key research focus across the Team GB system, particularly within the English Institute of Sport (EIS), wherein practitioners from across a range of disciplines explored topics related to women athlete health. One area that coaches, practitioners, and senior managers raised questions about was how their sports could create an environment that more effectively optimizes the performance potential of women athletes. Out of these questions arose a partnership between the EIS and St Mary's University, wherein this program of research was created. With the purpose to explore the psycho-social-cultural factors involved in supporting women athletes, the overarching research question that underpinned and informed this research was: *What can the British elite sporting system do to support women athletes and optimize their performance potential more effectively?* The staff at the EIS wanted to enhance their understanding of the elite women athlete with a rigorous program of research that would subsequently inform future practice.

At the outset of this program of research, within the field of sport psychology, the research-landscape on elite women athletes and elite sport environments was limited. Sport psychology scholars tended toward using 'sex' as a co-variate, represented as a binary variable, as opposed to 'gender' as a social construction (Norman, 2016). Drawing from this limited pool of research and extending the literature search to account for other fields of

research (e.g., the sociology of sport and critical feminist psychology), it was argued that sport was developed by men, for men (MacKinnon, 2011) and adopts a 'one size fits all' approach. Sport, it has been suggested, is a patriarchal arena, governed by 'traditional masculinity' in which women athletes are positioned as physically inferior to their men counterparts (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Given the limited research in this space and the dominant 'one size fits all' approach in sport that had been identified in the literature, combined with the broader rationale from the EIS to understand elite women athletes, the purpose of this program of research was to explore the cultural and relational nature of elite sport environments and how these are experienced by and acted upon women athletes and their coaches.

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis comprises of seven chapters. Building upon this opening chapter (i.e., chapter one), chapters two and three set the scene for this program of research. Chapter two begins with a review of the literature pertaining to this research context, which includes an exploration of the historical fight for equality in sport, the study of gender within sport sociology and the evolution of feminist work within sport psychology. The chapter then introduces the theoretical underpinning of this work, provides a rationale for this program of research and ends with an outline of its aims and scope. Chapter three introduces the research context, its paradigmatic, and methodological underpinnings. It explains the choice of methods used to collect and analyze the data and how those data are represented. It also outlines the ethical considerations identified and offers criteria against which the quality of this thesis might be judged.

Chapters four, five, and six present the main research findings of this thesis. Chapter four explores the psycho-social-cultural experiences of coaches working with elite women athletes within their sport environments. This chapter presents three themes that describes

the participants' experiences working with women athletes: (a) *It's Bigger Than Sport*, (b) *Women in a Man's World,* and (c) *Same Same But Different*. Chapter five turns attention to the experiences of the women athletes themselves. This chapter presents three themes that described the participants' experiences as women athletes within the world of elite sport: (a) *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* (b) *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* and (c) *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"*. In both of these chapters, the first themes reflect a macro-level analysis that considers how wider cultural gendered norms infiltrate the sport environments, the second themes reflect a meso-level analysis that explores how the gendered structures of sport organizations influences the norms and practices within elite sport, and the third themes reflect a micro-level analysis of the participants' individual experiences competing and coaching in elite sport.

Chapter six uses the genre of the confessional tale to share my reflections of doing immersive research as a feminist within elite sport environments. The following research questions are explored: what were the challenges faced as a feminist researcher in a sport environment? And, how might other researchers address the challenges of feminism within elite sport? In this chapter, I discuss four main challenges: (a) *To Wear or Not to Wear?* (b) *It's Bigger Than Us*, (c) *Spinning the Plates*, and (d) *The F-word*. This chapter concludes with a summary of the key lessons that I learned that future feminist scholars can apply to their own fieldwork to develop the craft of doing critical feminist research in elite sport.

Finally, chapter seven brings this thesis to a close by drawing conclusions from this program of research and summarizing its contribution to sport psychology knowledge. This chapter begins with the empirical implications of this research as it outlines how this thesis has extended previous research through its methodological rigor, its use of a multi-level

framework, its theoretical underpinning, its elite and multi-sport sample, and its engagement with reflexivity. This is followed by the practical implications of this research, in which several 'moments of intervention' are offered to coaches, sport practitioners and sport leaders. The practical implications are presented at a macro-level wherein sports are urged to use their influential, public platform to drive progressive social changes within wider society, at a meso-level wherein sport organizations are encouraged to create more gender equitable sport environments, and at a micro-level wherein coaches, practitioners, and sport leaders are encouraged to take responsibility for their own efforts toward supporting women athletes. This chapter ends by offering some suggestions of avenues for future research and how, together, we can, and *should*, continue to take strides toward gender equity.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Overview

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature pertaining to topics related to this PhD. The review begins with an overview of the historical fight for equality in sport. This section is followed by summarizing the dominant strands of feminism as they relate to feminist sport activism. Next, the review considers the evolution of the study of gender within the sociology of sport before turning to explore gender studies within psychology. The theoretical underpinning of this thesis is then introduced. Finally, this chapter provides a rationale for this program of research and ends with an outline of its aims and scope.

2.1 Women's Fight for Equality in Sport

In 1912, Baron de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) wrote an article for his journal, *Revue Olympique*, in which he stated the inclusion of women into the Olympic Games would be "impractical, uninteresting, ungainly, and, I do not hesitate to add, improper" (Coubertin, 1912, p.713). Women, therefore, were barred from competing in the Olympic Games. Four years later, women were permitted to enter the Olympic Games, but only in sports that were considered to be compatible with their 'femininity' and 'fragility' and so they represented a mere 2% of athletic competitors (International Olympic Committee, 2021a). Since then, it has not been a smooth ride; women have had to fight their way into sport. For example, for more than seven decades after its inception in 1897, women were not allowed to run in the Boston Marathon (Bush, 2019). In 1967, entering with an ambiguous name, Kathrine Switzer challenged the belief that strenuous activity was bad for childbearing by running, and finishing, the men's-only Boston Marathon (Bush, 2019). Five years later, the Amateur Athletic Union officially allowed women to compete in the Boston Marathon and its other sanctioned races (Bush, 2019).

Fast forward 40 years and women are still fighting for their rightful place within sport. In 2008, a coalition of international women ski jumpers filed a lawsuit against the

Vancouver Organizing Committee about their exclusion from the Winter Games (Vertinsky et al., 2009). Though they did not win the right to compete immediately, they did gain access to the 2014 Sochi Games. To provide yet another example of women's ongoing struggle, boxing was outlawed for women until 1994 as the 'ring' was seen as a site for men (Tjonndal, 2016). It was not until 2012 that women boxers were able to compete at the Olympic Games (Tjonndal, 2016), which marked the first time that women competed in every sport at a Summer Games. London 2012 was also the first Games in which every National Olympic Committee had at least one women and one man in their respective Olympic teams (Dugan, 2012).

Whilst women have faced an uphill battle to gain access to sport, in recent years the number of athletes competing at the elite level of sport has become more evenly balanced between men and women (Norman, 2016). For example, heralded as the first ever gender-balanced Games in history, almost 49 per cent of the athletes participating in the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Games will be women (International Olympic Committee, 2021b). Team Great Britain (GB), within which this thesis is based, has not only seen a steady increase in women participation, but has also witnessed women's athletic success augment in recent years. For example, despite still receiving fewer medals than Team GB men athletes, at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, of those who returned home with a medal for Team GB, 45.4% were women (BBC Sport, 2016).

Against the backdrop of a postmodern and neoliberal society, it may appear, especially with regards to the equal numbers of elite women athletes, that the fight for equality in sport is "over" (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). However, equality is more than just a number, and women are still fighting. At present, women athletes are still campaigning for equal rights, equal pay, and equal treatment within sport. For example, in 2018 the players of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) announced that they were opting

out of their contract agreements on the grounds that they wanted better resources, more investment in the league, and higher salaries (Garcia, 2020). In 2019, albeit still receiving much less than their men counterparts, the league announced a new contract agreement that gives the women players higher salaries, better travel experiences, and new health benefits, including maternity and childcare policies. On March 8th (International Women's Day), 2019, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team sued the U.S. Soccer Federation for gender discrimination, declaring unequal pay and working conditions. In response to the lawsuit, tennis player Serena Williams, told reporters during a press briefing at the BNP Paribas Open, "the pay discrepancy is ludicrous…It's a battle; it's a fight" (Leasca, 2019). At the time of writing in July 2021, Norway's beach handball players have just this week each been fined 150 Euros for wearing shorts rather than the required bikini bottoms (European Handball Federation, 2021). Ironically, the European Handball Federation have said that the fine has been imposed due to a case of "improper clothing" (European Handball Federation, 2021). Thus, despite the progress that has been made over the years with regards to women in sport, sport continues to be a patriarchal domain that was developed by men, for men (MacKinnon, 2011). A range of research streams have shown that sport still provides significant barriers and issues for women as they navigate an environment that is dominated by men (Norman, 2016) and the following subsections offer an overview of the literature pertaining to particular issues that have emerged throughout this thesis.

2.1.1 Where are all the Women Leaders and Coaches in Sport? Even though there has been significant increase in the number of women participating in sport, leadership and coaching positions remain overwhelmingly dominated by men (Norman, 2016). Research data has shown that over the last four consecutive Olympic cycles (up to and including the Rio 2016 Olympic Games), globally, the ratio of men to women coaches has been approximately 10 to 1 (Norman, 2017). Consistent with these statistics, it was reported

that approximately only 10% of coaching positions within the high-performance community in the UK are held by women (UK Sport, 2020).

One of the biggest barriers for women coaches in elite sport is cited to be the success of the 'old boys network' (Acosta & Carpenter, 1988). The 'old boys network' has been described as a network that provides valuable sources of social capital that can significantly increase a person's labor market opportunities (McDonald, 2011). Most often associated with high status white men, the social capital accrued from the 'old boys network' can be in the form of information, influence, and status that are embedded in social network relationships (Lin, 2001). Being excluded from the 'old boys club', even in the last decade, has been shown to limit one's access to social capital, and by extension, their chances of attaining higher status jobs (McDonald, 2011).

With regards to college athletics in America, Hoffman (2011) suggests that the 'old boys network' provides an explanation for the underrepresentation of women leaders in sport. Hoffman (2011) demonstrates that women face unique limitations in acquiring high-powered jobs such as an athletic director. Specifically, the candidate criteria for the role of athletic director requires prior experience at the senior level and significant fundraising experience, both of which are opportunities that are more readily available to men. The women participants also indicated that the search committees often doubt women's capabilities to do the job and that search firms tend not to create optimal candidate pools or promote women (Hoffman, 2011). Candidate criteria, search committees, and search firms are all deeply embedded components of the 'old boys network' and provide examples of how the network operates and functions to disadvantage women candidates.

Within the United Kingdom, there has recently been public acknowledgement of the lack of women coaches within the high-performance system and UK Sport has announced a new leadership program as part of a plan to more than double the representation of women

coaches in the Olympic and Paralympic high-performance community by the Paris Games in 2024 (UK Sport, 2020). Whilst projects like these offer valuable opportunities for women to gain access into leadership roles, obtaining such positions is one step of many; the theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) for example, suggests that embedded organizational pressures will delimit one's capacity to 'give voice' to alternative ideas even if a leadership position is obtained. Within sport, women coaches or leaders, are often the only women amongst a team that is predominantly men (Hoffman, 2011), and so like women athletes, they continue to navigate a patriarchal culture that is historically and systemically associated with the 'old boys network' and oftentimes, 'laddish' behaviors.

2.1.2 The Lad Culture. Nowhere is a lad culture more visible than in sporting spheres, where the concept of lads and laddish behaviors arguably originated (Nichols, 2018). 'Laddishness' is associated with men "having a laugh, alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviors, objectifying women and an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine" (Francis, 1999, p. 357). Informed by the historical context, lad culture and laddish behaviors have become embedded into British culture and one central feature of a 'lad culture' is banter. Although attempts to define the term banter are complex, it is generally accepted that it is the "playful exchange of teasing remarks" (Hein & O'Donohoe, 2014, p. 1299). Understood as a type of humor, banter has been described as a form of jocular interaction involving impolite, offensive, and abusive language and tone (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012). It has been argued, however, that banter can be 'double-edged' (Roderick, 2006) and insightful recent research into Cricket in the South East of England has differentiated between 'inclusionary' and 'exclusionary' forms of banter (Lawless & Magrath, 2020).

Inclusionary banter is characterized as that which brings people together (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). For example, research into British Football and Cricket has shown how

banter can foster a sense of community leading to the development of friendships and building solidarity between teammates (Kennedy, 2000; Lawless & Magrath, 2020). It has also been suggested that banter can help create a light-hearted, cathartic, and generally more positive atmosphere amongst a team (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). Exclusionary banter, on the other hand, is believed to have a more negative effect as it is characterized as 'crossing the line' (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). These types of 'banter violations' (Rivers & Ross, 2019) have been described as comments about someone's personal identity, such as their race, religion, gender, or sexuality (Lawless & Magrath, 2020).

While exclusionary comments about someone's personal identity have been deemed as examples of transgressing the boundaries of acceptable banter, sexist and misogynist comments can be particularly problematic as they are often passed off as 'just a bit of banter' (Nichols, 2018). Research from sport environments has conceptualized banter as a "traditionally male linguistic insult, deemed to function as a 'regulatory or policing tool' in order to sustain masculine identities" (Nichols, 2018, p. 74; McDowell & Schaffner, 211; Thurnell-Read, 2012). As it has been argued, sexist comments that are framed as innocent and go unchallenged, are examples of practices that legitimize men's dominant position (Nichols, 2018). In this way, the relationship between lad cultures and everyday sexism is growing, as sexist comments have become so ingrained in our daily lives that they go unnoticed, becoming normalized through society (Ronai et al., 2013). Therefore, the lad culture that permeates sport has become a space where the subordination of women has become accepted, reinforced, and justified through language.

2.1.3 Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport. Another way that the subordination of women is visible in sport is through the sexual harassment and abuse they experience. The occurrence of sexual harassment in sport was first brought to light by researchers in the mid-eighties, and since then, there has been an increased focus on this issue both from

scholars and within the wider media (Parent & Fortier, 2018). Whilst there are varying definitions of sexual harassment, central to most versions includes that the behavior experienced is unwanted or threatening, troublesome, insulting, or offensive (Fasting & Sand, 2015). In line this with, the International Olympic Committee's definition of sexual harassment and abuse is:

> Sexual harassment and abuse are forms of sex discrimination. They include unwanted, groomed or forced involvement in sexual behavior, from use of offensive stereotypes based on your gender to sexual jokes, threats, intimidation, approaches or actions of a sexual nature (IOC, 2013).

Following the exposure of numerous sexual-abuse allegations against Hollywood's film producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, the #MeToo movement triggered a rampage of media attention to the age-old problem of sexual harassment in society (Reel & Croach, 2019). The hashtag, which has been used more than 19 million times on twitter since its first conception, has prompted people to speak out about authoritative figures who have used their power to sexually exploit subordinates. This has led to accusations of sexual misconduct against well-known and respected people across professions (Reel & Croach, 2019). One sphere that was put under the spotlight light as the #MeToo movement built momentum was sport, a place that has been accused of being a breeding ground for sexual harassment and assault (McMahon, 2007). The Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar scandals within the United States in the past decade have highlighted the painful reality that child and adolescent athletes are vulnerable to abuse by so-called professionals that they thought they could trust (Reel & Croach, 2019). There have been numerous examples of coaches in authority positions who have abused their power with young athletes, which has inflicted lifelong wounds on victims including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety and depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and attempted suicide (Olafson, 2011).

Within sport, the majority of studies focused on sexual harassment have been prevalence studies. Studies such as these have shown that Norwegian athletes experience more harassment from men authority figures than nonathletes (Fasting et al., 2003) and that there is a higher prevalence of sexual harassment experiences from coaches who exhibit authoritarian behaviors (Sand et al., 2011). Research in Norway has also shown that women athletes in sports that have traditionally been labeled as 'masculine', such as kick boxing, weight-lifting, and snowboarding (Koivula, 1995), experience more harassment than those in more traditionally perceived 'feminine' sports, such as dance, gymnastics, and volleyball (Fasting et al., 2004). Pertinent to this thesis, wherein elite athletes are the focus, Fasting and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that the chance of being harassed from someone within sport in the Czech Republic increases with performance level.

Some scholars have moved away from prevalence studies and toward understanding women athletes' sexual harassment and abuse experiences. For example, Fasting and colleagues (2002) interviewed 25 elite women athletes in Norway about their experiences of sexual harassment and found that these experiences have long lasting negative consequences for the athletes; the athletes reported an inability to stop thinking about the incident many years later, a fractured relationship with their coach, and a more negative view of men in general. Fasting and colleagues (2007) also interviewed 25 elite women athletes and found that the athletes reacted with disgust, fear, irritation, and anger when the sexual harassment incidents occurred but that most of them neither confronted the harasser, nor reported it. By problematizing the Larry Nassar case, Fisher and Anders (2019) explored sexual exploitation in USA Gymnastics and argued that abuse, violence, and oppression persists in sport domains because of privilege structures and practices that produce and reproduce power imbalances that subordinate athletes. They encourage scholars and practitioners to challenge systemic intersectional disempowerment and cultures of sexual exploitation. Fisher and

Anders (2019), like Fasting and colleagues (2007), concluded that sport organizations have a lot of work to do if sexual harassment is to be eradicated within elite sport.

2.1.4 The Last Taboo in Sport. Another way that the culture of sport has been accused of marginalizing women is by using biological differences between the sexes as a leverage point to sustain men's power over women (Dykzuel, 2016). Coined in the media as 'the last taboo in sport' (Dykzeul, 2016), women athletes still report feeling uncomfortable talking about their menstrual health (Brown et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021). In 1996, after German runner, Uta Pippig, won the Boston Marathon for the third time, menstruation became visible within sport media as it was explained in a race report that Uta was suffering from "female issues" (Shaughnessy, 1996). Kissling (1999) examined the media coverage following the event and found an overwhelming amount of negativity surrounding menstruation. Two decades later, British tennis player, Heather Watson, made international headlines when she referenced "girl things" as a reason for her suboptimal performance at the Australian Open (Newbery, 2015). Sparking media uproar, the responses were varied, with some claiming that Watson's statement could put the women's movement back as women's physical capabilities will be questioned, while others suggested statements like these may break the silence around the topic and shift the perception toward one that is more positive (Lewis, 2015).

Since then, research into sport environments have shown that women athletes still experience shame and taboo around their menstruation (Brown et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021). Dutch athletes with amenorrhea, for example, suggested that they did not report their symptoms as they feared being judged for a lack of femininity and felt that the topic of menstrual health was a taboo in their sport (Verhoef et al., 2021). Elite British athletes suggested that although they felt comfortable communicating with other women, there was variation in their comfort discussing their menstrual health with men coaches (Brown et al.,

2020). These athletes suggested that their experiences of being encouraged to hide their periods from an early age contributed to their discomfort talking about menstruation as adults (Brown et al., 2020). Kissing (1996, p. 293) suggests that the shame and discomfort for women around their menstrual health is "evidenced, for example, in the measures women take to conceal not only menstrual blood but knowledge of their menstruation from others". Whether women's desire to control and hide their menstruation is proof or a result of their menstrual unease, it is clearly a powerful force and one that continues to silence a natural part of a woman's biology (MacDonald, 2007). In fact, it has been argued that menstrual health is often used to reinforce a woman's biological inferiority (Dykzuel, 2016; Delaney et al., 1988). Young (2005) suggests that a menstruating body is not a masculine one, and therefore, by association is not a sporting one. The negative stigma surrounding the menstrual cycle is not congruent with the strong masculine ideal that athletes are aspiring to and so a menstrual leak, so to speak, reinforces a women's biological inferiority (MacDonald, 2007). Research has shown that women athletes will therefore do what they can to conceal their menstrual cycle to maintain their chances of equal positioning on the sportsground (MacDonald, 2007).

In recent years, researchers and applied practitioners have started to recognize the importance of understanding the impact of the menstrual cycle not only on optimal health and well-being, but also on sport performance (Knowles et al., 2019). There is a growing body of evidence that postulates how phases of the menstrual cycle can affect anaerobic, aerobic, and strength performance (Carmichael et al., 2021). Specifically, research has shown how estrogen can influence the cardiovascular system, substrate metabolism, and the brain, while progesterone appears to affect thermoregulation, ventilation, and usage of fuel for energy needs (Constantini, Dubnov, & Lebrun, 2005). While research has highlighted general trends of menstrual cycle phases that can guide training adaptations to optimize

performance, it has been argued that to be effective, we must shift the negativity associated with menstruation toward one that views it as a positive phenomenon worthy not only of exploration, but also of celebration (MacDonald, 2007).

2.1.5 The Stigmatization of Women Athletes. In addition to being trivialized for their biological sex differences, women in sport are also stigmatized for transgressing the social construction of gender norms. Gender represents a powerful normative system that entails socially constructed conceptualizations of behavior that are intricately tied to societal perceptions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (Keller, 1978). Traditionally, women were given primary responsibility for caring for children and the family, while men were given primary responsibility for providing for the family's economic well-being (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). As such, traditional conceptualizations of gender suggest that men develop independence, self-reliance, and other instrumental skills that will permit them to protect their family, while women develop nurturing, expressive characteristics needed to carry out their interpersonal tasks (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Widespread violation of traditional gender norms poses a serious threat to the entire gender system, wherein men and masculinity hold a dominant and powerful position (Anderson, 1988). In a culture that traditionally equates athleticism with masculinity, one group of women who cross the boundaries of traditional gender norms is athletes (Blinde & Taub, 1992), many of whom have reported feeling that femininity is the antithesis of athleticism (Krane et al., 2004).

Perhaps it is no surprise then, that women athletes are subjected to various forms of deviance labeling and stigmatization (Blinde & Taub, 1992). Shilling and Bunsell (2009) showed how women bodybuilders are a 'gender outlaw' in Britain as they are stigmatized not because they have broken a formal law, but because they have so blatantly transgressed what is acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction. Indeed, research has shown that women athletes are often viewed as masculine, 'unladylike', or manly (Willis,

1982) and are stigmatized for looking masculine and unattractive (Hardy, 2015). The pervasiveness of these stereotypes does not escape the consciousness of women athletes as they express feelings of marginalization as a result of failing to embody characteristics of "normal" women (Krane et al., 2004). As women athletes violate cultural sensibilities of masculinity and femininity, they suffer disapproving comments and stares, as well as relationship breakdowns (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009).

Women athletes are also confronted with the 'image problem' wherein there is an underlying belief that participation in sport will cultivate homosexuality (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Such beliefs have led to the 'lesbian stigma', or the stereotypical notion that women participating in sport are masculine, butch, and/or lesbians (Kauer & Krane, 2006). As Brownsworth (1991, p. 37) explains, there is an insidious view that "sports are masculine; therefore, women in sport are masculine; therefore, women in sport are lesbians". Research has shown that being a member of a stigmatized social group can impact one's personal and professional well-being (Ragins, 2008). Interestingly, Sartore and Cunningham (2009) demonstrated that the lesbian stigma impacts women athletes from every sexual orientation, as non-stigmatized athletes may experience similar threats to their physical and mental health and well-being due to the risk of being inaccurately classified as a member of the stigmatized group. Sartore and Cunningham (2009) also showed that those who possess higher levels of stigma consciousness are more likely to suffer stress as a result and modify their behavior and self-presentation to thwart the lesbian label, than women with low levels of stigma consciousness. While there are likely a multitude of factors that contribute to the lesbian stigma within women's sport, a study conducted with Canadian women rugby players suggests that the media plays a significant role reinforcing the lesbian association and in producing and reproducing the portrayal of women athletes (Hardy, 2015).

2.1.6 Media Coverage of Women's Sport. The mass media is one of the most powerful platforms for shaping values in modern culture (Kane, 1988) and research has shown that the way the media frames an event, impacts how it is perceived by the public (Gitlin, 1980). Research suggests, therefore, that the media plays a significant role in the perception of women athletes. For instance, Canadian women rugby players suggested that the dominance of men's rugby in the media, enhances the belief that rugby is a hyper-masculine sport, which they believe contributes to the lesbian stigma (Hardy, 2015). To circumvent the lesbian stigma, Knight and Giuliano (2003) argue, that sport media employs a feminine apologetic in which they heterosexualize women athletes through emphasizing their relationships with men. Since being an athlete violates traditional gender norms associated with being feminine, the media overcompensate for sportswomen's 'masculine' sporting behavior by portraying them in traditionally 'feminine' ways (Knight & Giuliano, 2003). While media images of men athletes emphasize power and athletic prowess, women athletes are presented in a 'heterosexy' manner (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011). Indeed, there is a body of evidence that demonstrates that the media sexualizes and objectifies women athletes (Kim et al., 2011), by presenting images that highlight physical attributes that are viewed as an object of sexual desire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Sexualized images of women athletes within the media has received resistance from the athletes themselves; when asked their preferences for how they wish to be portrayed, women athletes have reported a clear preference for media images that indicate their athletic competence rather than sexualized images of their bodies (Kane et al., 2013; Daniels & LaVoi, 2012). Women athletes from the National Collegiate Athletic Association in the United States have suggested that media portrayals that objectify sportswomen and emphasizes femininity and heterosexuality not only enhances their body shame (Varnes et al., 2015), but also continues to serve as an institutional and cultural site that reproduces

hegemonic masculinity (Greer et al., 2009; Kian et al., 2008). This presents a paradox for women athletes who must not behave or act too feminine for fear of being sexualized, nor must they act too masculine for fear of being demonized or tarnished with the lesbian label (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Whether framed as too 'masculine' or too 'feminine' research consistently finds that women athletes are 'othered' within the news.

Researchers have demonstrated that women athletes and women's sport is positioned as inferior to men's sport not only in the *way* women athletes and women's sport are portrayed, but also through the *lack* of media coverage. For example, there is a longstanding trend that there is a lack of coverage of women's sport, which is evident in a variety of media platforms including print, television, and online news media (Cooky et al., 2013). Despite the increased participation and success of women and girls in sport in recent years, there has not been much progress in terms of their representation within the media. Back in 1989, studies demonstrated that women's sport represented approximately only 5% of sport media and thirty years later, despite women representing 40% of sport participants, reports suggest that women only received 4% of sports media coverage (Mackenzie, 2019). The persistent lack of women's sport media coverage has recently been called into question in the media itself with articles titled "Where are all the women? Shining a light on the visibility of women's sport in the media" (Women in Sport, 2018) and "Coverage of women's sport is pathetic at the best of times" (Bowes, 2020). Articles such as these have criticized the lack of women role models for young girls in sport and have highlighted the cyclical nature of publicity; that is, without airtime, women athletes lose out on sponsors, supporters, and financial investments, which in turn hinders their opportunities for further media coverage (MacKenzie, 2019).

Overall, the various research streams focused on gender within sport demonstrate that despite improvements in the conditions for women in sport over the years, sport

continues to be plagued by historic and systemic patriarchal structures that marginalize women. In many ways, the progress for women in sport reflects wider society, wherein despite witnessing advancements in the rights for women, feminist movements continue to fight for equality.

2.2 Feminisms and Sport

The term ‘feminist’ carries many meanings for different people and while there is no single definition shared by all those who accept the feminist label, many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who believes that gender is an essential category of analysis and that all human experiences are ‘gendered’. Feminists, in general, believe that achieving gender equality requires a change (some would go as far as to say a revolution) in the social, economic, and political order (Delmar, 1986). Given the heterogeneity of feminists, the term ‘feminism’ inevitably becomes unwieldy with diversity and meaning. In fact, since the 1980s, feminism is often spoken about in its plural form (‘feminisms’) to signify that although all feminists share a basic commitment to examining gender, they do not necessarily approach the topic from the same philosophical base or political stance (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

Despite the various threads within feminism, there are dominant strands, which have been labelled using the ‘wave’ analogy. That is, the pattern of rise and fall of feminisms over time is characterized as following the motion of tidal water (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). In broad historical terms, ‘first wave’ feminism is dated to include pre-nineteenth-century up until about the 1920s (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). ‘First wave’ feminism draws on liberal thought, which asserts that women’s inferior social positioning within society can be addressed by political processes under democracy. For ‘first wave’ feminists, a key priority was attaining equality and therefore their focus was centered around securing legislation change (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). For example, ‘first wave’ feminists campaigned for the

right to vote, for access to education, for property ownership, rights in marriage and divorce and so on. In this way, 'first wave' feminists worked within the structure of society with an aim to integrate women into the structure through political and legal reform (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

In relation to sport, the underlying assumption of 'first wave' feminists is that sport is an experience that girls and women should have equal access to (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). For 'first wave feminists', it is discriminatory practices, such as restrictions on women's access to sport clubs, that inhibit women from having equal sporting opportunities (Crosset, 1995). It is also argued that socialization practices can cause differences in sport participation as girls are socialized into traditionally feminine sports such as gymnastics or netball, while boys are socialized into traditionally masculine sports such as rugby and football (Scraton, 1992). 'First wave' feminists, therefore, aim to work alongside sport organizations, governing bodies, and schools to provide equal sporting opportunities to girls and women and to equalize the number of women participants and decision-makers in sport (Knoppers, 1994).

'Second wave' feminism emerged out of radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s. For 'second wave' feminists, the underlying structural power relations are a direct result of the patriarchy wherein men are said to dominate (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Stemming from the famous slogan the 'personal is political', 'second wave' feminists prioritized the personal experiences of women as a way to explore the nature of oppression. As opposed to 'first wave' feminists who lobbied for women's suffrage through the right to vote, to education, and to own property, 'second wave' feminists campaigned for 'liberation' from the patriarchal institution that defined society (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

In relation to sport, 'second wave' feminists are concerned with men's power over women within and through sport (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). They characterize sport as a

‘male preserve’ (Dunning, 1986) that serves to sustain symbolic idealizations of men’s power, marginalize women, and reinforce the male hierarchy (Matthews & Channon, 2019). In this way, ‘second wave’ feminists seek to expose unequal gender relations in sport by challenging the social construction of men’s dominance and women’s submission. Whereas ‘first wave’ feminists seek to work *within* the sport structure, ‘second wave’ feminists seek to *destroy* the existing institution and replace it with a more gendered equitable structure (Hargreaves, 2004).

‘Third wave’ feminism was born out of a backlash against ‘second wave’ feminism. While ‘third wave’ feminists recognized the legacy of ‘second wave’ feminism, ‘third wave’ feminists accused ‘second wave’ feminists of remaining too exclusively white and middle class (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). ‘Third wave’ feminists believed that previous feminist movements were guilty of homogenizing women’s experiences and neglecting the differences between women. ‘Third wave’ feminists argue against seeking one truth or single explanation of a particular issue. Instead, they celebrate difference and diversity (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). They reject essentialist ideas about what it means to be a ‘woman’ and promote a multiplicity of femininities, masculinities, and sexualities (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

For ‘third wave’ feminists, the body has been the focus within sport. More specifically, they explore how women athletes negotiate their display of gender through their bodies and the clothes they wear (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). They are interested in how sport can reproduce gender norms in relation to femininity and how it can challenge gender boundaries by recreating and redefining new femininities through women athletes having strong, muscular physiques (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

In recent years, there have been discussions about a ‘fourth wave’ of feminism. While some question its mere existence, others, like Baumgardner (2011, p. 250), “believe that the

fourth wave exists because it says that it exists". According to Parry and colleagues (2019), the four key components that dominate 'fourth wave' feminism are: (a) blurred boundaries across waves (as it interweaves the micropolitics of the 'third wave' into the political, social, and economic agenda of the 'second wave'), (b) technological mobilization (as people are increasingly engaging with multiple and contradictory identities through online interactions), (c) interconnectedness through globalization (where notions of intersectionality are grounded in a globalized lens that unites feminists around the world on shared gender equity issues) and, (d) a rapid multivocal response to sexual violence (as backlash against men's domination takes the form of women publicly exposing their everyday encounters with sexism).

In relation to sport, in what has been referred to as a 'rebirth' of athlete activism (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020), women athletes have taken to public media platforms to stage social protests. For example, the US Women's National Soccer Team filed a gender discrimination lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation, within which player statements and interviews were widely visible. The hypervisibility of this case – a strength of 'fourth wave' feminism – made it accessible and admired in popular culture. Alongside feminist activism, scholars have also been studying gender and feminisms from an academic perspective for many years.

2.3 The study of gender within the Sociology of Sport

The academic study of the sociology of sport initially faced resistance as a field of enquiry from both its 'parent' disciplines of sociology and sport science/kinesiology (Pike et al., 2015). Mainstream sociologists questioned the value of studying sport, while some sport science/kinesiology scholars challenged the merit in studying sport from a social and cultural perspective (Pike et al., 2015). Despite their initial struggles, sociologists began specializing in the sociology of sport and they led the way by studying gender within sport

around the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, feminist sport studies scholars began examining the differences between men's and women's opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity (for a review, see Thorpe et al., 2020). Since then, feminist studies of sport and physical activity has emerged into an extensive field that explores a plethora of topics using an array of theoretical approaches (Markula, 2005). While all feminist sport studies scholars share a joint commitment to extending our understanding of gender within sport, their research aims, and interests, vary. For example, in the 1980s, feminist sport studies scholars started to embrace more critical sociological approaches to focus on distinguishing between sex and gender, and to consider the negative impacts of patriarchal structures and practices on women's roles in sport and society (Thorpe, et al., 2020). During this time, there was growing interest in theoretical ideas that considered sports in relation to the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, women's oppression and resistance, and social transformation (e.g., Birrell, 1988; Birrell & Cole, 1994; Hargreaves, 1986).

In the 1990s and 2000s, feminist scholars began to move away from a focus on ideology, hegemony, and the state, and toward social constructionist approaches wherein they began exploring the role of sporting discourses in the production of gender and gendered ideologies (Thorpe, et al., 2020). In doing so, feminist scholars used poststructuralist theory to highlight competing meanings of truth, various subjectivities, and the relational aspect of power (e.g., King, 2015; Markula, 2018). Since then, scholars have drawn upon several strands of critical race and feminist theory to highlight the politics of religion, ethnicity, culture, and race in women's experiences of sport and physical culture (e.g., McGuire-Adams, 2019; Ratna, 2018). Researchers have also used theories such as phenomenology and concepts such as embodiment, to examine the corporeal, sensual, and affective dimensions of women's sporting lived experiences (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2011; Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2014; Francombe-Webb, 2017; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). More

recently, scholars have started to gravitate toward new materialist and post-humanist approaches (Giardina, 2017; Newman et al., 2020) to explore "the complex interactions of language and matter, the human and nonhuman" (Hekman, 2010, p.4). In addition to studying gender within sport from a range of academic perspectives, sociology of sport scholars have also turned their attention to the applied implications of their work with a clear aim to inform sport policies and practices.

2.3.1 Sport Policy and Practice. In the 1980s, feminist scholars and activists highlighted the need to address gender inequity within sport governance (Piggott & Pike, 2019) and since then, sociology of sport scholars have studied a wide array of policies and governance activities from a range of geographical and cultural contexts. Indeed, from 2014 to 2020, fifteen special journal issues have focused specifically on women and gender in sport policy and governance. For example, research examining French sport policy since 1945, showed that sexist stereotypes still influence access to sporting practices for women today (Attali & Bazoge, 2021). Another study focused on FIFA women's football World Cups over the 1991-2019 period, showed that the increased competitive balance within women's football is largely influenced by the sport policies, politics across countries and the decisions made by FIFA (Scelles, 2021). Scelles (2021) showed that the evolution of women's football is, at least in part, related to the fact that each confederation have enhanced their incentives for their national associations to develop their women's football team (Scelles, 2021). As the European country with the fewest proportion of women holding senior positions in national sports federations, Organista (2021) explored the gendering of recruitment and selection processes to boards in Polish sport federations. The women respondents believed that women are not nominated for board positions due to a lack of trust toward women in sport and the prominence of the old boys' network (Organista, 2021). The findings revealed, therefore, that despite the candidate nomination process appearing

democratic, the chances for women are distorted, thus there is a need for leaders of sport organizations to revisit their recruitment and selection policies for board members.

Scholars within the United Kingdom have also focused on gender inequities within sport governance. Piggott and Pike (2019) for example, drew upon Bourdieu's theory of practice to explore how gender-equity and gender-balance within two national governing bodies of sport are impacted by informal organizational practices. Their findings revealed that (dominant) men and masculinity are privileged through informal organizational practices, which legitimizes and reinforces the positions of men as leaders. They recommend that sport governing bodies link gender-equitable governance to their organizational values to create sustainable change. In another study conducted within the UK, Mogaji and colleagues (2021) explored the financial well-being of sportswomen. The study demonstrated that a lack of financial well-being, impacted on the sportswomen's mental health and contributed to them delaying major life milestones like starting a family. Mogaji and colleagues (2021) suggested that governing bodies need to prioritize the financial well-being of sportswomen and invest in efforts to improve it, such as by connecting sportswomen to partnership and sponsorship deals and opportunities.

Research within the sociology of sport, whilst not always widely visible, has had considerable influence on the publicization of sporting issues within the media and has played significant and diverse roles in policy development (Pike et al., 2015). For example, nationally, sociology research has informed charities and organizations such as Women in Sport, the Women's Sport Trust, the Anita White Foundation, and the Well HQ, all of which share a joint commitment to improving the conditions for girls and women in sport. Internationally, sociology of sport research has also prompted a number of powerful organizations to take steps toward addressing the gender imbalance within sport (Piggott & Pike, 2019). For example, in 2017, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) conducted

a gender equity review project wherein they made recommendations related to sport, portrayal, funding, governance, and human resources (International Olympic Committee, 2018). The Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) has introduced taskforces to oversee the development of gender equitable governance and have launched their first women's coaching internship program to build women's coaching capacity (Commonwealth Games Federation, 2018). In 2020, the United Nations Women led a campaign, the Sport for Generation Equality Initiative, which aims to make gender equality a lived reality in and through sport. Whilst the field of sociology of sport has embraced feminist research and has informed sport policy and practice, within the field of sport psychology, the contextualized study of gender in sport has been under-represented and under-researched.

2.4 Gender Studies within Psychology

Researchers have questioned the lack of inclusion of culture within sport psychology for many years (Duda & Allison, 1990) and while other areas of professional psychology have integrated cultural aspects into their work, the field of sport psychology has been slow to embrace cultural factors such as power, social structure, identity, gender, and religion (Schinke & Moore, 2011). Recently though, there has been a further push towards advocating for a more culturally inclusive sport psychology (McGannon & Schinke, 2015). Known as *Cultural Sport Psychology* (CSP), scholars have begun challenging mainstream sport psychology to encourage contextualized explorations and understandings of marginalized topics (Blodgett et al., 2015). At the heart of cultural sport psychology research, is cultural praxis, which crystalizes the genre as one that moves beyond an academic endeavor to one that leads to social justice and change (Blodgett et al., 2015). By prioritizing marginalized topics and cultural praxis, cultural sport psychology goes hand in hand with feminist approaches to psychology.

2.4.1 Critical Feminist Psychology. Inspired by the field of sociology, psychology researchers also begun utilizing feminist theories in their work. Pioneering feminist psychologist Naomi Weisstein (1968) documented systemic biases and stereotypes that dominated the discipline of psychology, that classified women as the more emotionally unstable, weaker, and erratic sex. Feminist scholars started to expose how such sexist conclusions are the product of psychology's deep androcentric bias, wherein men are positioned as the 'norm' and women as deviants that are less valuable for understanding human experience (Crawford & Marecek, 1989). It had been standard practice for research to be conducted with men participants – most often, white, middle-class, heterosexual men (Fine & Gordon, 1989). It was precisely this type of androcentric research that spurred feminist psychology scholars to develop different ways of thinking about and doing research (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). In this way, feminist scholars across disciplines have a joint commitment to the task of re-writing knowledge in explicitly non-androcentric and decolonizing ways (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

Psychology, by definition, focuses on individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Gill, 2001). Feminist psychology, however, is said to *do* psychology differently (Macleod, Marecek, & Capdevila, 2014) as it recognizes the value in understanding the individual within the wider context of the world (Gill, 2001). Wilkinson and colleagues (1991) explained that feminists within psychology are committed to representing the diversity of women's concerns and to addressing a range of social inequalities (including, race, class, and gender) to improve the conditions for women. These two purposes, namely, the restoration of psychology and the motivation for social and political change, created the space for the development of *Critical Feminist Psychology* (Wilkinson et al., 1991). Critical feminist psychology became a place to challenge mainstream or as Wilkinson and colleagues (1991, p.7) referred to it, "malestream" psychology's myopic focus on objectivity in the

laboratory, which neglects the ways in which psychology and individual behavior are inescapably political (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994). With a clear focus on considering the contextualized experiences of women, critical feminist psychology acknowledges the relationship of power to knowledge and the bias toward pathologizing women (Gergen & Davis, 1997).

Psychology scholars using critical feminist approaches aim to improve the conditions for women by exposing and resisting oppression, which includes challenging the ways in which psychology itself reinforces androcentric biases (Gough, 2017). There is no one critical psychology and so critical approaches draw across a wide array of theoretical perspectives, including but not limited to, feminist standpoint theory, postmodernism, Marxism, critical psychology, and critical race theory (Gough, 2017; Gough et al., 2013; Hook, 2004; Teo, 2015; Walkerdine, 2001). It has been argued that the diversity of epistemological and disciplinary positions within critical psychology is a notable strength as it allows for a range of approaches to explore and address oppression (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Whilst sport psychology scholars have recognized the importance of centralizing marginalized groups in their work (Schinke et al., 2019), they have been slow to gravitate toward using critical feminist approaches.

2.4.2 Feminist Sport Psychology. Sport psychology as a field of study is inherently context dependent; we must consider people within their sport context to understand their behavior. Back in 1994, Gill suggested the importance of using a feminist perspective for sport psychology to challenge hegemonic practices. She proposed that a feminist perspective is particularly appropriate for sport psychology scholars to question how gender relations in sport influence the evident inequities (Gill, 1994). However, 25 years later, it has been questioned whether the sport psychology discipline is moving toward feminism with real progress toward social justice (Carter, 2019). More women are involved and visible in

competitive sport than ever before, yet it appears that sport psychology falls short of a feminist vision (Carter, 2019).

Similar to that of the larger discipline of psychology, sport psychology was slow to move beyond isolated studies of sex differences (Gill, 2001). Sport psychology scholarship has been dominated by research questions and methods that neglect the complexities of gender relations within sport and exercise contexts (Gill, 2001). For example, in 2010, the abstracts from the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) conferences from 1986 to 2007 were surveyed and it was found that only around ten percent addressed cultural diversity, most of which focused on gender differences, without considering intersections of identity, power relations, or any feminist issues specifically (Carter, 2019).

A recent position statement focused on prioritizing community-based sport for development projects for marginalized groups, suggested that research conducted with a feminist lens can critically expose gendered disparities and can influence social change (Schinke et al., 2019). In this way, feminist theory within sport psychology has the potential to deepen our understanding of the experiences of women athletes and identify the systemic changes required for women athletes to thrive in elite sport environments. Although few sport psychology scholars have focused on cultural understandings of women and gender or taken a feminist standpoint in their research projects, indeed some have recognized that gender inequalities remain a prominent issue within sport and have started to prioritize using cultural and critical approaches to exploring women's issues and women's athletic experiences within sport.

2.4.3 A Review of the Sport Psychology Literature. In recent years, sport psychology scholars have started to embrace more cultural and critical approaches to studying women athletes. One topic that has been at the forefront of exploration is women athletes' identities against the backdrop of gender within our wider society. For example,

McGannon and colleagues (2012) used a cultural sport psychology lens to explore media representations of elite running, pregnancy, and motherhood. With an aim to better understand the complexities surrounding an athletic mother's identity as a socio-cultural construct, they examined how the media manages and constructs Paula Radcliffe as an elite athlete and mother. They demonstrated how Radcliffe's identities were constructed differently depending on how her two roles were framed and which was given priority. Blodgett and colleagues (2017) used a cultural lens to explore the intersecting identities of elite women boxers in Canada. They showed how issues of identity expression, oppression, and white privilege remain in the boxing context and suggested that women boxers must negotiate between identities that are valued and those that are marginalized. Building on research that theorizes gender and sexuality as intersecting identities, McGannon and colleagues (2018) explored elite women Canadian boxers' identities in relation to inclusion and marginalization. The study demonstrated how boxing was both empowering, as identities were openly expressed within the team, and constraining, as gendered identities were not always experienced as inclusive. Focusing on Greek women Judokas, Kavoura and colleagues (2015) used a Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore how women construct their identities through the negotiation of sociocultural beliefs and gender stereotypes. They demonstrated how the gender power dynamics within wider Greek society are reproduced in the sporting experience of women judokas as they strategically negotiated multiple identities. Research in this area has shed light on the complexities surrounding athletes' identities as they are shaped by the broader narratives in which they are formed (McGannon et al., 2012).

Another research stream that has embraced a cultural and critical approach has been focused on exploring women's experiences with their athletic bodies. For example, using a feminist cultural studies framework, Krane and colleagues (2001) showed the paradox

sportswomen from an American university face of having to maintain a muscular physique to support their sporting endeavors whilst trying to preserve the feminine cultural ideal. The findings revealed that the athletes' ideal body type was dependent on the social context; their body satisfaction and self-presentation varied based on whether they considered their bodies as athletes or as cultural women. Joining feminist cultural studies and social psychological theory in their work, Krane and colleagues (2010), examined how American women college athletes prefer to be represented photographically. The findings revealed that the women athletes chose to emphasize their power and strength and took pride in their athleticism and musculature. Other research has shown that revealing sport uniforms contribute to decreased body esteem for American women college athletes (Steinfeldt et al., 2012) and that women athletes experience a period of struggle on their journey toward self-acceptance of their athletic bodies (Mosewich et al., 2009). Research in this area has unveiled the many contradictions sportswomen face being women in Western society and women in elite sport.

The coach-athlete relationship is a topic that has been studied for many years within the discipline of sport psychology and has revealed differences between the sexes. In recent years however, researchers have started to go beyond sex differences to explore gender as a social construction within the coach-athlete relationship. For example, in their study on elite women rowers, De Haan and Norman (2019) drew on Bourdieu's social theory to explore how gender as a relation of power is exercised between women athletes and men coaches. They demonstrated that within elite rowing, women athletes experienced feeling as though they are positioned as inferior to their men counterparts by their men coaches. Also in elite rowing, De Haan and Knoppers (2019) used a Foucauldian lens to explore the discourses that coaches draw on when thinking about their women athletes. The findings showed that although the coaches professed to treating their athletes the same regardless of gender, they drew on discourses that positioned women athletes as inferior to several implicit masculine

norms. Other research has shown that underlying gendered attitudes and beliefs concerning women's sporting abilities can negatively affect the coach-athlete relationship as the gendered relations between the woman athlete and man coach can be detrimental to the athlete's sense of well-being (Norman & French, 2013). Critical and cultural approaches to the study of the coach-athlete relationship have demonstrated that broader gendered ideas infiltrate sport environments and transfer into the transactions between coaches and athletes. These findings highlight the need for researchers, and sport practitioners, to not be gender blind, but rather to appreciate the complexities surrounding gender. Whilst research that has adopted cultural and critical approaches have resulted in several practical implications for supporting elite women athletes, the majority provide only a single level of analysis.

2.4.4 A Multi-level Approach to Research. One way that researchers have incorporated a multi-level approach to the study of gender within sport is through using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST) social-ecological model. Originally used to understand child development, the EST model has been adapted and used to organize the literature on women coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Coaching is an inherently social process (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2004) and the EST model has been employed to capture the complexity of the network of relationships and structures within which a coach is imbedded. The EST model identifies four levels that influence human experience and behavior: the individual level (i.e., personal, biological, and psychological factors), the interpersonal level (i.e., social-relational influences), the organizational level (i.e., organizational policies practices and opportunities), and the sociocultural level (i.e., norms and cultural systems; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). LaVoi and Dutove (2012) used the EST model to organize the barriers and supports for women coaches and through doing so demonstrated the potential to create social and personal change within sport. More specifically, LaVoi and Dutove (2012) demonstrated how the EST model can help develop

the reflective practice of individuals to assist them in identifying the norms, assumptions, and social structures that impact their lives. They also showed how the EST model can be used to empower and educate people to resist and challenge outdated stereotypes and to provide policies and tools to create a tolerant, inclusive, and respectful environment.

Similar to the EST social-ecological model, Burton and Leberman (2017) proposed a multilevel framework to use when examining women's studies, highlighting the need for research on women in sport to consider socio-cultural (i.e., macro), organizational (i.e., meso) and individual (i.e., micro) factors. According to Burton and Leberman (2017), a macro, or societal, perspective considers institutionalized practices of gender in sport, a meso, or organizational, perspective examines how the organizational culture is constructed around gender, and a micro, or individual, perspective explores how internalized gendered stereotypes impact individuals. In response to Burton and Lebermen's (2017) call for more multilevel research, De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) used a holistic approach to examine the multi-level factors associated with men coaches working with women athletes within an elite rowing program. Their findings indicate that coaches' personal cultural experiences shape their gendered beliefs and influence their coaching practices toward women athletes. Within the context of an Olympic rowing program, De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) demonstrate how a male hierarchy pervades the environment, which manifests as women's competition not being taken as seriously as that of men (macro-level), an overt inequality in resource allocations (meso-level) and coaches positioning men athletes as mentally stronger than women athletes (micro-level). These findings demonstrate how macro and meso-level factors can provide context to coaches' experiences and practices at a micro-level and thus highlights the importance of using a multilevel approach to capture the nuances associated with individual experiences shaped by a culture infiltrated with historical gendered biases.

2.5 Theoretical Underpinning

Aligned with using a multilevel approach and as recommended by De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019), this thesis also draws from sociological theory to situate and interpret the individual sporting experiences within their wider cultural context. This PhD has been commissioned by the EIS as a sport psychology project, and I, a sport psychology student and (trainee) practitioner, have had no prior engagement with the study of sociology. Whilst this remains largely a sport psychology PhD, I have, through attending sociology lectures, discussions with my supervisors, and a perusal of broader sociology of sport literature, been introduced to a range of sociological theories and feminist schools of thought, my understanding of which have continued to evolve throughout the entirety of this project. Throughout this process, it became increasingly more apparent that drawing from sociology theory would help to develop a more cultural, critical, intersubjective, situated, and embodied understanding of women athletes in elite sport.

Discussions with my supervisors, attending sociology lectures, and a critical review of the literature led me firstly to Goffman's theory of social interaction. Using the framework of 'dramaturgy', Goffman (1990) analyses interpersonal interaction and likens human behavior to that of a theatre, suggesting individuals 'perform' to present a desirable image using 'front stage' and 'back stage' behavior. Goffman's frame analysis suggests that performances are always constrained by frames, which are the properties of the social order that provide meanings governing interpretations of social events (Brickell, 2003). In relation to gender, Goffman (1979, p. 8) suggests that gender schedules frame gender performances, to the extent that gender identity is not authentic, but rather a false pretense based on the available "schedule for the portrayal of gender". Though dramaturgy is a powerful way of describing human behavior and gender identity, Goffman's interactionalist approach has been critiqued, particularly by structural theorists, for being too micro-level (Gouldner,

1971) and in direct relation to this thesis, Goffman's micro perspective lacks a conceptualization of power that would provide a broader examination of the experiences of women athletes.

Seeking a broader approach to contextualize the experiences of women athletes, I turned to Foucault's theory of power, which examines the relations between knowledge, power, and human subjects (Gallagher, 2008). To illustrate how modern power functioned, Foucault used Bentham's Panopticon to provide an idealized illustration of power's everyday techniques and effects (Cole et al., 2004). Foucault (1977, p. 201) argued that the effects of power were not limited to prisons and that everyone, not just inmates, is "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers". Foucault was one of the first academics to centralize the body in discussions of power (Rail & Harvey, 1995). Through his concept of bio-power, characterized as power over life that optimizes the capabilities of the body (Smart, 2002), Foucault suggests that sport and exercise are "an ensemble of disciplining and normalizing parties… that produce and put under surveillance multiple bodies" (Rail & Harvey, 1995, p. 173). Although feminist Foucauldians (e.g., Bartky, 1988) and sport scholars (e.g., Cole et al., 2004; Markula-Denison & Pringle, 2007) have drawn on the Panopticon and the concept of bio-power to highlight the micro-physics of power within modern sport and athletes' bodies, Foucault's conceptualization of power has been criticized for over-emphasizing the impact that technologies of power have upon the subjection of humans, rendering efforts to resist futile and reducing the subject to a passive effect of power (Borg, 2015). In contrast to Goffman's interactionalist approach, and Foucault's post-structuralist perspective, through discussions with my supervisors and studies such as De Haan and Sotiriadou's (2019) exploration of coaching elite women athletes, I was introduced to Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The theory of hegemony offers a form of 'praxis', which provides a productive amalgamation of theorizing and concrete

engagement with key social issues and action (Rowe, 2004) that, in line with the EIS objectives, allow for contextualized understandings of individual experiences as well as critical, specific, and practical outcomes.

2.5.1 Hegemony and Hegemonic Masculinities. In order to expose and resist oppression, critical feminist psychology and feminist sport psychology draw from various other disciplines. Here, we decided to draw upon Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony. Hegemony complements the idea of power by direct coercion with the notion of power by popular, and at its most powerful level, spontaneous consent. As Stoddart (2007, p. 201) argues, hegemony "appears as the 'common sense' that guides our everyday, mundane understanding of the world". Citing Gramsci, he explains it as a view of the world that is "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (Stoddart, 2007, p. 201), that serves to reinforce the dominant groups in society. 'Common sense', then, is the received wisdom passed down and sedimented from generation to generation, amplified and accentuated by those with the power to do so and actively and passively reproduced by those who accept and work with it (Gramsci, 1971). This 'common sense' contains fundamental ideas about what men and women are and therefore what amounts to appropriate and predictable behavior. As Hall (1977, p. 325) explains:

> It is precisely its 'spontaneous' quality, its transparency, its 'naturalness', its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time 'spontaneous', ideological, and unconscious. You cannot learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things.

Gramsci encourages a philosophy that functions within the sphere of the 'commonsensical' and the 'popular', and which enables individuals to work with the

materials of everyday life in an open, yet critical way (Rowe, 2004). For Gramsci (1971, p. 276), the disruption to the hegemony may occur when "the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe". The hegemony then, is not an inevitable, or stable, condition, but a continuing 'work-in-progress' (Rowe, 2004). While Gramsci discusses the major upheavals that occur after war, the same principle has been applied to less dramatic social contexts wherein in the case of sport, resistance to a regulation has resulted in the closure of a football club, the relocation of a sports franchise, and the takeover of a sports club by a media company (Gruneau & Whitson, 1994; Rowe, 2000). Drawing from Gramsci's concept of disruption to the hegemony, throughout this thesis the term 'moment of intervention' is used to represent a moment, in which enough momentum has been built up to create an opportunity for sport personnel to contribute to resisting the hegemony within their sport environment. Being on the 'front line' within sport environments, sport personnel have many advantages in directing social values and controlling institutions and are therefore offered, at various points throughout this thesis, 'moments of intervention', or suggestions for applied recommendations for coming together to disable the hegemony.

Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, Connell developed a theory of masculinities that has been deemed the "single theoretical framework" for studying men and masculinities (Pascoe & Bridges, 2015, p. 20-21). While the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been debated and contested, it has been refined over the years and has been profoundly influential in the sociology of gender (Yang, 2020). Emerging partly in response to sex role theory, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities largely contributed to the paradigmatic shift from seeing gender as 'sex roles' to understanding gender as relational (Yang, 2020). Connell (1987) coined the term hegemonic masculinity to constitute the most dominant and idealized form of masculinity available to men. The concept of hegemonic

masculinity reflects the study of masculinity within a system of gender relations (McVittie, et al., 2017) which, as Connell (1995) defines it, is a mechanism of domination that is responsive to changes in the conditions of the patriarchy. In this way, hegemonic masculinities are not static but are the "configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell, 1995 p. 77).

Arguing that masculinity is inherently relational, for Connell (2005), masculinity exists only in contrast to femininity. This relation is not "a confrontation between homogenous, undifferentiated blocs" of men and women, but between multiple masculinities and femininities (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 590). Hegemonic masculinity represents the most socially valued form of masculinity and therefore, although some femininities are culturally idealized, no femininities are hegemonic because "all forms of femininity in society are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men" (Connell, 1987, p. 186). It follows then, that the hierarchy that privileges hegemonic masculinity not only marginalizes women, but also serves to enact power over men who do not fit this form of masculinity (Anderson, 2005). Women's gender subordination means that when women embody masculinity, it may be empowering, or conversely, stigmatizing, but it cannot be considered hegemonic within the terms of Connell's conceptualization (Grindstaff & West, 2011).

As hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but rather what sustains their power, perhaps it is no surprise that sport has become a fruitful arena for studying hegemonic masculinity. Scholars of gender and sport have recognized that "men make sports, and sports make men" (Birrell & Richter, 1994, p. 226) as particularly in the Western world, sport has been, and continues to be, one of the most masculine institutions (Grindstaff & West, 2011). Sport continues to be critiqued as a patriarchal arena, that is

dominated by hegemonic masculinity (McVittie et al., 2017), wherein women athletes are positioned as physically inferior to their men counterparts (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Gill (2001) argues that our world is shaped by gender and that sport is no exception and Dellinger (2004) reminds us that the concept of hegemony highlights *cultural* dimensions of gender inequality. Hegemony, therefore, offers a springboard for theorizing the relation and hierarchy between the genders (Yang, 2020) as well as offering a form of praxis that is directly relevant to this project. Whilst the concept of hegemony has been criticized for class reductionism and determinism and for a lack of attention to key differences between cultural institutions (Harris, 1992), given the aims of this thesis, during the analysis and write up phase of this PhD, I made the decision to use the concepts of hegemony and hegemonic masculinity to examine elite sport environments and situate the sportswomen's and coaches' experiences. Despite gravitating toward the concept of hegemony, throughout the entirety of this project, I continued to engage with the feminist literature.

2.5.2 Feminisms. With an aim to enhance the support for women athletes, my readings, critical reflections, and methodological musings, led me to the literature on feminism. At first, I was overwhelmed to learn of the plethora of interrelated and contradictory feminist theories, including but not limited to liberal, cultural, radical, essentialist, embodied, black, social constructionist, post-structuralist, post-modern, neo-liberal, and phenomenological feminisms (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2018; Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Riley et al., 2017). At various points throughout this project, I have debated situating this thesis within a specific branch of feminism. To provide one example of how a branch of feminism was debated and then not used in this thesis, when I embarked on this project, I recognized that sport psychology research has rarely focused on sportswomen's lived experiences. With that in mind, I directed my reading towards feminist phenomenology. Concerned with how sex and gender impact one's experiences and understandings of the

world, according to Allen-Collinson (2011), phenomenology can be used as an epistemology, theoretical perspective, or methodology and method to provide an insightful analysis of sportswomen's cognitive and corporeal embodiment. For feminist phenomenologists, the personal is inextricably linked to the political, which adds a powerful element to understanding the complexities of sporting experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2011). Whilst a feminist phenomenological approach offers powerful insights into the corporeal specifics of bodies that are located in time and culture (an approach not often considered in sport psychology), feminist phenomenology has been criticized for not being "a rigorous method, but more an approach to inquiry" (Young, 2005, p. 8). Thus, a phenomenological description, it has been argued, needs to be considered alongside other approaches such as deconstructionist and psychoanalytical theories (Bunsell, 2010). Moreover, given the emphasis on the 'lived experience' and the specific focus on embodiment, feminist phenomenology prioritizes the individual experience. Given the wider objectives proposed by the EIS to explore a range of sports and to understand women athletes' and coaches' experiences more generally, I decided against situating the thesis within this branch of feminism.

As I grappled with the nuances within and between my participants' experiences, my readings and discussions with my supervisors led me to postmodern feminism, which embraces the messiness, complexities, and contradictions of feminism (Thorpe et al., 2017). As Bruce (2016, p. 368) suggests, "rather than accepting *either/or* discourses, third-wave feminists argue for a both/and perspective that creates space for a ruptural discourse that sees no incompatibility between athleticism and femininity". A postmodern feminist perspective therefore, explores the ways that practices and behaviors can be simultaneously "both empowering and oppressive" (Beaver, 2016, p. 654) and provides a platform to challenge the binaries within sport of what it means to be a woman (Thorpe et al., 2017). Despite

offering a valuable perspective to resist the binaries by viewing femininity and physicality as an integrated whole, a postmodern sensibility rejects metanarratives and the idea that we can discover any 'truth'. It follows then, if taken to its logical, albeit extreme conclusion, that postmodern feminism denies that there can be a 'universal woman', 'women's experience', and even the possibility of accessing any authentic female voice (Nicholson, 1990). While postmodern perspectives are useful in highlighting the limitations of the feminist standpoint that implies all women are oppressed by men, embracing these perspectives, in their strictest sense, have been viewed as anti-political and anti-feminist. If there is no such thing as speaking on behalf of 'woman' as a collective, then the idea of political action is rendered useless (Soper, 1990). Therefore, in line with the EIS objectives in which a collective voice was central, and my activist agenda to improve the support for women athletes, I opted against situating this thesis within post-modern feminism and instead, decided to use the concepts of hegemony and hegemonic masculinity to provide a critical and practical framework.

2.6 Aims and Scope

Whilst extant literature has provided useful insights into the experiences of women athletes and has offered practical implications to those working in sport, this program of research aims to extend previous works by addressing knowledge gaps in at least five ways. First, the methodological rigor of prior research focused on gender in elite sport has been questioned due to its over reliance on cross-sectional research designs (Norman, 2016). Using a "hit and run approach" (Booth & Booth, 1994, p. 417) provides only a 'snapshot' of the dynamic, fluctuating experiences of and interactions between women athletes and those working directly with them. Booth and Booth (1994) suggest that building rapport demands a level of intimacy that goes beyond the 'normal' relationship between an interviewer and participant. Therefore, this program of research uses a multi-method, immersive,

longitudinal approach, which offers the potential to capture a more in-depth, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the experiences of women athletes and their coaches. Andersen and Ivarsson (2016) suggest that when research participants feel heard and cared for, they are likely to leave the research encounter feeling comforted and understood. In this program of research, the immersive, longitudinal approach offers an opportunity not only to become accustomed to the sport environments, but also to give primacy to the researcher-participant relationships, which has been reported as a pivotal aspect in encouraging participation in the interview process (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016).

Second, sport psychology researchers exploring women athletes have predominantly used a single level of analysis, that is either a macro, meso, *or* micro level approach. However, it has been argued that a single level of analysis may not capture the complexities surrounding gender, nor identify the nuances required to challenge the gender hierarchy and bring about change (De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019). Therefore, in response to several calls to explore the women athlete from a socio-cultural perspective (Norman, 2016; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2015), this research uses a more holistic approach to consider the individual experiences of women athletes and their coaches situated within the context of their sport environment and our wider culture. Underpinned by critical feminist psychology (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019), this research utilizes a feminist methodology wherein a consideration of the wider context is a central tenet. Therefore, by using a multi-level analysis, this research will extend previous research by deepening our understanding of the experiences of women athletes and their coaches and locating their experiences within their sport environments and wider culture.

Third, this thesis draws on the theory of hegemony in order to explore the nuances of the gender order (i.e., the way institutional patterns, performed by individuals, creates power relations between genders; Matthews, 1984) in elite sport. The articulation and

rearticulation of common sense – as the lived, felt, and practiced basis of hegemony – helps us to understand the (re)production of the gender order and therefore how sport is inextricably tied to historical power relations, within and beyond sport, entrenched within its organization and cultural logics. This provides us with a tentative way of understanding how the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels work in dynamic reciprocity over time, along with how each plays a role in maintaining the male hegemonic status quo within sport. Therefore, through using an interdisciplinary approach of psychology and sociology, and drawing on the theory of hegemony and related concepts, this research will critically expose gendered disparities within sport.

Fourth, previous work in this area has predominantly focused on the experiences of women athletes or the coaches working with them from *within* a single sport rather than examining the transferability of findings *across* sports. By engaging with participants from across five sports, this research seeks to increase generalizability through naturalistic generalization and transferability. To clarify, naturalistic generalizability happens when the research resonates with the reader's personal engagement in life's affairs or vicarious experiences, whereas transferability within this research is defined as when an individual or group in one context considers adopting something from another environment that the research has identified (Smith, 2018). Therefore, by exploring the experiences of women athletes and their coaches across a range of sports, this thesis will extend previous research as it will highlight the nuances between and among participants and sports.

Finally, there appears to be considerable confusion and inconsistency among expertise researchers with regard to the criteria used to explain the term 'elite' or 'expert' athlete (Swann, et al., 2015). Despite claiming to examine elite athletes, research frequently uses university student athletes as participants, many of whom, it can be argued, should not be classed as elite (Swann et al., 2015). Swann and colleagues (2015) distinguish between

four types of elite performer: semi-elite (below the top standard e.g., talent-development programs), competitive-elite (regularly compete at the highest level but without success), successful-elite (some success at the highest level), and world-class elite (sustained success at the highest level). The dubious nature of the definitions of 'elite' in previous research limits our development of understanding the gendered experiences of genuine elite women athletes and their coaches within world-class sport settings. The participants in this program of research are a combination of competitive-elite, successful-elite, and world-class elite sportswomen and their coaches, all of whom are training in and amongst world-class elite environments.

This research has three broad aims. The first aim is to build a rich, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the experiences of women athletes and their coaches against the backdrop of gender in elite sport. This aim will be met through using a multi-method, immersive, longitudinal approach within Olympic and Professional Great British sports. Specifically, this research will explore elite women athletes' sporting experiences (chapter five) and the experiences of the coaches working directly with them (chapter four). To date, most studies that have focused on the women athlete and coaching experiences have neglected how their experiences may be shaped by the sport environment and our wider cultural context. Therefore, the second aim of this research is to situate the individual experiences within the wider cultural context. This objective will be met by using a multi-level holistic approach to analysis and by drawing from the theory of hegemony throughout the discussion. Underpinned by critical feminist psychology, the final objective is to critically expose gendered disparities within elite sport and to offer practical recommendations to sport practitioners and policy makers on how to support women athletes more effectively (chapter seven). This aim will be met by using a feminist methodology in which there is an unapologetic commitment to inciting change that leads to emancipation

from gendered oppression, by drawing from the theory of hegemony to offer ‘moments of intervention’ that highlight specific opportunities for sport personnel to implement change and disrupt the status quo, and by producing a resource to disseminate across Great British sports, which offers practical recommendations on how sports can support their women athletes more effectively within their sport environments.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Methods

3.0 Overview

This chapter provides an overview of, and rationale for, the methodological approach taken in this program of research. I begin by outlining the context of the research, followed by a discussion of the theoretical background and critical feminist methodology. I then explore the ethical issues addressed in the course of this research, before introducing my participants and the procedures for data collection, saturation, analysis, and representation. Finally, I offer criteria for judging the quality of this work.

3.1 Research Context

This research arose through a partnership between St Mary's University and the English Institute of Sport, an organization that provides support services to British sports. Despite the success for Team GB at the 2016 Olympic Games, of the countries that placed in the top four of the medals table at that Games, Team GB were the only country who won fewer medals from their women, compared to their men, athletes. This result sparked interest across Team GB coaches, practitioners, and senior managers, who raised questions about how the system could more effectively optimize the performance potential of women athletes. The women athlete became a key research focus across the GB system, within which this PhD was developed, with an aim to consider the psycho-social-cultural factors involved in supporting women athletes. Given this context, the question that drove this research was: *What can the British elite sporting system do to support women athletes and optimize their performance potential more effectively?* To critically consider this question, this program of research aimed to explore the cultural and relational nature of elite sport environments and how these are experienced by and acted upon women athletes and coaches.

3.2 Theoretical Background

Underpinned by critical feminist psychology, this research utilized a critical feminist methodology, within which there is an unapologetic commitment to inciting change

that leads to emancipation from gendered oppression (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). My philosophical stance is therefore based on a critical-ideological paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005); that is, ontological critical theory (i.e., reality is shaped by cultural views and mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted) and epistemological critical ideology (i.e., knowledge is transactional and subjective). The critical-ideological paradigm is one of emancipation and transformation, one that serves to disrupt and challenge the status quo (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). The purpose of research shaped by a critical-ideologist paradigm is both dialogic, in its focus on inducing deep insights through interaction, and dialectic, in its unapologetic commitment to social transformation. The researcher's proactive values, therefore, are central to the task, purpose, methods, analysis, and representation of the research (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical feminist psychology challenges mainstream, or as Wilkinson and colleagues (1991, p. 7) refer to it, "malestream" psychology's continued focus on the individual at the expense of the social and political. It acknowledges the relationship of power to knowledge, the bias toward pathologizing women, and the limitations of decontextualising women's experiences (Gergen & Davis, 1997). In order to expose and resist oppression, critical feminist psychology draws from various other disciplines. Here, we draw upon the theory of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). This theory provides a conceptualization of power that has informed the methodology in two key ways.

First, the concept of hegemonic masculinity reflects the study of masculinity within a broader system of gender relations (McVittie et al., 2017). Framing gender as relational enables an opportunity to move beyond an exploration of individual personalities and toward an investigation of power dynamics between men and women that delimit what is possible for the individual (Carrigan et al., 1985). By drawing on related concepts such as the gender order, this research considers how gender relations are inextricably tied to the history of

sport and society itself (Theberge, 2000). The theory of hegemony has offered a perspective of sport as a site of not only reproducing the status quo, but also in many ways, of reforging views, and reconstructing meanings of gender. For example, this research has explored gender relations from a macro, meso, and micro level perspective, which considers how individual experiences and sport environments are permeated by a system of hegemonic meanings. Throughout the data collection, I encouraged participants to consider the meanings of gender and in the final write up, examples of subvert dominant meanings of gender and hegemonic femininity have been highlighted.

Second, in line with critical feminist psychology in which there is an activist agenda (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019), the theory of hegemony can be used as part of a critical theory of change (Jewkes et al., 2015). Gender relations within the gender order and hegemonic practices are regarded as in process as they are continually produced and reproduced over time (Connell, 1987). The theory of hegemony thereby allows for the possibility of social change and has informed the methodology as one that considers recommendations for action. Specifically, throughout the data collection period, the participants were offered numerous opportunities to discuss their recommendations for change, and in line with critical feminist psychology, I hope to have contributed to a broader counterhegemonic project. Within the final write up there are various instances where I provide 'moments of intervention', which refers to specific applied recommendations that resist the status quo, around which sport personnel can consider concentrating their energies toward implementing change within their sport environments.

3.3 Critical Feminist Methodology

In line with a critical-ideological paradigm, and underpinned by critical feminist psychology, this study utilized a critical feminist methodology. As recommended by Lafrance and Wigginton (2019), this research took into account five aspects of doing critical

feminist research: (a) the politics of asking questions, (b) attention to language/discourse, (c) reflexivity, (d) representation and intersectionality, and (e) mobilizing research for social change.

3.3.1 The Politics of Asking Questions. The politics of asking questions centers around the assumption that research questions are not neutral, but rather are inherently reflective of power relations and are inevitability political (Fine, 2012). Critical feminist psychology research questions are in stark contrast to 'difference' research questions, that compares men and women on specific variables (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). In fact, it has been argued that psychology's traditional (and essentialist) approach to sex/gender differences are at odds with a critical feminist agenda as it not only neglects the complexities of people's experiences (Tavris, 1993) but also legitimatizes and reinforces social inequalities (Wilkinson et al., 1991). According to Lafrance and Wigginton (2019), therefore, the first step in developing a critical feminist program of research is to reflect on the area of interest and the question being asked. Lafrance and Wigginton (2019) recognize that it may not be possible to fully answer such questions, but they highlight the value in reflexively considering them. In line with this recommendation, one key question that was frequently revisited throughout this program of research was how my work could resist, rather than reinforce, gender inequalities within elite sport. For example, I questioned whether the specific focus on women athletes could ultimately reproduce women as a homogeneous group and accentuate the differences between men and women within elite sport, as opposed to challenge the gender hierarchy. In many ways, I began to recognize the importance in asking questions that allowed for complexity and contradiction.

3.3.2 Attention to Language/Discourse. Similar to that of the politics of asking research questions, critical scholars make the assumption that language is not neutral, but rather a site of meaning-making and power (Burr, 1995). Therefore, Lafrance and Wigginton

(2019) suggested that a reflexive consideration of the language and discourse used by the researcher throughout the research process is an essential aspect of doing critical feminist research. In line with Lafrance and Wigginton's (2019) recommendations, throughout this program of research, I critically examined not only the questions I asked, but also how I asked the questions. To move away from a focus on differences between men and women, I made a conscious effort to use open terminology and questions that allowed for complexity and contradiction. In the final write up, I have explicitly acknowledged the complexities of gender and highlighted the contradictions within and between participants.

3.3.3 Reflexivity. Reflexivity involves an ongoing consideration of the ways in which our own values, beliefs, social characteristics, and experiences shape the research process and outcomes (Teo, 2015). Within critical feminist research, reflexivity begins from the assumption that the researcher is not separate from the research process (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Instead, reflexivity recognizes that our personal experiences and identities shape the selection of our research topics, our research questions, our interactions with participants, and our readings of the data (Wilkinson, 1988).

During this program of research, I engaged with two ways of reflecting. First, I kept a reflexive journal (i.e., introspective reflexivity) where I detailed my daily experiences, thoughts, emotions, and reactions to what I was witnessing in the sport environments, which totalled more than 11,000 words. Through my reflexive journal, I was able to situate my own personal identities and to explore the surprises and undoing's in the research process (i.e., unexpected turns in the research), with myself ultimately becoming the site of analysis and the subject of critique (McGannon & Metz, 2010). This "self-situating" is integral to cultural studies analysis (Frow & Morris, 2000) and critical feminist research (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) where it is believed that personal experiences cannot be detached from discussion and analysis of the data. I found it a particularly useful platform to engage with

when I was concerned about mistakes I had made or when I was grappling with introspective debates in relation to my research. To address the call for more transparency within feminist methods (Clarke & Braun, 2019), using excerpts from my reflexive journal, these experiences are presented as a confessional tale about doing feminist research within elite sport.

Second, these ongoing introspective reflections were also shared with my supervisors (i.e., intersubjective reflexivity) on a weekly basis. Thus, I presented my interpretations of the data on a regular basis to my supervisors who provided a sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations. As part of this process of critical dialogue, I was required to make a defendable case that the available data supported my interpretations. For example, I debated the titles of the themes with my supervisors to ensure that they were concise and immediately gave the reader a sense of what the theme was about (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3.4 Representation and Intersectionality. Central to critical feminist research is the ways in which participants are represented in the research (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). As Coyle (1996) suggests, it is important that critical feminist scholars consider the process of representing a marginalized group responsibly in their research. To this end, despite collecting data for the athlete and coach samples simultaneously, I made the decision to analyze and present the data for the coach and athlete participants separately, to ensure their voices, and particularly those of the women athletes, were sufficiently represented. I also made a conscious effort to acknowledge the inconsistencies within and between participants to highlight the heterogeneity of viewpoints.

Intersectionality is at the heart of critical feminist research, as it considers how gender inequality intersects with other aspects of a woman's identity such as her age, race, class, (dis)ability, or sexuality (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Intersectionality challenges

the notion that women are a homogenous group and instead highlights the multidimensionality of positions of difference and oppression (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). While it was not possible to explicitly reference the participants ages, ethnicities, social classes, and sexualities due to anonymity, the participants in this research represent a range of identities. Given the aims of this program of research, the intention was not to delve into intersectionality, and therefore it has instead been proposed as a direction for future research (see section, Future Research: Where do we go next? in chapter seven).

3.3.5 Research for Social Change. Feminist scholars acknowledge systemic oppression and share a commitment to social justice (Clarke & Braun, 2019). Therefore, despite their differences, feminist scholars are united by a vision of future change (Braun, 2011). According to Lafrance and Wigginton (2019), feminist scholars contribute to a better future and social change in two ways through their research. The first is through critically examining the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin and perpetuate inequalities. In my research, I have challenged gender binaries and hegemonic associations of masculinity and femininity. I have done this by drawing on the theory of hegemony to situate the findings of my research, as well as including several practical recommendations that reconstructs what it means to be an elite athlete. For example, I highlight the importance of celebrating characteristics such as displaying emotions and asking questions, both of which deviate from hegemonic masculinity.

The second way feminist scholars contribute to social change is through using methods that are intentionally designed to do just that. Within academia, the idea of 'scientific objectivity' has supported the use of the passive voice, which has legitimized the neutral role of the researcher as they are rendered invisible (Fine, 1994). Feminist scholars who work in alternative and critical epistemologies, however, have celebrated and prioritized reflexivity as a means of "dismantl[ing] the smokescreen" of impartiality (England, 1994,

p.81). Feminist researchers recognize that their role is not simply to be a passive observer, but rather to co-construct knowledge through social interactions with their participants (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) and by shaping how data analysis is conducted. Braun and Clarke (2020, p.7) suggest that:

> Demonstrating coding reliability and the avoidance of 'bias' is illogical, incoherent, and ultimately meaningless in a qualitative paradigm and in reflexive thematic analysis, because meaning and knowledge are understood as situated and contextual, and researcher subjectivity is conceptualized as a *resource* for knowledge production, which inevitably sculpts the knowledge produced, rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility.

The feminist researcher, therefore, is an active part of the social interactions with participants, contributes to the analysis of data, and is involved in co-creating the knowledge produced, including knowledge critical of the oppressive status quo (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

When I started this program of research, I naively thought my role as a researcher was to be neutral. Through reflexive practice, however, I learned that having an activist agenda is a central part of conducting feminist research (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). To this end, throughout my data collection, I embraced the idea of co-constructing knowledge and taking an active role in resisting the hegemony as I frequently engaged in discussions with participants whereby I challenged their viewpoints and offered my own perspectives. I also sought the participants' opinions on how to drive social change within their sport environments. For example, questions I posed during the interviews focused on the participants' perspectives on driving a progressive social change. Moreover, during informal, unstructured interviews, when a participant shared their views on a topic related to gendered disparities within sport, I would ask their thoughts on actions toward social change. Finally, I have developed a resource that summarizes my findings and offers practical

recommendations to coaches and practitioners within the Team GB system on how to support women athletes more effectively (see appendix H). The aim of disseminating this resource is to incite social change by encouraging sports to evaluate their current environments, to consider their gendered practices, and to open the dialogue on how they might drive social change within their own sport environments.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research took into account three dimensions of ethics: procedural ethics, situational ethics, and relational ethics. Procedural ethics relates to the kinds of ethics required by institutional ethics review committees to ensure that the research procedures adequately address issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protection of human participants from harm (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This program of research was granted procedural ethical approval by the St Mary's University Research Ethics Committee (see appendix A). Prior to participation in the study, the Performance Director of each sport that showed interest in participating received a participant information sheet (see appendix B) and gave written informed consent (see appendix C). Once the Performance Directors had identified which participants met the sampling criteria, prior to participating, each participant was given a participant information sheet (see appendix D), which was adapted for one participant who was under the age of 18 (see appendix E). They also received a verbal briefing that informed them that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participating at any time without being required to give a reason. The participants each gave written informed consent (see appendix F), which was also adapted to require a parent or guardian's signature for the participant under the age of 18.

McNamee and colleagues (2007) describe an identifier-richness dilemma within research writing; on the one hand, it has been argued that good qualitative research requires

rich description to provide context to the findings and discussion, while on the other hand, it is recognized that including identifiers and characteristics about a participant make anonymity difficult. Sparkes (1998) noted that anonymity can be particularly challenging within sport as when someone has a high profile, it can be difficult to disguise them. The participants included in this research are from five Olympic and Professional sports from Great Britain, some of whom are indeed high-profile and in the public eye. Moreover, the women coaches who participated in this study, are the only women coaching at the world-class level, and so knowledge of their sport would render them instantly recognizable. Therefore, in the interest of preserving the anonymity of individual participants, in the write-up sport names are not identified, pseudonyms are used, and any specific information that could identify the participants or others they have worked with has been omitted. Recognizing the identifier-richness dilemma, a concerted effort has been made to ensure the findings remain relevant and rich with description.

Situational ethics, or 'ethics in practice' pertain to the day-to-day ethical issues that arise whilst doing research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). As described by Ellis (2007, p.4) situational ethics deals with "the unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field" and therefore it is a process that requires ongoing consideration and reflection throughout the doing of research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). During my research, I monitored situational ethics primarily through reflexivity and discussions with my supervisors. For example, during one interview, an athlete reported a lack of motivation and enjoyment and suggested she was experiencing low mood. I wondered whether the participant was suffering a clinical mental health illness and was faced with an ethical dilemma of whether to breach her confidentiality and report these symptoms to the sport psychologist or doctor in her sport. After engaging with reflective practice and discussions with my supervisors, I decided to inform the athlete of my concerns, to which

she reassured me she was receiving appropriate clinical support. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p.264) describe examples like this raise issues about the ethical obligations a researcher has toward a participant in terms of interacting with him or her "in a humane, nonexploitative way while at the same time being mindful of one's role as a researcher".

Relational ethics seeks to consider the dynamic relationship between the researcher and participant over time (Ellis, 2007). Slattery and Rapp (2003, p.55) describe relational ethics as doing what is necessary to be "true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their consequences on others". Relational ethics recognizes the value of mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and participants (Ellis, 2007). I monitored relational ethics through reflexively exploring my relationships with participants, how they changed over time, and the impact this may have on those individuals. For example, I reflected on my own identity as a white, middle-class, young, woman researcher and considered how it may impact my relationships with participants. I also sought to remain an attentive and engaged listener and to approach each interaction from a non-judgmental position, regardless of the participants' viewpoint.

3.5 Sampling and Participants

Following procedural ethical approval from the University's Ethics Committee, participants were recruited through criterion-based purposeful and maximum variation sampling strategies (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Criterion-based sampling was used to recruit elite women athletes and coaches working with elite women athletes, defined as athletes who are training and performing at the highest level in their sport (Olympics, World Cups, and World Championships; Swann et al., 2015). Maximum variation was chosen to enhance the study's potential generalizability (i.e., naturalistic generalization, transferability) by recruiting participants from a range of Great British sports, such as team and individual sports, traditionally male dominated and traditionally female dominated sports, and

successful and emerging elite women's programs. Maximum variation sampling was also used to gather both men and women coach participants. The Performance Directors from five sports agreed that their sport would participate in the study. Ten coaches (six men and four women), who had coached elite women and men athletes for at least two years, and 19 elite women athletes from across five sports met the sampling criteria.

3.5.1 Elite Interviewing. In recent years, there is a growing body of research that has explored the challenges and dynamics associated with interviewing 'elite' participants in qualitative research (e.g., Duke, 2002; Harvey, 2011; Mikecz, 2012; Neal & Mclaughlin, 2009). One challenge that has been widely documented in the literature is gaining access to 'elite' participants, as it has been suggested that these individuals may resist the scrutiny of research (Duke, 2002). In her review of the literature, Morris (2009) highlighted recommended techniques for researchers to gain access, including drawing attention to the researcher's credentials and using personal connections. As my research was part-funded by the English Institute of Sport, I was in a unique position where I was connected to a wide network of Olympic and professional sport teams across Great Britain. Whilst being on the 'inside' allowed me to make initial contact with numerous sports across the network, becoming an 'insider' took time; before I was granted permission to begin my data collection within the individual sports, I sent several emails, attended various meetings with performance directors, and presented to coaches and sport science staff across the sports. As Ostrander (1995, p.135) noted, I was also acutely aware that "gaining access is not the same as establishing the trust required for getting useful data" and therefore, I carefully navigated relationships with my participants before, during, and after data collection.

Another challenge that has been highlighted in the literature is the suggestion that elite participants will occupy a more powerful position than the interviewer (Mikecz, 2012). Whilst much of the literature assumes that the power will be in favor of the 'elite' participant

(Mikecz, 2012), like Lancaster (2017, p.97), my experience suggests that the power dynamics between a researcher and participants can be "fluid and context dependent". Neal and McLaughlin (2009) argue that a linear and statically defined conceptualization of power ignores notions of vulnerability or sensitivity, as power can flow unevenly and ambiguously across and between the researcher and participant. In my experience, the power dynamics were continually shifting depending on a range of variables from the participant's age, gender, and comfort talking about the topic of the women athlete (see Chapter six for more detail). Other research has also suggested that when participants are sharing their personal experiences, there can be a therapeutic effect of "an attentive and sympathetic listener" (Welch et al., 2002, p.622), which is something I experienced with several participants who shared their frustrations with their sport and frequently thanked me for listening. In line with Lancaster (2017) and Neal and McLaughlin (2009), even though my position as a PhD student may be regarded as being less powerful, through continuous reflexive practice I was able to recognize power not as fixed, but rather as relational and dynamic, which allowed me to respond to shifting vulnerabilities and power dynamics over time.

3.6 Data Collection

All Olympic and some professional sports working in a Great Britain national sporting organization were contacted, informed about the study, and invited to participate. The Performance Directors from five sports showed an interest in the study and agreed to meet to discuss the study in more depth and the logistics of participating. All five gatekeepers agreed that the participant coaches and athletes who met the sampling criteria could be contacted individually via an e-mail initially and then face-to-face, during which they were informed about the study and invited to participate in observations and interviews. All potential participants agreed to take part in the study and provided written informed consent.

Data collection for this research spanned a period of 20 months between July 2017 and March 2019. A longitudinal, immersive, multiple qualitative methods approach was used to enhance the study's scope and construct a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of elite sport environments. During this period, I divided my time across the five sports, spending on average 1-2 days per month in each sport environment, which had independent training facilities and comprised of their own athletes, coaches, sport science and medical staff, and administration staff. During the time spent in the sports, I engaged in observations, informal unstructured interviews, and semi-structured individual and group interviews. In total, I spent around 300 hours across the five sports.

3.6.1 Observations. Data collection started with observations, which involved attending to the actions occurring, asking questions, and engaging in dialogue with participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Guided by critical feminist psychology (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) with an aim to consider the participants within their wider cultural sport contexts, observations were used to become accustomed to the participants' day-to-day schedules and to gain an overall perspective of the five elite sport environments. In line with critical feminist psychology (cf. Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019) being immersed in the sport environments over an extended period also gives primacy to the centrality of researcher-participant interactions. Spending time in the sport environments provides an opportunity to build rapport with participants, which has been reported as a pivotal aspect in encouraging participation in the interview process (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016).

Observation moved through a continuum of observation and participation roles as suggested by Gold (1958). At times, especially at the initial phase of observation, I acted as a complete observer whereby I sat on the side lines and watched training without actively participating in the field. However, as time passed, I became more of an observer as participant and a participant as observer as I began spending time in the sports, helping set

up equipment, sharing mealtimes with the athletes, coaches, and staff, and attending various team meetings and workshops.

Once I felt sufficient rapport had been developed with the participants, which could be evidenced through sharing of intimate stories, using and reciprocating 'banter', and physical touch (e.g., hugs, high fives), I began engaging in semi-structured interviews. Observations before, between, and after the semi-structured interviews were used to supplement, extend, and provide context for the data collected in the semi-structured interviews as well being used to monitor, reflect upon, and refine initial themes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Observations were also used to guide interview questions, to probe and challenge participants where appropriate, and to reconceptualize the difference between what is said in interviews and done in practice (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Observations were recorded in note form as soon as possible on my phone at the sport center. When returning home, the initial notes were typed up on a laptop using detailed fieldnotes and were elaborated upon the next day using a reflective journal. These notes included what I had seen and heard, alongside my initial thoughts and impressions. The final body of fieldnotes totalled approximately 43,000 words and the reflective journal totalled around 11,000 words.

3.6.2 Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups. In addition to observations and informal-unstructured interviews, participants were also invited to take part in semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups. The rationale for using semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection was that they would provide the participants with the freedom to discuss their experiences, while also ensuring areas of interest pertinent to the study were discussed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). During a semi-structured interview, the participant has the opportunity to share the meanings that they attach to events, which provides the interviewer a deep insight into the participants' experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Focus groups were also offered to the participants as they have been suggested to allow for safety in numbers, which means that participants only need to contribute to the conversation when they feel able (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Focus groups can also encourage participants to disclose more and can prompt a range of views (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups, it has been argued, are particularly appropriate for feminist psychology research as they address feminist ethical concerns about a researcher's power over a participant within a one-to-one interview (Wilkinson, 1998). It has been suggested that during a focus group, the participants are within their context and are therefore able to generate interactive data that is co-constructed between participants (Wilkinson, 1998). The decision to engage in an individual interview or focus group was participant-led based on their preferences.

Two interview guides (one for the coaches and one for the athletes) were developed for the purposes of the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups (see appendix G), which guided by critical feminist psychology, included questions that considered gendered relations within a wider cultural context (Crawford & Marecek, 1989). Both interview guides encompassed questions from three levels: macro (i.e., our wider culture), meso (i.e., the sport environment), and micro (i.e., individual experiences) and focused on six main areas. The interview guide for the coach participants focused on the following: (a) past experiences (e.g., what was it like starting out as a coach to women athletes?), (b) training and competition (e.g., what changes, if any, do you notice in your women athletes from the training to competition environment?), (c) relationships (e.g., how would you describe your relationship as a coach with your women athletes?), (d) personal experiences (e.g., in what ways do you think you personally, and this program as a whole, are effective at supporting women athletes?), (e) the environment (e.g., what kind of environment are you trying to

create for your women athletes?), and (f) the wider culture (e.g., in what way, if at all, do you believe our wider culture impacts women's sport and women athletes?).

The interview guide for the athlete participants focused on the following: (a) past experiences (e.g., how did you get involved in sport? what was your transition to the elite level like?) (b) relationships (e.g., how would you describe your relationship with your coach?) (c) women characteristics (e.g., how does it feel to be a woman in elite sport? Are there any ways that being a woman in sport impacts your personal life?) (d) training and competition (e.g., what does a typical week look like for you? How do you feel about competing?) (e) training environment (e.g., what does your training environment feel like?), and (f) the wider culture (e.g., in what way, if at all, do you believe wider cultural views on women and women's sport impacts your experiences as a woman athlete?).

Guided by critical feminist psychology (Braun, 2011) the final section of each interview and focus group was focused on the participants' perspectives on how to drive a progressive social change (e.g., what do you believe can be done to better support women athletes?). In line with critical feminist psychology, the questions asked, and the elaboration probes used throughout the interviews and focus groups, were worded in such a way that allowed for complexity and contradiction (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

During the individual interviews and focus groups with the athletes, respondent-generated visual data were used to amass complexly layered meanings in a format, which is both accessible and easily retrievable to researchers and participants (Phoenix, 2010). The athlete participants were asked to draw out what their ideal training environment would look like and were given an opportunity to discuss their drawings. Elaboration and clarification probes were used to elicit more information and ensure understanding. In addition, ahead of the individual semi-structured interviews the athlete participants were asked to bring three images or photographs that represented an answer to the following three questions: who were

you? who are you now? and who are you going to be? It has been suggested that images are powerful because they evoke a specific type of response as they can *do* things (Phoenix, 2010). It has also been argued that thinking, writing, presenting, and discussing images can help people represent their points in more vivid and lucid ways than alternative forms of representation (Grady, 2004). Visual images, therefore, allow people to construct and communicate their experiences whilst powerfully revealing the multiple meanings embedded within (physical) culture.[1]

After the first round of interviews and focus groups, the decision to engage in follow-up interviews and focus groups was participant-led. Follow up interviews and focus groups gives the participants more opportunities to express themselves and build upon what they shared in the previous interview or focus group, increasing the likelihood of achieving a deep and comprehensive picture of their experiences (Culver et al., 2003). Follow up interviews and focus groups also provides an opportunity for respondent validation or member checks, wherein participants can check their previous transcripts to ensure they fairly represent their ideas (Torrance, 2012). Five of the coach participants and 12 of the athlete participants explicitly stated they felt as though they had more to share and wanted to engage in a follow up interview or focus group.

For the coach cohort, 10 participants engaged in the study, and 15 individual interviews and one focus group were conducted: five participants engaged in one individual interview, three participants engaged in two individual interviews, and two participants engaged in two individual interviews and one focus group together. All 16 interviews (individual and focus groups) were conducted face to face (at the request of the participants, five were on the individual sporting premises and one was in a public café). All interviews

[1] To preserve the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, examples of their drawings and images will not be included.

and focus groups were audio-recorded to provide a complete account of what was discussed. The interviews and focus groups ranged from 36 min to 97 min (*M = 67.3*min, *SD* = 19.5) and totalled 18 hours of data.

For the athlete cohort, 19 participants engaged in the study, and 24 individual interviews and five focus groups were conducted: eight participants engaged in one interview or focus group, five participants engaged in two interviews or focus groups, and six participants engaged in three interviews or focus groups in total. 28 of the interviews and focus groups were conducted face to face (at the request of the participants, all were conducted on their sporting premises), and one individual interview was conducted via a video skype call. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded to provide a complete account of what was discussed. The individual interviews ranged from 33 min to 125 min (*M = 63* min, *SD* = 24.3), the focus groups ranged from 55 min to 127 min (*M* = 84.2 min, *SD* = 28.1) and together totalled 32 hours of interview data.

3.7 Data Saturation

Braun and Clarke (2021 p. 201) encourage researchers using reflexive thematic analysis to "dwell with uncertainty and recognize that meaning is generated through interpretation of, not excavated from, data". They suggest, therefore, that judgements about the number of data items and when to end data collection are inescapably situated and subjective and cannot be predetermined (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that the concept of data saturation is incompatible with the interpretative assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis. Instead, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that for reflexive thematic analysis researchers, what might constitute 'saturation' is an interpretative judgement that aligns to the purpose and goals of the analysis. In line with this suggestion, through discussions with my supervisors and writing in my reflexive journal I recognized that I had reached a point where I felt immersed into the sport environments and had gathered

a comprehensive amount data to offer practical recommendations to help sports support their women athletes more effectively.

3.8 Data Analysis

In line with critical feminist psychology (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019), I used reflexive thematic analysis to make sense of the data as this method of data analysis enabled me to analyze the data inductively (e.g., new experiences), deductively (e.g., guided by theoretical concepts), critically (e.g., challenging the status quo), and reflexively (e.g., situating the first author within the study). I engaged in three reflexive thematic analyses: one for the coach data, one for the athlete data, and one for the confessional tale (Braun et al., 2016). In line with critical feminist research (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019), after an initial reading of the data, I made the decision to analyze the data separately as I wanted to centralize the women athletes' voices. Women athletes and their coaches have different experiences of the elite sport world, and I did not want to conflate the two perspectives.

From the outset, I familiarized myself with the data; this involved transcribing the interviews, repeat reading of the interview transcripts, my fieldnotes, and my reflexive journal, as well as revisiting the participant drawings and images, and noting down initial ideas. Phase two involved generating codes by highlighting interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set (e.g., "understanding the individual," "women more emotional," and "work-life balance"). I highlighted anything that related to feminist thought, wider cultural perspectives, organizational norms, and individual gendered experiences. A table with two columns was created; one column included the highlighted transcripts, the other summarized key words from the highlighted extracts. The next phase involved collating codes into potential themes. For each participant, repeated codes were removed, and all remaining codes were moved into separate columns (one per participant). Overlapping ideas were then color coded across the data set, producing potential themes.

These provisional themes were discussed at length with my supervisors, who acted as critical friends to check and challenge that the themes were coherent and consistent (see Williams et al., 2018) until the themes were identified for each data set. These themes were refined and defined, and the theme names were identified. This process resulted in the identification of three themes for the coach study: (a) *It's Bigger than Sport,* (b) *Women in a Man's World,* and (c) *Same Same but Different*; three themes for the athlete study: (a) *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* (b) *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* and (c) *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"*; and four themes for the confessional tale: (a) *To Wear or Not to Wear?* (b) *It's Bigger Than Us*, (c) *Spinning the Plates*, and (d) *The F-Word*. Finally, producing the thesis involved ensuring the write-up provided a concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the data, with appropriate examples and vivid quotations.

3.9 Representation

Chapters four and five, which consider the experiences of the coaches and the athletes respectively, present the findings of the thematic analyses as a 'realist tale' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The realist tale is the most dominant means of presenting qualitative data and according to Sparkes and Smith (2014), it is characterized by experiential authority, the participant's point of view, and interpretive omnipotence. Experiential authority involves the absence of the author from the text (Van Maanen, 1988). While the orchestration and theoretical framing of the participants' voices by a disembodied author may appear at odds with feminist research, it has been argued that realist tales, when well crafted, can provide powerful, thorough, and nuanced representations of a social world (Sparkes, 2002). Furthermore, in line with feminist research, throughout chapters four and five, I have incorporated my observations, frequently providing examples of things that I saw and heard

during my time spent in the sport environments. The participant's point of view involves foregrounding the participants' voice through extensive and closely edited quotations (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007), and interpretive omnipotence involves presenting a theoretical account of the story (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Sparkes (2002, p. 55) suggests that "the realist conventions connect theory to data in a way that creates spaces for participant voices to be heard in a coherent context, and with specific points in mind". This convention was selected as an appropriate means of representing these data as it centralized the participants' voice, representing their points of view whilst drawing upon theories and concepts to explain the findings.

To compliment the realist tales in this program of research and aligning with critical feminist research, chapter six utilizes the genre of the confessional tale to foreground and present my reflexivity of my experiences conducting feminist research within elite sport. The genre of confessional tale foregrounds the voice of the researcher in a way that exposes the "behind the scenes" methodological concerns and discussions that are so often neglected in realist tales (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.156). The confessional tales adopt a reflexive stance to explicitly elucidate my personal view and sheds light on some of the dilemmas, tensions, and surprises of the research process (Sparkes, 2002). The themes presented within the confessional tale are not 'findings', but rather an exploration of my reflexive challenges and learnings of the time spent conducting feminist research within elite sport contexts.

3.10 Assessing Research Quality and Rigor

It is important to judge the quality of research using appropriate markers. For this reason, readers are encouraged to consider several quality indicators for judging the rigor of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), including the worthiness of the topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. Tracy (2010) suggests that good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or

evocative. This research topic did not only emerge as a response to several calls within the literature to explore women athletes from a socio-cultural perspective (e.g., Norman, 2016; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2015), but it has also grown out of a request from coaches, sport practitioners and sport leaders *within* Team GB wanting to enhance their understanding of the elite women athlete to inform future practice.

In contrast to quantitative research that values precision, high-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundance (Winter, 2000). According to Tracy (2010), a rigorous qualitative study should use sufficient theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s), and data collection and analysis processes. In line with the aims of this thesis, this research utilized an immersive, longitudinal, mixed-methods approach to data collection, with a sample of elite athletes and coaches across five sports. The data were analyzed inductively, deductively, critically, and reflexively, and the interpretations of the findings drew from various social theories and feminist concepts.

Sincerity as a marker of rigor in qualitative research is characterized by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, aims, idiosyncrasies, and how these impacted the methods, pleasures, and challenges of the research (Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) suggests that sincerity can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, and transparency. Aligning with this indicator and as an important component of feminist research, reflexivity was used throughout this research. I kept a reflexive journal (i.e., introspective reflexivity) to situate my own personal identities within the research process and I shared my ongoing reflections with my supervisors (i.e., intersubjective reflexivity) at regular intervals to reflect upon and explore alternative explanations and interpretations. To address the call for more transparency within feminist methods (Clarke & Braun, 2019), I also wrote a confessional tale about my experiences doing feminist research within elite sport.

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings (Tracy, 2010). Credible qualitative research is that which the reader trusts enough to guide their decision making (Tracy, 2010). One way of achieving credibility within qualitative research is through thick description, which is described as in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973) and rich detail (Bochner, 2000). In line with this recommendation, not only did I utilize an immersive, longitudinal, mixed-methods approach to data collection, but throughout this thesis, I have also provided contextual information, situating the participant quotes within their sport environment, and have provided detail about the participants' experiences for the reader to reach their own conclusions.

Resonance refers to the ability of the research to meaningfully resonate with and impact an audience (Tracy, 2010). Although a written report cannot provide direct insight into the lived experiences of others (Schutz, 1967), researchers can engage in practices that will promote resonance. For example, Tracy (2010) suggests that resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit and generalizability/transferability. In line with Tracy's (2010) recommendations, this research has been presented in two ways to ensure the research is comprehensible to the academic reader and the applied sport practitioner. First, it has been written in an academic format to cater to fellow scholars within the field. Second, a resource has been created for the purposes of disseminating the findings and offering practical recommendations to the coaches and practitioners within the EIS system (see appendix H). This document presents the findings of the research in bullet form and avoids academic jargon.

Furthermore, by engaging with participants from across five sports, this research sought to increase generalizability through transferability and naturalistic generalization. By immersing myself into five different elite sport environments, it is hoped that readers feel as

though this research overlaps with their own environment (i.e., transferability) and that they can make choices based on their understanding of the research (i.e., naturalistic generalization). Another way this research gained a sense of generalizability was through a strategy Wadey and Day (2018) referred to as 'external reflections'. Specifically, the identified themes and proposed practical implications were presented on a PowerPoint slideshow in a 45-minute presentation to a selection of 20 EIS Sport Psychology practitioners. The practitioners were invited to reflect on which themes, if any, resonated with their experiences of the sport world, whether they recognized their own sport cultures in the data, and any other ideas they wished to discuss. This group reported that at times, they felt uneasy listening to some of the quotes presented, specifically in relation to comments and behaviors that trivialized the women athletes. They revealed however, that despite it being uncomfortable to admit, in general the findings overlapped with their experiences working in elite sport and suggested that the practical recommendations were helpful suggestions to incite change within their environments. The discussion became particularly heated as one male practitioner, who was a retired coach, reported feeling victimized as a perpetrator of sexism. This conversation taught me a valuable lesson in the important role language plays in the presentation of data. I learned that an accusatory tone will likely deter men coaches, and practitioners, from engaging with my practical recommendations and so I took extra caution with the language I selected as I developed the resource for dissemination purposes.

When judging the significance of a study's contribution, the study's conceptual, practical, moral, methodological, and heuristic contributions should be considered (Tracy, 2010). This research extends our previous knowledge in this area conceptually by examining how existing feminist theories and social concepts make sense within this new context, practically by challenging hegemonic norms and providing recommendations for social

change within elite sport environments, methodologically by using a critical feminist psychology approach to understanding the women athlete, and heuristically by offering readers with suggestions for future research. Ethically this research considers procedural ethics, situational ethics, and relational ethics. Finally, meaningful coherent qualitative research achieves what it sets out to do, uses methods and procedures that fit its stated aims, and meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions, findings, and interpretations with each other. Consistent with critical feminist psychology, this research used a feminist methodology and reflexive thematic analysis to situate the individual experiences of women athletes and their coaches within their sport environments and has offered several practical recommendations to inform policy on how to support elite women athletes more effectively.

Chapter 4

Women in a Man's World: Coaching Women Athletes in Elite Sport

4.0 Overview

This chapter describes the experiences of coaches working with women athletes within their elite sport environments. It explores not only their personal experiences of coaching sportswomen, but also how they are situated within and influenced by our wider culture. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify three themes that described the participants' experiences working with women athletes: (a) *It's Bigger Than Sport*, (b) *Women in a Man's World*, and (c) *Same Same But Different*. The first theme, *It's Bigger Than Sport*, reflects a macro-level analysis of how traditional gendered views and behaviors impact the sport environments. The second theme, *Women in a Man's World*, reflects a meso-level analysis of how deep structures of sport organizations are gendered. The third theme, *Same Same But Different*, reflects a micro-level analysis of the participants' personal experiences working directly with women athletes. While the three levels are presented separately, the analysis here demonstrates their dynamic reciprocity, as each plays a role in actively producing and reproducing the broader power relations between genders within and beyond the sporting environment. Where relevant, potential moments of intervention are foregrounded, in order to construct a more inclusive environment and a more optimal sporting domain for women athletes.

4.1 It's Bigger Than Sport

This section demonstrates how, at the macro-level, the hegemony present within our wider society permeates the institution of sport, where it is continually produced and reproduced. Despite recognizing positive shifts that have been made toward gender equality in recent years, several participants suggested that due to ingrained traditional views around women and gender, parity is yet to be reached. Like the coaches in De Haan and Sotiriadou's (2019) study, it appears that women's sport and competition is not always taken as seriously as that of men. Looking at the experiences of women coaches, Norman (2010) argued a

consequence of sport continuing to be a masculine domain is that women coaches are less attracted to and less likely to remain in sport as they feel "second best". From both, interview respondents (coaches) and observations (women athletes, sport science staff, and coaches) across the sports, this notion of women athletes being "second best" or "second class" was very much present. For example, Elizabeth asks:

> The whole world needs changing in terms of how women are classed and looked at and I think in women's sport, Olympic sport as well, a lot more medals are coming from the women now so why are they always deemed as second class? (Elizabeth, woman)

Elizabeth goes on to argue that this stems from wider society:

> You'd like to think that it changes with generation but it doesn't, and yes it's changing but I don't think it'll ever be 100% there, you might get I don't know, equal pay and things like that but there's still a thing within history that's like as I say the woman should be at home and the guy should be out at work… It is changing, changING, it's not changed… So there's always gonna be that the guy is built up in young children's heads to be the strongest or the fittest or they'll protect me rather than the female, so that's why I don't think it will ever change… it's not just sport it's a whole, it's bigger than sport isn't it? (Elizabeth, woman)

This superiority manifests in multiple ways. For example, Lauren suggested that the motivational videos shown to the athletes at major competitions predominantly focus on "how wonderful the boys are", whereas, regarding the women's section, "if you blink you will miss it". During my time in the field, as another example, staff members and women athletes described how, in two sports, head coaches and performance directors had prioritized attendance at a men's event, at the expense of the women's equivalent.

Despite a nominal equity in terms of potential outcomes, and a significant increase in participation rates for women, these coaches describe a patriarchal culture within sport. They provide clear evidence of a gender order that remains the standard for athletic achievement, a mode of segregation learnt early in life, as alluded to by Elizabeth above, and reproduced over time (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). This gender order, which is the way institutional patterns, performed by individuals, creates power relations between genders (Matthews, 1984), is inextricably tied to the history of sport and society itself (Theberge, 2000) and continues to reproduce a hegemonic form of masculinity, and, as with the coaches in Norman's (2010) study, potentially deters women athletes from enduring with a sporting career. That this form is hegemonic, and therefore spontaneously accepted by many, is demonstrated across this study.

Several women participants across the sports identified that despite consciously positioning men and women athletes on the same level, coaches and staff members subconsciously act in accordance with the male hierarchy. For example, Susan (woman) suggested that whilst she had witnessed several coaches make an active effort to work with men athletes ahead of women athletes, she believes that the coaches are unaware of their efforts to prioritize the men, "sometimes they [women athletes] are left a little bit as they [coaches] seem to target the lads more than the females… Unbeknownst to the coaches but I've been there and witnessed it" (Susan, woman). Furthermore, Lauren (woman) suggested that one of their specialist coaches prioritizes men athletes during training: "there is a tendency to put the boys first, like the boys get the best times, the boys always go first and the girls are sorta like 'well we don't get a choice'". However, when describing her confrontation with him she said, "he wasn't aware of that because nobody had made him aware of that" (Lauren). While many of the men participants did not suggest subconscious gendered behaviors were present, observational data suggests that these coaches were in fact

some of the people being referred to when the women participants suggested others unwittingly act in accordance with the male hierarchy. For example, fieldnotes describe how one participant, a man himself, suggested no male hierarchy existed, but appeared to exhibit mutual respect and act on a level playing field with his men athletes, whilst seemingly demonstrating clear boundaries with his women athletes:

> There is far more jokey interaction between [the coach] and the two male athletes as opposed to between [the coach] and the females, who just listened to his comments and nodded along. [fieldnotes, February 2018]

This is consistent with De Haan and Knoppers' (2019) study, which demonstrated how despite consciously professing to treating men and women athletes the same, the coaches drew on several subconscious gendered biases to guide their coaching practices such as framing women athletes as the 'other' and making men athletes the norm. The potentially subconscious bias of these behaviors is suggestive of what Gramsci (1971) describes as 'common sense': the received wisdom passed down and sedimented from generation to generation, amplified and accentuated by those with the power to do so and actively and passively reproduced by those who accept and work with it. As this this 'common sense' contains fundamental ideas about what men and women are, it therefore amounts to what behavior is deemed appropriate.

Despite the enduring power inherent within it, common sense is always contested and contestable, leaving (or producing) space for the development of critique and alternative understandings, such as those provided by Lauren, Susan, and Elizabeth above and the longer history of feminist and critical thought. For Connell (1987), gender relations within the gender order and hegemonic practices are regarded as in process and thereby allows for the possibility of social change. Indeed, the data and examples provided demonstrate a contested common sense, with alternative articulations opening the space for change in the

sport setting. Using this theoretical lens, the fact that the coaches are unaware of their efforts to prioritize the men presents a moment of intervention, an opportunity for sports to shift the gender order by encouraging coaches and staff to engage reflexively to consider how their gender biases are influencing their work with women athletes. The potential role of the coach in subverting common sense understandings of gender relations is thus foregrounded, but it is also problematized. As De Haan and Sotiriadou (2019) demonstrate in their study on rowing, elite men coaches' personal sociocultural experiences shape their beliefs around gender norms. Thinking in these terms, the question therefore becomes how to overcome traditional common sense understandings, which coaches may either actively or passively reproduce.

One channel through which this 'common sense' is often said to flow is the media, with studies highlighting the qualitative and quantitative differences in mediation that have historically contributed to the marking out of the gender order (Fink, 2015; Hardin & Hardin, 2005). However, respondents within this study demonstrate the contested nature of common sense and its mediation. Participants from two sports suggested that recent shifts in media attention toward the exploitation of women in the workforce and women athletes reflects attitude changes in sport. For example, the heightened focus on publicizing harassment claims has made some coaches, particularly the men, more conscious of their own behavior, making them acutely aware of how they interact with their women athletes. Harry shared his internal conflict:

> But nowadays because of the sensitivity of female athletes in general, if they start saying that 'I'm tired, I'm this and that' you probably, you, you pull back where back in the day with the 2012 we'd say "just get on with it, you wanna win a medal or not?" … not that you bullied anybody back in the day you just said "look do you wanna win a medal or not?" "yes" boom they go and do it but now it's, you're, in

> my opinion you're trying to train them as a, but you're a bit limited sometimes… but you've still got to be very aware of the individuals you're dealing with, you can't be dealing with people like you did years ago, shouting in their ear with a shitty stick, you can't be doing that, you won't get the best out of them. But the media certainly like, um what's gone on in the outside world in sport and also in the workplace I think it affects what you do in here with the females. (Harry, man)

Like Harry, several of the men participants revealed that they feel there are now unspoken parameters around what they can or cannot say to women athletes following media portrayals of women athletes' experiences in sport. They explained that they feel a lingering pressure to alter their interactions with women athletes for fear of being branded a bully. This was in direct contrast to the women coaches, several of whom recognized an ease with which they were able to challenge their women athletes. As one coach shared:

> We could say the same thing like we said before and it can come out completely different… maybe things I say, because I'm a female, if a man said it, they could take it in the complete wrong context as well (Susan, woman).

Stirling and Kerr (2014) propose an ecological transactional model of vulnerability, within which they suggest media messages condoning abusive coaching practices helps to rationalize athlete maltreatment. Perhaps it is no surprise then, that media messages condemning such behavior is having a different impact on coaching practices. An emerging line of research within sport psychology suggests that thriving in elite sport is characterized by simultaneous dimensions of well-being and the perception of sustained high-level performance, suggesting both should be considered for an athlete to be fully functioning in a sport context (Brown et al., 2018). In the above quotation the participant alludes to the fact that he believes it is counterproductive to the success of his women athletes as he feels restricted to push them to optimize their potential. This presents a paradox for coaches as

society remains a place of the traditional gender order, yet the narrative within the media promotes a disruption to the hegemony. Whilst it is vital that well-being remains a priority, for women athletes to thrive in their sport environments it is also important for men coaches to feel confident and supported in their decisions to help the women realize their sporting goals. This presents a potential opportunity for sports to intervene, by providing support to coaches and staff members as they navigate their way through supporting their women athletes.

Overall, at a macro-level, the analysis shows that wider socio-cultural beliefs that promote men superiority impacts what becomes the norm in elite sport, a point well understood by many of the coaches. Whether consciously or not, sport environments continue to act in accordance with the male hierarchy by treating men and women athletes differently and using men athletes as the gold standard, which in many ways disadvantages elite women athletes' opportunities to thrive. There is a complex relationship between gender norms, social collectivities, and the individual, as hegemonic masculinity is both "a personal and collective project" (Donaldson, 1993, p645), a point well represented by the concept of common sense. While the firmly entrenched common sense of the gender order and hegemonic masculinities appear to function at a more collective (i.e., macro) level they are legitimized and reproduced through social institutions, organizations, and infrastructure (i.e., meso-level), and by individuals within these environments (i.e., micro-level). The following two sections will look to these two latter levels, with the conceptual apparatus allowing us to demonstrate plausible interventions for change, targeting individuals and their relations to shift their values and provoke reflection on behavior (Jewkes et al., 2015).

4.2 Women in a Man's World

This section demonstrates how the broader, gendered norms outlined above are mobilized with repetition in the institutional basis and organization of sport. It shows that

coaches work within a domain that actively reproduces common sense gender relations, in what might be regarded as the meso-level, where individuals and structures interact based on cultural and material norms. The second class, subordinated status that women athletes are made to represent are continually re-created in the material and infrastructural basis of sport. Examples of this include practical aspects such as access to facilities, with Susan (woman) describing how the local club gyms "only got one toilet" and "only got one changing room", both of which were created for men. William (man) suggested that the quality of equipment given to the men athletes far exceeds that which is given to women athletes. Feeding back into the broader consensus of male athletic superiority, William (man) suggested that men athletes are treated like "royalty", a point he illustrates by explaining that the prime parking spaces are reserved for men's team captains only, while the women's team captains received no such treatment. These examples demonstrate the way in which material and cultural dimensions interweave over time and serve to reproduce dominance of one group over another. 'Common sense' ideas of gender relations are generative, embedded in institutional practice and quotidian uses of physical space, which then further delimit or constrain the possibilities for cultural change.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this structuring felt more deeply than in resource distribution more generally within sport, which, skewed toward men athletes, has a direct impact on an effective system and the ability of women athletes to train and perform at the top level (Sotiriadou and De Bosscher, 2013). As with the rowing coaches in De Haan and Sotiriadou's (2019) study, several coaches in this study acknowledged the financial discrepancies in supporting women athletes and this rang true across all five sports. For example, William (man) shared, "we actually travelled with the men and they went in business class and we went economy". The coaches here, however, more prominently discussed inequalities in financial investment linked to tensions around development pathways. Several participants,

specifically from two sports where the elite women's program is relatively new, discussed the impact on the women of the absence of gradual exposure to the elite level. The participants suggested that given the general lack of investment, the women's pathway to the elite level is far shorter than their men counterparts. This results in less experience and international exposure prior to arriving on to an elite program; a program in which they are immediately held accountable for training and performing at the top level. For example, one participant shared:

> We're the closest I've ever come across to a group of people working in development and performance at the same time. In the men's world you'd obviously allow them to make mistakes and grow, get it wrong, get it right, but so you're trying to do that with this lot [the women] but you're live on TV and that's really hard (Edward, man).

Another participant suggested, "you can't take away the years invested in it etcetera, there has to be a level of patience and understanding as well as you know helping them cope with the extra scrutiny" (William, man). The above quotations suggest that although women's representation in elite sport is progressing, the longstanding financial discrepancies appear to have a profound impact on elite women athletes as they are expected to navigate their way through elite sport despite receiving fewer opportunities to develop prior to performing on the world stage. Indeed, in one sport I witnessed a handful of women athletes who, fast-tracked through the system, decided to leave the world-class program for reasons associated with not feeling comfortable meeting the demands of the elite program.

As the participants have proposed, perhaps some sport organizations are not addressing the inevitable imbalances caused by unequal opportunities in the development stages. It could be argued that in their attempts to achieve gender equality, by striving toward equalizing the numbers of women and men athletes at the elite level, some sport organizations are overlooking the idea of gender equity. This is an important distinction:

while gender equality refers to men and women having equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities, gender equity refers to fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019). While other literature explores the gradual athlete transition from junior to senior level (Hollings et al., 2014), this study demonstrates the qualitative difference in experience between men and women athletes, as embodied within institutional and organizational arrangements. With less time available for development due to the shortcutting to the elite level, and potentially a smaller pool of athletes due to higher rates of dropout, it can also be argued that women's sport becomes 'naturalized' into a different spectacle, one distinct from the relatively resource-heavy 'pinnacle' that is men's sport (Adams et al., 2014). In certain sports, then, the common sense imaginary or spectacle of what women's sport is, in direct reference to what it is not, is maintained by this developmental shortcut, which then serves to reproduce the gender order in sport. For example, within the interviews, where certain coaches appeared to question the capacity (e.g., "robustness") of women athletes to train and perform in the same way as men athletes, under scrutiny those coaches would refer back to just such developmental opportunities. This marks a clear space to intervene, recognizing the developmental shortcut faced by women and providing support accordingly should be prioritized by coaches and sport institutions.

Fewer opportunities such as these, along with the male hierarchies they maintain, inevitably lead to different forms of women absence in sport: not just in terms of numbers, but also numbers in positions of power or leadership. The women participants acknowledged the prominence of men in leadership positions within their sport organizations and suggested a direct impact on women athletes, for example:

> Just knowing this organization as I do, my high-performance coach is quite a strong character and I'm probably one of the few women that he listens to so if you're

> talking about our organization they [the women athletes] would struggle to get their voice heard because even if they tell those women [women staff members], those women don't have a voice, it's the way it is (Lauren, woman)

A gendered hierarchy therefore seems to marginalize the voices, and collective voice, of women athletes. Despite recognizing an increase in women staff working in elite sport, the women coaches maintained that women athlete voices are rarely heard by people in positions of power. Instead, as the coaches suggested and I witnessed, the women athletes communicate more with women staff members, who themselves experience a barrier to access the top of the organizational hierarchy. Although there are now more women athletes present in elite sport than ever before, other studies also report an ongoing absence of women in decision-making positions, including management, coaching, and officiating roles (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016), which seems to correlate with women memberships in national governing bodies, suggesting there may be an impact on the number of women athletes retained in elite sport organizations (Gaston et al., 2020). Fundamental to hegemony is cultural leadership, the capacity to win 'active consent' (Hall, 1982), but without these voices in those positions, any challenge to the traditional gender order is forestalled. With more women in leadership positions, there is more opportunity to subvert and disrupt this gender order, through the (re)organization of common sense and the development of channels of communication for voices that are already there but not being heard. Therefore, as a moment of intervention, perhaps introducing more women leaders or direct channels of communication from women athletes to the leaders, are ways that policy makers can shift the power dynamics within elite sport organizations and develop a more robust platform for women athletes' voices to be heard.

With the opportunity this would offer for greater cultural leadership at the organizational level, it might also be possible to engage with other, more invisible, processes

of gendering (Acker, 1990). For example, women coaches' accounts from across three sports revealed ways banter is used to trivialize women in sport. One coach shared her experiences of trying to voice concerns about being a "woman in a man's world" (Elizabeth); she explained that when using a serious tone of voice to raise a gender-based issue, her men colleagues often joke about her time of the month, diminishing both her authority and the authority of her utterance. On the other hand, several men participants alleged that banter is light-hearted and that it should not be taken personally or seriously. For example:

> What we consider to be banter is just banter it shouldn't be horrible, malicious, I mean but then we get it back, I don't go moaning to [the performance director] if someone's called me a bald-headed old git, which I do get called and I get swore at and I don't go running to [the performance director], I don't go to [the governing body] and say "oh he was horrible to me" or "she swore at me" cos it's just the environment that you're in. (Harry, man)

On several occasions during my observational period, I witnessed jokes being made at the expense of women and women's sport. For example, upon meeting a man participant for the first time, I was greeted with "I thought you'd be wearing more biblical clothes, someone told me you were coming to help out with the chicks so I've been waiting for my savior" whilst another participant, also a man, said "she's a woman, there's something wrong with all of ya". Within society, banter is an increasingly used form of interaction, which it has been argued, can be used as way to pass off sexist ideas as a joke without any implications (Nichols, 2018). As Nichols (2018) argues, when derogatory remarks are passed off as 'just banter' it signals the normalization of sexist behaviors. In this way, exaggerated signifiers of a particular gender order are operationalized to destabilize emergent ideas of what it means to be a woman, while stabilizing and reproducing the dominant order. Indeed, research into football environments have conceptualized banter as a traditionally masculine

discourse, functioned to sustain masculine identities (McDowell & Schaffner, 2011). While the men participants proposed that banter in their sporting environments is, as Lawless and Magrath (2020) describe, 'inclusionary' or, that which is harmless and brings people together, the women participants suggested that banter was 'exclusionary' or, used to marginalize women's voices. This presents an opportunity to intervene as coaches and those in positions of power within sport may wish to assess and reassess their boundaries for what type of language is deemed accepted within their environments.

The data described here demonstrate various mechanisms – at the meso- or organizational level – by which the traditional gender order is reproduced. Through unequal funding more generally, but through the impact of asymmetrical development pathways specifically. With the traditional common sense of men superiority having already caused development pathways far shorter than in men's sport, this returns full circle to recreate a common sense that sees women's sport as in some way diminished as a spectacle. Over time, cultural logics feed into material provision which then serve to reproduce those same cultural logics. A lack of leadership roles and communication channels to leaders, in the very organization of sport, highlights another way in which traditional common sense resists destabilization. However, in this analysis each of these offers up a moment of intervention and a space of potential resistance for women coaches and their allies, whereby the traditional common sense – as accentuated most crudely in banter – can be destabilized and a more inclusive common sense can be articulated, amplified**,** and practiced upon. In the next section, we look more specifically at the coaches' practice and experiences of working with women athletes.

4.3 Same Same but Different

Having looked at the role of broader conceptions of gender and how they pervade the organizational basis of the sporting environment, it is useful to look at how these

influence the practice of the coaches themselves when working with women athletes. As analysis at the micro-level, this provides insights into how coaches relate to, and have learnt to relate to, men and women athletes. Once again, the theoretical insights provided by theories of cultural hegemony are useful here as hegemony can be understood as a form of power functioning at a 'lived' level, exemplified by the notion of our engaging with the world, including in our understandings of gender, through common sense.

Similar to previous work in soccer (Navarre, 2011) and rowing (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019), the men coaches in this study initially revealed a discourse of absence when talking about gender. While the women coaches almost immediately vocalized differences between their men and women athletes, the men coaches, on the other hand appeared hesitant to reveal differences between their men and women athletes, framing their approach to coaching as "gender neutral". Such a position is perhaps due to the contested and political basis of gender claims-making; as De Haan and Knoppers (2019) suggest, this is perhaps a default 'politically correct' position of 'everyone is equal'. For example, at the early stages of the interviews, the men coaches maintained that they treat all their athletes the same, with statements such as: "I treat everybody the same, I don't treat anybody different" (Joshua, man) and "they're athletes to me, I just train athletes" (Harry, man). De Haan and Knoppers (2019) also argue that self-proclaimed gender neutrality, such as this, is futile if not put into practice. Indeed, whenever a power imbalance is at play, this 'veil of neutrality' becomes an instrument of power. As Mouffe (1994) argues, it posits or substitutes the particular (i.e., partial or specific) as or with the universal (i.e., impartial or general). Steeped in the common sense of hegemonic masculinity – as sport is – this apparently centered position is far more likely to reward the behaviors and practices of the dominant culture. Despite this veil of neutrality, the men coaches subsequently differentiated between

men and women athletes: take, for example, Joshua's opinion about women that "they're just a different animal" and Adam's belief that:

> I'm a guy and you know the hormone that predominantly goes through my body is testosterone as it is with the other guys and you know, we are different, we're meant to be different, we've been different since the creation of humans (Adam, man).

Leaning heavily on common narratives of evolutionary history (McCaughey, 2012), what Messner (2011) regards as the 'hallmark' of 'soft-essentialism', the coaches position women athletes as different from ideological heterosexual masculinity, which during my observation period appeared overtly celebrated across sports.

Specifically, the participants from across all five sports reported two interrelated differences in the way women athletes behave that are contrary to this norm. First, the participants alleged that while the men "just get on with it", women athletes display their emotions and allow them to impact the quality of their training. For example, one participant suggested that unlike men athletes who "can have hassle going on outside in their lives but the minute they get in the [training environment] they just forget about things" (Harry, man), women athletes will "expect you to stand there and have that conversation, which aint such a bad thing but when you've got the whole team to train, I aint, you know coaches haven't got time" (Harry, man). Harry implies that coaching women requires additional time; time that he suggests they do not have. Aside from recent arguments about the need for a more holistic psychological and emotional approach to all athletes' health and wellbeing (Lee Sinden, 2012), if it is true that women athletes (universally) require more time, then this would indicate a sporting environment, once again, representative of dominance by men. Emotional labor and the management of emotions, however, are often reported as features of the gender order: where 'being a man' has been associated historically with the hiding or neglect of emotion and femininity has been historically articulated with excessive emotion,

delimiting lifestyle, career and behavioral 'choices' for all (Ellis, 2015; Giazitzoglu, 2019; Nixon, 2009).

Other coaches also tended to use a gender hierarchy describing the ability to "just get on with it" as a desirable characteristic. For example, one participant said, "I'll be honest, they [women athletes] can be harder to work with" (Joshua, man). Another participant shared, "I do value that as a set of characteristics you know I like working with people that are just gonna crack on" (Adam, man) and continued by suggesting that women are less coachable:

> From a training perspective, if you considered a robot to be the easiest thing to train so you know, give it an instruction, it will follow the instruction, it will do it the first time you ask it to do it without emotion and then as a coach I can look and go 'that worked, that didn't work, try something else' and keep going until it's as good as it can be … there is a scale of how effective people are of doing that and you know some people are way closer to that robot for whatever reason and again, I'd say, my experience in the sport of [sport name] the guys tend to be a bit less thoughtful about what they're doing in that respect and so [pause] are a bit more coachable in the sense that they're not probably experiencing quite as many emotions [when performing] and again there are exceptions in both directions but to generalize I would say it. (Adam, man)

The coaches remark upon their preference for working with athletes that do not display their emotions. Similar to Adam's comparison to robots, another participant stated that the men athletes resemble "soldiers". In a sense, the robot and soldier comparisons can be seen as a stand-in for the veil of neutrality outlined above: an emotionless, instructible, acquiescent body, seemingly impartial and disinterested, but mirroring the ideals of a certain hegemonic masculinity (c.f. Van Gilder, 2019). Less emotion equates to fewer training complications

in an environment organized and institutionalized around this ideal, which is easier, and apparently more convenient, to work with as a coach. In this way, the participants reproduce a dichotomy that distinguishes women athlete behavior from that of men athletes (LaVoi, 2007), with the latter positioned as the unemotional and hegemonic ideal. The women athletes are routinely (re)constructed as 'other' (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019) in a way that positions them as disruptive and deviant from the ideal (man) elite athlete.

The coaches generally engaged with this differentiation between women and men athletes and suggested that to be most effective, they had to adapt their coaching to accommodate for such differences. Specifically, coaches from all sports reported using a "softer" approach when working with women athletes, which was described by one coach as being, "a bit more understanding, a bit more caring, a bit more tuned in." (Joshua, man). Several coaches highlighted the importance of using softer skills, as one explained:

> I shouldn't say that as head coach, but one man and his dog could come in and do something technical but to actually learn and understand how that person's feeling, how they're getting on in life and stuff, which makes them a better person and a better [athlete] at the end of the day, is massive. (Elizabeth, woman)

The above quotation demonstrates the value the coaches place on using softer skills when working with their women athletes. In some cases, the coaches proposed a 'softer' approach was used to enhance their working relationships with the women. In these cases, it appeared that the coaches used emotional intelligence, characterized as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions (Mayer et al., 2000) to strengthen their coaching practices. Other coaches, however, suggested that a 'softer' approach was used as "damage limitation" (Joshua, man) to avoid causing emotional responses. It could be argued therefore, that in some cases the participants are shifting their coaching practices to prioritize acting in accordance with what they feel most comfortable with, that is, hegemonic masculine norms

of concealing emotions, rather than what is necessarily best for women athletes. Other studies have shown how men coaches use erroneous perceptions of women athletes' expectations to adapt their coaching practices. For example, when the men coaches in Felton and Jowett's (2013) study worked with men athletes they advocated a 'winning at all costs' attitude, whereas when working with their women athletes they tended toward a 'try your best' mentality. In suggesting they use a softer approach, there appears to be a fine line between what some participants imply is emotional intelligence and others refer to as "damage limitation". Whilst emotional intelligence is indeed linked to effective high-performance coaching (Chan & Mallett, 2011), it is important that coaches do not shy away from having difficult performance conversations, as avoiding emotional encounters can have major consequences for health, well-being and elite performance.

The second alleged difference was that women athletes request more information from their coaches. For example, one coach participant suggested, "women want to know the ins and outs of everything, why? When? What's the purpose of that? Why do I have to do that? Why am I not having that?" (Susan, woman). Again, this narrative is contrary to common sense forms of masculinity (i.e., ideological heterosexual) within the environment, in which the men "just get on with it" without asking questions. It was perceived that women athletes engaged more in information seeking behaviors, asking about dates, schedules, plans, the value of certain aspects of training sessions. Several coaches shared that some perceive being asked questions as a threat to their authority, suggesting that they preferred "the old autocratic type of 'you all do this because I said this'" (Harry, man). Others, however, regarded information seeking and reciprocal conversation not as undesirable, but as valuable:

> There's nothing coming back from a guy that's why, so it's more enjoyable to have the conversation than it is, and to get true understanding than for somebody to just

> go “right I’m just gonna do this, coach has told me this” and we’re gonna have no discussion or there’s no feedback so at least with the coaching women you get feedback… or else it would be boring as hell if you just told, told, told… You know what? It probably is easier, or definitely easier I think um there’s not so much drama but that’s not a challenge is it? (Elizabeth, woman).

Here, it seems, value for the coaches that Harry refers to, is placed on the traditional model, based on knowledge transmission (rather than knowledge construction) and the expectation of unidirectional power (“just getting on with it”) and hierarchy, all of which engender more traditional common sense notions of gender. For Elizabeth, value lies elsewhere. The threat to authority that Harry refers to can be seen as contestation of hegemony, as two different articulations of common sense – ways of being, understood here at the most lived level, the level of identity and security in one’s concept of self – are competing for stability. The theory of hegemony is useful here as it allows us to understand the power dynamic of this relationship. It could be argued, for example, that the historically entrenched gender order, described in previous sections, is the most secure, with a common sense articulation that gives what we call the ‘weight of the status quo’ to a manner of coaching that is saturated with hegemonic masculinity. Taking seriously Deci and Ryan’s (2012) argument that individuals will experience high quality motivation when three psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – are satisfied, it could be argued that this socio-cultural, institutionalized setup of the sporting environment causes a reluctance to seek information, thereby reducing autonomy (the drive for ownership over one’s own behavior) and all athletes’ potential for optimal performance.

Despite the testimony regarding women’s apparent information seeking behavior, coaches from two separate sports acknowledged that men also ask a lot of questions and suggested instead that it reflected their younger age, opposed to their gender. As Singh and

Dangmei (2016) note, younger generations now prefer independence and transparency, where they expect to be informed and have direct communication with their seniors: a clear shift in ideas around knowledge transfer and the direction of power within relationships. This highlights how broader patterns of cultural change infiltrate, and are reproduced within, the sporting environment and also destabilizes the common sense argument that it is a woman trait to seek information, as well as to have 'emotional intelligence', and a man trait to 'just get on with it'.

The coaches interviewed for this study can be understood as on the frontline of the interaction between different systems of thought, navigating their way in practice through entrenched and emergent ideas of the gender order. In practice, at a general level, the coaches differentiated between women and men athletes but claimed that they tended toward a position that *individualizes* the athletes. Elizabeth, for example, said, "I think you still have to look at the individual, which is more important than anything". Furthermore, the coaches frequently acknowledged a danger in generalizing, offering examples of women athletes that are exceptions to their own gendered generalizations, such as Adam, who pre-empts his discussion with "there are exceptions in both directions but…". Therefore, the participants suggested that generalizations about women athletes should be used cautiously when guiding coaching practices. In this way, in practice and at the micro-level, the coaches actually challenge the broader gender binary, wherein women and men athletes are expected to act in accordance with traditional hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity. While the power of these views appears to prevail at the organizational level in sport, there are clear signs of acknowledgement of alternative and increasingly embedded articulations of gender, hopefully signifying an environment where further progress can be made.

The micro-, or experiential, level indicates contradictory aspects of experience as the coaches display dichotomizing attitudes towards men and women athletes, recognize alleged

traits of each and identify particular coaching practices that are gender-dependent, but also acknowledge the limitations and flaws in these behaviors. This is not at odds with the notion of common sense, which is always a sedimented and fragmented collection of elements and helps to explain how our lives are often a fragmented jumble of positions, stances and identities. With more women in positions of leadership, as described in the previous section, perhaps this contradictory set of elements can be better organized toward a 'good sense' that challenges older, less inclusive logics.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have described the coaches' perceptions of their experiences working with women athletes in elite sport environments. Three themes were discussed. The first theme, *It's Bigger Than Sport*, used a macro-level analysis to explore how traditional gendered views and societal gendered behaviors impact sport environments. The findings showed how women athletes are viewed and treated as "second-class" within elite sport environments. The coaches gave examples of how men athletes are deemed the ideal athlete and are continued to be treated as "royalty" compared to their women counterparts. The participants suggested that in many cases, people are unaware of their own gendered biases and actions that favor men athletes. They provided examples of how despite consciously positioning men and women athletes on the same level, coaches and staff members subconsciously act in accordance with the male hierarchy. The participants were also acutely aware of recent shifts in media attention toward the maltreatment of women athletes as they described feeling conscious of their own interactions with women athletes for fear of publicly being branded a bully. Overall, this theme demonstrated how wider socio-cultural beliefs that promote male superiority impacts what has become the norm in elite sport environments.

The second theme, *Women in a Man's World*, used a meso-level analysis to understand how deep structures of sport organizations are gendered. This theme highlighted financial discrepancies in supporting women athletes across the sports. For example, the participants gave examples of how certain training facilities only have one toilet and one changing room, which were created for men. The participants also linked inequalities in financial investments to the development pathway in women's sport. Specifically, the participants suggested that due to the lack of investment into women's sport, women athletes are sometimes fast-tracked through the sport system and are expected to navigate the challenges of development and elite sport simultaneously. The women coaches noted that there is an ongoing absence of women in leadership positions in sport and suggested that it directly impacts women athletes' ability to have their voices heard by people in positions of power. Finally, the participants revealed that the gendering of sport environments are also the consequence of invisible processes, such as through banter. Specifically, the women coaches provided examples of how banter is used to trivialize women within the sport environments that are dominated by men. Overall, the meso-level analysis demonstrated how the gendered norms that align to the hegemony are produced and reproduced through the institutional basis and organization of sport.

The third theme, *Same Same But Different*, used a micro-level analysis to explore the participants' personal experiences working directly with women athletes. The participants suggested that opposed to men athletes who "just get on with it", women athletes display their emotions and request information from their coaches. The participants revealed a preference toward working with people who behave in accordance with hegemonic masculinity as it requires less time and is easier to navigate as a coach. In many cases, therefore, women athletes were framed as deviants from the ideal norm. The participants revealed that there are subtle differences in their coaching practices toward men and women

athletes and suggested that to be most effective working with women athletes, they use softer skills. The participants were cautious about using generalizations about women athletes to guide their coaching practices, as they insisted, that above all, the most effective coaching practice was to take an individualized approach. Overall, at a micro-level the participants position women athletes as different from ideological heterosexual masculinity, suggesting that they are deviants from the ideal masculine norm.

Chapter 5

"They're Telling Me I'm Just Being a Girl and That I Need To Just Man Up":

Sportswomen's Experiences in Elite Sport

5.0 Overview

This chapter describes the experiences of women athletes within their elite sport environments. It explores not only their personal experiences, but also how they are situated within and influenced by our wider culture. A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on the data, which resulted in three themes that described the participants' experiences as sportswomen within the world of elite sport: (a) *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* (b) *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* and (c) *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"*. The first theme, *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* reflects a macro-level analysis of how traditional gendered views and behaviors impact the world of elite sport. The second theme, *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* reflects a meso-level analysis of how social norms shape the gendered interactions within elite sport environments. The final theme, *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting",* reflects a micro-level analysis of the participants personal experiences navigating the competing demands of being women in Western society and athletes within the world of elite sport. Given the complexities surrounding gender and the heterogeneity of women's experiences, these three themes celebrate the shifting of viewpoints and contradictory opinions within and between individuals and highlights the nuances associated with gender.

5.1 A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change"

At the macro-level, this theme explores how traditional gendered norms and socially accepted practices manifest to infiltrate the world of elite sport. In what follows, this theme will explore the various ways the participants suggest that their sport environments are suggestive of a gender order that is inextricably linked to the history of sport and society

itself (Theberge, 2000). In some ways, the athletes present examples of resistance to what Gramsci (1971) describes as 'common sense'. However, despite a slight shift in attitudes, the athletes describe a patriarchal culture within sport that continues to reproduce a hegemonic form of masculinity. Specifically, the participants shared six ways that their sport environments (re)produce the gender order and reflect the status of wider sociocultural attitudes with respect to gender: (a) views around the inferiority of women, (b) the preferential treatment toward men, (c) the quantity of media coverage, (d) the stigma attached to women's health (e) the financial gendered discrepancies and, (f) the denial of gender inequalities.

5.1.1 Views Around the Inferiority of Women. Similar to what Messner (1988) concluded over 30 years ago, the participants reported that while there have been noticeable shifts toward gender equality and evidence of resistance to the hegemony, the public's perception of women's sport and the gendered practices within their sport environments continues to align to the traditional gender order. The athletes acknowledged that, suggestive of a contested 'common sense', women's sport has gained positive momentum in recent years. They noted, however, that wider society and many people within their sports still show a "greater respect for the men [men's sport]" (Chloe), which is evidence of an enduring patriarchal culture. While the participants noted that there has been a perceptible shift in attitude amid the younger coaches specifically, they suggested traditional gender hierarchical views remained particularly evident amongst middle-aged men coaches:

> I think the old school coaches, male coaches have all got a little bit of that 'women's [sport]'s shit, the men are better' I think that's just ingrained in them, I think that's not gonna go, but maybe the newer coaches, the younger ones I definitely think it's getting better. (Rebecca)

During my observational period, several coaches, staff, and athletes across sports used the phrase “second-class citizens” when describing how women athletes are viewed relative to their men counterparts. At present, 90% of elite level British coaches are men (UK Sport, 2020), the majority of whom are middle-aged. Therefore, despite a nominal shift in the perception of women’s sport, these athletes describe an environment, populated with middle-aged men, that is reflective of the traditional gender order – a place that continues to reproduce a patriarchal culture and a hegemonic form of masculinity.

5.1.2 Preferential Treatment Toward Men. The participants suggested that sociocultural norms surrounding the superiority of men’s sport go beyond attitudes as they manifest into overt actions and behaviors that align to the male hierarchy. For example, despite recognizing a noticeable increase in the public’s appreciation of, and appetite to watch, women’s sport, the participants suggested that men’s sport is still treated as preferential. Participants across a range of sports suggested that the scheduling of events at competitions reflects the hierarchy, as one participant explained, “…the men’s [event] is always the final [event] and is always built up as the flagship event it’s like ‘okay here’s the finale, here’s what we’ve actually been waiting for’” (Chloe). Moreover, during my observational period, women staff members and athletes in two separate sports, brought to my attention that the Performance Director and head coach were prioritizing their attendance at men’s events at the expense of their attendance at the women’s equivalent. That program leaders prioritize their attendance at men’s events is a trivializing act that signals women athletes’ secondary status, a position that the women are clearly aware of. Event scheduling is also used to reinforce the male hierarchy as women’s sport is overshadowed by the structural and cultural realities that women’s sport is considered less than men’s (Cooky, 2018).

5.1.3 The Quantity of Media Coverage. Women's sport media coverage, a channel through which this 'common sense' is said to flow, was posed as a representative example of the progress that has been made over the years with respect to the gender hierarchy. The athletes proposed a contested common sense, as they described a visible increase in coverage of women's sport. The participants suggested that sport media has more frequently been championing women's sport, which they believed has had a noticeable impact on their experiences as elite sportswomen as "more people know about it" (Emma) as well as positively contributing to the uptake of sport at a grass roots level as young girls can now aspire to have a career in sport. However, the participants expressed a frustration at the sustained disproportionate number of media articles focused on men's sport, which they suggested, also occurred internally within their sport organizations, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

> Even the media woman with British [sport], the woman who's in charge of social media … She would never talk to me … but so she's really, well she's trying to get, recently she's become quite close with the boys in [training location], so that kind of thing's different like the boys get a lot more attention from the media, than the girls do. (Victoria)

The above quotation highlights another example of a gender order that continues to reproduce a hegemonic form of masculinity, that renders women athletes as less worthy of media attention. While elite level women athletes are participating in sport in record numbers, the amount of media coverage and marketing of women's sport does not appear to match this progress (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). In July 2019, it was reported that despite women making up 40% of all participants in sports, they only received 4% of sports media coverage (Mackenzie, 2019). Indeed, it has been argued that sport media coverage not only reflects the superiority of men's sport, but it also acts to reinforce the traditional

gender order. Without airtime, sportswomen lose out on sponsors, supporters, and financial investments (MacKenzie, 2019).

5.1.4 The Stigma Attached to Women's Health. Reflecting that of our wider society, the participants suggested that within their sport environments there remains a stigma attached to topics related to women's health such as, the menstrual cycle. A few years ago, menstruation was coined 'the last taboo in sport' (Dykzuel, 2016), and according to the participants the lack of communication around women's health remains limited in their sport environments. The participants revealed that their men coaches actively avoid talking about any women-related issues. For example, one participant explained, "some of them leave the room and get the [woman] physio to do it" (Charlotte). Moreover, during my observational period, one man coach openly admitted, "whenever there is a problem with the girls, we just send [the woman strength coach] to sort it out". Other participants noted how men coaches use avoidant language to reference any women-related issues, such as "downstairs" and "it" (Amelia). The use of avoidant language, whether intentional or not, is one way to perpetuate the concealment of women's menstrual health, acts to reinforce male superiority and to reproduce the gender order. It has been argued that the desire to control and hide women's menstruation from others is a powerful force that functions to reinforce a woman's biological inferiority (Dykzuel, 2016; MacDonald, 2007). Young (2005) suggests that a menstruating body is not a masculine one, and therefore, by association is not a sporting one. Research has shown that women athletes will therefore do what they can to conceal their menstrual cycle to maintain their chances of equal positioning on the sportsground (MacDonald, 2007). Indeed, this is consistent with the women athletes within this study, who suggested that although they would appreciate being able to talk to their men coaches about their menstrual cycles, they were acutely aware that doing so would put the men "in a situation that they [men coaches] didn't like and that they [men coaches] found awkward" (Chloe). Previous

research has demonstrated that in comparison to women coaches, men coaches are less comfortable communicating with women athletes about menstrual irregularity (Kroshus et al., 2014). Coaches sidestepping conversations with their athletes poses serious health risks and impedes potential competitive advantages as coaches are in a strong position to support their athletes' development if they know them well and have open communication (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Moreover, it has been argued that breaking the communication taboo of menstruation could have transformative potential for women to take pride in their bodies and their capabilities (Kissling, 1999).

Whilst the participants recognized a recent cultural shift in terms of more targeted campaigns focused on women's health, the participants revealed that these topics continue to be viewed and framed negatively within society and their sport environments. Negative associations with the menstrual cycle are consistent with my observations, as I heard comments from coaches such as, "why is she crying? She had her period last week". While some participants suggested their menstrual cycle has little to no impact on them, others acknowledged various physical and mental effects on their performance, which they felt a pressure to keep to themselves:

> It's like a big thing for me, for me personally it affects my weight, which obviously is a hot topic here, so I feel like I'm gonna get judged for my weight because I'm on my period and I'm heavier. You feel like it's something that you can't really use as an excuse, you can't not train because you're on your period like you just have to get on with it, I don't know, you just feel like it's just something that's silent, you just have to just get on with it as if you were a boy… You know and I could be really feeling really off one day, off one week and one of the coaches could turn around and be like "oh what's up with you? You know you're really moody today" or whatever "you need to sort yourself out" or whatever but it's just like you can't say

> "oh I'm on my period so I'm feeling a bit shit" so you have to just be like 'oh okay they're telling me I'm just being a girl so I need to just man up' that's like how you feel. But it does affect you in so many ways, it affects your motivation, it affects so many things and then that's kind of like all overlooked, it's not really seen as anything that is important. (Olivia)

The above quotation suggests that the stigma and taboo of menstruation both reflects and contributes to the male hierarchy and the gender order. The fact that the participants feel silenced to talk about a normal aspect of their physiology and are instead encouraged to 'man up' exposes the true essence of 'common sense' and its resistance to change or correction. The participants appear to be confronted with a quandary; they want to acknowledge their natural fluctuations however they fear reproducing the unhelpful stigma and stereotypes associated with it. A menstrual leak, so to speak, reinforces a women's biological inferiority and therefore it has been shown that women athletes, who feel uncomfortable talking about their menstrual cycle, have learned to adopt different approaches to manage it in relation to training and competing (Brown et al., 2020). Indicating a clear difference in emotional labor undertaken by women athletes than men athletes, the participants in the current study revealed that their management strategies include talking to women staff members, taking contraceptive medication, and privately adjusting their weight expectations to align with their fluctuations.

Despite the undesirable connotations associated with the menstrual cycle, the participants were adamant that there was an opportunity for a performance advantage by learning about, talking about, and monitoring their menstrual cycles. For example:

> Amelia: But then I also would like to know that, cos someone said that they were on their period when they did their [training] the other day and they got like a massive PB [personal best] on their [training] so were they actually stronger and better? Like

are you more, I don't know, aggressive or, it would just be good to know like how I could perform better.

Isabelle: Yeah I definitely think that, [name] mentioned that we should be pushing the weights in these two weeks of your cycle and we should, like we should be doing extra weights at that point because that's when you're gonna be strongest and we need to do endurance stuff at this time and bla bla bla and I think that would help us a lot.

Charlotte: That would be an advantage over the boys that we don't usually have.

Isabelle: Yeah and it would also be an advantage over other countries.

As the excerpt above exposes, the participants are eager to explore their hormonal fluctuations, particularly in relation to their training. As Connell (1987) explains, gender relations within the gender order and hegemonic practices are in process, which presents opportunities for social change. Despite the pervasive power inherent within it, common sense is always disputed and disputable, which leaves space for the development of alternate meanings, such as those provided by Amelia, Isabelle, and Charlotte above. Positively framing the menstrual cycle by monitoring fluctuations was not only viewed as an empowering process for the athletes to optimize their performance according to their menstrual adaptations, but it also provides useful data to discover early signs for medical concerns such as amenorrhea. Indeed, toward the end of my observational period, some of the sports had begun monitoring the athletes' menstrual cycles. However, despite a number of international campaigns focusing on breaking down the stigma of menstrual cycle, it still exists in our wider society and within sport environments (Brown et al., 2020). Negatively framing a normal aspect of women's physiology reinforces the superiority of heterosexual masculinity and the marginalization of women athletes.

5.1.5 Financial Gendered Discrepancies. Another way in which the participants proposed their sport environments mirrored societal views about the inferiority of women's sport was through the amount of financial investment. The participants noted that in recent years, there has been a rise in financial investments into women's sport. Indeed, the number of women's sports sponsorship deals rocketing by 47 percent between 2013 and 2017 (Sport Business, 2019). One participant explained the benefits of a targeted funding scheme as her team won a major international trophy shortly after receiving significant financial investment:

> You could see if you do it properly and you have the right amount of money, it's an absolute success and it was… More marketing, more advertising, like anything like that, people knew about it more, just everything at the [stadiums] you'd probably have like you would a [high profile event] or there was just more about it and more to do when you're at the [stadiums], more family friendly rather than the club just putting the [event] on. (Emma)

Emma's comment above is indicative of the fact that a continued rise in financial investments into women's sport, has the potential to have transformative effects for both the experience and success of women's sport.

Despite Emma's example of a targeted funding scheme, the participants shared their frustrations about the general lack of financial investment they receive. The lack of financial investment, it can be argued, contributes to women's sport becoming 'naturalized' into an inferior vision compared to that of the highly invested benchmark of men's sport (Adams et al., 2014). The common sense idea of the inferior nature of women's sport, then, is maintained by the lack of financial investment, which serves to reproduce the gender order in sport, including its material platform. The participants were acutely aware of and disheartened by the continued financial discrepancies present within sport, as one athlete

questioned, “It’s not fair is it? … Like when you see how much the guys are getting paid within sport and then the difference in women … why should the men get more than the women?” (Amy). Despite recognizing and being grateful for financial parity in terms of funding within the Olympic sport system, the participants still acknowledged financial inconsistencies. For example, when asked to draw their ideal training environment, participants from one sport drew equal sized changing rooms stating that at present, the men’s changing room is double the size. Another participant explained how the men athletes compete in external competitions in which “they get paid extra money for it, females don’t get anything extra” (Gemma). Previous works have noted discrepancies such as clubs only having one male bathroom available (De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019) and vast diversity in resource allocations in supporting men and women athletes within the high-performance system (Truyens et al., 2016). Not only does the financial disparity signal the superiority of men’s sport, but it has also been shown that experiencing and receiving financial investment in elite sport is a driving force for international sporting success (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013).

In addition to the financial discrepancies they face as current athletes, the participants also suggested men athletes, in comparison to women athletes, have more sporting propositions when they finish competing at the top level. For example, the participants spoke about men athletes being offered more high-profile commentating roles, television appearances, and continued sporting opportunities, as one participant explained:

> The men get the luxury of finishing playing for [the country] and they can go back into [a local] set up and still earn decent money whereas we don’t have that luxury so if once we stop playing for [the country] we have to find a job elsewhere. (Emma)

The quotation above reveals that during their sporting careers, the participants experience additional personal stressors as they must consider their post-retirement prospects.

Throughout my observational period, I witnessed conversations between coaches and staff members questioning women athletes' commitment to their sport as they explored alternate opportunities alongside their sporting career. However, given the gender discrepancies in financial prospects post-retirement, perhaps it is sensible for sportswomen to strategize their future earnings. Not only do financial concerns impact the participants livelihood post-retirement, but previous research has also shown that personal stressors, including those surrounding finances, are salient features of elite athletes' performance (Hanton et al., 2005). In fact, the findings of Hanton and colleagues' (2005) study indicate that elite athletes recall more demands associated with the sport organization (within which financial stressors were included) than with competitive performance itself. This represents a possible moment of intervention for sport organizations, who may benefit from increasing the financial investment and support offered to athletes in relation to their financial status.

5.1.6 Denial of Gender Inequalities. Finally, while the participants were conscious of the ever-present gender order, they suggested that many people both within and outside of sport continue to deny the existence of gender disparities. For example, one participant shared:

> I feel like the starting point is this kind of getting people to recognize or agree that it [gender inequality] is a 'thing' and like there is no way that [the head coach], I mean I don't want to put words in his mouth but like would he [head coach] think that that was an important thing or a performance enhancing thing or something that deserves having a conversation about? I don't think so. Would any of the male coaches? I also don't think so, certainly none of the men's team coaches. The women's team, maybe one or two but I think if you polled people on do you think gender is an issue? Like it wouldn't, no [laughs] you would get a very small turnout, like me and [another woman athlete] and maybe a couple of the girls so I think that would be the first thing

> because if people don't see it as a problem at all then it just means that all the behaviors that are currently there, they don't see why it should change. (Chloe)

The above quotation suggests that gender inequalities are not being addressed by those in positions of power within elite sport. This is important because previous research has shown how power relations are a key feature for successful cultural changes within elite sport organizations (Feddersen et al., 2020). Like Chloe in the quotation above, many of the participants proposed that an acknowledgement of gender disparities is a pivotal starting point in the quest for equalizing the gender hierarchy. Previous research shows that many people in society fail to recognize gender discrimination as a persistent problem (Napier et al., 2020). The participants suggested that they frequently engage in conversations and sometimes passionately argue with people who insist gender inequalities no longer exist. The participants appear to actively resist the postfeminist sensibility, which argues that feminism has now achieved its goal of reaching gender equality (Gill, 2008). Instead, for the participants, denying the existence of gender discrimination acts as a function to reinforce the gender order and maintain male superiority. In this way, a refusal to acknowledge the discrepancies between men and women in sport, signals the naturalization of unequal practices and reproduces and stabilizes the dominant gender order. The fact that the participants feel there is a lack of urgency to address gender issues within their sports, presents a potential moment of intervention as sport leaders may wish to outwardly acknowledge gender inequalities and communicate their intentions to contest the gender order.

In general, the participants shared that they are fully cognizant of their inferior positioning relative to sportsmen and suggested that they internalize the gendered attitudes and behaviors within their sport environments in ways that has profound effects on their

performance. For example, one participant passionately articulated the accumulative impact of being a part of a system that stabilizes the dominant gender order:

> I think if the women are walking around feeling like really empowered and really like they are, their physicality is properly great and on par with, like they are among the best humans not just the best women … especially because other nations wouldn't be doing it … I think it would be a performance advantage because then you are lining up on the start line or attacking your training or whatever with that inbuilt feeling of like properly good rather than, 'ahh like, I'm good in a way but also a bit at odds being, what lots of people think being a woman is meant to be and being given slightly less good equipment or less time by coaches or whatever so I can't be that good because otherwise people would be investing in me in the same way they are investing, like exactly the same way they are investing in the men and if I'm not that good, if I'm not worth investment then why would I have confidence that I'm going to do brilliantly in this [event]?' … around [performance] I think it is a big advantage to have a pretty sure foundation confidence-wise to say, 'no I am really good and fully capable of doing well here' and that I think gets undermined by this difference in treatment or difference in attitude about what, what women are when women are at their best. (Chloe)

The above quotation reveals that the participants are acutely aware of the common sense meanings of what women's sport *is*, and that it is in direct reference to what it *is not*, that is, the gold standard of men's sport. Consequently, the accumulation of marginalizing experiences and the daily reminders of being inferior appears to manifest into implicitly undermining the participants' confidence to perform. From a performance perspective, this is pertinent as one of the most consistent findings in the literature is the significant correlation between self-confidence and successful sporting performance (Feltz, 2007). The

integrative model of sport confidence predicts that organizational culture is central to athletes' confidence (Vealey, 2001), and therefore perhaps it is no surprise that the participants in the current study suggest a direct link between their sports' cultural attitude toward women athletes and their confidence.

Overall, at a macro-level the analysis shows that sport environments reflect broader sociocultural trends. While the participants present moments of a contested gender order in the way women's sport has accrued increasing respect from the public, the common sense of the gender order and hegemonic masculinities appear to remain structurally intact within their sport environments. Whether consciously or not, sport environments continue to mirror societal norms by acting in accordance with the male hierarchy, which in many ways disadvantages elite women athletes' experiences and performance. This macro-level analysis demonstrates the importance of considering cultural and systemic changes when aspiring to support elite women athletes more effectively.

5.2 It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at"

At the meso-level, I explore the gendered processes and social norms imbedded within sport organizations and consider how they impact transactions with and between elite women athletes. In general, the participants explained that their training programs were akin to the men's, suggesting that from a physical training perspective there was little variance in the ways they were coached. In other ways, however, the participants suggested that their experiences and interactions as women in the world of elite sport differed to that of men athletes, intimating that the 'common sense' is so firmly entrenched within the gender order that it influences their transactions with those in their sport environments. This theme is divided into two parts. It will first consider the range of views surrounding the participants' preferences for coaching practices, before turning to explore the participants' experiences of

how wider sociocultural views manifest into accepted norms that influence the way people interact with and about women within their sport environments.

5.2.1 Coaching Preferences. The participants shared their views on how they wished to be coached as women athletes, within which there were a range of opinions both within and between individuals. For example, some athletes were adamant that despite physical differences, "male and female athletes are both striving toward the same goal, they both put in the same amount of work" (Isabelle) and therefore, it is important to not "treat female athletes any different to what you treat a male athlete because they will see it a mile off" (Gemma). These participants believed that in their pursuit of achieving sporting success, "there is no good like being soft on us and that because that's not going to get us anywhere" (Nadia). One participant explained how being treated the same as and by her men counterparts gave her a performance advantage: "I used to [train with] the lads and he [the coach] used to make them not take it easy on me otherwise, he didn't want them to treat me any different so that gave me the confidence and that brought me on" (Gemma). The above quotations suggest that these participants' motive for wanting men and women to be treated the same was the desire to be pushed as hard as the men. Previous research has shown how men coaches adapt their coaching practices based upon erroneous ideas of women's expectations as performers. For example, the men coaches in Felton and Jowett's (2013) study promoted a 'winning mentality' when working with sportsmen and promoted a 'try your best' mentality when working with sportswomen, suggesting that women athletes are not seen to be as competitive or capable of 'high-level' performance. These participants in the current study refute the notion that women athletes should receive different coaching practices. For them, being treated differently from men athletes is viewed as a discriminatory practice that reinforces the gender order (Matthews, 1984) and impedes their opportunity to optimize their full athletic potential.

On the other hand, some participants believed that differences been men and women exist and suggested that to be most impactful working with women athletes, coaches and staff members should acknowledge such differences and act accordingly. For example, one participant suggested that "although the goal that they [men and women athletes] both want to achieve is the same, the paths to getting there should be different because female bodies and male bodies are different" (Charlotte). Another participant brought to light an issue in defaulting to treating women like men when she said, "that's the difference, I don't want to be treated like how [man coach] treats male athletes but that's because he's being treated like a man" (Laura). In many cases, the participants suggested that it would be beneficial to actively acknowledge hormonal fluctuations in women by individualizing strength programs and accommodating for mood, fatigue, and pains associated with these fluctuations. For these participants, women can be men's equals despite differing treatment, provided society values women as much as men. It has previously been suggested that one of the reasons why traditional coaching programs may not be meeting the needs and optimizing the performance potential of women athletes is due to such programs being developed by men, for men, without considering the unique needs of women (MacKinnon, 2011). Various studies have found that the needs of men and women athletes differ and that coaches should tailor their coaching programs accordingly (Norman, 2016). For example, the women athletes in Norman's (2015) study suggested that they wanted coaches to recognize the salience of gender within the coach-athlete dyad. They urged coaches to understand that women may approach training and performance differently to men and to acknowledge that the gender of the coach also affects the relationship. For these participants in the current study, to ignore the unique presence of women athletes in the sport world hinders their opportunity for growth and acts to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. It is important to note, that this viewpoint is contrary to what the participants above, and many critical feminists, believe;

that is, that treating men and women athletes differently may act not to optimize their support, but rather to reinforce the gender order (Matthews, 1984).

Despite the differing of viewpoints within and between the participants, they all acknowledged the heterogeneity of women (and men) and therefore recognized the importance of catering coaching practices to individual needs. For example, one participant shared, “Get to know your athletes, do not bracket them all as the same because they’re not, and one thing that works for one person will not work for the other” (Camilla). Another participant explained that athletes are often grouped by gender during training, which she believes creates an unnecessary divide: “If you’re going to split it and you’re going to make it girls versus boys then we are already fighting against each other purely because of gender, which I don’t think is right in the first place” (Olivia). In this way, the women athletes challenge the broader gender binary, wherein women and men athletes are expected to act in accordance with traditional hegemonic views of masculinity and femininity. An individualized approach to coaching is also in line with later feminist perspectives (e.g., ‘third wave’ feminists), in which a common critique of earlier feminisms is that the focus on socialization and sex-role differentiation is problematic as it treats women as a homogeneous group (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). As De Haan and Norman (2019) note, the construction of homogenous groups negates the fact that there is likely to be more difference between two women athletes than between all women and all men athletes in general. Indeed, previous research exploring athletes from a range of sports has shown similarities in preferences for coaching behaviors regardless of gender (Sherman et al., 2000). Taking a homogenous approach can also highlight a distinction between men and women cohorts, which can, even if unintentionally, act to reinforce the dominance of men athletes as the ideal and women athletes as inferior. Whilst advocating for a heterogeneous approach to coaching, the participants were cognizant to the challenges involved with catering to individual needs and

therefore offered a moment of intervention to coaches; they suggested that when in doubt, rather than making generalized assumptions, coaches should speak to women athletes directly to seek further guidance on their individual needs.

5.2.2 Gendered Interactions. The participants described how wider sociocultural views and traditional assumptions held about women manifest into accepted norms that shape the gendered interactions within their sport environments. For example, the participants suggested their coaches view and treat their ability to apply themselves as lesser than the men athletes. One participant shared that her coach, "seemed to think the boys work harder but I'm not sure how true that is" (Debbie). She explained that during training sessions, "if we sat down having a chat or something, he [coach] would say something, he wouldn't say anything to the boys" (Debbie). Another participant shared:

> I'd say we are treated differently sometimes, I think there's an expectation, there's an expectation that the woman are going to cry first or the women are going to be the first ones to bail out or to not be able to push as hard, or to give up first, or you know we're softer. There's that expectation of women I think, whereas the men are mostly perceived to be tougher or less emotional, so then I think we get treated according to that. (Olivia)

Participants from across a range of sports acknowledged biological variances that render men athletes physically stronger and faster, however they refuted the notion that there are gender differences in the way they exert themselves. The above quotations suggest that coaches adapt their coaching practices based on perceptions that the athletes disagree with. Previous research has shown that people's implicit beliefs often rely on stereotypical associations, frequently without them realizing that this is the case (Ellemers, 2018). Furthermore, the above quotations suggest that comparative perceptions and comments tended toward a gender hierarchy that described men athletes as possessing desirable traits.

LaVoi (2007) explains that one of the most powerful techniques employed to maintain male hegemony in sport occurs by socially constructing differences between women and men athletes, which thereby establishes men as the universal ideological norm and women as "other". The dominant discourse surrounding gender and the "othering" of women athletes in a way that creates homogenous groups through stereotypical ideas is one way to exclude, oppress, or marginalize women athletes. Coaches and practitioners, therefore, may benefit from critically reflecting on their implicit biases and considering how their inherent beliefs may be impacting their coaching practices.

Another way the participants suggested sociocultural norms impact the gendered interactions within their sport environments was through the commonplace trivializing language used. For example, one participant shared:

> Especially in [this sport] I just feel like the comments get thrown around constantly like just roll off the tongue like or you'll say to a boy "you're doing it like a girl, you're doing it like a girl" or something like that and like put girls down, that puts them in a negative light. (Olivia)

Furthermore, the participants suggested that their athletic accomplishments are frequently belittled with comments by men athletes such as, "there was no one there, it was an easy competition, it's girls [sport] like it's not as hard as boys [sport]" (Olivia). Some of the older participants revealed that when they were younger, sexist comments infuriated them to a point where they, "properly would have reacted to it" (Gemma) by engaging in heated debates. However, the participants suggested that over time, they have learned to, "brush them off" (Amy) by ignoring what has been said. From a neoliberal feminist perspective, women who overcome structural inequalities and become a success story through gaining independence are celebrated as feminist subjects (Thorpe et al., 2017). In line with neoliberal feminist ideas (Dabrowski, 2021), the participants positively framed the shift in their

responses as one of maturity and personal empowerment. It is important to note however, that while the participants feel empowered to disregard flippant comments, it could be argued that by ignoring comments that marginalize women and women's sport, the participants are normalizing signifiers of a hegemonic gender order that functions to stabilize the dominant order. The fact that elite women athletes feel their athletic accomplishments are trivialized presents an opportunity to intervene as sport organizations can contribute to contesting the gender order by shifting their norms of what type of language is deemed appropriate within their environments.

Similar to that of the women coach participants, the athlete participants explained how 'banter' can also be used to further marginalize women and their athletic achievements. On several occasions during my observational period, I witnessed jokes being made at the expense of women and women's sport. For example, I heard comments such as, "she's a woman, there's something wrong with all of ya", "women ey, you let them out the kitchen" and "man up". The participants suggested that with banter, "some of it's done in gest, some of it's done to get a rise" (Amy), which supports recent research in British cricket that distinguishes between 'inclusionary' and 'exclusionary' forms of banter (Lawless & Magrath, 2020). The former incorporates how a close team relationship can facilitate inclusive forms of banter while the latter incorporates jokes which transgress acceptable forms of banter. This is an important distinction as inclusionary forms of banter can act to create a light-hearted and enjoyable environment. For example, the participants from one sport explained how they have bonded with men athletes through banter and subsequently feel closer to and more supported by them. Exclusionary forms of banter on the other hand, are shown to have a detrimental impact on those involved. An apt example of the drastic impact that banter can have, was described by one participant: "I know there was a couple of girls with weight issues, they would get a lot of stick a lot of the time and they cracked

quite a lot and a couple left [the sport]" (Rebecca). The participants admitted that their response to sexist banter was very much dependent on their mood and fatigue, suggesting that at times, they engage in banter, using witty remarks to counter derogatory jokes, while other times they get frustrated and either ignore the comments or snap at the person. Within British culture, banter is an ever-growing form of interaction that often functions to conceal derogatory or insulting remarks. Targeting sex has been proposed as an example of what has previously been described as a 'banter violation' (Rivers & Ross, 2019) yet sexist comments are often passed off as 'just banter' (Nichols, 2018). Normalizing banter that marginalizes women and women's sporting achievements signals that derogatory remarks are entirely acceptable, keeping intact apparent gendered common sense and reinforcing the male hierarchy. This, importantly, and as one participant alluded to, runs the risk of negatively impacting women athletes' well-being and retiring from sport prematurely.

Several participants disclosed that due to traditional sociocultural gendered norms, as women athletes they are positioned as sexual objects within their sport environments. One encounter during a group interview was poignant:

> Amelia: I had like put on a bit of weight because I was injured and so my boobs were like massive and I remember just sitting there stretching and I remember the head coach, the head guy who's like the chief coach of [name] club came in and was just like "GOOORR" and I was like "what the fuck?". So I like felt uncomfortable, had to put my top back on… and then I didn't [perform very well] and I came last at this thing and then he took me into an office and he was just like "uh Amelia the only reason you're still here is because you're nice to look at, you got big tits and you're good for the boys morale" and I was literally like 'right okay cheers for that'.
>
> Isabelle: That is so classic.

Amelia: And then like it just made me feel shit, it made me feel like they didn't think I had potential, they weren't taking me seriously as an athlete.

Amelia explained that the above example was one of many where she had been sexualized by men coaches. The above excerpt highlights the continuation of the historical trend whereby women athletes are sexually harassed in ways that deny their sporting credentials. The sexual objectification of women in sport has long been held out as an example of the resilience of the patriarchy within the masculine world of sport (Channon et al., 2018) and the covert threat of dismissal in the quotation above is a good example of a hegemonic system in action. Sexualizing women athletes undermines the challenge they might pose to dominant gender ideals, as it deflects attention away from the athletic capacities of women's bodies whilst repositioning them as passive objects of the male gaze (Channon et al., 2018). Validating and rewarding women athletes on the basis of their heterosexual attractiveness reasserts hierarchal gender relations as sport is 'by' and 'for' heterosexual men, and women are only valuable when they become objects of men's desire (Channon et al., 2018). Arguably as important as the sexualization disclosure above, is the response from a fellow athlete who says, "that is so classic", which suggests that this behavior is commonplace within their sport. Research has shown that sexual harassment occurs across a range of sports (Fasting, et al., 2004), and that the chances of being sexually harassed from someone within sport increases with performance level (Fasting et al., 2010). Therefore, in addition to posing severe threats to mental health and well-being (Gutek & Joss, 1993), sexual harassment has caused several women athletes to move to a different sport or to drop out of elite sport altogether (Fasting et al., 2002).

Within one sport in particular, the participants suggested they also altered their interactions with their men coaches due to the hierarchical nature of the coach-athlete relationship. These participants, the youngest of the participant sample, recognized the

power dynamics between themselves and their men coaches and suggested that gender, and age, were salient factors within the relationship. For example, one participant described how the men athletes, who were two or three years older than the women athletes, interacted differently with their coach who is a man:

> Because the coach is male they [men athletes] feel like they've got more of sort of like a friendship… they feel like they can disagree, whereas I feel like sometimes the girls are just kind of maybe feel like, almost view the coach as being a bit higher up so they don't, they don't want to disagree, or sort of, not get on the bad side but yeah they don't want to go into that discussion. (Sophie)

The above quotation is in line with my observations, where I noted how the coach Sophie refers to, had a more friend-like relationship with his men athletes, as opposed to the more professional relationship he exhibited with his women athletes. In my fieldnotes I wrote, "there is far more jokey two-way interaction between [the coach] and the two men athletes as opposed to between [the coach] and the women, who just listened to his comments and nodded along" [February, 2018]. Similar to the elite women athletes in Norman and French's (2013) study, the above quotation reveals that the participants are acutely aware of the distribution of power and its associations with gender in the man coach-woman athlete relationship. In line with previous findings (De Haan & Norman, 2019), the participants in the current study are cognizant of the male hierarchy and their marginal positioning, which has real consequences for the way they engage and communicate with their coaches. The fact that the younger participants are acutely aware of the unequal distribution of power between themselves and their man coach, presents an opportunity for men coaches to engage in conscious behaviors to shift the power dynamics between themselves and their athletes, particularly those who are younger.

Another way the participants suggested the balance of power within their relationships impacts their experiences as athletes was through their lack of voice. Many participants from across a range of sports suggested that when they attempt to confront people in leadership positions, "What happens is we have a voice to a certain point" (Olivia), as their suggestions are heard, but rarely actioned. Another participant suggested, "Our battles are never going to be won by us… we don't actually have someone fighting for us as much as I think we'd quite like" (Charlotte), which was a sentiment many of the participants shared. During my observations and interviews, I was surprised at how openly and honestly the participants spoke to me. When I shared my observation with the participants, many suggested that opportunities to talk freely to someone who cared were few and far between. In fact, many of the participants even thanked me for listening to them and providing them a platform to share their experiences. The above quotations are consistent with the findings of the coach chapter, which suggested that the gendered hierarchy in elite sport marginalizes women athletes' voices. Previous research has demonstrated that women athletes' voices in relation to their coaching experiences are often overlooked (MacKinnon, 2011) and that the athletes' lack of control made them reluctant to stay with their coach as they felt it was significantly hampering their athletic development (Norman & French, 2013). The participants in the current study passionately urged people in leadership positions to take ownership over representing elite women athletes, as their own attempts to challenge the status quo have been to no avail. Fundamental to producing a counterhegemony – and gaining traction around an alternative map of meaning – is people in positions that have the capacity, and willingness, to subvert and disrupt the traditional gender order. Therefore, as a moment of intervention, there is an opportunity to resist the gender order through the (re)organization of common sense and development of robust communication channels for women athlete voices that are not being heard.

Overall, the findings at the meso, or organizational level, showed how the gendered interactions within elite sport reflect and reproduce the gender order. The language used in and around the sport environment more generally, and the manner with which coaches communicate with their athletes more specifically, serves to reinforce the traditional common sense. A lack of recognition of gender inequities within sport, along with the absence of individuals representing the women athlete voice, highlights another way in which a common sense, that sees women's sport as inferior, resists destabilization.

5.3 Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"

Having focused on the broader conceptualizations of gender and how they permeate the processes within sporting organizations, this section considers the participants' insights into the unique experiences they face as elite athletes against the backdrop of a gendered society. Being a woman and being an athlete was frequently discussed as being paradoxical as Western culture celebrates a feminine ideal that contrasts with what is needed to be an elite athlete. This theme is divided into two parts. First, it will present how the participants challenged hegemonic norms of women being weak and passive in (a) their mental and physical strength, (b) their competitiveness and, (c) their communication style. It will then consider the participants' internal quandaries as they negotiated the competing pressures of traditional hegemonic ideals and elite sport performance with (a) their physical bodies, (b) expectations of perfection, (c) displaying emotions, and (d) requesting information.

5.3.1 Challenging Hegemonic Norms. The participants suggested that being an elite athlete, which demands strength and competitiveness, by its very nature conflicts with traditional gender norms of women being weak and passive. The participants shared their frustrations around the stereotypes associated with women being incapable of acquiring mental and physical strength and suggested they relished resisting traditional sociocultural

narratives about women. For example, one participant articulated, “You’re creating success in your own way by being strong and by being a woman, so you’re kind of like breaking down those stereotypes of being a woman, weak, and won’t win at anything” (Olivia). Another participant similarly shared, “I’m doing something positive just by being in my sport because I’m being this physically strong woman… People can be courageous and feminine” (Chloe). The participants gave examples of the many assumptions made about women athletes being characteristically unfeminine and spoke passionately about their tendencies to demonstrate behaviors associated with both femininity *and* elite sport performance. In many cases, the participants expressed a sense of pride in relation to their activist role in “breaking down those stereotypes of being a woman” (Olivia). Like many ‘third wave’ feminists, the participants resisted essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women (Snyder, 2008). The quotations above implicitly support the ‘third wave’ position that views stereotypically clashing gendered personality traits as an integrated whole (Thorpe et al., 2017). Rather than accepting either/or discourses, ‘third wave’ feminists argue for a ‘both/and’ perspective that creates space for a discourse that sees no incompatibility between characteristics associated with athleticism and femininity (Bruce, 2016). Therefore, the participants suggest that by merely occupying the position of elite sportswomen, they are proudly shaping new identities within the interstices of competing narratives and subverting the gender order.

With regards to the portrayal of women athletes, the participants suggested that their personal preferences for how they wish to be photographed and publicized as competitive athletes clashed with hegemonic femininity. For example, one participant explained how the nature of the footage published by their internal photographer differs between the sexes:

> The photos of the women are all on the podium like girls smiling basically and all the photos of the men are of them like right in the muscle of it like right in the midst

> of [competing] and being really physical it's like 'are you kidding?' it's that kind of stuff as well, it's like right okay the men are really so strong and so fast and so technical and then the women it's like look how pretty they look on the podium … I think it just is like [sighs] in some ways it is [the photographer] trying to show the female athletes in the way that is going to be most acceptable to the public, which is not pulling an ugly face, but do the public just not view men's faces working hard as ugly? Is it like, I don't know, like what are they seeing when they see those faces like 'ah no they are just working so hard and that's like masculine and that's the epitome of macho strength that's really attractive' whereas if a woman is seen doing that it's like 'oh yuck [laughs] why can't she look a bit calmer?' (Chloe)

The above quotation reveals that the participants are navigating a paradox between what is "most acceptable to the public" (Chloe) – that is, hyper femininity – and how they wish to be portrayed, which is contrary to traditional gender norms. There is a body of evidence that demonstrates that sport media coverage is disparagingly different between the sexes (Fink, 2015), as it often puts more emphasis on women athletes' hyper femininity and heterosexuality as opposed to their athletic prowess (Daniels, 2009). Like Chloe alluded to in the quotation above, many of the participants were aware of the age-old formula of "sex sells" (Kane et al., 2013). Indeed, across a variety of media outlets, sports, countries, and time periods, there is evidence that more coverage is provided to women who compete in sports that embody feminine ideals such as grace, beauty, and glamour (Fink, 2015). However, the participants appeared to reject the notion of being sexualized in the media, instead making active efforts to counteract the hyperfeminine narrative by posting pictures and videos on their social media platforms of themselves and their women teammates lifting heavy weights and amid their training and performance. In this way, the participants validate a growing and diverse body of evidence indicating that images reflecting a high degree of

physical ability are preferred by women athletes over those which emphasize the physical attractiveness of sportswomen (Kane et al., 2013). Whilst media outlets and some high-profile women athletes in the public sphere align to a feminist sensibility focused on 'choice' and 'empowerment', other feminist stances have critiqued the notion of women's empowerment as being subsumed within consumerist discourses reducing feminist politics to individual practices of consumption and performance (Channon et al., 2018).

Another way the participants reported challenging hegemonic norms was by being direct, which they suggested is a characteristic used by and celebrated in men, however framed negatively by men coaches when used by women. Despite several participants from a range of sports suggesting that they appreciate honest and direct communication, they suggested that men athletes have a more direct relationship with their coaches. Furthermore, one participant revealed a hesitancy to being forthright with fellow teammates:

> I think a performance element that could be improved is women believing that they can't have frank discussions with each other without it being a bit unfeminine or without it being characterized by male coaches as bitchiness. (Chloe)

The term 'female apologetic' has been coined to refer to any behaviors that women athletes engage in to negate negative stereotypes associated with their involvement in sport by embodying the traditional, or hegemonic notion of femininity (Hardy, 2015). It can also refer to any practices society engages in to emphasize this form of femininity in women athletes (Ellison, 2002). Previous research has shown that women athletes learn what behaviors and appearances are privileged and so they 'perform' femininity to gain social acceptance and status (Krane et al., 2011). It could be argued, therefore, that by labelling frank conversations as 'bitchiness', the participants are having to work through the contradiction that in many ways, they are expected to act in line with hegemonic masculinity within their sport environments, but in the way they communicate they feel pressured to behave in a way that

preserves hegemonic femininity (Krane, 2001) as they are encouraged to perform more 'typically' feminine traits, such as docility (Connell, 1987).

5.3.2 Internal Quandaries. The participants described the difficulties they face negotiating the demands of elite sport as women in Western society. For example, they described their physical bodies as a clashing cultural ideal of the sport world and our wider society. Within their role as elite athletes, the participants are expected to acquire strength, which often results in, "The women [athletes] are more muscular than is stereotypically associated with a woman" (Chloe). The participants described being acutely aware of looking markedly different to their non-sporting peers, which produced mixed feelings, within and between the participants. On the one hand, the participants expressed an appreciation for being in good physical shape, voicing a deep sense of pride for what their bodies are capable of. On the other hand, the participants shared their insecurities about their muscular bodies, particularly when they are taken out of the sport context, as one participant explained, "It's difficult because the moment you take yourself out of a sporting setting, you don't really want the muscles, you don't want to look like a man" (Olivia). Several participants spoke about relationship breakdowns as a result of deviating from aesthetic cultural norms and described performance impediments from attempts to satisfy the cultural ideal:

> When I was younger coming into the sport and I went out with a guy who was like 'Amelia stop doing weights like honestly, like it's disgusting, you don't wanna end up like the women in the GB team with legs like that de de de de' so I genuinely was like 'right I'm actually not gonna do that because otherwise my boyfriend's going to find me unattractive' so I literally stopped doing upper body weights and then, I, yeah obviously you need your upper body weights cos you need to get strong and stuff but it was my decision, I just stopped, just took it out my program, just never

did it because I just didn't want my boyfriend not to fancy me at the time, and then now looking back at it I'm like, 'you dickhead'. (Amelia)

The above quotations expose the participants' experiences within the public sphere, wherein they are alienated for aesthetically deviating from the cultural norm. The participants revealed that they frequently receive unprovoked comments about the way they look, which they suggested highlights their insecurities. The quotations above also illustrate the difficulties elite women athletes face when seeking intimate heterosexual relationships, as they are at times, rejected for their muscular physiques. Shilling and Bunsell (2009) describe the women bodybuilder as a 'gender outlaw': A figure who is stigmatized not because she has broken a formal law, but because she has so blatantly disregarded dominant understandings of what is acceptable within the gendered order of social interaction. It appears that the participants in the current study are similarly being positioned as 'gender outlaws' as they transgress what is aesthetically acceptable within society. The participants acknowledged a recent cultural shift toward celebrating fitter bodies, with famous 'third wave' feminist slogans such as 'pretty and powerful' and 'strong and sexy' becoming more mainstream (Thorpe et al., 2017). Unlike in the examples given previously wherein the participants relished breaking gender stereotypes and felt it was possible to demonstrate characteristics associated with femininity *and* athleticism, in relation to physicality, the participants suggested there remains an accepted limit of the 'both/and' discourse. Specifically, the participants maintained that there existed a culturally produced glass ceiling of muscularity for a woman (Dworkin & Messner, 2002) wherein toned but slim bodies are celebrated whilst large muscles remain undesirable. Shilling and Bunsell (2009) propose, that 'gender outlaws' are faced with two options: either to conform to the appearances and performances validated by the gendered foundations of social interaction, or to reject these norms. In general, the younger participants expressed a desire to conform, suggesting that

they did not like the way they look, whilst the older participants recognized a shift in their response over time, from one of conforming to one of defiance. The older athletes suggested that when they were younger, they felt compelled to abide by social norms, admitting to avoiding strength sessions to minimize their muscle gain. As older athletes, however, they told a story of full commitment to their sporting endeavors and one that disrupts the gender order where women are associated with 'heterosexy' bodies. Whilst they acknowledged the insecurities and challenges associated with aesthetically deviating from the cultural ideal, the participants maintained that over time they have chosen to prioritize their sport careers and have become more accepting of the way they look due to a combination of shifting cultural ideals toward celebrating more muscular physiques and their own increased confidence in the way they look. These athletes offer an example of a contested common sense that is producing alternative meanings of what it means to be a woman. This marks a clear space to intervene as sports may wish to open the dialogue particularly with their younger women athletes, to offer support as they navigate their physical bodies in two competing worlds.

The participants described pressures on women within our society to strive for perfection without making mistakes as contrary to the expectations associated with taking risks within the sport world. For example, one participant made a direct link between sociocultural gendered norms and a fear of failure:

> We're hard on ourselves, incredibly hard on ourselves because we are looking for perfection, like naturally we do it to ourselves like everything in magazines is perfection like everything in life, a woman has to be the best mum in the world, the best friend in the world, everything has to be perfect… because you do, you get in these environments and most of the time people don't want to fail because of what

other people think and that's, that's natural that's life but I feel like women do it more than men I would say. (Emma)

As the above quotation suggests, traditional gender stereotypes and societal pressures for women to act a certain way conflicts with important characteristics associated with high level performance. Within our society, gender stereotypes reflect assertiveness, performance, and risk taking as indicators of greater agency in men, and warmth and care for others as signs of greater communality in women (Kite et al., 2008). Differences in the emphasis placed on assertiveness and care within our society puts an underlying pressure on men and women to behave according to those norms (Ellemers, 2018), which creates a predicament for women involved in the masculine sphere of sport. The above quotation also reveals that the participants do not feel psychologically safe to take risks and make mistakes in their training setting. Previous research has demonstrated that perfectionistic concerns about mistakes and perceived coach pressure are indeed factors central to the perfectionism-fear of failure relationship (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009). A fear of failure has been shown to undermine sporting performance and has also been related to several maladaptive consequences on athletes such as burnout, drop-out, and high levels of stress and anxiety (Correia et al., 2017). Again, the participants appear to be navigating the competing demands of what it means to be a woman in Western society, whilst also being expected to apply traditionally masculine characteristics that are associated with elite performance.

Several participants suggested that sportswomen, as compared to sportsmen, are generally more emotional, in the sense of being sensitive and crying. Interestingly however, oftentimes in the group interviews, other participants refuted these suggestions with comments such as "or they definitely *show* their emotions more" (Sophie). During my observational period, I engaged in numerous conversations with coaches and staff who also believed that, on the most part, women athletes show their emotions more readily. This was

presented as contrasting with men athletes who, many participants suggested, feel like they "always have to present in a really tough way" (Chloe). Findings from the coach chapter demonstrates that the coaches viewed the ability to 'just get on with it' without displaying emotions as a desirable characteristic. Furthermore, previous research has shown how emotions are viewed as private, feminine, and weak within elite sport, which sets the standards of athlete's emotionality to which they are encouraged to conform (Lee Sinden, 2012). Research into emotions as social phenomena (Tamminen & Bennett, 2017), emphasizes the role of social and cultural norms for emotion expression and the implicit 'display rules' that impact how and when people express their emotions (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). The participants, aware of the 'display rules' within their sport environments, must navigate between wanting to display their emotions openly but not wanting to be criticized for deviating from the ideal (hegemonic masculine) elite athlete. Consequently, while some participants revealed they exposed their emotions to their coaches, others suggested that they outwardly conceal their emotions to align with hegemonic masculine norms and appear mentally tough, while privately expressing their feelings to selected (women) staff members and other women athletes. Attempts to homogenize athletes' emotions can have major consequences to health and well-being as athletes may suppress their emotions and thus signs that something could be going wrong may be overlooked (Lee Sinden, 2012).

Similarly, the participants suggested they want the freedom to ask questions about training programs and coaching decisions but recognized that doing so was contrary to hegemonic masculine norms. The participants suggested that the men athletes also wanted the freedom to ask questions, but the women athletes described, "a fear in the men's side that if you're seen to question something you are whining and moaning and almost being a bit weak about it and you just need to get on and do it" (Chloe). Findings from the coach chapter showed that the coaches valued athletes who do not question their coaching

decisions, which presents yet another paradox for the women athletes, wherein their standards for wanting to openly ask questions clash with the hegemonic masculine narrative of being tough and self-contained. While some of the participants suggested they felt comfortable asking questions, others admitted to conforming to hegemonic masculine norms by staying silent for fear of being branded weak. Self-determination theory identifies three psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – for human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The ability to ask questions and acquire information about one's own training falls within 'autonomy', which is the desire to feel ownership over one's behavior. The theory argues that when the three psychological needs are satisfied, individuals will experience higher quality of motivation, psychological well-being and will engage in adaptive behaviors (Papaioannou & Hackfort, 2014). Therefore, a culture underpinned by traditional hegemonic masculine norms that renders asking questions as weak may hinder *all* athletes' agency, motivation, and welfare.

Overall, at a micro-, or experiential level, the analysis showed how sportswomen navigate the competing demands of being elite athletes in a society governed by hegemonic gender norms. In many ways, the participants describe a contested gender order, which opens the space for alternative articulations of femininity. In other ways, however, the participants present their experiences that signify the firmly entrenched common sense of the gender order that still idealizes hegemonic masculinities. The complexities and contradictions within and between the participants' experiences are in line with the concept of common sense, which reflects how our experiences and identities are often complicated, contradictory, and nuanced.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have described the athletes' perceptions of their experiences being women in the world of elite sport, within which three themes were discussed. The first theme,

A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change", used a macro-level analysis to explore how traditional gendered norms and behaviors impact elite sport environments. The findings showed how elite women athletes are acutely aware of views and behaviors that align to men athlete superiority. women athletes feel as if they are viewed and treated as "second-class citizens" as men's events are deemed the flagship events at competitions and there continues to be a disproportionate amount of media coverage for men's sport. Women's health and the menstrual cycle continues to be a taboo within sport, leaving the athletes feeling silenced to talk about a natural part of their physiology. The women athletes recognized the vast financial disparities between men and women athletes, suggesting the impact on their abilities to perform at the elite level and their post-retirement prospects. Finally, the participants urged people in positions of power within sport organizations to acknowledge gender discrepancies as a starting point toward change. Overall, the macro-level analysis demonstrated that the gender order and hegemonic masculinities remain structurally intact within sport and highlights the importance of considering cultural and systemic changes when aspiring to support women athletes.

The second theme, *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* used a meso-level analysis to understand how organizational norms and practices impact the gendered transactions within elite sport environments. This theme was divided into two parts. The first section revealed a range of coaching preferences within and between the participants. For example, while some athletes prefer to be treated the same as the men athletes, others felt strongly that it was important to consider the differences between men and women and for coaches to tailor their practices accordingly. Despite their differing viewpoints, all the participants acknowledged the heterogeneity of women athletes and valued an individual approach to coaching. The second section explored the participants' perceptions of how wider sociocultural norms impact the

gendered interactions within their environments. The findings revealed how women athletes are treated according to perceptions that women are less able to push themselves compared to men. The participants also suggested that the language used within sport environments often sexualize women and trivialize women athletic accomplishments. The younger participants reported feeling a power imbalance between themselves and their men coaches, and all the participants felt as though they lacked a sufficient voice to raise concerns within their sports. Overall, the meso-level analysis highlighted how traditional hegemonic assumptions and implicit biases about women pervade sport environments, impact the transactions involving women athletes, and serve to reproduce the gender order.

The final theme, *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"*, used a micro-level analysis to explore the participants personal experiences navigating being elite athletes against the backdrop of a gendered society. The first part of this theme described the ways the participants challenged traditional hegemonic assumptions about women being weak and passive. For example, the participants took pride in breaking down stereotypes of women by merely being athletes. They also suggested they wanted to be portrayed as strong, competitive athletes and preferred honest and direct communication. The second part of this theme explored the internal quandaries faced by the participants as they negotiated traditional feminine ideals and elite sport norms. For example, the participants described the paradox they face with their physical muscular bodies in and outside of the sport context, as well as navigating their expectations as 'perfect' women in society and those of risk-taking elite performers. Finally, the participants revealed navigating between wanting to display their emotions and request more information from their coaches, but not wanting to be criticized for deviating from the ideal (hegemonic masculine) norms within their environments. Overall, the micro-level analysis showed how elite women athletes must navigate the competing demands of being

women in a Western society and athletes in elite sport, wherein ‘common sense’ ideals of hegemonic masculinity prevails.

Chapter 6

The Confessions of a Feminist Researcher in Elite Sport

6.0 Overview

This chapter uses the genre of the confessional tale to illustrate the challenges I encountered as a feminist researcher within elite sport environments. I use my own voice to explore and reflect upon my experiences navigating the challenges of feminist research in sport and provide recommendations for other researchers grappling with similar issues. In line with Bryman's (2015) suggestion for confessional tales to be explicit about the research questions that drove the investigation, the research questions specific to this confessional tale were: (a) what were the challenges faced as a feminist researcher in a sport environment? and, (b) how might other researchers address the challenges of feminism within elite sport? In this confessional tale, I discuss four main challenges: (a) *To Wear or Not to Wear?* (b) *It's Bigger Than Us*, (c) *Spinning the Plates*, and (d) *The F-Word*.

6.1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been growth in sport psychology researchers conducting feminist research to understand the lived experiences of women athletes with an aim to shift the emphasis toward empowering women and contributing toward social change within sport (Gill, 2019). As the appetite for feminist research within sport psychology has grown steadily, so too has the intention to embrace reflexivity as a central tenet of conducting fieldwork in feminist projects (Carter, 2019). Reflexivity begins from the perspective that researchers are intertwined with the research process (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Therefore, reflecting on a researcher's personal identities, values, and experiences is a crucial aspect of situating the knowledge they produce (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Reflexivity invites researchers to consider how their own background, values, and personal experiences shape the selection of their research topics, their research questions, their interactions with participants, their analysis, and their representation of the data (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Many researchers across disciplines are starting to view reflexivity as

being more than a methodological tool, or theoretical concept, but rather as an instrumental feature of doing embodied research (Carrington, 2008).

Recent developments in qualitative inquiry are urging researchers to go beyond reflecting on their role in their research, to also integrating this reflexivity into their presentation of data (Fortune & Mair, 2011). It has been argued that by only reporting where research endeavors go as planned, the learning that comes from mishaps remains private and overlooked (Boman & Jevne, 2000). Instead, offering the perils and pitfalls of the research experience has great pedagogical potential as it provides an opportunity to help fellow researchers learn from the personal experiences of others (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Feminist researchers in sport have embraced reflective writings and have started to use the genre of confessional tales to share the research process as experienced by the author(s). Confessional tales foreground the voice of the researcher by sharing their personal experiences doing fieldwork. By taking the reader behind the scenes of fieldwork, the confessional tale reveals the researcher's concerns, challenges, and learnings throughout the research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Feminist researchers within sociology have long emphasized the importance of reflexivity in conducting fieldwork and sport sociologists have used the genre of confessional tales in their works. For example, in their work titled, "Negotiating the 'F-Word' in the Field", Olive and Thorpe (2011) shared their experiences doing feminist ethnography in action sport cultures. Drawing from their experiences doing fieldwork, they shared some of the strategies they employed to subtly disrupt the cultural norms within surfing and snowboarding cultures. Fortune and Mair (2011) shared their confessional tales conducting field research in a curling club in Canada. They discussed how their roles as a student and a professor impacted their relationships with participants, how they grappled with knowing how much or how little to participate in the field, how they found themselves

'performing' certain aspects of their personality to get closer to participants, and the importance of paying attention to the effects a study has on the researcher. Pavlidis and Olive (2014) explored their insights doing fieldwork in roller derby and illustrated the blurred boundaries between being an 'intimate insider' and an 'interested outsider' when conducting feminist research. As a doctoral student beginning my program of research, I found these stories of researcher experiences particularly helpful as I prepared for immersing myself into fieldwork as a feminist researcher.

Despite scholars explicitly acknowledging the importance of reflexivity within feminist research in psychology, there remains an absence of feminist sport psychology researchers overtly sharing their personal reflexivity (Clarke & Braun, 2019). In this respect, sport psychology continues to be plagued by the "phenomenon of the missing researcher" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 156) as there appears to be a dominance of (post)positivism as researchers adhere to the rhetoric of researcher neutrality (Clarke & Braun, 2019). As Van Maanen (1988, p. 91) urges, sport psychology researchers should engage with the introspection of the confessional tale as it can be used to "lift the veil of public secrecy surrounding fieldwork" and should be used to admit the blind-spots and to demystify the process of conducting fieldwork.

One context within which the genre of confessional tale has received limited attention is elite sport. Throughout this program of research, I have been asked at multiple times and by multiple people, specifically about my experiences doing feminist research within elite sport. I recognize my fortunate position to have gained access into Great British elite sport environments and my ability to interact with world-class women athletes and their coaches. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to provide an account of my experiences conducting feminist research within the British elite sport system. Through sharing my experiences, I hope to provide a useful perspective for other early career feminist researchers

immersing themselves into an elite sport environment or a similarly male-dominated space. In offering an account of my experiences, my hope is to highlight the importance of reflexive practice, to provide comfort for others grappling with relatable issues, and to encourage researchers on a similar path to use my learnings to prepare for and negotiate their immersive fieldwork.

6.2 Positioning Myself

With reflexivity a central tenet of feminist research and a hallmark of the genre of the confessional tale, it would not only be amiss, but also ironic to overlook my own identity and the perspectives that inform my work. With that in mind, I will begin by sharing that I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied, woman researcher in her late twenties. When I started this program of research, I was - and still am - determined to improve the conditions for women within elite sport. I was - and still am - also simultaneously frustrated and motivated by the significant under-representation of women participants in sport and exercise medicine research (Costello et al., 2014). For me, it was time to give primacy to women athletes' voices and challenge androcentrism, the historical tendency to marginalize women's experiences (Fraser & MacDougall, 2016).

When this program of research was initiated, I felt passionately about the fact that sport is a male dominated environment that is laced with structural gender inequalities, and I would have referred to myself as a 'feminist'. Back then, I was not, however, aware of the myriad, and paradoxically interconnecting and conflicting, feminist schools of thought. Whilst it would be oversimplistic to situate myself within a single feminist perspective, I am now able to recognize that my views most broadly align to a 'third wave' feminist stance, wherein choice is a central tenet. I, like 'third wave' feminists, reject the essentialist narrative that there is one way to be a woman and believe that there is a significant relationship between discourse and power (Lerner & Sinacore, 2012).

Having played amateur football since the age of 9, I have spent a lot of time in environments that are dominated by men prior to this research. I have played on teams as the only woman and have attended weekly premier league matches as a spectator. However, I had no prior experience of conducting immersive research or spending an extended period of time within elite sport settings. As I navigated the five elite sport environments, I engaged with two ways of reflecting, both of which will be drawn upon throughout this chapter: (a) my reflexive journal and, (b) frequent discussions with my supervisory team. In my reflexive journal, I detailed my daily experiences, thoughts, emotions, and reactions to what I was witnessing in the sport environments. During weekly discussions with my supervisors, they acted as critical friends as they asked thought-provoking questions and challenged my thinking. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, I identified four challenges that I faced navigating feminism as a researcher in elite sport: (a) *To Wear or Not to Wear?* (b) *It's Bigger Than Us*, (c) *Spinning the Plates*, and (d) *The F-Word*.

6.3 To Wear or Not to Wear?

Prior to entering the sport environments, I was unashamedly excited to receive my new kit; I was finally becoming a member of the English Institute of Sport (EIS) and Team GB, and I would soon have the kit to prove it! What I had not anticipated was how multifaceted the subsequent reflections on my clothing would turn out to be. On the day of my EIS induction, I wrote in my reflexive journal:

> Today, I was told that most people in the sport environment wear tracksuit bottoms everyday, that (my suggested) leggings are probably inappropriate, and that I will likely stand out if I wore (my suggested) jeans. I wouldn't normally be one to complain about being told jeans are too smart for work, but unfortunately the standard kit trackies are men's and are horrendously unflattering! [January, 2017]

After writing about this, I internalized my feelings and I brushed it off as a matter of my own vanity, which I naively thought was petty and insignificant. Three years later, in a discussion with my supervisors, I reflected further on the implications of this excerpt and realized that my earlier reflection was by no means trivial, nor straightforward. The above extract highlights an important question of what to wear as a woman researcher entering an elite sport environment, within which there are two key aspects to consider: the informality of activewear and the gendered nature of sport clothing, both of which will be explored in turn.

6.3.1 The Informality of Activewear. Prior to entering the sport world, I had not given my clothing much thought beyond my initial excitement at receiving my kit. However, after my induction, the more I thought about it, the more it felt counter intuitive to wear tracksuit bottoms when aspiring to be 'professional' in my role as a researcher. I questioned whether people would take me seriously wearing a tracksuit, especially considering how young I looked. For many years, researchers have discussed the idea of appearance as a methodological tool to gain access and blend into research fields. For example, Edwards (1990) suggested that a researcher looking and behaving like their participants can enhance the ease with which one builds rapport and can thus help the possibilities of yielding rich data. Kvale (1996) similarly discussed the importance of self-presentation, noting the advantages for constructing rapport when feminist researchers appear like their participants. Previous research, however, to my knowledge, has yet to specifically consider researcher clothing in sport, an environment in which the informality of activewear is the norm.

Despite the warning I had been given, I decided to wear jeans with the branded kit tops as I feared looking unprofessional. When I arrived, I looked around the gym to find not a single person wearing anything other than sport clothing. Whilst I noticed that I looked different, at the time, I did not see that as an issue. It was not until a few weeks later, when another person entered the environment wearing jeans, that it became strikingly obvious to

me, that my clothing choice *was* important. I noticed this other person immediately, purely because of their clothes; it was evident they were an outsider. Despite my initial hesitancy, after seeing someone else so clearly be viewed as an outsider, I decided to wear activewear in a bid to blend in. Almost immediately, I found that my appearance, such as my clothing, helped me be viewed as an insider within the research field (Berbary, 2014). I noticed that people started to act more comfortably around me and were including me in their banter. Whilst it certainly took some time for *me* to adapt to feeling comfortable wearing such casual attire to work, I quickly recognized that wearing sport clothing was not a hindrance to my professionalism, but rather an aid to my ability to fit into the environment. My branded and casual clothing allowed me to look and feel a part of the team and helped to establish trust between myself and my participants.

6.3.2 The Gendered Nature of Sport Clothing. As can be seen from the extract from my reflexive journal above, at the time of receiving my kit, I was also concerned about the shape of the tracksuit bottoms. The tracksuit bottoms were clearly men's: they were oversized and shapeless and I was frustrated that there was not a more flattering 'women's alternative'. The tracksuit bottoms made me feel self-conscious and I feared wearing sport leggings would be perceived as inappropriate. Therefore, admittedly, my decision to wear jeans was driven, at least in part, by my discomfort in my two alternative options. I noticed that several women athletes and staff members wore leggings regularly and so after checking it was okay to do so, I followed suit. It felt like a simple win-win: leggings were suitable attire in terms of blending in, they were acceptable in terms of appropriateness, and I personally felt more comfortable wearing them.

What I had not realized at the time, was that my clothing choice was not merely a superficial personal conundrum, but indeed a wider, far more complex topic area that I would continue to grapple with for years to come. Years later, after a particularly thought-

provoking conversation with my supervisors, I noted down some of the questions that were circulating my brain for weeks:

> Is it fair for women to have to wear clothing that is designed for men? What constitutes women's sport apparel? Am I, by advocating for women's sport clothing, reinforcing the binary between traditional femininity and masculinity? Am I contributing to the sexualization of sportswomen? Even if women have the choice, will they feel a pressure to conform to hyper-femininity? How might my data collection have differed had I continued to wear the jeans, or tracksuit bottoms, rather than the leggings? [March, 2020]

In my search for answers, I started to understand the gravity of these questions and the nuances surrounding gendered clothing in sport and clothing choices in research. Like feminism itself, I learned that there are as many answers to these questions as there are feminisms! For example, while some feminists would likely suggest that tight, skimpy women's sport apparel detracts from the sport itself and thus sexualizes sportswomen (e.g., 'second wave' feminists), other feminists highlight women's empowerment and would suggest it is a sportswomen's prerogative to wear revealing clothes if she so desires (e.g., 'third wave' feminists). Rather than accepting either/or discourses, some feminists (e.g., 'third wave' feminists) would argue for a 'both/and' perspective that sees no incompatibility between characteristics associated with athleticism and femininity (Bruce, 2016) and would therefore suggest a women athlete could be simultaneously, 'pretty and powerful' as they wear more fitted sport clothing. After much reading about and discussion on this topic, with respect to clothing, I personally believe, in line with a 'third wave', or post-modern feminist stance, that there should be more shapely clothing available for *anyone* to wear without judgment. I also believe that the unfortunate possibilities of sexualization is a wider and longstanding issue that can largely be attributed to the historical discourse about women.

With regards to the final question listed above, that is, "how might my data collection have differed had I continued to wear the jeans, or tracksuit bottoms, rather than the leggings?", previous women researchers interviewing men have described consciously choosing not to perform traditional femininity through their dress and makeup to prevent or minimize the likelihood of sexual advances from their participants (Lee, 1997). On reflection, I recognize that my decision to wear leggings was, at least to some extent, me choosing to perform femininity. While I did not experience any signs of sexual advances from my participants, I am now able to appreciate that what felt like a trivial decision at the time, was unquestionably driven by my personal feminist views and will most likely have impacted my research. Naturally, I am left with countless further unanswerable questions about precisely how, or the extent to which, my clothing choices influenced my data collection. Whilst I have now accepted that I do not, and will not, have the answers to all my questions, I have since reflected, discussed, and read about this topic at length and feel more informed of the various feminist perspectives and researcher experiences in this space. I would urge any woman researcher experiencing similar personal conundrums to that which I faced, to discuss these with supervisors or critical friends to ensure they are aware of the gendered complexities surrounding clothing and at the very least, mindful of how their personal beliefs may be impacting their clothing choices.

6.4 It's Bigger Than Us

Within qualitative research, the interview is considered as an active dialectical process, wherein the interviewer and interviewee co-construct the data (Eggly, 2002) with each of their own identities, experiences and values permeating the research space (Jachyra et al., 2014). Prior to entering the sport environments, through writing in my reflexive journal and discussions with my supervisors, I considered how my ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and age may influence my ability to build rapport with my participants. Given my

sporting background and my many experiences being in male-dominated environments, I had not anticipated vast differences in my ability to connect with my men and women participants. However, once I started my data collection, I noticed that certain social-contextual factors such as my gender was playing a fundamental role in influencing the interactions with my participants and their disclosure of information. While I do believe my gender informed my research relationships, reducing such a dynamic down to gender is over simplistic (Broom et al., 2009). Therefore, I will discuss how in addition to my gender, other factors such as, my age, the research topic, and the time of the research also interacted to shape the research space.

During my initial conversations and interviews with the women participants, I felt an instant connection that meant the conversations felt easy to navigate. The women participants, both young and old, were disclosing rich and meaningful information almost instantaneously and it felt effortless on my behalf. The following excerpt from my reflexive journal describes how I felt after an interview with a woman athlete:

> The interview went really well! It felt informal and comfortable. At the end of the interview, the athlete told me that she thought I was 'like a professional interviewer' as it just felt like a chat. She said she couldn't believe we had been talking for almost an hour and a half. Nor could I! Whilst I do think I was more casual and willing to disclose more about myself, admittedly, I think [athlete] and I just clicked as people too. [April 2018]

I distinctly remember walking away from that interview and thinking that had I met this participant in different circumstances, we could easily have become friends. Our connection was instant, our conversation flowed, and we had similar interests and views. I also noticed that during my observational period, I slotted into conversations comfortably with the women participants and I was able to gain what Macphail (2004) refers to as 'street

credibility' by relating to them about issues they found to be of interest. For example, there were several instances where my ability to input into casual conversations about television shows, for example, created a noticeable shift in the women athletes' comfort and openness toward me (and if nothing else, it gave me a great excuse to stay up to date with the newest television craze!). It has previously been noted that when researchers highlight the similarities between themselves and their participants, it can ease the rapport building process and improve the ability to elicit different, and at times more intimate data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

When reflecting on my experiences with the men participants, on the other hand, I became increasingly aware that especially in my initial conversations with them, several appeared hesitant to disclose their genuine views. Despite the women athletes and coaches sharing issues and concerns within their sports, the men participants initially deflected questions related to gender imbalances by revealing a discourse of absence when talking about gender. They suggested that there were no differences between their men and women athletes and maintained that they, "treat everyone the same" regardless of gender. It felt as if the men participants, in this respect, defaulted to what they thought was the 'politically correct' position of 'everyone is equal' (De Haan & Knoppers, 2019, p.12). That is not to suggest the men participants were being inauthentic, but rather that perhaps they felt less safe than the women participants in the interview space. After a particularly challenging interview with a man participant, I wrote in my reflexive journal:

> I had an interview with [man coach] at [sport] yesterday and during it I almost cried out of frustration. Every time I asked a question, he'd go off on a rant about how "everything is great at the minute", that there are "no problems", and that "all his athletes are working hard". I kept trying to think about how I could take a different approach to questioning or try to make him realize I wasn't there to catch him out,

> but I just couldn't think on the spot and everything he was saying felt so surface level. It was particularly frustrating because earlier that day the women athletes he works with, and his women colleagues, had shared their real concerns within their sport. He clearly didn't feel comfortable being honest with me. [March 2018]

The conversation felt like a formality and every attempt to build rapport by making a joke or disclosing more about myself were disregarded. In that moment, my thoughts spiraled, and I started to panic, questioning my abilities as an interviewer. It was not until I later reflected on my identity that I considered how my age and gender may have contributed to this, and other similar experiences too. Thorne (2004) explains it is often easier to establish connections with participants when the researchers' personal characteristics, such as age, gender, culture, and ethnicity, do not make them distinctly an outsider. From the outset, it was evident that the men participants and I were distinctly different. Aside from my interest in sport, there were few obvious commonalities, which made the initial conversations between us feel effortful. Particularly at first, it felt as if the gender (and age) incongruence between us created distance. Whilst there were no discernible tensions between me and the men participants, initially some appeared tentative to share their honest opinions, providing what felt like surface level responses to my questions.

In addition to my identity as a young woman, it quickly became apparent that the subject of the research was also shaping the interview space and mediating the research relationships. In the case of the men participants, not only were these men talking to someone they had little in common with, but they were talking to a woman *about* women. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001, p.91) argue that to examine the impact of gender on interviews we need to move beyond 'Who is asking whom?' to 'Who is asking whom about what?'. I support this addition as in my opinion, the gendered topic of my research contributed to the reluctance of the men participants to talk candidly. On reflection, I question whether perhaps

the men participants felt, to some extent, at risk of offending *me* and therefore felt a pressure to withhold their views to protect *my* feelings as a woman. Gender is a highly complex topic and one that was likely previously unchartered territory for these men. Talking about it in depth for the first time, with a woman, could appear threatening and uncomfortable. For the women participants on the other hand, the research subject appeared to enhance their eagerness to engage in conversations. Many were passionate about women's rights and gender equality in sport and were yearning for their voices to be heard. As McDowell (1998) suggested, it is the subject of the research, not just the identities of the researcher and the research, that will shape an interview.

Pini (2005, p.204) argues that we need to go further and question "Who is asking whom about what and where?", because the gendered context of the research environment also informs the interview relationship. I would argue, we should go further again to ask, 'Who is asking whom about what, where, and *when*?', because the gendered context of the time of the research also pervades the research space. My data-collection period was at a time when stories about inappropriate treatment of sportswomen was highly prevalent in the media. During my interviews, the men participants admitted that they were acutely aware of the widespread media focus and the sensitivity of the topic and some even suggested that they adapt their coaching practices toward women athletes for fear of being publicly branded a bully. It would make sense then, that especially in the early stages of our conversations, the men participants refrained from speaking their minds for a similar concern of being framed in a negative light. They were, after all, talking to a woman, about women, at a time that stories about women were ubiquitous. For the women participants, the time of data-collection and the pervasive media attention only heightened their passion for the topic. They too, referenced news stories and frequently used public figures as examples to support their

points. It felt as if the women participants perceived me, at least to some extent, as an ally in a wider battle against gender inequality.

I discussed these reflections with my supervisors who urged me to think critically about the relational and performative aspects of my identity and the context of my research, specifically as it relates to myself and my participants. I so often read in the literature that it can be problematic for women to interview men, as the power brought by the interviewee's 'maleness' usurps the power of the woman researcher (Pini, 2005). In my experiences, however, I sensed the men participants initially felt uncomfortable and to some extent, threatened by the prospect of talking to a young, woman interviewer about women athletes at a time when media stories about women athlete maltreatment were rife. Whilst the development of trust between myself and the participants was likely to build over time, I also engaged in conscious behaviors in attempt to shift the power dynamics. For example, I made an active effort to engage in informal and light-hearted conversations during my time spent in their environments, asking plenty of questions about them and their life experiences. I reinforced my role *within* the EIS system, reinstating that my intention was not to catch them out, but rather to gain insight into their experiences with an aim to later provide support for the high-performance system. I repeatedly reassured them about anonymity and confidentiality and gave them several opportunities to ask me questions. Fortune and Mair (2011) suggest that when people recognize a student is someone who is there to learn, the threat diminishes and so I also reiterated my position as a student. Although I believe my age contributed, at least in part, to the initial challenges building a connection with the men participants, I later felt that being, and looking young helped me to plausibly adopt a more 'incompetent' and arguably, unthreatening position as a student (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). With time, I found that the men participants slowly started to open up to me. One particularly telling sign of this progress was the way they shifted their position on men and

women athletes. They started to acknowledge differences between men and women athletes and admitted to adapting their coaching practices accordingly, with comments such as, “I think you can definitely be a bit more forceful with the lads” and “I’ll be honest, they [women athletes] can be harder to work with”. There were also signs of trust and rapport developing through comments such as “your research feels real. I feel like we’re really chewing the fat on some of these topics”. While the gender (and age) incongruence between the men participants and me initially made it harder to build trust, over time our rapport developed as we engaged in banter and more personal conversations, and they offered what felt like more open and honest accounts of their experiences working with elite women athletes.

6.5 Spinning the Plates

When I embarked on my research journey, perhaps naively, I merely considered myself a researcher. Over time, however, I found myself navigating between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles and responsibilities as a researcher, a feminist, a physical cultural participant, and a trainee sport psychologist. Given the gendered focus of my research, in what follows I will focus on the challenges I faced negotiating the competing demands of being a feminist, within which I unashamedly have an activist agenda toward gender equality, and an immersive researcher, wherein building and maintaining rapport with participants is central to its quality.

During the early phases of my research, I experienced some unsettling interactions with participants in which I subsequently questioned my own responses. For example, during my observational period, much to my own surprise, I found myself laughing off jokes and comments made at the expense of women, such as, “women ey, you let them out the kitchen” and “man up”. In my reflexive journal I wrote:

> I can’t stop thinking about the fact I laughed off those sexist jokes today. I’ve tried justifying it to myself as part of the ‘rapport’ building process, which is a means to a

> (hopefully positive) end. But is my silence complicity? I keep asking myself: How far will I, and *should* I go to build rapport? There must be a more effective way to challenge these comments, whilst maintaining good relationships with my participants… [August, 2017]

I was confronted with a predicament; I wanted to draw attention to inequalities and sexist comments, but I feared doing so may compromise my project or damage my relationships with participants. I was navigating my conflicting roles as a feminist with an activist agenda, and a researcher with a rapport agenda. The literature shows that my experiences are not unique as a feminist researcher. For example, Wilson (2010) explained how she "smiled through gritted teeth" (p. 139) as she endured sexist comments to access participants, and Olive and Thorpe (2011, p. 426) asked, "must we bite our 'feminist tongue' to collect quality data?" after reflecting on similar experiences.

Through reflexive practice, it became clear that I was avoiding confrontations with participants as I was negotiating, and to some extent sidestepping, the 'feminist' label. In other words, I was nervous about being branded a feminist. Not because I was ashamed of being a feminist, but because I was concerned that it would jeopardize my research. I feared it would create distance between myself and my participants and that they would no longer want to engage in conversations with me. Since starting my research journey, I have been acutely aware of the labels attached to feminists such as 'femi-nazis', 'man-haters', and 'bra burning crazies' (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Several participants made comments that insinuated negative connotations of feminists, such as, "I sound like such a feminist" and "I'm not one of those feminists but...", which heightened my concerns around being branded a feminist. At the time, I could not help but feel guilty about my avoidance of the feminist label as I feared it may reproduce the negative stigma around feminism. However, ultimately, I felt it was more productive for my research and women athletes in the long term

if I blended in and challenged sexist comments more subtly. This choice to avoid the feminist label, like Berbary (2014) describes, was not an attempt to conceal my identity or act disingenuously, but rather a bid to reduce the distance between myself and my participants as much as possible.

I turned to extant literature for guidance on how to negotiate my multiple roles and noted that whilst few researchers have offered advice on how to practically negotiate these issues in immersive projects, Olive and Thorpe (2011) provided specific guidance based on their experiences. For example, they shared how they experimented with various responses ranging from quick witted humor and irony, visual signs of disapproval (e.g., a frown or a raised eyebrow), to verbal statements and/or questions to prompt the perpetrator to rethink their position. I too experimented with different responses. At times, when the conversations were more casual, I used sarcastic comments and witty retorts. For example, during my time in the field, a man performance director, said, "there's always something with the women, they're such nightmares to work with", to which I replied, in laughter, "because the men are all such angels to work with?". In this example, I found irony an effective strategy to employ as the performance director responded with, "ha that's true, they're also nightmares!". Other times however, when the setting was more formal, for example, in team meetings, I felt it was inappropriate to respond with humor so instead I experimented with simple statements and questions to prompt a shift of perspective or trigger a conversation. Tone and timing both proved pivotal aspects in effectively employing these strategies. Not only did I find Olive and Thorpe's (2011) suggestions useful to subtly challenge comments without damaging my relationships with participants, but I also appeased my own conscience for my previous silence did not sit well with me.

In addition to using wit and subtle prompts and questions, I wanted to engage in more in-depth conversations with my participants around the topics of feminism and gender in

sport as I felt it was important to gain a deeper insight into their perspectives. During these conversations, I frequently found myself fighting the temptation to share my personal views with the participants. At times, I had to manage my own emotions as my feminist blood boiled in response to sexist or ignorant comments made by some of my participants. In those moments, I felt my feminist role was at odds with my researcher role; I wanted to share my views and challenge my participants, but the idea of doing so felt contrary to what I believed the role of an interviewer to be, that is, to be neutral and unassuming. Through reflective practice, discussions with my supervisors, and reading extant literature, I immediately felt comforted to learn that in this way, the two roles were less contradicting than I originally thought. In fact, as it turns out, I was buying into a (post)positivist rhetoric of researcher objectivity, which effectively disavows the researchers' voice (Clarke & Braun, 2019). Within feminist research, it is widely believed that the researcher and the researched co-construct the data (Eggly, 2002). Striving for neutrality, therefore, is not the aim of a feminist researcher. Whilst I felt like I had been given the license to be more open about my views, especially with the men participants, I was still conscious of being perceived as a 'man hater' (Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). I therefore experimented with different approaches to challenging the participants' viewpoints and discovered that when done tactfully, it prompted rich discussions. I found using phrases like "some people would argue" or "the literature says" to offer alternative perspectives particularly helpful. Doing so allowed me to present opposing ideas in a calm and non-judgmental way, which was often met with respect and openness. Feminist researchers have long admitted the reflexive and methodological complexities and contradictions of their political, researching, personal, and gendered positions (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Squire, 2002; Wilson, 2010). Here I have outlined some of the difficulties I faced navigating the competing demands of being a feminist and a researcher. I entered the sport environments unaware of the tight rope I would be walking

but similar to that of Olive and Thorpe (2011), I found that as my research evolved, I became more confident and more effective in my ability to negotiate my multiple roles.

6.6 The F-Word

In the previous theme, I unpicked some of the contradictions and competing demands of being a feminist *and* a researcher. In this section, I will discuss some of the challenges I faced being a *feminist researcher*. In the same way there are multiple definitions of feminism, what it means to conduct feminist research can differ (Roper & Fisher, 2019). However, despite the differences, there are defining tenets of feminist research, some of which, I personally found difficult to engage with. For example, within feminist research there is an inherent commitment to social change, a central methodological emphasis on reflexivity, and an interdisciplinary focus (Olivier and Tremblay, 2000). Whilst I value all three of the aforementioned features of feminist research, I found each of them uniquely and continually challenging to navigate throughout my research.

Despite their differences, feminist scholars share an acknowledgement of systemic oppression and an unapologetic commitment to progressive social change (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). This was true for me too. I knew exactly *what* I wanted to achieve – gender equity in sport. I felt passionately about the fact that sport has been created by men, for men and that it continues to be laced with historical and structural gender inequalities. As I progressed through my research, however, I became increasingly aware that I was unsure *how* best to approach this mammoth feat. I had good intentions, of that I was sure, but I doubted whether the outcomes of my research would necessarily produce a positive change for sportswomen. I frequently questioned whether I was reinforcing the binary between men and women and potentially doing more harm than good. After a conversation with my supervisors, I wrote in my reflexive journal:

> As is common during our conversations, I felt like we were going round in circles. I started to question whether what I'm doing could actually have a negative impact on the women athletes. By focusing solely on women athletes, could my findings reproduce homogenous groups and accentuate the differences between men and women rather than take strides to closing the gap? I'm worried that despite my best efforts, I may do women an injustice. [May, 2018]

As can be seen from the extract above, I felt like the focus on difference between men and women was at odds with my aims as a feminist researcher, but at that time, I was unsure as to why. Asking these questions forced me to think about the answers. As Wilkinson and colleagues (1991) explain, I now recognize that psychology's traditional gender difference research has been used to reinforce and legitimize inequalities. By its very nature, difference research is in direct opposition to a critical feminist agenda as focusing on differences neglects the complexities surrounding gender relations (Gill, 2001). Back in 2018, I felt like I was going round in circles on this issue. My wise supervisors have since taught me the difference between a circle and a spiral; importantly, the latter involves forward momentum. Whilst these questions challenged my thinking and were difficult to work through, I now appreciate that they were part of the process of moving forward and have helped me to take a step closer toward more effectively achieving my goal of gender equity in sport.

As I moved forward through the spiral, I started to understand the important role language plays in the research process and the ability to create social change. Critical feminist scholars highlight the performative role of language in the construction of reality (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019), which is why feminist researchers are encouraged to critically examine the language and discourses used throughout the research process. I recognized that if I wanted to deviate from a focus on difference, the language I use, in the questions I ask and in the way I ultimately present my findings, must allow for complexity

and contradiction (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). This is a complex topic, that requires complex conversations. Appreciating the power of language helped me to recognize the role discourse itself could play in my quest for social change. I so frequently put pressure on myself to produce a ground-breaking piece of work that would transform the gender inequalities within the elite British sport system, but I started to understand that opening the dialogue on gender issues in sport is a powerful place to start. I did not need all the answers to have a positive impact on women athletes' experiences. Instead, I realized that highlighting the contradictions and complexities surrounding gender issues, challenging the narratives around women athletes and women's sport, and encouraging sports to bring gender issues to the forefront of their conversations were significant steps in the right direction.

Another central aspect of feminist research that I, at times, found overwhelming was engaging with the ongoing practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity stems from the premise that researchers cannot be separate from their research and so for feminist researchers, locating the researcher in the research process is pivotal (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Reflexivity involves a continual consideration of how the researchers' personal identity, values, and experiences impact the research process and outcomes (Crossley, 2007). Feminist researchers have long described the benefits of engaging with reflexive practice to explore a researcher's role in the co-production of knowledge and as a process to learn important lessons throughout a researcher's journey (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). As is evidenced throughout this confessional tale, the reflexive process challenged me to ask and answer difficult questions and undoubtedly helped me develop as a researcher. Less discussed in the literature, however, are the difficulties associated with engaging with the ongoing practice of reflexivity. The reflective process requires intense introspection on the part of the researcher, which sometimes involves reliving uncomfortable moments and realizing harsh

realities (Sanders et al., 2017). In my attempts to be thorough, I frequently found myself falling down a rabbit hole of unanswerable 'what if' questions and frustratingly going round in circles (or spirals). In my experience, it is a process that can become overwhelming and emotionally taxing. After particularly intense periods of reflexivity, I often found myself thinking, "I just want to be me and not have to think about the impact of my every move". Even in my personal life, I struggled to switch off from constantly wondering how my experiences were shaping my views and how my behaviors were impacting the current situation. It was exhausting. During these times, ironically, I found increasing my engagement with my reflexive and reflective practices especially helpful. They enabled me to process my thoughts and feelings, to articulate the challenges I was experiencing, and to get everything off my chest. In my opinion, reflexivity is an unquestionably valuable process to engage with as a feminist researcher, but it is one that requires honesty, self-awareness, and a lot of patience. I would urge any feminist researcher, or reflexive researcher alike, to experiment with various reflective practices such as, through writing a reflexive journal or discussions with critical friends, to ensure they feel supported through the inevitably bumpy journey of introspection and wandering thoughts.

The final aspect of feminist research that I found particularly challenging to navigate was its interdisciplinary approach. Olivier and Tremblay (2000) suggest that feminist research is interdisciplinary as it utilizes various lenses to understand the multiple forms of women's oppression. In my case, doing feminist research within sport psychology inherently required an interdisciplinary approach. Psychology is the study of individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Gill, 2001). However, as McGannon and Smith (2015) point out, to understand gender, we must consider the individual within the wider context of the social world, as culture shapes how we think, feel, and behave. Sport psychology does not have well-developed feminist theories or models and so many sport psychology scholars utilizing

feminist perspectives, like myself, have turned to other disciplines for feminist inspiration and guidance (Gill, 2001). Like Gill (2001), I appreciated that feminist theories have the potential to enrich the field of sport psychology. In doing so, I engaged with the sport sociology and feminist theory literature for the very first time. It felt totally alien to me. Particularly at first, when reading an article within a sociology journal, it felt as if I was googling every other word for a definition! At the time, I was embarrassed about my struggles and felt it reflected a lack of intelligence on my behalf. I have since taken comfort from learning that other sport psychology researchers have also experienced similar challenges with the hyper-sophisticated jargon used by some scholars in the sociology of sport literature (Butryn et al., 2014). In fact, it has been argued that the rhetoric gap is an obstacle to more interdisciplinary research being conducted (Smith & Brown, 2011). Like many things related to my PhD, I found perseverance and frequent discussions with my supervisors a useful tool in working through this challenge. I was fortunate enough to have a supervisor who specializes in the sociology of sport, who helped guide me through the literature, but I can certainly appreciate how the stylistic differences could be a deterrent to other researchers lacking support. Of course, there is no easy solution, as sociology scholars should not be expected to 'dumb down' their sophisticated work, however, researchers have been urged to write in clear and concise language to enhance accessibility and allow for greater opportunity for interdisciplinary work (Butryn et al., 2014).

With time, I slowly became more attuned to the language being used and started to appreciate the intricate theories within the sociology of sport literature. As I immersed myself within the field, I started to enjoy the sociological theorizing and critique. But that brought about its own problems as the further I delved into sociological thinking, the more difficult it became to uphold the practical application of sport psychology. Particularly when writing up my findings, I felt like it was a constant balancing act: whenever I felt like I had

demonstrated the contradictions and complexities of the sociology theories, the points seemed abstract and unpractical. On the other hand, whenever I neatly separated my point into clearly defined practical suggestions, they seemed oversimplistic and hollow. Other sport psychology researchers crossing sociology boundaries have similarly reported an enchantment with the critical thinking and intellectual stimulation of the sociology of sport, but also yearned for the direct applicability of sport psychology (Butryn et al., 2014). I have since come to understand the power in striking a balance between the two disciplines. Whilst psychology traditionally focuses on individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, – sometimes, at the expense of cultural understandings – sociology is motivated by societies, how people interact within these contexts, and the processes that sustain and challenge the social order. Combining the two perspectives provides a platform to situate the individual within a wider cultural context and to inform interventions from a micro, meso, and macro level. Together, these disciplines can have a profound impact on sport policy, sport practices, and the individuals within sport environments, which is precisely the reason why researchers should continue to grapple with this tension at the sport psychology, sociology of sport nexus. Overall, I found doing feminist research an apt example of the phrase 'nothing good comes easy': it is as rewarding as it is challenging. Working toward progressive social change, reflecting on your every move, and bridging the gap between two seemingly contradictory disciplines is a powerful and fulfilling journey, but one that requires hard work and perseverance.

6.7 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide an authentic account of my experiences conducting feminist research within the British elite sport system. Throughout this chapter, I have drawn upon extracts from my reflexive journal, without which, this confessional tale would not have been possible. Writing this chapter has been an eye-opening part of my

reflexive journey as I have been able to further process and dissect my experiences as a feminist researcher immersed in an elite sport environment. On several occasions throughout my research, I felt as if I was going round in circles. However, writing this chapter has helped me confirm that those circles, were indeed spirals. In offering an honest account of my experiences as a feminist researcher, I hope to demonstrate the value in engaging with reflexive practice, to normalize the many struggles of a feminist researcher, and to encourage other early career feminist researchers to learn from my mistakes. In concluding, I will summarize the key lessons that I have learned.

First, in preparing to embark upon this project, I underestimated how my identity, such as my age and gender, would impact my ability to build rapport with the men participants. I also overlooked how my research topic and the time of the research would interact to pervade the research space. The men participants appeared uncomfortable at the initial stages of my data collection. Whilst trust is likely to develop over time, I learned that there are certain behaviors that a researcher can engage with to appear less threatening and help the rapport building process. For example, reiterating my position as an insider with an intention to help inform practice *within* the system helped me be perceived as less intimidating. I also believe that as Fortune and Mair (2011) suggested, positioning myself as a student who is there to learn helped to put the men participants at ease. Acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic and the prevalence in the media also proved pivotal in my attempts to create a safe space for the men participants. Despite my active efforts to put my participants at ease, I experienced first-hand that patience is a virtue; the longer I spent in their environments, the more the participants disclosed personal information. Before embarking on a project that involves fieldwork, I would recommend any researcher to critically reflect on their own identity, the research topic, and the time of the research and think about how these factors may impact their research.

Second, upon entering the elite sport environment, I encourage feminist researchers to consider their clothing choices. Choosing what to wear may at first seem like a narcissistic and trivial decision, but as I later learned it is one that permeates the research space. Wearing clothing that is similar to that of your participants is an important methodological tool for blending in (Edwards, 1990; Kvale, 1996), even if it means wearing a tracksuit to an interview! At first, I was hesitant to wear informal sport clothing as I feared it would be perceived as unprofessional, but I quickly learned the importance of being viewed, at least to some extent, as an insider, to help ease the rapport building process. I also learned that particularly as a feminist researcher, it is important to be aware of how your personal feminist views shape the clothing choices you make and how you choose to perform traditional femininity through your appearance (Lee, 1997). Whilst it may be impossible to know how your clothing choices impact your research, I would urge feminist researchers to reflect on or discuss their clothing decisions and to be mindful of how they may impact their relationships with participants.

Third, at times, it can feel as though your role as a feminist with an activist agenda can be at odds with your role as a researcher wherein building and maintaining rapport is pivotal. On several occasions, I found myself biting my feminist tongue as I was conscious of damaging rapport with participants and not wanting to bias their perspectives. I learned that there are more effective ways to navigate the competing demands of being a feminist and a researcher than my initial silence. For example, inspired by Olive and Thorpe (2011), I found humor, subtle prompts, and poignant questions effective strategies to employ in response to sexist remarks. I also learned that the aim of a feminist researcher is not to stay neutral, and instead found, like many other researchers (Richards, 2015) that disclosing my own, or contrary views, prompted rich discussions with my participants. Using phrases like "some people would argue" or "the literature says" were particularly helpful in providing an

alternative perspective in a non-judgmental way. Whilst I appreciated the sensitivity of researching an area like gender, I had not anticipated the need to manage my own emotions as I negotiated my passionate feminist views. I would urge any feminist conducting research in this area to be honest with themselves about their personal views, to experiment with strategies to effectively manage their own emotions, and to consider challenging sexist comments in ways that they feel most comfortable.

Finally, I can now confirm that engaging with feminist research is in no way, simple (not that I ever thought anything to the contrary)! Inherent in feminist research is an unapologetic commitment to social change, which is the type of social change that feminists have been rallying for since the nineteenth century (cf. Carter, 2019). Despite the undue pressure researchers may put on themselves, it makes sense, then, that feminist researchers do not hold a master key that unlocks all the answers to gender equality. On reflection, I can recognize that the doubts I experienced about the outcomes of my research were an important part of the research process. Without those questions, I would not have advanced my thinking and clarified my positions. I also began to understand the power of language within critical feminist research, wherein it is said to be involved in the construction of reality (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Language became a central tenet of my research, both in the way I asked questions and eventually the way I wrote up my findings, allowing for contradictions and complexities.

Reflexivity is another central feature of feminist research, and it is my hope that this chapter exemplifies the many reasons why. My continued reflective practice pushed my thinking to new heights by forcing me to ask and answer challenging yet important questions, and it helped improve my ability to recognize and negotiate feminist complexities as a researcher. Whilst feminist researchers have long described the benefits of reflexivity, they rarely discuss the challenges involved in engaging with the process. Reflexivity can be

frustrating and emotionally taxing. Admittedly, I found that at times, engaging with reflexivity took its toll on me. Both within and outside of the research context, I struggled to not critically reflect on my every move. Ironically, I found writing in my reflexive journal and engaging in reflective conversations with my supervisors particularly helpful during these times.

As someone coming from a sport psychology background, it meant that I experienced an adjustment period as I was introduced to the sport sociology literature for the first time. Like other sport psychology scholars (cf. Butryn et al., 2014), I found it particularly difficult to navigate the sophisticated verbiage within the sociology of sport literature. Later, when writing up my findings, I also struggled to incorporate the depth of sociological theories and critiques, whilst maintaining the practicality from sport psychology. Importantly, I later understood that the sociology of sport literature, though less concerned with individual interventions, has informed a wide range of sport policy and governance interventions. For others embarking on similar interdisciplinary work for the first time, it might be useful to allow a generous amount of time when entering a new field of research. I would also strongly recommend finding a patient, well-read, supervisor, or critical friend, with appropriate expertise, to help guide you through the process!

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Implications

7.0 Overview

In this thesis I have offered a rigorous, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the psychosocial experiences of women athletes and their coaches within Great British elite sports. In this final chapter, the findings are synthesized to detail the empirical and practical implications of this research and how we move forward in this space, which includes a resource that was created to disseminate across the Great British elite network to guide coaches, practitioners, and sport leaders on how to support and work *with* women athletes more effectively within their environments. This chapter, and the entire thesis, closes by offering future avenues for research to bring about change for women athletes, before providing some concluding thoughts on the significance of this work.

7.1 Summary of Studies

The main objective of this research was to build a rich, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the psychosocial experiences of women athletes and their coaches. There were three practical aims of this thesis: (a) to identify how coaches and sport practitioners can support women athletes more effectively, (b) to critically expose gender disparities in sport, and (c) to offer practical recommendations for sport organizations to address the gender imbalances and create an environment that enables women athletes to thrive.

Chapter four explored the coaches' perceptions of working directly with women athletes within the elite sport system along with my observations of my time spent in the sport environments. Building upon and extending previous research, the aim of the chapter was to offer a holistic multi-level analysis of the socio-cultural factors affecting the coaching practices of those working directly with elite sportswomen from a range of sports. Data were collected over a 20-month immersive period via fieldwork observations and semi-structured interviews. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 men and women elite coaches and a reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Three themes were

identified: (a) *It's Bigger Than Sport*, (b) *Women in a Man's World,* and (c) *Same Same But Different*. The first theme, *It's Bigger Than Sport*, reflected a macro-level analysis that demonstrated how traditional gendered views and behaviors impact the sport environments. For example, the findings demonstrated that, reflective of wider sociocultural views, women athletes continue to be viewed and treated as second class citizens within their sport environments. Some of the participants suggested that other coaches and practitioners sometimes unintentionally treat men athletes as "royalty" as they actively seek to work and travel with men athletes and prioritize the sportsmen's training schedules. The second theme, *Women in a Man's World*, reflected a meso-level analysis that exposed how deep structures of sport organizations are gendered. The findings highlighted inequalities in basic facilities, the absence of women in leadership positions, and the lack of opportunities for women athletes to have their voices heard. The findings also revealed how the gendering of sport organizations is the consequence of invisible processes such as how banter is used to trivialize women in sport. The third theme, *Same Same But Different*, reflected a micro-level analysis that discussed the participants' personal experiences working directly with women athletes. The findings demonstrated that women athletes are positioned as different from traditional views of heterosexual masculinity, which are celebrated and preferred within sport. For example, several participants revealed that they had a preference for working with people who "just get on with it" without displaying emotions or asking questions. The participants recognized the danger in making gendered generalizations and insisted that above all, the most effective coaching practice was to treat each athlete as an individual.

The fifth chapter in this thesis explored the experiences of elite women athletes within their sport environments. The aim of the study was to offer a holistic multi-level analysis of women athletes' experiences across a range of sports, situated within their sport environments and our wider culture. Data were collected over a 20-month immersive period

via fieldwork observations and semi-structured interviews. 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 elite sportswomen and a reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Three themes were identified: (a) *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* (b) *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* and (c) *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting"*. The first theme, *A Mirror Without Reflection… "They Don't See Why It Should Change",* reflected a macro-level analysis that showed how sport environments reflect societal trends wherein the upward trajectory toward gender equality continues to be laced with beliefs and behaviors that align to the male hierarchy. For example, the participants reported that many people within sport still show "greater respect for men's sport", which was demonstrated by the men's events at competitions being the flagship event and the head coaches and performance directors prioritizing their time to travel to men's events at the expense of traveling to the women's equivalent. The findings also showed that, similar to that of our wider society, there remains a stigma attached to women's health topics such as the menstrual cycle. The second theme, *It's a Man's World… "The Only Reason You're Still Here is Because You're Nice to Look at",* reflected a meso-level analysis of how social norms shape the gendered interactions within elite sport environments. More specifically, the participants suggested that their experiences and interactions as women in the world of elite sport differed to that of men athletes as coaches and sport practitioners were influenced by traditional gendered norms about men and women. For example, the participants suggested that some of their coaches adapt their coaching practices according to views that women will cry first, will give up first, will not be able to push themselves as hard and are 'softer'. The participants also suggested that banter is used within their sport environments to marginalize women and their athletic achievements. The final theme, *Balancing the Elephant on the Seesaw… "It's*

Difficult the Moment You Take Yourself Out of a Sporting Setting", reflected a micro-level analysis of the participants' personal experiences navigating the competing demands of being women in Western society and athletes within the world of elite sport. For example, the participants described challenging hegemonic associations of being a woman by merely being an athlete, which demands mental and physical strength, competitiveness, and direct communication. They also articulated their intrapersonal quandaries as they negotiated the opposing pressures of traditional hegemonic ideals and elite sport performance with their physical bodies, expectations of perfection, displaying emotions, and requesting information.

Complimenting these two realist tales and extending qualitative literature in sport psychology, the sixth chapter in this thesis was a confessional tale exploring my experiences of doing feminist research within elite sport environments. In this study, I reflected on my experiences being a young, white, middle-class, woman researcher integrating into elite sport environments. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze ~300 hours of observation, my reflexive journal, and ongoing reflexive discussions with my supervisory team. Four challenges navigating feminism as a researcher were discussed: (a) *To Wear or Not to Wear?* (b) *It's Bigger Than Us*, (c) *Spinning the Plates*, and (d) *The F-word*. The first challenge, *To Wear or Not to Wear?*, discussed my experiences receiving my sport kit, my decisions in what to wear throughout my data collection period, and my reflections on how my decisions impacted data collection. The second challenge, *It's Bigger Than Us,* shared my reflections of how my own identity played a fundamental role in influencing my interactions with different participants. Specifically, I discussed the ease with which I felt I was able to build rapport with my women participants and shared the initial challenges I faced engaging with my men participants. The third challenge, *Spinning the Plates,* exposed the difficulties I faced navigating between multiple, and sometime conflicting, roles and

responsibilities as a feminist, within which I unapologetically have an activist agenda toward gender equality, and an immersive researcher, wherein building and maintaining rapport with participants is central to its quality. The final challenge, *The F-word*, discussed my experiences engaging with feminist research within elite sport. Specifically, I reflected on the difficulties and doubts I experienced in trying to drive a social change through my research, the intensity of engaging with reflexivity, and the complexities surrounding an interdisciplinary approach between psychology and sociology. Recommendations for other early career feminist researchers were offered, which included engaging in reflexive practice to explore how their own identity may impact their research, to consider their clothing choices, to understand the power of language within their research, and to experiment with strategies to effectively manage their own emotions.

7.2 Empirical Implications

This section addresses the empirical implications of this thesis, the aim of which was to build a rich, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the experiences of women athletes and their coaches. In doing so, this thesis extends previous research in at least six ways. First, the methodological rigor of prior research focused on gender in elite sport has been questioned due to its over reliance on cross-sectional research designs (Norman, 2016) that use a "hit and run approach" (Booth & Booth, 1994, p. 417). Booth and Booth (1994) suggest that building rapport demands a level of intimacy that goes beyond the 'normal' relationship between an interviewer and participant. By using a multi-method, immersive, and longitudinal approach, this research has been able to address the intimate, dynamic, contextualized experiences of and interactions between women athletes and those working directly with them. During the 20-month period where I was immersed into the sport environments, I was able to build rapport with participants, which was evidenced through the sharing of personal stories, using and reciprocating 'banter', and physical touch (e.g.,

hugs, high fives). In line with previous research, building rapport was a vital aspect in encouraging participation in the interview process (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016) and there were notable differences in the ways the participants communicated with me the more time I spent in their sport. For example, on several occasions during the semi-structured interviews, the participants referenced conversations or jokes we had engaged in during my time spent in their environments, which appeared to create a sense of familiarity and comfort during our interactions. The participants started to use sport specific terminology, referenced people from their sport settings, and spoke about specific structures of their sports, as they took confidence in my understanding of their environments. During the latter stages of my data collection, the participants opened up about very personal struggles and in some cases shared intimate stories that they had only previously told to those closest to them. Finally, being able to spend time with the participants before, during, and after their interviews provided several opportunities for me to reflect on and probe the participants on what I had seen and heard during my data collection period, which enhanced the depth of our conversations and the richness of the data. Therefore, through using an immersive and longitudinal approach, I have highlighted the complexities associated with building rapport and have demonstrated the value of investing time and emotion into the research process. All in all, this thesis extends previous literature by providing a *rigorous* program of research, so that researchers and applied sport practitioners can be confident in the findings and suggested recommendations for how sports can support women athletes more effectively.

Second, when this research was initiated in 2016, sport psychology scholars had predominantly used a single level of analysis (i.e., a macro-level, meso-level, *or* micro-level) to explore women athletes. It has been argued, however, that a single level of analysis may not capture the complexities surrounding gender, nor identify the nuances required to bring about change that challenges the gender hierarchy (De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019). Therefore,

in response to several calls to explore women athletes from a socio-cultural perspective (e.g., Blodgett et al., 2015; Norman, 2016; Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2015), this research used Burton and Leberman's (2017) proposed multilevel framework to understand the experiences of women athletes and their coaches by considering their individual experiences (i.e., micro-level), within the context of their sport environment (i.e., meso-level) and our wider culture (i.e., macro-level). Therefore, consistent with the cultural sport psychology agenda (Blodgett et al., 2015), the multi-level analyses framework used in this research adds a layer of context to previous one-dimensional results flowing from the conventional single-level analyses. Cultural competence starts with considering people as cultural beings within their contextually contained backgrounds and experiences (Ryba et al., 2013), and this research highlights how broader socio-cultural norms (i.e., macro-level factors) influence the gendered practices of sport organizations (i.e., meso-level factors), which shape the individual experiences of coaches working with women athletes (i.e., micro-level factors).

Third, through drawing on the theory of hegemony, this study adds texture to the underlying agendas of cultural sport psychology, critical feminist psychology, and feminist sport psychology with an understanding of power as built on active and spontaneous consent in order to ascertain the nuances of the gender order in elite sport. The articulation and rearticulation of common sense – as the lived, felt, and practiced basis of hegemony – has helped to understand the (re)production of the gender order and therefore how sport is inextricably tied to historical power relations. This has enabled an understanding of how the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels work in dynamic reciprocity over time, along with how each plays a role in maintaining the male hegemonic status quo within sport.

Fourth, previous work in this area has predominantly focused on the experiences of women athletes or the coaches working with them from *within* a single sport rather than examining the transferability of findings *across* sports (e.g., De Haan & Norman, 2019; De

Haan & Knoppers, 2019; De Haan & Sotiriadou, 2019). By engaging with participants from across five sports, this research has increased the naturalistic generalizability and transferability of this field of research, which extends previous research as it highlights nuances between and among participants and sports. For example, the findings demonstrate that the women athlete participants from across *all* sports were acutely aware of their inferior positioning as women within the world of elite sport. They also show that the athlete participants from across the sports feel as if they lack suitable avenues to raise their opinions and concerns within their sport environments. Arguably as important as the consistencies between athletes and sports are the shifting of views and contradictory opinions within and between the participants. For example, the findings show that the way women athletes wish to be coached is highly personal as their preferences differed within and between participants. For example, while some participants were adamant that they wanted to be treated just like their men counterparts, other participants suggested that women athletes have different bodies and therefore should be coached accordingly. Moreover, the findings revealed that there are additional challenges for women athletes in sports where the women's program is relatively new as they are often fast-tracked through the sport system. Therefore, by using participants from across sports, this research provides opportunities for sports in one environment to consider adopting a recommendation based on experiences within another sport environment. Moreover, through using evocative quotations in chapters four and five, and storytelling in chapter six, this research has enhanced generativity, which occurs when research moves people to act upon what they have read (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Fifth, despite claiming to examine elite athletes, research frequently uses university student athletes as participants, many of whom, it can be argued, should not be classed as elite (Swann et al., 2015). Whilst research exploring pre-elite athletes provides valuable

insights to the field of sport psychology, the context in which they train and compete are likely to differ to that of the elite level. The dubious nature of the definitions of 'elite' in previous research, therefore, limits our development of understanding the gendered experiences of genuine elite women athletes and their coaches within world-class sport settings. According to Swan and colleague's (2015) characterization of elite, the participants in this program of research were a combination of semi-elite, competitive-elite, and world-class elite women athletes and coaches, all of whom train and compete in a world-class elite environment. This research, therefore, presents a unique perspective of the nuances of gender within genuine elite sport environments and offers several novel findings. For example, despite the recent athletic success for women athletes within Team GB, the findings revealed that elite women athletes still feel as if they are viewed and treated as inferior to men athletes. Moreover, the findings reveal that even within elite sport environments, the menstrual cycle remains a taboo. Despite the potential for competitive advantages by monitoring hormonal fluctuations, the men coaches openly admitted avoiding conversations on these topics, and women athletes suggested they felt silenced to talk about a normal aspect of their physiology.

Finally, despite scholars explicitly acknowledging the importance of reflexivity within feminist research in psychology, there remains an absence of feminist sport psychology researchers overtly sharing their personal reflexivity (Clarke & Braun, 2019). In this respect, sport psychology continues to be plagued by the "phenomenon of the missing researcher" (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p,156) as there appears to be a dominance of (post)positivism as researchers adhere to the rhetoric of researcher neutrality (Clarke & Braun, 2019). In response to this call, and in line with critical feminist research (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019), this thesis has embraced reflexivity. Throughout the four and a half years that spanned this program of research, including 20-months of data collection, I engaged with two ways of reflecting. First, I wrote a reflexive journal, in which I detailed my daily

experiences, thoughts, emotions, and reactions to what I was witnessing in the sport environments. Second, I engaged in frequent and reflexive discussions with my supervisors, who acted as critical friends as they asked thought-provoking questions and challenged my thinking. In chapters four and five, in addition to offering the perspectives of the coaches and women athletes respectively, I have also included my observations as I experienced the sport environments. Complimenting the two realist tales, I have also used the genre of the confessional tale to share my experiences of doing feminist research within elite sport environments. It has been argued that by only reporting where research endeavors go as planned, the learning that comes from mishaps remains private and overlooked (Boman & Jevne, 2000). Therefore, in addition to offering insights into what I observed during my time in the sport environments throughout the two realist tales, this thesis also extends previous research by presenting, through my confessional tales, the challenges I experienced during the research process, which has tremendous pedagogical potential as it provides an opportunity to help fellow researchers learn from the personal experiences of others (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

7.3 Practical Implications

This section addresses the third aim of this thesis, that is, to offer practical recommendations to sport practitioners and policy makers on how to support elite women athletes more effectively. This thesis has drawn upon the theory of hegemony and related concepts such as ‘common sense’ to help us understand the (re)production of the gender order. The articulation and rearticulation of common sense provides a level of nuance to establish moments of intervention around which energies can be concentrated. By specifying the potential mechanisms by which hegemony is maintained, it also presents opportunities for resistance and therefore practical recommendations. Most of these can be seen as what Gramsci (1971) would describe as a ‘war of position’: ways of identifying strategic

opportunities to disrupt and destabilize the status quo, and through these attempting to legitimize a reorganization of common sense (Zompetti, 2012). These moments of intervention, although all interrelated, will be discussed at three levels: macro, meso, and micro. In this thesis, macro-level implications, or 'moments of intervention', are characterized as those that use sport as a vehicle to drive progressive social changes within society. Meso-level implications are those that sport organizations can operationalize to contribute to a more gender equitable sport environment that challenges the male hierarchy. Finally, micro-level implications are those that coaches, and sport practitioners can engage with from an individual perspective to support women athletes more effectively.

7.3.1 Macro-Level Implications. Policy makers and sport managers have the tendency to overlook macro-level factors predominantly on the grounds that they believe these factors are out of their control (De Bosscher et al., 2015). However, in recent years there has been growing interest in how sport can become a sociocultural context to enable social missions (Guest, 2013; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2012). Known as *Sport for Social Change* (SFSC), this sub-field of *Sport-for-Development* uses sport as a catalyst to develop socially and physically healthy communities (Sherry et al., 2015). Social missions through sport date back to Ancient Greece where sport was considered a context to stimulate the advancement of the person and society (Schinke et al., 2015). The long-standing belief in social virtues of sport has led several societies to use sport as a vehicle to drive social integration and societal cohesion, and as a means of empowering disadvantaged populations within society (Schinke et al., 2015).

The shared language of sport has the potential to influence people by increasing global awareness, respect, and understanding of diversity in a safe context (Schinke et al., 2015). The findings of this thesis offer several ways that elite sport organizations could, and *should*, harness their influence as a means of challenging the status quo and contributing to

a rearticulation of common sense. For example, reflective of our wider society, the findings of this thesis suggest that the menstrual cycle, at least to some extent, remains a taboo in Great British elite sport. The men coaches admitted actively avoiding conversations that related to women's health, while the women athletes recognized a competitive advantage of having the opportunity to talk about and monitor their hormonal fluctuations and adapt their training accordingly. The men coaches felt uncomfortable, mainly because they felt they did not, and could not, understand women's health. This marks a clear space to intervene as sport organizations can up-skill their members of staff on women's health to give them confidence to engage in conversations on these topics. Furthermore, if sport organizations are to contribute to a shifting gender order and break the taboo, they must prioritize bringing the menstrual cycle to the forefront of their conversations, getting the resources needed to monitor their women athletes' hormonal fluctuations and considering the athletes' individual differences. By breaking the taboo of the menstrual cycle, sport has the potential to help change society's perception of women's health, from one that is stigmatized as an abomination (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011) to one that celebrates the intricacies of the women's body.

Another way sport organizations could help reproduce a common sense understanding of women's sport as in some way inferior to men's sport is through their individual media platforms. The women athletes recognized that sport media coverage tends to favor men's sport and men athletes in both the quality and quantity of articles, and many suggested these inconsistencies were also apparent within their individual sport media platforms. Specifically, the participants revealed that the media representatives within their sports pay more attention to and publicly promote their men athletes over their women athletes. They also shared their frustration toward the men being portrayed as strong, competitive athletes amidst their performance while women are photographed smiling on

the podium. In this way, the sportswomen felt their athletic prowess was being reduced to embody hyper femininity, which is in line with a body of evidence that demonstrates sport media emphasizes women athletes' heterosexual femininity over their sport competence (Daniels, 2009). Some of the women athletes spoke about wanting to be role models for the younger generation of women by publicly showing them that women can be and *are* strong, powerful, athletes. To this end, they themselves took active strides toward counteracting the hyperfeminine narrative by posting pictures and videos on their social media platforms of themselves and their women teammates lifting heavy weights and amid their training and performance. They felt passionately that by outwardly celebrating strong, athletic, women, they would contribute to a cultural shift in which deviations from hyper femininity would become normalized. This seems to present a fragile hegemony, or evidence of a moment of transition within sport, partly based on shifts in attitudes outside of sport, and partly based on the determination of women athletes to reconstruct meanings of hegemonic femininity. There is scope for sport organizations to support the women athletes on their mission to empower the younger generation, by ensuring their individual media platforms not only promote their men and women athletes in an equal *amount* of coverage, but also make an active effort to use images of their women athletes that reflect a *high degree of physical ability,* over those which emphasize their physical attractiveness. By filtering their internal media platforms to promote women athletes how they wish to be portrayed – that is, as strong, powerful athletes – sport organizations will not only be empowering elite women athletes to have the confidence to perform, but they will also be publicly challenging traditional hegemonic views of femininity within our wider culture.

Despite increased participation opportunities for girls and women within sport in recent years, there continues to be an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions at all levels of sport (Burton, 2015). The coaches and athletes were indeed concerned about

the lack of women in positions of authority as the women athletes and coaches described feeling that they did not have a voice, nor did they have anyone fighting for them and progressive social change. A macro-level approach to examining the lack of women in leadership positions in sport recognizes that sport is a gendered institution that operates within a hegemonic masculine norm (Burton, 2015). It has been argued that sport organizations have institutionalized masculinity, which privileges male activity and reinforces masculinity and masculine behaviors as the preferred characteristics required to be a leader (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). As stakeholder groups influence the operations and the gendered norms of organizations (Schull, Shaw, & Kihl, 2012), it is imperative that stakeholders within sport begin to challenge how gender operates as an organizing principle in leadership to create more opportunities for women to obtain leadership roles. In line with Piggott's (2019) recommendations, stakeholders can, for example, introduce a minimum gender rule which ensures an equal number of women and men are in leadership positions. Stakeholders can also contribute to closing the gender gap within leadership through initiatives that diversify the high-performance coaching community by investing into the younger generation of women coaches and increasing the opportunities for women coaches to take up senior and leadership roles.

Pushing for more leadership roles, within coaching teams, senior management, and the broader institutions of sport, would also help in the continued building of institutional positions from which to further legitimize oppositional meanings. These offer opportunities to amplify alternative articulations of common sense along with the chance to develop channels of communication between seemingly isolated voices within sport. Of course, obtaining such positions is one step of many; the theory of hegemony suggests that embedded organizational pressures will delimit one's capacity to 'give voice' to alternative ideas even if a position is obtained, and therefore efforts will need to be concerted. To build

the prospect of resonance around an alternative common sense, for greater inclusivity, it need not be directly based on women athletes. For example, when discussing the apparent information seeking of women athletes, coaches suggested they do not have the time required to offer suitable support that aligns with the athletes' needs, something that coaches could look to amend at a superficial level. With evidence here and elsewhere, however, of generational changes in expectations around the direction of power within relationships and attitudes shifting toward dialogue (over knowledge transmission), voice can be offered to *all* athletes, thereby increasing the appeal of the alternative message and athlete autonomy, a well-documented psychological need associated with optimal performance.

7.3.2 Meso-Level Implications. The findings from this thesis have also demonstrated how an understanding of the bigger picture (i.e., macro-level) can provide useful information needed to inform meso-level interventions. Sport psychology researchers have traditionally examined success in elite sport from an intra-individual perspective, focusing on athlete motivations (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004), beliefs (Hays et al., 2007), and emotions (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003), with a tendency to overlook the climatic and cultural factors associated with optimal development (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Wagstaff (2017, p. 3) suggests that there is a danger of a "myth of individualism"; the prevailing belief that sporting success or failure is a result of individual effort and ability. Drawing from Shaw's (1981) work on social environments, Hardy and colleagues (1996, p. 239-240) argued that "elite athletes do not live in a vacuum; they function within a highly complex social and organizational environment, which exerts major influences on them and their performances". In line with Hardy and colleagues' (1996) vacuum analogy, organizational psychology, a subfield of sport psychology, focuses on understanding individual behavior and social processes in sport organizations to promote organizational functioning (Wagstaff, 2019, p. 1).

Allied with the multi-level framework used within this thesis, organizational psychology researchers and practitioners seek not only to highlight organizational processes that lead to optimal functioning, but also to understand how organizational processes and concepts in sport (i.e., meso-level factors) influence individual behavior (i.e., micro-level factors; Wagstaff, 2019). Indeed, research has shown that recurrent success and well-being in elite sport is not solely dependent on the talent of the athlete, but rather, how effectively the individuals are able to build and sustain working relationships with a systemic collective of social agents (e.g., coaches, support staff), supports (e.g., scientific, medical), networks (e.g., personal social support), and bodies (e.g., sport organizations, commercial sponsors; Wagstaff et al., 2012). In recent years, sport organizations have started to be held accountable for their role in developing and maintaining cultures that promote a duty of care and well-being for all individuals within their environment (Wagstaff, 2019), thus meso-level interventions are of utmost importance here.

In line with the organizational psychology agenda, critical sport and exercise scholars have argued it essential to challenge organizational structures and the exercise of power in sport contexts, which marginalize anyone socially constructed in opposition to white heterosexual masculine standards, including, but not limited to, those who are women, gay, ageing, or disabled (Schinke et al., 2015). Indeed, the findings in this thesis have identified ways that elite sport organizations can take strides to operate in a way that challenges the male hierarchy. The women athlete participants specifically highlighted the direct performance implications of training in an environment that reinforces the gender order; they revealed how training in an environment that views and treats women athletes as inferior to men athletes implicitly undermines their confidence to perform as they do not feel empowered to be the best athletes they can be. The High Performance Environment (HPE) Model, which identifies variables associated with sustainable high performance at the

individual, group, and organizational levels, suggests that a leader is responsible for creating conditions in which their followers will excel and fulfil their potential (Jones et al., 2009). The HPE model also postulates that for people to operate effectively in their performance environment, they must be motivated to perform to the best of their ability (Jones et al., 2009). The fact that the women athletes suggest that they do not feel empowered, nor motivated to perform, presents a moment of intervention for sport organizations to acknowledge the gender discrepancies within their sport and to verbalize their intentions toward progressive change. Gender inequality is a complex topic, and one that cannot be 'solved' overnight. Therefore, those in leadership positions within sport organizations have a responsibility to allocate sufficient time, resources, and commitment toward the process of a cultural shift within their environments.

Participants from across sports within this study acknowledged the underlying basis of their sports as dominated by a traditional gender order. A large number of examples were given as to how this manifests, examples that, as repetition of common occurrences, can be seen as also reproducing that traditional common sense. For example, both the women coaches, and the women athletes, suggested that banter is used inappropriately within their sport environments. The participants offered several examples of sexist banter, and during my observational period, I also witnessed various jokes being made at the expense of women and women's sport. The women coaches suggested that sexist banter was used to undermine their authority and to trivialize their real concerns, while the women athletes revealed how sexist banter was used to belittle their athletic achievements and to reinforce the male hierarchy. Both, the athletes and the coaches, suggested that sexist banter and inappropriately sexualized comments are commonplace and accepted within their sport cultures. Within British culture, banter is an ever-growing form of interaction that often functions to conceal derogatory or insulting remarks. Targeting gender has been proposed as an example of what

has previously been described as a 'banter violation' (Rivers & Ross, 2019) yet sexist comments are often passed off as 'just banter' (Nichols, 2018). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that sport leaders revisit their cultural norms and reset the standards for what type of language and jokes will be deemed appropriate within their training environments. In line with Piggott's (2019) recommendations, gender-biased or discriminatory language should be called out and challenged across the organizations by *everyone*, but particularly by members of the leadership teams who should take responsibility for leading cultural change within their environments.

Other ways that sport organizations can contribute to shifting the gender order within their environments is through equalizing their training facilities and scheduling. Athletes and coaches from across a range of sports suggested that men's sport and men athletes still receive superior facilities. For example, when asked to draw their ideal training environment, participants from one sport drew equal sized changing rooms stating that at present, the men's changing room is double the size. Other participants suggested that the men athletes get preferential training times and revealed that changes to the men's program must be accommodated by changes to the women's program. The HPE model, outlined above, stipulates that people need to be equipped with the right instruments to help them perform (Jones et al., 2009). By ensuring basic facilities and training programs are distributed fairly, sport organizations can challenge the existing gender order and empower women athletes to thrive in their elite sport environments.

The final way that this thesis has demonstrated how a consideration of the bigger picture can provide useful information to inform an organizational intervention is through recognizing the athletes' shorter pathway onto an elite program. The findings suggest that given cultural inequalities in relation to financial investment into women's sport, the women's pathway to the elite level is often shorter than their men counterparts resulting in

less experience and international exposure prior to arriving on to an elite program. The findings suggest that the shorter pathway for women has profound implications on their elite career as they are expected to navigate their way through a program in which they are immediately held accountable to training and performing at the top level. During the time I spent in the sports, I witnessed a handful of fast-tracked sportswomen retire from the world class program for reasons associated with not feeling comfortable meeting the demands of the elite program. By failing to consider the bigger picture, therefore, sport organizations are unable to provide appropriate support for athletes entering the world-class level, which hinders their opportunities for success and in some cases, results in premature retirement from sport. It is urgent that sport organizations understand their athletes training history and adapt their expectations and support accordingly. Moreover, by seeking symmetrical arrangements of not just funding but the funding of development pathways, between men and women's sport, the possibility emerges of moving beyond these current shortcuts that help reproduce a common sense understanding of women's sport as in some way inferior to men's sport. Investing into development pathways for women's sport would not only offer a resistance to the hegemony but would also provide women athletes more opportunities to gradually increase their exposure to competitive sport, which as the participants suggested, would improve their abilities to meet the demands of training and performing at the elite level.

7.3.3 Micro-Level Implications. The findings from this thesis have also demonstrated how an understanding of the bigger picture (i.e., macro-level), and organizational practices (i.e., meso-level) can provide useful information needed to inform individual (i.e., micro-level) interventions. The women athletes revealed that they felt as if their coaches adapt their coaching practices based upon traditional hegemonic associations of gender. For example, the women athletes suggested that their coaches are influenced by

stereotypes that characterize women as those who will cry first, will give up first, will not be able to push themselves as hard, are softer and do not want direct, honest feedback from their coaches. The women athletes disagreed with these stereotypes, and the general position of the coaches, which appeared to move beyond the, perhaps 'politically correct' veil of neutrality, was that generalizations were dangerous, and that athletes should be treated based on their individual needs. This seems to present a fragile hegemony, or evidence of a moment of transition within sport, partly based on shifts in attitudes outside of sport, with scope to intervene and entrench a more inclusive approach through the activity of coaches. Previous research has shown that people's implicit beliefs often rely on stereotypical associations, frequently happening without people's conscious awareness of doing so (Ellemers, 2018). Therefore, whilst such assumptions may be subconscious, the findings highlight the need to create spaces for reflection within the organization of sport, to encourage coaches to reflect on their own underlying common sense views of gender, and to consider how their biases are influencing their current coaching practices. Sport organizations can support this process by creating a non-judgmental space for people to reflect honestly on their implicit beliefs and by encouraging people to take active steps toward altering their behaviors where appropriate.

Over the last year, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has gained global attention and many important lessons can be drawn from their tremendous efforts toward justice. One such lesson is the push toward 'anti-racism'. Whilst the term 'anti-racism' is a twentieth-century creation, it has received a lot of attention recently as activists have used the term to specifically make the point that it is not sufficient merely to be 'non-racist' (Bonnet, 2000). It has been argued that the neutrality of being 'non-racist' is inherently a mask for racism as, in essence, silence is complicity (Kendi, 2019). Whilst I do not wish to draw comparisons between race and gender, the idea of being anti-racist is both poignant

and applicable to gender. Throughout this thesis, there are several examples of how accepted cultural, organizational, and individual practices marginalized women athletes. To shift the gender order within elite sport organizations, it is important that everyone takes responsibility to be actively involved in the process of change. Thus, being 'non-sexist' is not enough; we need to be 'anti-sexist'. We each need to speak up and confront the gender hierarchy, by challenging sexist banter, refuting sexualized comments, disrupting the associations between hegemonic masculinity and elite performance, contesting unfair and unequal practices, and generally, reproducing the status quo. To allow women athletes to thrive in elite sport environments every person must take responsibility and hold each other accountable to being 'anti-sexist' to collectively drive the change toward gender equity.

7.4 Future Research: Where Do We Go Next?

Whilst this research offers several novel empirical and practical implications, it also presents opportunities to embark on future research. For example, one strength of this research is its methodological rigor. Underpinned by critical feminist psychology, this research used a feminist methodology in which the politics of asking questions, attention to language/discourse, reflexivity, representation and intersectionality, and mobilizing research for social change were all central tenets (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). However, given the aims of this thesis, which centered around optimizing the performance potential of women athletes within elite sport, intersectionality was not prioritized. The concept of intersectionality was born out of the critique of early feminist work wherein women were treated as a homogenous category (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Intersectionality is an important aspect of feminist works as it sheds light on the multidimensionality of positions of difference and oppression including race, class, (dis)ability, and sexuality (Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019). Through using multiple-axis analyses of marginalization, researchers can consider the multiple and shifting systems of power operating in people's lives (Lafrance &

Wigginton, 2019). Therefore, to better understand the multidimensional experiences of elite women athletes, future research should consider the links between individual experience and overlapping systems of marginalization.

In line with a feminist agenda, throughout this thesis, I was committed to disrupting the gender order and contributing to social change within elite sport. In many ways, this thesis has taken strides to expose systemic oppression and make recommendations for how elite sport can improve the conditions for women athletes. However, like much of the sport psychology literature (Keegan et al., 2017), there is a notable 'gap' between this research and applied practice. At the initial preparatory stages of this thesis, I had planned to do an additional study that would involve developing, disseminating, and evaluating an informational resource for the Great British elite sport network on how to support women athletes more effectively. However, after immersing myself into the sport environments for 12 months, I realized that my passion for social change risked undermining the quality of the project altogether and so, together with my supervisory team, I made the decision to spend more time collecting data to build a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the sport environments and the experiences of those within them. Despite the decision to prioritize the depth of data collection, I still developed a resource to disseminate across the Great British elite sport system that offers practical recommendations to coaches, practitioners, and sport leaders on how to support their women athletes more effectively (see appendix H). Whilst I have developed, and will disseminate, the resource with the intention to create change, I am cognizant to the fact that creating a cultural shift requires more than a resource. To help improve the conditions for elite sportswomen, therefore it is urgent that future research focuses on closing the research-practice gap through projects such as those that prioritize action research (cf. Chalip, 1997) and integrated knowledge translation (cf. Leggat et al., in press).

Whilst this research was conducted across a range of elite sports, the sample was limited to Great British sports. This thesis has demonstrated the importance of considering individual experiences (micro-level) situated within sport environments (meso-level) and how they are influenced by our wider culture (macro-level). Therefore, it is likely that women athletes and coaches training in other countries face different personal, organizational, and cultural issues. Their experiences will depend on how traditional gendered roles are perceived on a macro-level, how the sport is structured at a meso-level, and how coaching practices are gendered on a micro-level. For example, in contrast to traditional standards of masculinity in western countries that promote qualities such as strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence (Bartky, 1990), dominant ideas of masculinity in many Asian countries are associated with behavioral traits such as conscientiousness, gentleness, and patience (Chua & Fujino, 1999). Therefore, Asian perceptions of hegemonic masculinity will likely permeate their sport environments and impact their gendered practices in a way that differs to that of Great Britain. In order to provide optimal support for elite women athletes globally, research is needed that explores the experiences of athletes and staff working within other systems in other countries.

7.5 Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this research was to provide a rich, nuanced, and contextualized understanding of the psychosocial experiences of women athletes and their coaches, with an aim to inform how elite sports can support women athletes more effectively. This thesis has brought together the perspectives of women athletes and the coaches who work directly with them, offering a detailed picture of their experiences within their elite sport environments. In this concluding chapter, I have summarized the empirical and practical implications of this thesis, have suggested avenues worthy of future exploration and have demonstrated how this thesis, through an informational resource that will be disseminated across the Great

British elite system, will contribute to change within sport. My hope is that this research is only the first step in a much bigger push toward cultural change within elite sport. I hope this thesis, and the informational resource, triggers further conversations within elite sport and empowers individual and collective commitment toward shifting the gender order and creating more gender equitable sport environments.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Ethics Sub-Committee Approval

St Mary's University Twickenham London

11 July 2017 SMEC_2016-17_127

Hannah Levi (SHAS): 'Maximising the Performance Potential of Female Athletes'.

Dear Hannah

University Ethics Sub-Committee
Thank you for submitting your ethics application for the above research.
I can confirm that your application has been considered by the Ethics Sub-Committee and that ethical approval is granted.

Yours sincerely

Dr Peary Brug
Acting Chair, Ethics Sub-Committee

Cc Dr Ross Wadey

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet – Performance Director

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – PERFORMANCE DIRECTOR

Optimising Female Athletes' Potential

Why are we carrying out this research?
Each Olympic cycle, more and more GB female athletes compete and succeed at the Games. Since sport was originally dominated by men, a lot of research has explored how to develop male athletes, however, very little research has considered how to optimise the performance potential of female athletes. We want to fill this gap by learning more about female athletes' experiences while they prepare for an Olympic Games, by talking to the athletes themselves and those involved in their development. If we can understand what is working well and perhaps what is not working so well, we can then develop guidelines to help improve performance.

What is our aim?
We aim to develop some guidelines for athletes and/or support staff at the English Institute of Sport (EIS) to better prepare female athletes for the Olympic Games. We want to provide a resource that has long lasting and practical effects and so we aim to make them as informative, accurate, and engaging as we can. The precise form of these resources is unknown at this stage, but they may include interactive workshops, short video clips, or even cartoons.

Before we can do this, we need to increase our understanding of the experience of being a female athlete training in the Olympic environment. Over the next few months, Hannah will be spending time observing and talking to athletes, coaches and support staff at the English Institute of Sport to learn more about what it means to be an elite female athlete.

We would very much like to hear about the experiences of those involved in female athlete development as they go through the Olympic cycle. What is going well or, perhaps, not so well? What challenges have they faced, and how have they coped with them? What support has been helpful, and what could be improved? This research is all about optimising our female athletes' potential, so we are keen to hear their opinions, good or bad.

Your invitation to participate
As the Performance Director of an Olympic Programme with support from the English Institute of Sport, we would like to invite your sport to take part in our research study. The study is being carried out by Hannah Levi, a psychology PhD researcher from St Mary's University and the English Institute of Sport, who will go through this information sheet with you to help you decide whether or not you would like to take part. We'd suggest this should take about 10 minutes. Hannah will answer any questions you may have, but please do feel free to talk to others about the study if you wish.

Joining the study is entirely up to you, and before you decide we would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for your sport. The first part of this Participant Information Sheet tells you the purpose of the study and what will happen if your sport takes part, followed by more detailed information about the conduct of the study. Please do ask if anything is unclear.

What does this research involve?

If you choose to take part, your sport will be involved in the study for around 18 months. During this time, athletes and staff from your programme will be invited to take part in a range of different research activities, most of which will take place during your sport's usual training hours at the site in which you are located or during a competition, wherever it may be.

The table below describes each of the research activities that will take place during training and/or competitions, alongside the maximum frequency and duration. We want to make participating as easy and as enjoyable as possible, so you will be able to choose whether or not your sport gets involved in each activity at any given time.

Activity	What will happen?	How long will it take?
Interviews	The main method of data collection will be talking to your female athletes and their coaches to hear what they believe helps and hinders your athletes' performance. With their permission, all interviews will be recorded and secured in a password protected computer.	These conversations can be brief (e.g. 5-10 minutes) or longer in duration (e.g. 60 minutes) and it is expected that each participant will engage in at least two longer interviews over the course of the study.
Focus group	Athletes and staff may be asked to take part in a group discussion with other athletes and/or staff.	This will happen no more than twice and each should last between 1-2 hours.
Observation	Hannah will spend time in your sport during your normal activities at training or competitions. She may just watch or will chat to various people about what they are doing and may make a few notes.	Hannah may observe the sport for several hours on each day you are training or competing.

Where will this research take place?

The research will take place at your training location or during a competition, and all activities will be carried out during your normal training/competition hours.

Who can take part in this research?

To take part, your sport must be:

1. Supporting a female athlete in preparation to Tokyo 2020.
2. From an Olympic sport supported by the English Institute of Sport.

3. Able to understand this information sheet and give informed consent to take part.

What are the potential benefits of participating?
The aim of my research is to produce guidelines to help athletes and support staff optimise the performance potential of female athletes in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games and thereafter. As long as your sport continue to work in the high performance EIS sport environment, it is hoped that my research will improve the experiences of those involved in supporting female athletes and consequently, optimise the performance potential of your female athletes.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of participating?
There are no significant risks to participating in this research. You will be able to choose which activities your sport is involved in, and no one will be asked to talk about or do anything they are not comfortable with. If at any point they do feel upset or uncomfortable, they may end that particular activity or withdraw from the study without giving a reason.

If you are interested in your sport participating in this research, please take some time to read the more detailed information below and ask any questions before making your decision.

Detailed Information Sheet

What exactly do the research activities involve?
If your sport does decide to take part, your role in the study will last for approximately 18 months. However, you may withdraw your sport from either the study or from a specific activity, at any time and without giving a reason. The study consists of three different research activities, as described below. We would very much like your sport to participate in all three; however, you may choose not to take part in a certain activity at any time without affecting your future participation.

1. Your sport will be observed by Hannah whilst taking part in normal training hours at your given location for up to several hours per day. Hannah will ask your permission each time she is observing, and you have the right to refuse at any time without giving a reason. Whilst observing, Hannah may have an informal chat with people in the environment and make some written or verbal notes about what is happening. No one will ever be filmed or recorded during observation.

2. Female athletes and coaches may be interviewed at various points over the course of this research; most likely when a topic emerges that Hannah would like to know more about. These interviews will cover their experiences of being or supporting an elite female athlete and any challenges they may have faced. Interviews will take place during their regular hours spent at your sporting location, and are likely to last between one to two hours. There will be no pre-set questions, so it will be up to them to decide which topics are discussed and how much information they reveal. With their permission, interviews will be audio-recorded and direct quotations may be used in the write-up. Their identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and removal of any identifying information.

3. Female athletes and staff may be invited to take part in one or two focus group sessions to discuss various topics. This will involve discussing their thoughts about topics that they have

brought up with a small group of other athletes and/or staff, suggesting recommendations going forward. These sessions will last approximately one to two hours, and those involved may contribute as much or as little as they choose. With their permission, these sessions will be audio-recorded and direct quotations may be used in the write-up. Their identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and removal of any identifying information.

Who is organising and funding this research?
The research is being organised and funded by the English Institute of Sport in partnership with St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Who has reviewed this research?
This research has been reviewed by the St Mary's University Research Ethics Committee.

What will happen to the results of this study?
The results of this study will be written up as part of a PhD thesis, and may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences.

How will my information be kept confidential?
All participation in this research will be confidential. However, confidentiality may be breached in the event that there appears to be sufficient evidence to raise serious concern about the health, welfare, or safety of any participant or others. Should this occur, the English Institute of Sport Lead or the specific Sport Team Lead would be informed. If any participant discloses any information that is criminal in nature, or any other information that is required by the law to be disclosed by the researcher, this will be passed on to the relevant authorities.

If your sport chooses to participate, the personal data that we collect will include the participant's name and the sport that they partake in. Throughout the study, the participant may be identified in research data including audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, and in notes taken by the chief investigator during observation. The data will be analysed by the chief investigator, overseen by the research supervisors. It will not be accessible to anyone else. No participant will ever be identified in any published data. Although direct quotations may be published, a pseudonym will be used and any identifying information will be removed.

Any hard copies of data that include any personal information will be stored in a locked drawer in a filing cabinet within a secure building at St Mary's University or the English Institute of Sport. All electronic data will be stored on an English Institute of Sport encrypted laptop. Any data in which anyone is identified will be accessible only to the chief investigator and research supervisors. Both personal and research data will be stored securely for five years before being destroyed, in line with St Mary's University policy.

What should I expect during the consent process?
Once you have read this information sheet, and received satisfactory answers to any questions you may have, you will be asked to decide whether you would like your sport to participate in this research. Participation is voluntary, and you may refuse without giving a reason. This would not affect your legal rights. You may take as long as you need to decide.

If you are willing to take part, you will be asked to complete a consent form. You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the consent form to keep. Hannah will also ask you to verbally reconfirm your willingness to participate before each research activity.

What happens if I don't want to carry on with the study?
If you agree to take part in this research but would like to stop at a later date, you may do so at any time by contacting one of the researchers using the details below. You do not need to give a reason, and your legal rights would not be affected. If you choose to withdraw no further data would be collected. However, any data already collected may be retained and used for the study.

What happens if something goes wrong?
We don't anticipate that anything will go wrong whilst taking part in this research. However, if you have any concerns, you can speak to one of the researchers named below. If your concerns are not addressed, you may contact Dr Kate Hays, head performance psychologist at the English Institute of Sport (kate.hays@eis2win.co.uk) or Dr Conor Gissane, Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at St Mary's University (conor.gissane@stmarys.ac.uk).

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

Chief investigator: Hannah Levi
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Telephone:

Research Supervisor: Dr Kate Hays
Address: English Institute of Sport,
200 Coleridge Road,
Sheffield,
S9 5DA
Email:
Telephone:

Appendix C: Consent Form – Performance Directors

St Mary's University Twickenham London

Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Optimising Female Athletes' Potential
Name of Researcher: Hannah Levi

	Please initial box to confirm consent
1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my sport's participation is voluntary and that we are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	☐
3. I understand and give my permission for the use of audio recordings during interviews and focus groups, and the publication of direct anonymised quotations.	☐
4. I understand that data collected during the study may be processed by individuals from St Mary's University or the English Institute of Sport, where it is relevant to my sport taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my sport's data.	☐
5. I understand that confidentiality may be breached in the event that there appears to be sufficient evidence to raise serious concern about the health, welfare, or safety of a member of the sport, or if they disclose any information that is criminal in nature.	☐
6. I agree for my sport to take part in this study.	☐

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Date Signature

_____ _____ _____

Name of Person taking consent Date Signature

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet - Athlete

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – ATHLETE

Maximising the Performance Potential of Female Athletes

Why are we carrying out this research?
Each Olympic cycle, more and more GB female athletes compete and succeed at the Games. Since sport was originally dominated by men, a lot of research has explored how to develop male athletes, however, very little research has considered how to maximise the performance potential of female athletes. We want to fill this gap by learning more about female athletes' experiences while they prepare for an Olympic Games, by talking to the athletes themselves and those involved in their development. If we can understand what is working well and perhaps what is not working so well, we can then develop guidelines to help improve performance.

What is our aim?
We aim to develop some guidelines for athletes and/or support staff at the English Institute of Sport (EIS) to better prepare female athletes for the Olympic Games. We want to provide a resource that has long lasting and practical effects and so we aim to make them as informative, accurate, and engaging as we can. The precise form of these resources is unknown at this stage, but they may include interactive workshops, short video clips, or even cartoons.

Before we can do this, we need to increase our understanding of the experience of being a female athlete training in the Olympic environment. Over the next few months, Hannah will be spending time observing and talking to athletes, coaches and support staff at the English Institute of Sport to learn more about what it means to be an elite female athlete.

We would very much like to hear about your experiences as you go through the Olympic cycle. What is going well or, perhaps, not so well? What challenges have you faced, and how have you coped with them? What support has been helpful, and what could be improved? This research is all about maximising our female athletes' potential, so we are keen to hear your opinions, good or bad.

Your invitation to participate
As a current athlete training within an Olympic programme with support from the English Institute of Sport, we would like to invite you to take part in our research study. The study is being carried out by Hannah Levi, a psychology PhD researcher from St Mary's University and the English Institute of Sport, who will go through this information sheet with you to help you decide whether or not you would like to take part. We'd suggest this should take

about 10 minutes. Hannah will answer any questions you may have, but please do feel free to talk to others about the study if you wish.

Joining the study is entirely up to you, and before you decide we would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. The first part of this Participant Information Sheet tells you the purpose of the study and what will happen if you take part, followed by more detailed information about the conduct of the study. Please do ask if anything is unclear.

What does this research involve?

If you choose to take part, you will be involved in the study for around 6-9 months. During this time, you will be invited to take part in a range of different research activities, most of which will take place during your usual training hours at the EIS site in which you are located or during a competition, wherever it may be.

The table below describes each of the research activities that will take place while you are training and/or competing, alongside the maximum frequency and duration. We want to make participating as easy and as enjoyable as possible, so you will be able to choose whether or not to get involved in each activity at any given time.

Activity	What will happen?	How long will it take?
Interviews	The main method of data collection will be talking to you to hear what you believe helps and hinders your performance. With your permission, all interviews will be recorded and secured in a password protected computer.	These conversations can be brief (e.g., 5-10 minutes) or longer in duration (e.g., 60 minutes) and it is expected that you will engage in at least two longer interviews over the course of the study.
Focus group	You may be asked to take part in a group discussion with other athletes.	This will happen no more than twice and each should take between 1-2 hours.
Observation	Hannah will spend time with you during your normal activities during training or competitions. She may just watch or will chat to you about what you are doing and may make a few notes.	You may be observed for several hours on each day you are training or competing.

Where will this research take place?

The research will take place at your training location or during a competition, and all activities will be carried out during your normal training/competing hours.

Who can take part in this research?

To take part, you must be:

4. A female athlete.
5. From an Olympic sport supported by the English Institute of Sport
6. Able to understand this information sheet and give informed consent to take part.

What are the potential benefits of participating?

The aim of my research is to produce guidelines to help athletes and support staff maximise the performance potential of female athletes in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games and thereafter. As long as you continue to train in the high performance EIS sport environment, it is hoped that my research will improve your experiences and performance as a female athlete.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of participating?

There are no significant risks to participating in this research. You will be able to choose which activities you are involved in, and you will not be asked to talk about or do anything you are not comfortable with. If at any point you do feel upset or uncomfortable, you may end that particular activity or withdraw from the study without giving a reason.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please take some time to read the more detailed information below and ask any questions before making your decision.

Detailed Information Sheet

What exactly do the research activities involve?

If you do decide to take part, your role in the study will last for approximately six to nine months. However, you may withdraw, either from the study or from a specific activity, at any time and without giving a reason. The study consists of three different research activities, as described below. We would very much like you to participate in all three; however, you may choose not to take part in a certain activity at any time without affecting your future participation.

4. You will be observed by Hannah whilst taking part in normal training sessions at your given location for up to several hours per day. Hannah will ask your permission each time she is observing, and you have the right to refuse at any time without giving a reason. Whilst observing, Hannah may have an informal chat with you and make some written or verbal notes about what is happening. You will never be filmed or recorded during observation.

5. You may be interviewed at various points over the course of this research; most likely when a topic emerges that Hannah would like to know more about. These interviews will cover your experiences of being an elite athlete and any challenges you may have faced. Interviews will take place during your regular training hours, and are likely to last between one and two hours. There will be no pre-set questions, so it will be up to you to decide which topics are discussed and how much information you reveal. With your permission, interviews will be audio-recorded and direct quotations may be used in the write-up. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and removal of any identifying information.

6. You may be invited to take part in one or two focus group sessions to discuss various topics. This will involve discussing your thoughts about topics that you have brought up with a small group of other athletes suggesting recommendations going forward. These sessions will last approximately one to two hours, and you may contribute as much or as little as you choose. With your permission, this session will be audio-recorded and direct quotations may be used in the write-up. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and removal of any identifying information.

Who is organising and funding this research?
The research is being organised and funded by the English Institute of Sport in partnership with St Mary's University, Twickenham.

Who has reviewed this research?
This research has been reviewed by the St Mary's University Research Ethics Committee.

What will happen to the results of this study?
The results of this study will be written up as part of a PhD thesis, and may also be published in academic journals or presented at conferences.

How will my information be kept confidential?
Your participation in this research will be confidential. However, confidentiality may be breached in the event that there appears to be sufficient evidence to raise serious concern about the health, welfare, or safety of you or others. Should this occur, the English Institute of Sport Lead or the specific Sport Team Lead will be informed. If you disclose any information that is criminal in nature, or any other information that is required by the law to be disclosed by the researcher, this will be passed on to the relevant authorities.

If you choose to participate, the personal data that we collect will include your name and the sport that you partake in. Throughout the study, you may be identified in research data including audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, in notes taken by the chief investigator during observation. The data will be analysed by the chief investigator, overseen by the research supervisors. It will not be accessible to anyone else. You will never be identified in any published data. Although direct quotations may be published, a pseudonym will be used and any identifying information will be removed.

Any hard copies of data that include your personal information will be stored in a locked drawer in a filing cabinet within a secure building at St Mary's University or the English Institute of Sport. All electronic data will be stored on an English Institute of Sport encrypted laptop. Any data in which you are identified will be accessible only to the chief investigator and research supervisors. Both personal and research data will be stored securely for five years before being destroyed, in line with St Mary's University policy.

What should I expect during the consent process?
Once you have read this information sheet, and received satisfactory answers to any questions you may have, you will be asked to decide whether you would like to participate in this research. Participation is voluntary, and you may refuse without giving a reason. This would not affect your legal rights. You may take as long as you need to decide, and are encouraged to discuss your participation with your coach before making your decision.

If you are willing to take part, you will be asked to complete a consent form. You will be given a copy of this information sheet and the consent form to keep. Hannah will also ask you to verbally reconfirm your willingness to participate before each research activity.

What happens if I don't want to carry on with the study?
If you agree to take part in this research but would like to stop at a later date, you may do so at any time by contacting one of the researchers using the details below. You do not need to give a reason, and your legal rights would not be affected. If you choose to withdraw no further data would be collected. However, any data already collected may be retained and used for the study.

What happens if something goes wrong?
We don't anticipate that anything will go wrong whilst taking part in this research. However, if you have any concerns, you can speak to one of the researchers named below. If your concerns are not addressed, you may contact Kate Hays, head performance psychologist at the English Institute of Sport (kate.hays@eis2win.co.uk) or Dr Conor Gissane, Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at St Mary's University (conor.gissane@stmarys.ac.uk).

Who can I contact if I have any questions?

Chief investigator: Hannah Levi
Address: School of Sport, Health, and Applied Science,
St Mary's University,
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TW1 4SX
Email:
Telephone:

Research Supervisor: Dr Ross Wadey
Address: School of Sport, Health, and Applied Science,
St Mary's University,
Waldegrave Road,
Twickenham,
TW1 4SX
Email:
Telephone:

Research Supervisor: Dr Kate Hays
Address: English Institute of Sport,
200 Coleridge Road,
Sheffield,
S9 5DA
Email:
Telephone:

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet - U18

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – ATHLETE U18

Maximising the Performance Potential of Female Athletes

Hi, my name is Hannah and I am trying to understand what it means to be a female athlete. I want to understand your experiences so that I can help get you the best support possible.

If you don't mind, I will be hanging around while you train and I might take some notes while I'm watching you. I might come with you to competitions too, just to see how the competitions work and what you do while you're there.

When you've got a bit of time during the day, I'd like to have some casual chats with you about your experience as an athlete. Sometimes, I might even want to have a bit of a longer conversation with you, if you don't mind talking to me. These conversations will be recorded, just so I don't forget anything you have said.

There are no right or wrong answers at all and I won't be telling anyone who you are or what you say. If you want to stop at any time, just tell me - you do not have to a give a reason. If you have any questions, you can contact me at hannah.levi@eis2win.ac.uk.

So, are you okay with me hanging around for the next few months?

YES → **Sign the form on the next page**

NO → **You do not need to do anything**

CONSENT FORM

To take part in the project, please fill in the form below.

- I agree to take part in the research
- I understand what I will be doing
- I understand that I can stop at any time
- I understand that some of my chats with the researcher will be recorded
- I understand that all information I give will be private and my name will not be used
- I am free to ask questions at any time before and during the study

Name: ……

Signed: ……..

Date…….

WITHDRAWAL FORM

If you've changed your mind and want to stop participating in the research, please complete this form and return it to me or your coach.

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Name: ……

Signed: ……..

Date…….

Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

St Mary's University Twickenham London

Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Optimising Female Athletes' Potential

Name of Researcher: Hannah Levi

	Please initial box to confirm consent
7. I confirm that I have read the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.	☐
9. I understand and give my permission for the use of audio recordings during interviews and focus groups, and the publication of direct anonymised quotations.	☐
10. I understand that data collected during the study may be processed by individuals from St Mary's University or the English Institute of Sport, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	☐
11. I understand that confidentiality may be breached in the event that there appears to be sufficient evidence to raise serious concern about the health, welfare, or safety of myself or others, or if I disclose any information that is criminal in nature.	☐
12. I agree to take part in this study.	☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of Person taking consent	Date	Signature

Appendix G: Interview Guides

Coaches

PAST EXPERIENCES

- Tell me how you got involved in coaching?
- How did you get involved in women's sport?
- What was it like starting out as a coach to female athletes?
- Who has had the biggest impact on the way you coach?

FEMALE CHARACTERISTICS

- What characteristics do you think make a successful female athlete?
- When first worked with females, did any behaviours stand out to you? How did/do you manage them?
- Hormonal changes having an impact on mood or behaviour?
- Behaviours: being included in planning, asking more questions, flexibility and variation in training, communication?

TRAINING/COMPETITIONS

- How often do the girls train with the guys?
- Mixed vs. separate dynamics?
- Do males/females train the same way?
- Are there differences in what makes them tick?
- How do the females react to/perform under competition pressure?
- What do you do to manage this?

RELATIONSHIPS

- Female athlete – female athlete? (romantic)
- Female athlete – male athlete?
- Coach – female athlete? (M/F?)
- What do you feel your ROLE as a coach is to female athletes? (M/F?)
- Do you treat them the same? SHOULD you treat them the same?
- In what way, if at all do personal relationships impact athlete performance?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

- What do you enjoy most about working with female athletes?
- What do you think you and this programme do really effectively with females?
- What daily challenges, if any at all, do you face working with females?
- Are there any areas you wish to know more about females?
- Any ways you would like to be more supported?

CULTURE/ENVIRONMENT

- What kind of environment are you trying to create for your female athletes?
- Are there M/F differences?
- Who is involved in creating it?
- What constraints are there?
- How do you think the public view female athletes and women sport?
- In what way, if at all, do you think our society's culture has an impact on female athletes?

Women Athletes

PAST EXPERIENCES

- Tell me how you got involved in sport?
- Main reasons for getting involved?
- What was it like starting out as a female athlete?
- Did you train with boys?
- Was your coach male/female?
- Who had the greatest influence on your early career?
- Advice to coach to young female?
- Advice to younger self starting?

TRAINING/COMPETITIONS

- When was the transition to 'elite'?
- What does a typical week look like?
- Do you train with the guys?
- In what way, if at all, do the sessions differ w/ + w/o?
- Do you feel you're treated the same?
- SHOULD you be treated the same?
- Any day-to-day training challenges?
- How do you feel about competition? (Challenges?)
- Any advice to a coach starting?

FEMALE CHARACTERISTICS

- Do you feel your menstrual cycle ever affects your performance, physically or mentally?
- Do you communicate it to anyone?
- How does it feel being a *female* in elite sport? (Dis/advantages?)
- Any challenges that you face as a female in sport that males don't?
- Any ways that being a female in sport impacts on personal life?

RELATIONSHIPS

- Who's involved in daily training?
- Relationship w/ other female athletes? (Ever romantic?)
- Relationships w/ male athletes?
- Relationship with coach? What role do they play in your life?
- Personal relationships (friends, family, partners) impact on career?

CULTURE/ENVIRONMENT

- What does your training environment feel like?
- What would an ideal environment look like?
- How do you think the public view female athletes? Fair representation? Causes for this? Impact on you?
- How do you feel female athletes are portrayed in the media?
- How are you supported as an elite athlete?

FUTURE EXPERIENCES

- What's the goal for Tokyo 2020?
- Any changes to the women's programme for next cycle?
- How can the system better support you as a female athlete? What would that look like?
- Do you ever consider life after Tokyo 2020?
- Ever thought about having a family and how it might influence career?

Appendix H: EIS Resource

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

ENGLISH INSTITUTE OF SPORT

INTRODUCTION

Post Rio, many sports expressed a desire to explore how they could support their female athletes more effectively to optimise their performance potential in Tokyo, Paris, and beyond. Fast forward 5 years and Team GB make history by sending more female athletes than males to the Olympic Games. During this period, the EIS have worked collaboratively with St Mary's university to enhance our understanding of the elite female athlete, and how to create high performance environments that provide the best opportunity for them to thrive.

This document provides a summary of findings generated from world class athletes, coaches, SSSM staff and senior leadership teams within the Great British high-performance system who contributed to this PhD project. It is hoped that sharing this insight across the network, alongside some informed recommendations, will serve to improve the support we provide to the female Olympians of the future.

THE FINDINGS

The overarching message is this: if we want to improve the support for female athletes, we must strive towards a cultural shift. Sport reflects wider society, wherein gender stereotypes and gendered practices still prevail.

> ***"When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower."***
>
> Alexander Den Heijer

The following examples illustrate how gendered biases within sport environments impact our female athletes:

1. **A lot of female athletes still feel as though women's sport and female athletes are viewed as inferior compared to the males. This can impact them in the following ways:**

- They feel undermined as athletes.
- Their sport achievements are devalued.
- They feel like second-class citizens.
- They do not feel empowered to perform.
- It destabilises their confidence as athletes.

"I feel like the starting point is getting people to recognise or agree that it is a thing... because if people don't see it [gender inequality] as a problem, they don't see why it should change" – female athlete

In general, the athletes appreciate when sport leaders acknowledge gendered discrepancies and vocalise their efforts toward change.

WE CARE. WE COLLABORATE. WE INNOVATE. WE EXCEL.

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

THE FINDINGS

2. **Across the sports, there were several examples of how male athletes receive preferential treatment. For example:**

- Preferable training schedules.
- Bigger and better training facilities.
- Primetime competition schedules.
- Experienced coaches preferring to work with them.
- More social media attention.
- Portrayed as strong, competitive athletes (compared to females who are often publicly portrayed away from the sporting context).

"If I'm not worth the investment, then why would I have confidence that I'm going to perform brilliantly?" – female athlete

In many cases, these behaviours were not intentional as people were not aware of when their actions, or those of others, favour male athletes. This highlights the need to start reflecting and talking about gender.

3. **The menstrual cycle remains a taboo in sport.**

"You just feel like it's something that's silent, you just have to get on with it as if you were a boy" – female athlete

Male coaches reported:

- Feeling awkward talking about women's health.
- Not knowing how to broach the subject with females.
- Feeling that others (i.e., female staff) are better placed to talk about women's health.

Female athletes reported:

- Wanting to talk openly about their menstrual cycle.
- Wanting others (including males) to feel comfortable to talk about women's health.
- Feeling that there is a competitive advantage to monitoring their cycles and adapting their training accordingly.

Even though it may feel uncomfortable to talk about, female athletes would prefer to have open conversations about their menstrual health as they feel there is a competitive advantage to be gained.

4. **There remains an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in elite sport. This impacts female athletes as they reported:**

- Feeling as though they do not have a platform to raise their concerns.
- Feeling as though they cannot talk to anyone in a position of power that could make a difference for them and their experiences in sport.
- Feeling as though no one is fighting for them as females.

"In our organization the female athletes would struggle to get their voice heard because the women they talk to [female staff] don't have a voice, it's the way it is" – coach

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

THE FINDINGS

5. **Language is not always used appropriately in relation to women – sexist jokes are rife.**

"Comments get thrown around constantly, just roll off the tongue like you'll say to a boy 'you're doing it like a girl' or something like that, which puts girls down, it puts them in a negative light." – female athlete

- It might not be intentional, but sometimes jokes can undermine women's sport achievements.
- Often, even when females don't react in the moment, they hear the jokes and feel disrespected by them.

Whilst banter can create a light-hearted environment, when there are no boundaries to what is acceptable, jokes can undermine females and their sporting achievements.

6. **What happens before the athletes reach the high-performance system is important. Coaches recognised that because there are fewer sporting opportunities for females:**

- They are sometimes fast tracked through to the high-performance system and are immediately expected to train and perform at the elite level, despite their lack of prior training history and sport exposure.
- There are fewer post-retirement sport prospects for them, which mean they must explore alternative career options whilst they are training/competing.

"We're the closest I've ever come across to a group of people working in development and performance at the same time. In the men's world, you'd allow them to make mistakes and grow, get it wrong, get it right. You're trying to do that with the women but you're live on TV." – coach

It is important to consider athletes' previous sport experiences so that sports can provide optimal support for female athletes.

7. **Female athletes are sometimes, often unintentionally, treated according to stereotypes rather than their individual personalities. For example:**

- 'Females cannot be pushed hard.'
- 'Females do not want direct communication.'
- 'Females do not want honest feedback from their coaches.'
- 'Females need a softer approach to coaching.'

"I'd say we are treated differently sometimes, I think there's an expectation that women are going to cry first or the women are going to be the first ones to bail out or not be able to push as hard, or to give up first." – female athlete

It is important to remember, that there are more differences within a group of females than there are between a group of females and a group of males.

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

THE FINDINGS

8. Gender is a salient aspect of the coach-athlete relationship.

Male coaches reported:

- Feeling uncomfortable pushing their female athletes for fear of being branded a bully.
- Finding it easier to work with male athletes who are more like them.

"You can't be dealing with people like you did years ago... The media certainly, what's gone on in the outside world in sport and also in the workplace, I think it affects what you do in here with the females." – coach

This is not to imply female coaches are better placed to work with female athletes, but rather, that it is important to recognise gender might be an influencing factor within the coach-athlete relationship.

9. In some sports, showing emotions and asking questions is still frowned upon.

Some of the coaches reported that:

- They do not have time to discuss athletes' emotions during training.
- Questions from athletes can be perceived as a threat to their authority.
- They prefer an athlete to "put their big boy pants on" (coach) and "just get on with it" (coach).

Female athletes reported:

- Not always feeling comfortable displaying their emotions to their coaches.
- Sometimes feeling judged when they are emotional (e.g., crying).

Wanting to ask questions about their training programmes.

"Female athletes will expect you to stand there and have that conversation, which aint such a bad thing but when you've got the whole team to train, I aint, you know coaches haven't got time." – coach

Although the intention of this research was not to compare males and females, the female athletes suggested that a lot of the male athletes also sometimes feel a pressure to put on a brave face.

10. For a lot of the female athletes, they are having to navigate being a female in our society where women are associated with 'traditional femininity' and being a female in sport, where strength and performance are central. The females reported experiencing the following contradictions:

- In society they are expected to look 'feminine' – in sport they are expected to be strong and muscular.
- In society they are expected to be gentle and passive – in sport they are expected to be strong minded, independent, and competitive.
- In society they are expected to be tender – in sport they are expected to be forthright.
- In society they are expected to be risk averse – in sport they are expected to take risks.
- In society they are expected to be perfect – in sport they are expected to manage failure.
- In society they are expected to be a mother and look after their family – in sport they are expected to 'win at all costs'.

"You're creating success in your own way by being strong and by being a woman, so you're kind of like breaking down those stereotypes of being a woman, weak, and won't win at anything" – female athlete

Being aware of the many paradoxes female athletes' face allows you to provide optimal support as they negotiate these challenges.

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do your female athletes feel valued in your environment?

a. How do you, as a sport, treat male and female athletes?
b. Are there equal facilities and training programmes in your environment?
c. Are you doing things the same or different? In what way? Why are you doing things the same/different?
d. How do your female athletes like to be coached?

2. How do people feel and talk about women's sport and female athletes?

a. Are people aware of their implicit beliefs?
b. Can you encourage people to reflect honestly?
c. How might people's views impact their applied practices?

3. How do your media platforms portray your female athletes?

a. Do you have equal media representation for your male and female athletes? Consider both quality and quantity.
b. How might the recent prevalence of media articles on women in sport impact your coaches' comfort in working with females?

4. Is the menstrual cycle discussed openly in your sport?

a. Do the female athletes talk about their menstrual cycle and women's health to anyone in the sport? If so, who?
b. Do you think male staff feel comfortable talking about women's health?
c. How might you start to encourage people to talk about these topics?
d. How might you educate people in these areas, so they have more confidence to talk about these topics?

5. What is the pathway to reaching the elite level for your female athletes?

a. Have they been fast-tracked through the system? If so, how might you support their integration into the elite level?
b. What financial prospect post-retirement are available to female athletes? How can your sport support your female athletes exploring a post-retirement career?

6. How many females are in leadership positions within your sport?

a. Are the female athletes given regular opportunities for their voices to be heard by someone in a leadership position?
b. How might you integrate the athletes' voice into your decision making?

7. How is language and banter used in your organisation?

a. Do people make sexist jokes?
b. How might you encourage people to challenge sexist jokes?

8. How are emotions perceived in your sport?

a. Do your athletes have an opportunity to offload their emotions to their coaches outside of training hours?
b. s there an opportunity (and/or time) for athletes to ask questions about their training programmes?

9. To what extent are your athletes treated as individuals?

a. How might you encourage people to avoid generalisations about 'females' and 'males'?

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Acknowledge gender inequalities and vocalise the planned actions within your sport.	Deny gender inequalities and avoid conversations on this topic.	Recognising gender discrepancies and talking about change shows a willingness to progress.
Recognise the complexities involved in conversations around gender and schedule time to discuss them in meetings.	Try to find a quick fix in relation to working with female athletes.	Gender is a multifaceted area that requires several conversations, which involves a commitment to individual and systemic change.
Be cautious about the language you and others use in relation to females. Be bold and speak up if you hear something sexist.	Keep talking about and treating men's sport as better.	Female athletes internalise these comments and behaviours and it impacts their confidence.
Encourage people to reflect on their own gender biases in a non-judgmental space and to consider how their implicit beliefs might impact their practices.	Point the finger and shame people for their views and behaviours.	Being reflective in a non-judgmental way can allow people to be honest with themselves about how their beliefs are impacting their practices.
Question your sport's current practices around the treatment of male and female athletes.	Continue to do what you've always done without question.	Being reflective and opening the dialogue is the first step toward positive change.
Talk to your staff (particularly males) about their concerns working with female athletes.	Avoid these conversations and let your staff figure it out for themselves.	Providing a safe space to raise concerns allows people to agree strategies and gain confidence in what they are doing.
Ensure your internal media outlets are equal for men and women – through the amount and type of exposure.	Post images and articles without much thought.	Female athletes want to be portrayed as strong, competitive athletes.
Break the taboo - start talking about women's health and monitor hormonal fluctuations to optimise training adaptability.	Avoid conversations related to women's health and rely on female staff to support work in this space.	There are huge performance and health opportunities available by prioritising women's health. And female athletes want to talk about it!
Offer educational sessions around women's health and menstrual cycles to increase people's confidence talking about these topics.	Expect people to feel comfortable to talk about women's health without any guidance or education.	If people feel confident and more comfortable to talk about women's health, they are more likely to.

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Consider female athletes' pathway to the elite system and provide support accordingly (e.g. a slower integration to provide a gradual exposure to the elite level).	Create high levels of challenge without high levels of support.	Any athlete (male or female) is likely to struggle with the demands of elite sport without sufficient training history. It is important to provide appropriate support for those fast-tracked.
Support female athlete's exploration of future career paths, particularly when post-retirement sport opportunities are lacking or insufficient.	Expect female athletes to ignore their careers and lives outside of sport.	There is much less financial stability post-retirement for female athletes, so it is important for them to plan for their lives after sport.
Ensure there are regular opportunities for female, and male, athletes to have their voices heard directly by people in positions of power.	Block the pathway from the athletes to those in leadership positions.	Many of the athletes reported not having their voice sufficiently heard by people in leadership positions.
Be cautious of using trivialising language and making sexist jokes. Be bold and challenge people if you hear anything inappropriate.	Ignore inappropriate language or jokes and pass it off as 'just banter'.	The aim is not to eliminate banter altogether, but rather to ensure your sport environment does not disrespect females and their sporting achievements.
Where possible, treat each athlete as an individual.	Avoid generalisations of 'females' and 'males'.	There are more differences within a group of females than there are between a group of males and females.
Speak to female athletes (particularly younger) about how their strength programmes may be impacting them on a personal level.	Ignore the impact of societal pressure on females and particularly how they relate to strength training and body image.	If a female is struggling with how they look, they may avoid doing strength training altogether.
Provide a non-pressurised, non-judgemental, and safe space for athletes to take risks and make mistakes.	Expect athletes to automatically feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.	The expectations on women to be 'perfect' in our society can clash with the sport expectation to take risks and make mistakes.
Encourage frank conversations with female athletes without negative judgement.	Label females who are direct as 'bitchy' or 'bossy'.	Labelling females a certain way for being direct can deter them from having important conversations.

Creating an environment to optimise the potential of female athletes

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

DOs	DON'Ts	RATIONALE
Allow time before or after training for athletes (male and female) to express their emotions.	View and frame displaying emotions as 'weakness'.	Suppressing athletes emotions can have major consequences to health and well-being.
Offer support to staff members on how to engage in emotional conversations so they feel comfortable in those situations.	Expect people to feel comfortable talking to people about their emotions.	If people don't feel comfortable around emotions, they will likely avoid them, which can result in less effective coaching and support for athletes.
Provide an opportunity for athletes to ask more questions about their training programmes.	View questions asked as a threat to authority.	Providing athletes with autonomy over their training can help with motivation.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGES

Gender is a highly complex topic that requires complex change.

There are no hard and fast rules or one simple way to create an environment that enables female athletes to thrive. In addition to individual strategies, a cultural shift is also needed. Cultural change involves an in-depth consideration of the intricacies within your unique setting and requires explorative and honest conversations to begin the process.

For more information or to discuss these findings in the context of your sport, please contact the EIS Psychology Team via **Hannah.levi@eis2win.co.uk**

IF WE DO NOT START TALKING, WE WILL NEVER CHANGE.

WE CARE. WE COLLABORATE. WE INNOVATE. WE EXCEL.

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