

# **Sociological tools for improving women's representation and experiences in strength and conditioning coaching**

Rhiannon Lord

Mykolas Kavaliauskas

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1 **Sociological tools for improving women's representation and**  
2 **experiences in strength and conditioning coaching**

3 Rhiannon Lord, PhD<sup>a</sup> and Mykolas Kavaliauskas, MSc, CSCS<sup>b</sup>

4 *<sup>a</sup>Division of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Abertay University, Dundee, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of*  
5 *Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK*

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# 1 Sociological tools for improving women's representation and 2 experiences in strength and conditioning coaching

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4 Women are underrepresented in strength and conditioning (S&C) coaching,  
5 arguably more so than women in sport coaching. They account for  
6 approximately 6-16% of strength and conditioning coaches at all levels, thus  
7 negatively affecting the gendered experiences of women working in S&C. Based  
8 on evidence from coaching research, it is likely this is due to longstanding  
9 patterns of structural bias and discrimination, which is inherent in sport, but it is  
10 important for future strength and conditioning coaches (SCCs), both men and  
11 women, that more equitable practices and opportunities are implemented. In this  
12 paper, we present three sociological perspectives as tools for those working in  
13 S&C, including individual coaches, educators, governing bodies and  
14 organizations, to critically examine their own gendered practices and  
15 environments. We hope that by *doing* sociology within their day-to-day practice,  
16 those working in S&C can develop a better awareness of structural bias and  
17 forms of discrimination that affect women SCCs' experiences and then, where  
18 possible, make positive changes for women working in the field.

19 Keywords: sociology; coaching; strength and conditioning coaching; women in  
20 strength and conditioning; women strength and conditioning coaches; theory to  
21 practice

## 22 Introduction

23 Despite the longstanding and well-documented gender gap in sport participation now  
24 appearing to narrow (57), the same cannot be said for women in sport coaching (1). In  
25 the UK, 43% of coaches are women and they are significantly more likely to coach at  
26 recreational levels compared to men who tend to coach competitive athletes at regional  
27 levels or above (54). These patterns are not unique to the UK. Similar trends have been  
28 reported in the US (32), Finland (27) and Norway (12) and are also most notable at  
29 large-scale sports events where 6-13% of coaches are women (41, 13). These patterns

1 are still present after implementation of strategies and organizations to support women  
2 in sport coaching from the mid-1990s onwards (e.g., Women in Sport Foundation  
3 founded in 1995 and the Female Coaching Network founded in 2014).

4 Arguably similar or lesser patterns of women's representation are present among  
5 strength and conditioning coaches (SCCs). For example, in the UK women constitute  
6 7% of SCCs (38). There are few signs of an increase in representation as a 2016  
7 UKSCA internship survey completed by 600 respondents revealed just 6% of SCCs  
8 were women across all levels of athletic performance and various sports (51). Data  
9 from the US reveals a slightly better picture with 14.1% of Division I strength coaches  
10 identifying as women in 2019-2020 (30). Similarly, 16% of 2325 SCCs taking part in  
11 the NSCA's 2018 coaches survey identified as women (11). Importantly though these  
12 figures are for women SCCs at all levels of sport performance including high school  
13 sport and local or recreational clubs, where mainstream women sport coaches form  
14 around 43% of the population (32,54).

15 It is worth noting that SCCs, whether men or women, are relatively understudied  
16 in coaching literature. However, within the limited work available on SCCs, women  
17 have rarely been the focus of academic study or intervention. This is perhaps surprising  
18 given poor(er) patterns of representation (outlined above). That said, researchers have  
19 sought to understand gender inequalities in mainstream sport coaching, typically  
20 focusing on the representation and/or experiences of elite women sport coaches  
21 (2,33,55), rather than women SCCs explicitly. We can draw upon this work to form  
22 some conclusions about the underrepresentation and experiences of women SCCs, but  
23 we also need to acknowledge that most studies on women in sport coaching lack  
24 intersectional approaches (34), that is the ways in which various aspects of identities  
25 (e.g., gender, sexuality and ethnicity) simultaneously and inseparably intertwine.

1 Therefore, knowledge in this area is shaped by analyses of predominantly white, able-  
2 bodied, cisgendered and heterosexual women (34); little is known about women  
3 coaches who are of color, disabled, transgender or non-heterosexual. In addition,  
4 quantitative studies framed by psychological perspectives have dominated much of the  
5 literature (41,44). As such, to date, the underrepresentation of women in coaching has  
6 largely been explained by organizational relationships and support, lower self-efficacy  
7 and self-confidence, women's motivations to coach, coaches'/athletes' preferences and  
8 perceptions of one another and/or gendered perceptions of coaching competence  
9 (8,40,47,48). More recently, qualitative studies framed by social analyses have offered  
10 more structural explanations for gender inequalities and women's poorer experiences in  
11 sport coaching including gender relations, poor working conditions and sexism  
12 interconnected with homophobia and in some cases racism (13,33,42). Researchers in  
13 this area argue we have reached somewhat of a saturation point for identifying the  
14 barriers and facilitators for women coaches and we should now be looking to  
15 understand women's *experiences* in context and in interdisciplinary ways including  
16 focusing our attention on the performance level and sport coaches are working in, as  
17 these factors will largely determine their working culture (44). Those researchers who  
18 have begun to take a more experiential focus have used social perspectives to identify  
19 and interpret coaching experiences thus offering some explanation for women's  
20 longstanding patterns of underrepresentation and poorer experience in sport coaching.  
21 Studies in this area have reported women's experiences of gender differences in their  
22 day-to-day coaching. Women coaches in these studies report perceptions of  
23 disadvantage in job application processes despite having appropriate qualifications and  
24 experience (13,41,44), forms of intimidation, exclusion and isolation, having to overtly  
25 demonstrate physical competence to obtain respect and trust from coaching colleagues

1 and athletes (13,41,44). Arguably then, we need to start looking more specifically at  
2 the *experiences* of women SCCs from a social perspective to identify, deconstruct and  
3 address patterns of underrepresentation and poor aspects of their experience. To do so,  
4 is important for two reasons. First, patterns of underrepresentation are an indication of  
5 structural bias and discrimination where women do not receive the same opportunities  
6 to pursue career choices as men (3,22). Second, having fewer women in SCC positions  
7 has long-term consequences, producing fewer role models and mentors who are women  
8 for future generations of coaches and athletes (31). While this is important for future  
9 generations of women, it is also vital for men, and boys, to see women in leadership  
10 positions as the norm to produce long-term inclusive organizational and social change.

11 Therefore, the aims of this paper are three-fold. First, to raise awareness of  
12 women's gendered *experiences* of strength and conditioning (S&C) coaching and how  
13 these might be connected to their underrepresentation in S&C coaching. Where  
14 possible we will draw upon SCC-specific data or examples to achieve this, although we  
15 recognize the small collection of studies on women's experiences in S&C lacks  
16 intersectional approaches. Therefore, current knowledge is predominantly framed  
17 within white, able-bodied, cisgendered and heterosexual women's experiences. Second,  
18 to introduce the reader to sociological frameworks that have and can be used to  
19 understand women's underrepresentation and experiences in S&C, including  
20 frameworks that do more to acknowledge women's intersectional identities. These  
21 might be viewed as tools that help researchers, S&C practitioners, and individuals  
22 working in governing bodies to think critically about their and others' behaviors,  
23 interactions, and environment(s). Thus, ultimately by doing this, our third and overall  
24 aim is to support the development of more inclusive and equitable practices and  
25 opportunities for women SCCs.

## 1 **Doing sociology: A tool for examining gendered experiences in S&C**

2 In 2016, Mills and Gearity (39) presented sociology as a means of understanding  
3 complex problems in S&C and, in particular, the complexities and everyday lives of  
4 SCCs. In their paper the authors alluded to gender as one such problem that might be  
5 addressed using sociological perspectives, but it was not within the scope of that piece  
6 to offer any more detail, something we now hope to address.

7         Simply put, sociology is the scientific study of human life, social groups and  
8 whole societies (16). Sociologists study our (human) behavior as social beings as we  
9 form relationships and interact with others, but rather than being viewed as a natural  
10 process they understand this as a consequence of historical context and social processes  
11 (16). So, while most of us will accept how we see the world and how we operate on a  
12 day-to-day basis as natural or part of our free will and choice (agency), sociologists tend  
13 to view these aspects of our lives as linked to the broader social world and large-scale  
14 social institutions that influence how we behave and understand the world (social  
15 structures). A useful analogy here might be the cliché iceberg image, whereby most  
16 people often only see the tip of the iceberg protruding from the sea, but not the structure  
17 that holds it in place and makes it what it is - and it is this structure that sociologists  
18 seek to uncover.

19         Importantly, for us as practitioners either in S&C and/or research, this is perhaps  
20 not a helpful framing of the discipline; we need to know how to *do* sociology to see  
21 these often-subtle social structures at play. Mills (58) offers a useful invitation in this  
22 regard. He encourages (new) sociologists to consider their own personal experiences as  
23 social issues, connecting those individual experiences to the workings of society. In this  
24 sense, we take a specific example from our own or others' lives and relate it to broader  
25 society. For instance, a SCC experiencing difficulties working with a school-aged

1 weightlifter who is not engaging in a training program, yet driven to succeed in her  
2 sport, may need to understand the emotional tensions women face when developing a  
3 muscular body. Walseth and Tidslevold's (56) study, for instance, found that women  
4 who are student-athletes, placed a high level of value on beautiful feminine bodies  
5 within the dominant conventions of idealized beauty standards in society. This  
6 conflicted with the demands of their athletic, muscular, performance-based bodies,  
7 causing varying levels of internal struggle for these women, some of whom suggested  
8 they would focus on developing a 'beautiful body' after their sporting career had ended.  
9 Gender norms and body norms of particular sports then, are the structures that influence  
10 the athlete's experiences and behaviors and shape her relationship with her SCC. Only  
11 when we view individual experiences in the context of society, can we start to see the  
12 often unnoticed innerworkings of social structures influencing our everyday lives  
13 particularly in interactions we previously thought to be familiar and normal. As  
14 Giddens (16) puts it, doing sociology *disturbs* our common sense beliefs about  
15 ourselves and others, and for some of us who embrace the sociological imagination it  
16 can be hard to unsee how social structures shape our lives.

17         The scope of sociology is vast; sociologies of education, politics, crime, religion,  
18 to name but a few, have all contributed to our understanding of the social world that we  
19 live in. For us, sociology of sport and the more recent emergence of sociology of  
20 coaching can help us to understand why sociology can be a useful tool for examining  
21 gender inequalities and women's experiences in S&C. Prominent scholars in the  
22 sociology of coaching offered the unequivocal responses from top-level international  
23 coaches who were questioned about the nature of what they do as a rationale for  
24 adopting a sociological approach:



1           ‘Unless you understand [athletes] as people, the best coaching book in the world  
2           isn’t going to help. It all comes down to how well they really want to do for  
3           you...to the relationship you have with your players.’  
4           ‘The art of coaching is about recognizing the situation, recognizing the people and  
5           responding to the people you’re working with’.  
6           ‘A big thing is the manner you put things across...Really, it’s the ability to handle  
7           men, that’s the big thing, to handle people’.  
8           ‘Coaching to me is about reading the individual. People, people, people. That’s  
9           what it boils down to in the end’  
10          (24, p.5)

11        These quotes indicate that social skills or more specifically working effectively with  
12        people seemed to outweigh sport-specific technical knowledge (25). While this may  
13        appear common sense, coaches and coach educators often find it difficult to articulate  
14        and conceptualize the meaning and nature of these skills (25). This is because what  
15        appears to be normal or common sense is held together by social structures and  
16        processes or behaving appropriately in context in ways that are most valued. And  
17        herein then lies the crux of the problem and perhaps an uncomfortable truth, women -  
18        their bodies, their knowledge, and their leadership - are not valued in the same way as  
19        men, at least not historically and this (historical) context still shapes how women SCCs  
20        are viewed today. A useful example is perhaps to look at the social processes and  
21        values employers use and look for when hiring SCCs. Sociologically-grounded  
22        research in this area has found that in S&C a muscular and typically large physique is  
23        often privileged or more valued by employers; it is often synonymous with knowledge  
24        regardless of an individual’s qualifications (10). This has particular implications for  
25        women SCCs. Strength, power and muscularity are values or social symbols associated  
26        with masculinity; women who present these types of bodies are often perceived to be  
27        transgressing societal norms and often feel the need to develop muscle moderately (24).  
28        In addition, women who do enter leadership roles, often experience challenges either

1 from athletes or other coaches based on gender stereotypes (41,42). These are often  
2 centered on assumptions about their physical ability and/or knowledge and can manifest  
3 as both subtle and overt forms of disrespect, isolation and bullying-like behaviors  
4 sometimes framed as ‘banter’. Whilst these behaviors have been well-documented in  
5 sport coaching research (29,41,42), there is also evidence of this in S&C (49). If we use  
6 the premise of sociology to accept that individual experiences, social processes and  
7 structures are grounded in historical context, in this case the role and position of women  
8 in society are grounded in a patriarchal design where men are privileged, then this goes  
9 some way to explain why patterns of women’s underrepresentation and poorer  
10 experience in sport, sport coaching and SCC roles are longstanding (45). Therefore, the  
11 remainder of this paper provides the reader with some sociological theories or tools to  
12 help support practitioners’ identification and understanding of this in S&C, and  
13 therefore a platform to develop more equitable practices and opportunities.

#### 14 **Sociology and social theories**

15 Whilst sociologists largely agree on what sociology is and broadly how to *do* it, there is  
16 less agreement on theories of how societies work and/or how groups of people or  
17 individuals behave within social structures. Similarly, sociology tutors have noted  
18 social theory is often difficult for those who study and work in sport to understand and  
19 engage with, largely because of the sheer volume of various theories available, the often  
20 abstract, broad and impractical nature of them, and the terminology or jargon used (35).  
21 Indeed social theories are often presented in this way because they are trying to explain  
22 new and complex ideas on how we understand and experience the world in our day-to-  
23 day lives, and therefore they are fundamental to taking action or creating social change  
24 (35).

1 Mills (58) argued that social theories are a tool for identifying, understanding  
2 and potentially changing the social processes and structures that can (adversely) shape  
3 our lives. Therefore, to understand why there are so few women SCCs and why their  
4 experiences may differ from men, we have a vast range of sociological theories or tools  
5 to help us. It would be impossible to cover all relevant theories within this paper, so we  
6 have selected three we think offer the most promise for understanding the underpinning  
7 power-relations in the gendered *experiences* of women SCCs – Connell’s (7) concept of  
8 hegemonic masculinity, Erving Goffman’s (19–21) interactionist work on presenting  
9 selves in everyday life, and Rosalind Gill’s (17) postfeminist sensibility.

10 All three perspectives have recently been used to examine the gendered  
11 experiences of women sport coaches (39) and in some cases women SCCs (35, 49).  
12 Each explains how our interactions with people might be understood and experienced.  
13 So rather than focusing on these issues from an organizational, top-down approach  
14 placing the responsibility for change with National Governing Bodies (NGBs), they are  
15 more focused on small-scale interactions to explain how individuals experience their  
16 day-to-day lives. We have taken this approach in the hope it will support individual  
17 readers, including those working for NGBs, to facilitate change. That is not to say  
18 NGBs are devoid of responsibility here, far from it, but we accept that all organizations  
19 including NGBs are made up of individuals who can collectively prompt cultural and  
20 organizational change. In addition, these three theoretical perspectives can be and have  
21 been used in interconnected ways, as outlined below, to help identify and understand  
22 why *and* how women’s experiences are shaped in patriarchal structures and norms (35,  
23 39, 49), thus ultimately giving us a starting point to identify and develop more equitable  
24 opportunities and practices for women in S&C, the overall aim for this paper. It is  
25 likely that some theoretical ideas will resonate more with you than others, likely based

1 on your own experiences and how you understand the world.

2 ***Hegemonic masculinity: Working in a man's world***

3 To date, most sociological work on women SCCs has been framed by Raewyn  
4 Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Simply put, hegemonic masculinity is a  
5 pattern of behavior that privilege traditional and idealized forms of masculinity (7). For  
6 example, dominance, assertiveness, muscularity, confidence, aggression, and  
7 rationality. Hegemonic masculinity is synonymous with cultural and organizational  
8 power and privilege and is used to oppress, discredit and/or exclude other gender  
9 groups, particularly women and men who do not conform to the supposedly ideal form  
10 of masculinity, notably homosexual men (7). So importantly, whilst individuals in the  
11 S&C community might embody hegemonic masculinity, this in turn shapes the  
12 organization, its norms, and values. For example, how individuals present themselves –  
13 the level of musculature they develop, their ability and willingness to physically  
14 perform lifts or spot for others, working patterns which are perhaps not overly suited to  
15 traditional family life, competitive practices and accepted use of 'banter' and language  
16 (discussed in greater detail below). So, when we see repeated patterns in the ways  
17 individuals look and behave, we come to understand this as the cultural norm or what an  
18 organization is and what it requires to be included and accepted. Therefore, individuals'  
19 understanding of what the cultural norms of S&C are creates a reciprocal process of  
20 legitimizing patriarchal power and privilege.

21 Connell's (7) theoretical work has been recently used to understand women's  
22 experiences in S&C (38,52). For example, Thomas et al.'s (52) study of women SCCs'  
23 experiences of working in the field found hegemonic masculinity deeply rooted in their  
24 day-to-day lives. Interviewees felt privileging of men's bodies and knowledge led to  
25 them being unsuccessful in attaining paid S&C work, feeling undervalued, having fewer

1 opportunities for development and progression, and ultimately in some cases, them  
2 leaving S&C roles. In addition, they found examples of (sexual) harassment from male  
3 colleagues and athletes often framed as ‘banter’, again driven by hegemonic masculine  
4 ideals, norms, and culture. Participants in the study felt there was a lack of role models  
5 who are women, or at least any privileging of women SCCs, and a general lack of  
6 organizational support from a leading S&C governing body. The sample was of fifteen  
7 accredited women SCCs, a relatively large sample within qualitative work of this nature  
8 and given the overall low numbers of women SCCs in the UK. As such, it would be fair  
9 to say that hegemonic masculinity frames and shapes women SCCs’ day-to-day life  
10 based on these findings. Importantly, this work offers an explanation as to why  
11 women’s representation among SCCs has been and remains so low.

12 Anecdotally, from the first author’s recent teaching experiences, Connell’s (7)  
13 theoretical ideas seem to be increasingly contested by male sport students and  
14 practitioners as something of a historical hangover. They often suggest we have moved  
15 on from traditional patriarchal structures and interactions in both society, sport and  
16 specifically sport coaching. However, recent sport research indicates hegemonic  
17 masculinity is still very much present and prominent in many sport cultures, including  
18 sport coaching (13,41,42) and therefore we can expect it is likely to largely feature in  
19 the day-to-day lives of women SCCs too. Thomas et al.’s 2021 study (52) provides  
20 recent evidence of this. Therefore, we argue Connell’s (7) theoretical ideas continue to  
21 be a viable and useful framework for understanding women SCCs’ experiences.

22 However, the remaining theoretical perspectives might be more fitting for those who  
23 struggle to see hegemonic masculinity in their own practice, relationships, and  
24 environments. They can be used instead of or in combination with Connell’s (7) work  
25 on hegemonic masculinity.

1 ***The interaction order: Acting out the SCC role authentically***

2 Erving Goffman's (19–21) theoretical ideas on self and social identity have been  
3 used to understand sport coaches' day-to-day lives and how they act out their coaching  
4 roles (5,26). Therefore, his work could be useful to understanding why women SCCs  
5 are underrepresented and how their experiences may differ from men SCCs, along with  
6 a multitude of other aspects of SCCs working practices. Goffman's work comprises of  
7 interlinking concepts of *dramaturgy*, *interaction order*, *impression management* and  
8 *stigma*. Central to all these is the concept of *dramaturgy* whereby we would accept the  
9 idea that individuals perform various social roles or identities in their day-to-day  
10 interactions with others, much like being an actor in a play. Social roles or identities can  
11 be relational (e.g., being a mother/father, a son/daughter, a husband/wife, or a  
12 coach/athlete) or being part of a collective community or group (e.g., being a  
13 man/woman or a SCC). We can fulfil multiple social identities at any one time (e.g.,  
14 being a man/woman SCC) and in different contexts (e.g., a coach while at work, but a  
15 husband/wife at home). Collectively our social identities inform our self-identity – who  
16 we believe we are (21). The *interaction order* is key to *how* and *where* we act out our  
17 roles and how these acts inform our self-identity. For example, SCCs will often act,  
18 dress, and train their body in particular ways based on what they think a SCC should  
19 look like and how they should behave, most likely based on other SCCs they have  
20 worked with or been mentored by. This is called *impression management* and is  
21 particularly important in front stage spaces where individuals must perform well to  
22 convince an audience that they are acting out their role authentically. In S&C coaching,  
23 the athlete(s) or other SCCs a SCC works with are likely to be the audience and they  
24 will either reinforce or diminish the coach's sense of self-identity by how they respond  
25 to their act. If the coach perceives that their audience believes their act is authentic, this

1 will reinforce their sense of self identity as a SCC. If, however, the coach perceives that  
2 their audience is questioning their act, their behavior is not perhaps the same as other  
3 SCCs, their knowledge or how they communicate that knowledge is not what they  
4 expect or they look different to what they would expect of an SCC, then this will  
5 diminish their sense of self-identity. Consistent and/or substantial inauthentic  
6 performances can then lead to *stigma*, a failed or blemished identity that can be hard to  
7 recover from. Importantly, Goffman suggests actors can rehearse or relax in backstage  
8 spaces where inconsistencies or lesser performances are judged differently, with fewer  
9 consequences. In S&C coaching, these backstage spaces might, or should, include  
10 education courses and programs.

11 Two recent studies have used Goffman's (21) theoretical ideas, often in  
12 conjunction with Connell's hegemonic masculinity (above), to examine the experiences  
13 of women SCCs (38,52). Consequently, they revealed women SCCs often feel  
14 conflicted about and between their social identity as a woman and the masculine  
15 expectations associated with being a SCC coach. Women have reported male peers  
16 visibly appearing uncomfortable or unhappy about being paired with them in S&C  
17 education settings and/or male peers ridiculing those paired with women (38).

18 Essentially, the audience in this case did not perceive the woman SCC's performance to  
19 be authentic because she was a woman – she looked and behaved differently to what  
20 they associated with a SCC - and concerningly this took place in what should be a  
21 backstage setting where SCCs (both men and women) should have space to make  
22 mistakes and learn. To combat these types of interactions, women SCCs often engage  
23 in forms of impression management that emphasize their physical presence and  
24 competence (e.g., lifting in front of men or working out frequently) (52). Similar  
25 navigation behaviors have recently been identified in mainstream women sport coaches

1 too (41). So, using Goffman's (19–21) theoretical framework might help us to not only  
2 identify behaviors that are likely to negatively affect women's representation in and  
3 experiences of S&C coaching, but also *how* women SCCs experience this and *how* they  
4 are attempting to overcome or negotiate tensions in and between their social identities,  
5 hegemonic masculine (sub)cultures and forms of discrimination. That is not to say that  
6 women should have to change their appearance or behavior to overcome these  
7 challenges, but current studies framed in Erving Goffman's work suggest they are  
8 currently doing this quite extensively, which offers some explanation for longstanding  
9 experiences of dissatisfaction or poorer quality experiences among women coaches.  
10 These findings lead to questions about how women can coach in more equitable ways,  
11 but also authentically within their respective sport field(s), and so the final theory we  
12 outline is a means of examining more of women's successes in S&C coaching.

### 13 ***Post-feminist sensibility: Femininities, successes, and ongoing challenges***

14 To date there have been no analyses of women SCCs using Rosalind Gill's  
15 postfeminist sensibility (17). However, Gill's work has recently been used to understand  
16 women's experiences in sport coaching (41) in answer to calls to look at patterns of  
17 underrepresentation and poor experiences in women coaches in new ways (44). In  
18 addition, it also recognizes individual subjectivity and/or intersectionality (18),  
19 something which is absent from literature on women in sport coaching (34) and even  
20 more so on women SCCs. As such we believe Gill's postfeminist sensibility, which is  
21 often described as an analytical tool (17,18,41), offers a promising way to understand  
22 women SCCs' experiences *and*, in doing so, potentially identify more equitable  
23 practices that support women in S&C, the overall aim of this paper.

24 Postfeminist scholars acknowledge a renewed interest in feminism across



1 political and cultural spheres (17,37) including sport (53). This is part of a wider  
2 societal shift over the past two decades that has seen women and girls become  
3 successful, empowered and visibly leading in various aspects of society (9). In sport,  
4 for example, women have coached high profile athletes and sports teams (e.g., Sarah  
5 Stone, Edniesha Curry, Marina Armstrong, Annick Hayraud, Lang Ping). Although  
6 women SCCs are not perhaps as readily or easily recognized, notable examples include  
7 Maral Javadifar, Suki Hobson, Andrea Hudy, Lorena Torres-Ronda, Jo Clubb, Corliss  
8 Fingers, Cristi Bartlett, and Sophia Nimphius, to name a few. Alongside a growth of  
9 women successfully undertaking leadership roles, there is some evidence men have  
10 increasingly become supportive of these women, to some extent embracing and  
11 enacting feminist thought (23). Professional tennis player Andy Murray is a notable  
12 example, often correcting journalists' sexist media reporting of women athletes and  
13 coaches. The growth in successful women has however led to some debate about the  
14 need for traditional feminist activism that contested patriarchal systems and behaviors.  
15 However, whilst postfeminists like Gill (17) recognize the growing rise and shift  
16 towards women in more equitable positions of power and leadership, they also  
17 acknowledge the ongoing and systematic challenges women face in their day-to-day  
18 lives (28). For example, women have experienced increased success in obtaining  
19 leadership positions in sport such as coaching (41) including S&C roles (52). However,  
20 there is evidence they must navigate longstanding forms of inequality and  
21 discrimination such as being and/or feeling undervalued, scrutiny of physical  
22 competence and knowledge compared to male peers, harassment, and ridicule  
23 (38,41,52) to do this well. If we understand the world in this way – a complex  
24 intertwining of feminist and antifeminist tensions - then we can use Gill's postfeminist  
25 sensibility as an analytical tool to identify and understand how and why women are

1 becoming successful within the challenges associated with hegemonic masculinity and  
2 other patriarchal structures. To do so, we need to identify the ways in which women are  
3 doing femininity in different, non-traditional and, therefore perhaps in more equitable  
4 ways (17,18). However, we must proceed cautiously, ensuring we do not produce an  
5 accelerated view of progress by continuing to recognize the patriarchal pressures and  
6 tensions women face (18) as evidenced in recent research on women's experiences of  
7 coaching (38,41,52). In addition, by looking at the different ways women perform  
8 femininity we can also move beyond thinking of women as a homogenous group and  
9 recognize how their intersecting identities affect their experiences (18). For example,  
10 women who identify as black, disabled and/or lesbian, for example, may experience  
11 S&C differently to white, able-bodied and/or heterosexual women.

12         Using Gill's (17) framework, Murray et al.'s (41) study identified how  
13 predominantly white, able-bodied grassroots sport coaches in the UK were successfully  
14 navigating various sport cultures that are historically grounded in hegemonic  
15 masculinity (e.g., soccer and basketball). First and foremost, and problematically, they  
16 did so mostly by acting in traditionally masculine ways to gain acceptance, rather than  
17 acting in distinctly new or alternative feminine ways that would produce more equitable  
18 practices (41). Notably, similar patterns were identified in recent research on the  
19 experiences of women SCCs (52) who felt they had to emphasize their physical  
20 presence and competence to be accepted and trusted. However, Murray et al.'s study  
21 noted that although replication of hegemonic masculine practices led grassroots women  
22 sport coaches to successfully obtain leadership roles and integrate with male colleagues,  
23 it had implications for other women who were not able or willing to behave in assertive,  
24 aggressive, or physically dominant ways. Consequently there was a level of toxic  
25 competitiveness among women, rather than them working in supportive and collegiate

1 ways to overcome male privilege in their sport (sub)cultures (41). Toxic  
2 competitiveness among women is relatively understudied in sport coaching literature  
3 and is absent from the small collection of academic work on women SCCs' experiences;  
4 something researchers and practitioners may wish to focus on in the future.

5       Importantly for those looking to develop more equitable gender practices in  
6 S&C, by using Gill's (17) work, Murray et al. (41) did identify more secondary and  
7 newer femininities that led to more equitable experiences and practices. They found  
8 women coaches were actively challenging male coaches and athletes' bullying-like  
9 behaviors noted extensively in earlier coaching research (33). Numerous women  
10 coaches in the study verbally challenged male coaches and athletes' sexist remarks  
11 sometimes framed as 'banter' and in some cases left coaching positions where they felt  
12 undervalued and experienced ridicule and/or gender-based scrutiny of their coaching  
13 knowledge to pursue other more inclusive work environments. There was also evidence  
14 of male coaching colleagues supporting them when these challenges were made.  
15 Evidence of this taking place in mainstream sport coaching provides some evidence  
16 women in coaching roles are becoming increasingly empowered by wider societal  
17 movements to challenge discriminatory and inequitable behaviors in sport settings. The  
18 supportive role of men here is key too. Indeed, LaVoi, McGarry and Fisher (34) have  
19 recently advocated for men in positions of power to commit more to learn about gender  
20 bias and sexism in sport coaching and Heffernan's (23) recent work suggests men can  
21 be gender allies for women. If S&C practitioners, both women and men, actively  
22 challenge these types of behaviors in their day-to-day activities, then equitable practices  
23 across S&C organizations and culture will become more normalized over time.  
24 Challenges of these behaviors also serve as educational tools for those being challenged.

1           In addition to more empowered forms of femininity, Murray et al (41) also  
2 found that women operationalized a higher ethic of care for the athletes than some of  
3 their male counterparts. This was identified as a form of femininity which arguably  
4 privileged some women coaches who had relatively long and successful careers because  
5 of their reputation as being firm but caring with their athletes. Notably firm but caring  
6 forms of femininity were highlighted as having huge potential for sport organizations  
7 and NGBs following increased reports and investigations of abuse in sport (41). Yet,  
8 coaches in the study deemed this to be fragile gender/coaching performance, one that  
9 might be misinterpreted as maternal care, associated with traditional or hegemonic  
10 femininity (18), which was seen as undesirable for those wishing to work in  
11 performance sport where hegemonic masculinity framed organizational practices and  
12 values (41). For those who are focused on developing more equitable practices and  
13 opportunities in S&C, we need to identify if caring forms of femininity are also present  
14 predominantly in women SCCs, via research and/or critical reflection framed by Gill's  
15 work and then consider the ways in which teams, clubs, organizations and NGBs might  
16 capitalize on this like Murray et al.'s (39) work.

17           Thus, although Gill's postfeminist sensibility is yet to be used in research on  
18 women SCCs' experiences, use of this analytical tool to examine mainstream women  
19 coaches' experiences indicates it would be a promising means of identifying existing  
20 practices that might lead to more equitable opportunities, practices, and spaces in S&C.

### 21 **Concluding thoughts: Practical applications and recommendations**

22           Our paper offers three potential contributions. First and foremost, we hope our  
23 paper has given readers working in S&C some insight into women's experiences of  
24 S&C coaching, which are different and poorer to their male counterparts. Therefore, we

1 hope we have prompted a desire in the reader to look at their own practices and  
2 interactions more critically to support the development of more equitable opportunities  
3 and practices for women SCCs.

4 We have offered some sociological tools or frameworks to support practitioners  
5 to *do* sociology or engage in their own critical reflections of S&C practices and how  
6 these might affect women SCCs' experiences. When we start to unpack *why* and *how*  
7 women's experiences are shaped by patriarchal structures, norms and values then can  
8 we start to identify and develop more equitable and inclusive practices. Using these  
9 frameworks, we would encourage S&C practitioners to take time to critically reflect on  
10 their day-to-day interactions and practices in S&C and challenge them to first identify  
11 examples of male privilege.

12 To support the reader to identify examples of male privilege and based on our  
13 discussion of the three perspectives above, we offer these reflexive questions as a  
14 starting point - Do men in S&C behave in particular ways that exclude, scrutinize, or  
15 discriminate against women in some way, no matter how small? Do women in S&C  
16 behave in highly competitive and aggressive ways, typically associated with hegemonic  
17 masculinity? Why might they do this? Does this affect others working with or around  
18 them? In what ways? Do SCC employers privilege men's knowledge and physicality in  
19 recruitment processes, potentially limiting women's opportunities? How do they do  
20 this? Do S&C organizations (made up of people) privilege men's knowledge and  
21 reputation in S&C? Are women represented in areas where key decisions are made  
22 about S&C organizations, knowledge, and practice?

23 Once examples of male privilege are identified, we would encourage individuals  
24 to question how these might affect women's experiences, opportunities, and practices,  
25 and in what ways. Particular attention should be paid to how women are successfully

1 navigating forms of inequality and discrimination and if they are doing this in equitable  
2 and inclusive ways or if more work needs to be done to achieve this - Do women have  
3 poorer or different experiences or opportunities because of these behaviors? Do women  
4 have to behave in particular ways to try and overcome these practices? Are behaviors  
5 they use to navigate these issues inclusive and equitable, or do they potentially  
6 perpetuate problematic behaviors for other S&C practitioners? Are women of diverse  
7 backgrounds and/or those with intersectional identities (e.g., women from impoverished  
8 backgrounds, women of color, disabled women) more or less successful than other  
9 women? How and why? Engaging in these reflexive processes will not only support the  
10 development of more equitable practices for women currently working in S&C, but also  
11 for their male counterparts and future generations of SCCs and athletes they work with,  
12 regardless of their gender.

13           Importantly, individuals constitute the organizational culture and values of S&C.  
14 All groups and organizations are made up of people, they are not abstract. Therefore,  
15 organizations do not create change, individuals within them do. Subsequently, if more  
16 S&C practitioners think critically about their own and others' behaviors and practices  
17 that we have come to accept as normal, eventually over time, they will create  
18 organizational and structural change.

19           Second, by offering sociological frameworks contextualized with S&C specific  
20 examples and evidence as a way of addressing gender problems in S&C coaching, we  
21 hope S&C organizations, or more specifically individuals working and making  
22 decisions affecting organizational culture, think differently about sociological  
23 knowledge and its potential value; something Mills and Gearity (39) argued for in 2016,  
24 but some six years on, little has changed. Postfeminist scholars (discussed above),  
25 among others, recognize and highlight a substantial shift in the role and position of

1 women in society, but individuals within S&C organizations need to assess if this is  
2 mirrored in their own institutions and to what extent. Failing to do so, is likely to have  
3 negative implications for future generations of athletes, coaches, SCCs and the S&C  
4 community as a whole, who need aspirational, inspirational and supportive women (33).  
5 Diverse workplaces and organizations (i.e., those formed of people with various  
6 backgrounds and social and intersectional identities) lead to diversity in attributes,  
7 attitudes, values and beliefs (46) which are invaluable when working with diverse  
8 groups of people and organizations, such is the case in S&C coaching.

9         Diversity is dependent on organizations providing appropriate support for those  
10 who are underrepresented, underprivileged and have poorer experiences (6).  
11 Educational reform is key to this. Encouraging the integration of socio-cultural  
12 knowledge and practice in S&C curricula would be one way of doing this (e.g., socio-  
13 cultural modules on degree programs, socio-cultural information in practitioner course  
14 materials). Anecdotally, the second author who is a S&C practitioner, for example, had  
15 no sociological training during his Sport and Exercise Science degrees, nor during his  
16 governing body specific qualifications. His academic career has led to opportunities to  
17 learn about sociological perspectives that help him to understand his practice,  
18 relationships with coaching colleagues and athletes, and the broader S&C environment.  
19 For example, when mentoring new SCCs, he emphasizes the importance of not just  
20 technical knowledge, but also understanding the realities of individuals' lives and the  
21 pressures they face because of societal norms or social structures. Therefore, for  
22 existing practitioners who have not had these training opportunities, S&C organizations/  
23 governing bodies could facilitate sociologically driven CPD workshops, webinars, and  
24 forums. Coupled with this we suggest S&C organizations should better promote  
25 existing S&C specific support networks for women. These should not be exclusively

1 open to women, but also men who wish to support women in and through their SCC  
2 career.

3 Finally, we hope our paper provided those S&C practitioners working in  
4 academia (research and teaching) with an appreciation of how sociology might benefit  
5 their work, especially with interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches now  
6 emerging prominently. For those already sold on its value, we recognize the limitations  
7 of our paper in that we have presented just three theoretical perspectives which we felt  
8 might best support S&C practitioners to understand the underrepresentation and  
9 experiences of women in their field based on recent studies in this area and work that  
10 has the potential to support more equitable practices for women. Lots of other theories  
11 exist. Judith Butler's (4) work on *Doing Gender*, for example, might offer another  
12 useful tool to look at these and other gendered patterns including how sexuality  
13 intersects with gender. Other theoretical lenses commonly used in sociology of sport  
14 coaching might also offer promise too. Although Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault  
15 do not focus on gender per se, their work has been used to understand complex  
16 problems in S&C (coaching) (10,14,15) and women in sport (36), particularly those in  
17 leadership positions such as coaching (50) and therefore these perspectives are also  
18 likely to be useful to look at patterns of women's underrepresentation and gendered  
19 experiences among SCCs.



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