Title: “Women are Cancer, you shouldn’t be working in Sport”: Sport Psychologists’ Lived Experiences of Sexism in Sport

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Abstract

Though sexism has been recognised as problematic in sport, its impact on female sport psychologists in the UK has not yet been investigated. The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of sexism and its influence on practice. Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted, comprising 11 sport psychologists who worked in the UK. Thematic analysis revealed four general themes: the environment, privileging masculinity, acts of sexism, and the feminine. Participants’ discourse suggests female sport psychologists are impacted by sexism in their workplaces. Gendered power differentials, coupled with the low status of sport psychology within sport, exacerbated the challenges faced by female sport psychologists. This study contributes to the dearth of research on the impact of sexism on sport psychologists. Suggestions are made with regards to implications for practice.

“Women are Cancer, you shouldn’t be working in Sport”: Sport Psychologists’ Lived Experiences of Sexism in Sport

Fink (2016) notes that sexism in sport is “commonly overt yet simultaneously unnoticed” (p.2). Sexism in most sports is treated less seriously than other discriminatory issues, such as racism or homophobia, and is ignored or laughed at, rather than receiving condemnation (Fink, 2016). Hetero-patriarchal ideology is so deep-rooted in many sports that it has become invisible to many and therefore remains unchallenged, and thus perpetuated (Brackenridge, 2002; Cunningham, 2008; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). The central issue is that privilege is invisible to those who hold it, and in most sports, those who hold it are men (Kimmel, 2018; Krane & Waldron, 2020).
Women’s experiences across a range of sport-based professions were explored through Women in Sport’s (WIS; 2018) survey on sexism and workplace sport culture in the United Kingdom. The researchers highlighted the experiences women have working in this environment. The survey reports that nearly twice as many women experience gender discrimination in their workplace: 38% of women, and 21% of men. Similarly, 72% of men stated that they felt that their workplace was fair and equitable to both genders, whilst only 46% of women said the same. This demonstrates a large discrepancy in perception and lived experiences. A further survey from Women in Football (WIF, 2016; for reference, in the UK ‘football’ is the term used instead of the American ‘soccer’) documented that 61.9% of respondents had been the recipients of sexist “banter”, and that 14.8% had been sexually harassed. Since the release of this survey, WIF has reported a 400% increase in reports of sexual discrimination and harassment (Kelner, 2018). Perhaps this increase indicates that publication of the WIF report has facilitated greater awareness and action regarding sexist practices in the workplace. Whilst sport psychologists may have been respondents to these surveys, their experiences are not identifiable from the data.

The problem of sexism is often oversimplified, and a reductionist approach is taken. However, in order to understand the complexity of the gendered landscape of sport, it is important to consider acts of sexism and hegemonic masculinity. Acts of sexism have been categorised in the literature in two different ways: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick, 2013). These are useful theoretical concepts to be able understand and categorise sexist behaviour, however we must acknowledge that in lived experiences they may present themselves in more nuanced ways. Hostile sexism is used to punish individuals who deviate from prescribed gender norms and male hegemony (Glick, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Benevolent sexism is used to reward individuals who comply with prescribed gender norms (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). These two acts of sexism work hand-in-hand to ensure
compliance with traditional gender roles (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Glick, 2013).

Benevolent sexism is harder to recognise, as it often manifests as “compliments” or other patronising behaviours (Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Glick et al., 2000; Roper, 2008). The innocuous nature of benevolent sexism makes the perpetuation of sexism in the workplace more challenging to eradicate (Glick et al., 2000). It is in the moments that women are disempowered from confrontation through the use of benevolent sexism, that men are more likely to interpret as not being sexist, and it is in those moments where allies are needed the most (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2014; Drury & Kaiser, 2014). The aforementioned data, and further evidence that will be discussed below, reveal that the institution of sport is sexist (Brackenridge, Murtrie & Choi, 2005). However, to date, we have little evidence of whether acts of sexism have been experienced by UK female sport psychologists, and what the impact might be.

A formative and enduring definition of hegemonic masculinity, from Connell (1987), conceptualises it as the notion of dominant masculinity that is built upon two pillars: domination of women and hierarchical inter-male dominance. This type of masculinity generally manifests with the following characteristics: ruthless competition, control and dominance, a hierarchy of masculinities, a disinclination to show dependency or weakness, an incapacity to express emotions other than anger, the devaluing and exclusion of femininity and women, and stigmatisation of homosexuality (Brittan, 1989; Harris, 2008; Krane & Waldron, 2020; Waldron & Krane, 2005). However, the understanding of hegemonic masculinity conveyed by Lewis, Roberts, Andrew & Sawiuk (2020) offers a more layered perspective:
while we accept the masculine concept as a framework to understand gender-related norms, we reject the use of hegemonic masculinity as a fixed character type, or a collection of toxic traits. Instead we are framing masculinities as multiple, fluid and lithe and seen as positions held situationally, whereby practices and values espoused in one context may be different from those of another (Jewkes et al., 2015). (p. 73)

Thus, whilst a framework is useful to conceptualise hegemonic masculinity, it is acknowledged that it does not exist in a fixed way. Hegemonic masculinity has been linked to the systemic power differentials between men and women in sport, most notably in work pioneered by Brackenridge (2002). Sport is perceived to be a male domain and a prime indicator of masculinity (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Brackenridge, 2002; Wheaton, 2000). The sexism endemic to sport is related to the under-representation of women and is causally linked to how deeply entwined sport is with restrictive and toxic definitions of masculinity (Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2016). Krane and Waldron (2020) state that:

Hegemonic masculinity, as reified in sport, has seeped into the fabric of sport psychology whereby mainstream sport psychology organizations, through a functionalist lens, support, and one may say institutionalize, hegemonic masculine sport norms (p. 4)

Hegemonic masculinity discredits and dismisses the value of female voices (Beard, 2017; Drury & Kaiser, 2014), as articulated by Beard (2017): “you cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male” (p.86). This was echoed by Roper (2008) who reported female sport psychologists’ feelings of exclusion from not being “one of the boys”
and represents the only work to date explicitly addressing female sport psychologists’ experiences of sexism (p. 415). In sport, these discourses, and the construct of masculinity itself, are made up of a highly constricting set of heteronormative criteria. Any discourse that challenges “masculinity” is used for the purposes of punishment and seen as a threat (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Stapel & Noordewier, 2011). For example: “don’t play like a girl”. Thus, masculinity is heteronormative as it is used as a way of socially policing behaviour according to gendered categories (Chambers, 2003; Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Conversely, normative versions of femininity are often rejected within sport (Masser & Abrams, 2004). This might provide an explanation for the low status of psychology in sport (Cotterill & Barker, 2013; Pain & Harwood, 2004), as it can be argued that the core skills of psychologists align with perceptions of “femininity” (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Karniol, Gabay, Ockion & Harari, 1998; Petrie, Cogan, Van Raalte & Brewer, 1996), which may be perceived to challenge normative versions of “masculinity” (Anderson, 2008). Sport psychology in the UK, as a discipline, has its origins in sport science, not psychology, meaning that sport psychology carries an assumed positivist inheritance (Krane & Waldron, 2020). In this way, sport psychology often embodies what has been referred to as agentic male features when approaching practice, seeking to quantify, order, and control (Farnham, 1987). The reality of practice however, is less ‘cut and dry’, whereby the sport psychologist is necessarily embroiled in the complexities of the lives of those they work with, requiring sensitivity and communality to create the practitioner-athlete relationship (Farnham, 1987; Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Longstaff & Gervis, 2016).

Hegemonic masculinity, and its culture of emotional repression, has been linked to depression and suicide in young men (Canetto & Sakinofsky, 1998; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Möller-Leimkühler, 2003; Payne, Swami & Stanistreet, 2008). Furthermore, it poses harm to the physical and emotional well-being of both women and men.
Mental health issues have long been viewed in sport as being problematic, though there is an emerging trend whereby these concerns are beginning to be viewed with more understanding. Despite this, currently in sport there is a paucity of professional psychologists to support athletes (Gervis, Pickford, Hau & Fruth, 2020; Moesch et al., 2018). To date, these issues have not been connected with the enduring culture of hegemonic masculinity.

Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, power is viewed in a particular way, whereby power is conceptualised as something that men have over women (Jewkes et al., 2015). The language of sport is rife with references to power, which have many links to gender conflict and hegemonic practices (Brackenridge, 2002; Messner, 1992). According to Brackenridge’s (2002) influential work, power is both structural and cultural. Structural power is indicative of a hierarchy (Brackenridge, 2002). Hierarchical and structural conceptualisations of power are engrained into the fabric of the sporting world, which results in women being excluded from numerous positions therein (Carpenter & Acosta, 2000).

Moreover, men in sport are imbued with structural power that affords them the position of ‘gatekeeper’, which the female sport psychologist must then circumnavigate (Roper, 2008). Cultural power is continuously negotiated and constructed through discourse (Brackenridge, 2002). This can manifest through, for example, relational patterns and verbal communication, often characterised as “banter” (Roper, 2008; WIF, 2016).

Current power structures within most sports invariably have the coach at the top of the hierarchy (Aicher & Sagas, 2010; Brackenridge, 2002; Burke, 2001; Gervis, Rhind, Luzar, 2016). Other support staff, such as: physiotherapists, sport scientists, and strength and conditioning coaches, have been added to the sports performance hierarchy with sport psychologists being the last addition, and who consequently have the least power (Cotterill & Barker, 2013; Pain & Harwood, 2004). Sport psychology as a discipline faces challenges in terms of establishing credibility and acceptance within the sport and exercise sector (Cotterill...
This is reflected by a paucity of full-time sport psychology roles available, and a focus on short-term contracts (Barker & Winter, 2014; Cotterill, 2017; Gervis, Pickford, Hau & Fruth, 2020). This is problematic for sport psychologists not only due to the impact this has on job security and job clarity, but also diminishing the power of practitioners (Cotterill, 2017). Consequently, female practitioners may experience the dual effects of being both female and practicing an undervalued discipline (Krane & Waldron, 2020; Whaley & Krane, 2012).

Change can only occur if the problem is noticed and acknowledged (Mason, 2002). However, the majority of research into the professional careers of practitioner sport psychologists have focused solely on the male experience (Krane & Whaley, 2010; Ploszay, 2003; Roper, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2005; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Statler, 2003; Straub & Hinman, 1992), with the exception of Roper’s work (2002, 2008; Roper, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2005). When investigating the lived experiences of female sport psychologists from North America, Roper (2008) found evidence of gender bias, sexism, and discrimination. Specifically, she identified that women had a lower status as practitioners than their male colleagues. Moreover, they faced a range of sexist attitudes inherent to their sport cultures. Roper’s work was published twelve years ago, and begs the question: what has changed?

The above research provides some insight into the experiences of sexism by female sport psychologists. However, the research does not explore whether sexism is a problem experienced by female sport psychologists in the United Kingdom. Moreover, research to date has not called into question how the intersection of gender with status as a sport psychologist impacts practice. As such, this exploratory study investigates the lived experiences of female sport psychologists in the United Kingdom, and the impact that sexism has had on their practice. The research questions that guided this research were:
1. Do UK female sport psychologists have lived experiences of sexism?

2. What impact does sexism, if experienced, have on their practice?

**Method**

**Guiding Research Philosophy**

This study used a post-positivist approach, enhanced by feminist empiricism, as a guiding research philosophy – as detailed by Routledge (2007). Post-positivism maintains that the pursuit of knowledge through empiricism is the primary aim of any scientific enquiry but rejects the notion of complete objectivity and predictability, which aligns with feminist empiricism (Fox, 2008; Hundleby, 2011; Weiss, 1995). As such, it is accepted that “social biases, such as sexism and androcentrism, pervade both science and society” (Routledge, 2007, p. 284), whereby “science and society” are representative of sport psychology. Moreover, both post-positivism and feminist empiricism emphasise the importance of reflexivity in the research process (Dupuis, 1999; Fox, 2008; Henderson, 2011; Hundleby, 2011; Intemann, 2010). Further, the aim of this study was to highlight sport psychology’s existing structures that maintain inequality, in order to ultimately reduce gender bias, which aligns with both feminism and post-positivism (Rogers & Kelly, 2011; Ryan, 2006).

**Participants**

There were 11 female participants, each was assigned a participant number from P1 to P11 to maintain anonymity. All participants were accredited with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC). Participants had been practicing for between 2 and 25 years with athletes who competed from semi-elite to world-class elite levels across a range of team and
individual sports (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015). Further, participants represented different ethnicities, ages, and sexual orientations. However, due to the small number of female sport psychologists currently practicing, the intersectional identities of the participants will not be reported, to maintain confidentiality. In this instance, ethical consideration for the participants supersedes the importance of intersectional analysis in feminist research.

Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants through professional networks (Patton, 2005). Participants were recruited based on the following criteria to ensure that the information gathered was relevant to the study aims (Rhind, Scott & Fletcher, 2013): they were female, and had a formal role working as a sport psychologist in the United Kingdom. Prospective participants were emailed and informed that: “The purpose of this research is to reveal lived experiences of female sport psychologists, to explore if and how sexism impacts on their practice”. Consent was obtained prior to the commencement of any interviews.

Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted, where the primary researcher moderated and led the discussion. Each focus group was created in accordance with participants availability. The role of the moderator was to ask the questions stipulated in the focus group guide, prompt participants for further information when they deemed it necessary, and to steer the conversation if it drifted too far. A semi-structured format was chosen to ensure that certain topics were discussed, but that sufficient space was given for participants to discuss freely. Focus groups allow for the understanding and evaluation of differences and commonalities between members of the same group, in this case: female sport psychologists. Further, by using focus groups, the emphasis was placed on the conversation between participants, rather than each individuals’ personal narrative, which
became fragmented through the natural flow of conversation. Consequently, the data was
reflective of the interchange had in conversation by participants.

A focus group guide was prepared in advance, questions were developed by the
researchers in response to the literature and personal experiences. Participants were asked
questions designed to evoke their experiences of sexism in sport, such as: “have you
experienced sexism?”, “how has sexism affected you professionally?”, and “do you think that
we, as sport psychologists, challenge the existing macho culture?”

Prior to commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained. Contact with
participants was initiated by email, wherein the main purpose of the study was explained.
Written informed consent was gained from all participants prior to commencing the study,
where they were informed of the confidential and voluntary nature of the study, from which
they could withdraw at any time. Furthermore, all participants agreed to review the verbatim
transcription of the focus group. The focus groups were held via Skype and in person, were
audio recorded, and each focus group lasted for approximately 60-90 minutes. There were
three focus groups of three people and one group of two people due to a last minute drop out.
At the start of each focus group the following steps occurred: participants were welcomed
and introduced to each other, though in all but one case they knew each other; they were
reminded of how their data would be used; the topic was introduced, and participants were
reminded to allow each other to speak one at a time.

Data analysis
Reflexive thematic analysis was used to evaluate the qualitative data gathered from
the focus group. Reflexive thematic analysis is recognised as being theoretically flexible and
has been used in conjunction with focus group studies, post-positivist studies, and research
underpinned by feminist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Braun & Wilkinson, 2005; Jenkinson, Kruske & Kildea, 2017; King & Ussher, 2013). Thematic analysis is a valuable tool for understanding common and divergent elements across several cases, which was of particular interest in this study (Riessman, 2008). The conversations were transcribed verbatim and analysis followed the procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), who propose a six phase approach to thematic analysis: 1) familiarisation with the data (this includes transcription), 2) generating the initial codes (involving data reduction and compilation), 3) searching for overarching themes 4) reviewing and refining the themes, 5) naming and defining the themes, and finally 6) constructing the report. Negative case analysis was also used to gain a holistic perspective of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, a combination of inductive and deductive analysis was used to generate a full picture of the data. Deductive coding was grounded in the theoretical understanding of the core concepts of hegemonic masculinity, and acts of sexism.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered to be a key factor in feminist, post-positivist, and qualitative research practice, and is a core component of reflexive thematic analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019; Fox, 2008; Ryan, 2006; Tracy, 2010). It is a mode of self-practice that enhances the researcher’s awareness of their position within their research (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity is of particular importance given that the two authors are both female sport psychologists who have experienced sexism in their workplaces, and as such bring the expertise of their lived experiences to the analysis. Finlay’s (2002) conceptualisation of reflexivity proposes five variants of the reflective process which were used by the researchers: (i) introspection; (ii) intersubjective reflection;
(iii) mutual collaboration; (iv) social critique; and (v) discursive deconstruction. Both
researchers discussed frequently the products of their introspection and intersubjective
reflection, aiming to ensure that they were aware of how their experiences of sexism
impacted the ways in which they responded to the data. Analysis was conducted jointly by
the two researchers, and then further evaluated by four additional female sport psychologists
as a function of mutual collaboration.

Discussion of Results

Analysis of the data revealed four general dimensions: the environment, privileging
masculinity, acts of sexism, and the feminine. Each general dimension is comprised of
higher-order themes and further lower-order themes. Each general dimension is discussed in
detail in relation to current findings and existing literature.

The Environment

The general dimension of The Environment revealed four higher-order themes: the
discipline of sport psychology, male-dominated professional sport, mixed-gender
professional sport, and mixed-gender Olympic sport (see Table 1). Sport psychology as a
discipline is still in flux with respect to defining its role and practice. This was highlighted in
the lower-order theme ‘doing ‘male’ sport psychology’, whereby participants noted that there
was a particular conceptualisation of the way that sport psychology ‘should’ be practiced.
Specifically:
...the group of men who are the sports psychologists who hang on to this notion that
sport psychology is about performance not about, you know it's about measurement.
It's about science it's about all of those men type things. It's not about the skills of
communication, it's not about counselling, because that's the airy-fairy girly stuff isn't
it, and we're sports psychologists. And I think that some of the things in terms of how
we practice and what we believe to be the job of the sports psychologist I think it
allows male sports psychologists who adopt all of that hyper masculinity as being the
norm because they've all grown up in that environment so it's normalised, so it allows
them to be psychologists without the kind of emotional labour bit attached to it. (P11)

This quotation demonstrates the conflict present between the ‘soft skills’, or ‘feminine
skills’, inherent to being a practitioner psychologist, and the ‘hard skills’, or ‘masculine
skills’, of performance enhancement that can be measured, and echoes the arguments made
by Krane and Waldron (2020). In this way, Participant 2 conceptualised the role of the sport
psychologist as being: “So we kind of – we’re the holder in the sense of that vulnerability that
secret the stuff that they're not showing to the rest of the world”. Participant 4 furthered this
idea by noting that she had experienced open hostility towards the ‘soft’ skills inherent to
psychology: “the first team director of rugby will not allow a psychologist in, even though
his players are crying out for it, because it we'll make them weaker. She will make them cry”.

[Table 1. General Dimension: The Environment]

Most participants referred to the marginalisation of their discipline within sports
institutions because of their ‘lower status’ in comparison to other staff members. They
explained that they perceived sport psychology to be the “bottom of the pile” (P1). This had a
significant impact on the practitioners as they felt that they had less agency and credibility as
a result. Participant 5 states that “Psychology as a discipline is not highly regarded”. This
supports the literature that suggests sport psychology still does not have equal standing to
other roles within sport (Cotterill & Barker, 2013; Pain & Harwood, 2004). This is made
particularly evident through the following interchange:

P4: “I could be a psychologist I just don't have the time to do it”. The number of
times I've heard that.

P5: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right. So sad.

P4: Yeah. This took me seven years, but you could actually do this.

Indeed, this perspective was also encountered by Participant 2: “A physio who worked
in professional football said I've read a book on mental toughness and psychology I don't
need a psychologist to help me do that”. The sense of entitlement possessed by other staff
members, and the clear power discrepancy between sport psychologists and other
organisational roles resulted in many participants feeling that they were less able to denounce
sexism, particularly in relation to coaches who were generally men:

I found it easier with the players because we have more power. So it's easier to call
them out. With coaches, higher management, other members of staff, it's then knowing
the right way to do it... I've got used to it now, but it's that shock that you just can't
believe someone has actually said that (P3).
Moreover, coaches were seen to occupy a position of significant authority and influence in the sport organisations the participants worked in. This placed them higher in the hierarchy than sport psychologists and presented difficulties for sport psychologists seeking to renounce sexist practices. This supports the research by Brackenridge (2002) and Burke (2001) and indicates that little has changed with respect to the power of the coach.

The gender balance in the environment played a significant role in determining the practitioners’ experiences of sexism. Participants who had worked in a range of different contexts noted that in their experience, mixed-gender Olympic sport was the most inclusive and accepting of them as female practitioners. In stark contrast, the male-dominated professional sport environment was perceived as possessing the most barriers to the inclusion of women and produced the most sexist behaviours.

Privileging Masculinity

The general dimension of Privileging Masculinity encompassed the higher-order themes of: culture, behaviours, and maintenance (see Table 2). The culture was conceptualised by participants as one that glorified machismo, whilst simultaneously vilifying and eradicating femininity. This is made evident through an anecdote Participant 4 shared:

_The other day I was in the academy, and one of the guys – the senior academy players made a joke about rape, and at that point I step in and say that is – that's highly_
inappropriate. You can't do that. Never, ever, ever joke about rape whether I'm here or not... they don't – they don't want to have to change.

This is a phenomenon that the literature has extensively documented (Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2016; Wheaton, 2000). Most of the participants noted ever-present female dismissal whereby participant 5 recounts being told that “women and sport don’t belong together”. Membership to the ‘Boys Club’ and an intense focus on versions of machismo were also mentioned:

You do feel in the sort of – the professional sports side of things is very much a boy’s club. So that, that is definitely a barrier as a woman, because I don’t have that same network and I think along those lines is that in in that environment it is a very ‘laddy’ environment (P4).

This lends support to the findings of Roper (2008) and demonstrates the similarities between experiences of women in the UK and North America.

[Table 2. General Dimension: Privileging Masculinity]

Analysis revealed two main behavioural elements of privileging masculinity: extreme emotional constriction, and assumptions of normative femininity. On the subject of extreme emotional constriction, participants 1, 2, and 3 reflect:
P2: anger is an acceptable emotion whereas sadness, or disappointment or fear-

P1: The whole wonderful spectrum that women have access to-

P3: Well this is where working with those little under 8's is amazing. We went "how
did you feel when that happens?". They were like: "sad". "How- how did you feel
about this?" And they said, "Oh I was really scared". They say that they were sad,
and they were scared, but at some point between then and then being 16-

P1: Now you have to be a man

This suggests that some masculinities, as experienced by our participants, were
centred on behaviours that should not be done, rather than those that should. Emotional
literacy is therefore at odds with male hegemony, which aligns itself with extreme emotional
constriction (Brittan, 1989; Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Most of the practitioners noted that their
behaviour was compared against assumptions of normative femininity:

Considering that it's, it's such a male heavy, you know, environment that becomes
even more of a problem because, you know, being in touch with your beliefs your
emotions you you know that side of things, that's problematic for a lot of men to
wrap their heads around... athletes think that there are things that a female
practitioner wouldn't, we won't know, or you know they're just going to talk about
emotion and all the fluffy stuff around it. (P5)
Participant conceptualisations of the maintenance of privileging masculinity are that it may be sustained by normalisation: “Group striving towards an idealised masculine self that is so firmly entrenched in the media, the people they're surrounded with, and the way masculinity has been performed in the past” (P1), and conformity: “in order to be successful, the only way to do it is like a man” (P11). However, one participant represented a different approach to the normalisation of sexism in sport: “I'm not sure to be honest how much of that is also about the person's character. Because maybe it's also about what you accept to be sexism or not” (P8). This may represent a concerning phenomenon, whereby denial of sexism leads to the normalisation and acceptance of hegemonic masculinity in the workplace. This is further evidenced by this participant, who went on to state:

For instance, I work with people before who had a real problem in the environment and found it pretty offensive and really didn’t get on with it. And I think things that she felt were completely unacceptable examples of sexism to be honest they didn't fuss me that much. It's a bit the same, it's a throwaway comment and I would tend to respond to it by kind of taking the piss out of it. Yeah you're used to, kind of, if they take the mickey out [make fun] of me for being woman it's like I'll say something back...I think she [sport psychologist colleague] thought everything was about the fact that she was a woman whereas a lot of it- I thought it's just because some of the people we work with are a bit big headed and have huge egos and they like to shout people down...whereas I was like, it's working with difficult people, and you're always going to have to do that, to her it said something about the whole culture of the organization. I think it kind of leaves you with quite a different sense doesn't it? A few difficult people versus misogynistic culture. I think one's probably more OK than the other.
This would seem to be indicative of ‘victim blaming’, whereby the issue is perceived
to be only the problem of the person experiencing the sexism (Cortina, Rabelo & Holland,
2018). Participant 8 demonstrates a reluctance to challenge organisational norms, showing
how the culture of hegemonic masculinity works to undermine women’s lived experiences,
even to themselves. An understanding of why participant 8 responded in this way is provided
by participant 9 who, in response to the question “how has sexism impacted your practice?”
replied:

I would say it was more implicit to start with, and although I noticed it I think
because the era was different. I was at a different stage in my career and I was very
much going to wanting to fit in and so I tended to just see it- I think I downplayed it to
myself and I wanted to just see it as something I needed to accommodate and
overcome. I had to work harder to prove, I believed anyway, to prove myself credible
to work in professional male sports.

With the benefit of hindsight and self-awareness, she is able to recognise her own
actions as being a contributing factor to the maintenance of sexism. The problem with this
interpretation is that it leaves the organisation and its culture un tarnished, and therefore with
no impetus to change.

Acts of Sexism
The general dimension of Acts of Sexism included the higher-order themes: hostile
environment, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism (see Table 3). All the participants in this
study recounted acts of sexism in their workplaces. These recollections serve to illustrate the
sexist practices that have a direct influence their work and well-being.

[Table 3. General Dimension: Acts of Sexism]

All participants remarked on the inherent hostility of the sport environment towards
them. They noted that the environment was engineered in a way that deprived them of space,
facilities and legitimacy. The practitioners’ perception of their own legitimacy were regularly
brought into question, and served to undermine their worth:

*I probably would have to sell my experience more and my legitimacy in a space than
I've seen male colleagues have to do... I do think that sometimes I have to- would
have to affirm my status more in order to gain respect (P10)*

Further, they commented on how they were often in positions whereby they could not
access facilities as easily as their male colleagues. For example, many of the participants
remarked on an occasion where the basic need of a toilet was either denied or made
challenging to access: “They've changed the ladies toilets into another boys changing room...
clearly they didn't think there might be female staff who would need them.” (P3). In this way,
the enmity of the environment is invisible to the male majority and supports Kimmel’s (2018)
observations. Another type of environmental hostility that was noted by most of the
participants was the scarcity of instances where female kit is offered. Nearly all the
practitioners’ spoke of the profound discomfort they felt wearing kit that did not fit them
because of basic gendered physiological differences: “It isn’t designed with a female in
mind” (P9).

The experiences of the sport psychologists in this study also support the literature on
hostile sexism in sport (Fink, 2016), and indicates that female sport psychologists do
experience this in their workplaces. The lower-order themes were: challenging expertise,
using femininity as punishment, sexual harassment, misogyny, exclusion, and dismissing the
female voice. Seven of the participants noted experiencing blatant misogyny in their
workplaces, all of whom worked in professional male sport.

P4: the manager told me once that women are 'cancer' -

P5: Ayyy. What?

P4: You shouldn't be working in sport, you're just here to shag the players -

P5: Nice.

P4: If I argued against a point, which you kind of have to do quite a lot, it was: "ah,
are you on your period? Are you grumpy today? Is it that time of the month?" Stuff
like that. I had one football club where a coach wouldn't even say good morning to
me because he didn't think that as a woman I was supposed to be in that environment.
You know I'm very much supposed to be in the canteen making the teas, you know, I'm
not supposed be in the same space.
Conversely, the participants who worked in mixed-gender sports reported fewer instances of sexist acts in these environments. This supports Anderson (2008), who observed that misogyny flourishes in homosocial environments. The above quotation also highlights the lower-order theme of ‘femininity as punishment’, whereby being female was used as ammunition for punishment of anyone who challenged normative behaviours, aligning with the findings from Adams, Anderson & McCormack (2010).

Several female participants referred to a sense of entitlement possessed by some of their male colleagues to dismiss their voices: “he stood up, he felt entitled to say that in front of everybody, to call me out, to challenge me, when I'm about to deliver expert knowledge and I am the expert in the room” (P2). The assumption that gender negates knowledge was a reality that the female participants were exposed to on various occasions. They postulated that this was due to the systemic and organisational empowerment of men in sport, over women, thus positioning men, unchallenged, at the top of the organisational hierarchy (Brackenridge, 2002; Messner, 1992). The power differential that exists between men and women means that male voices were more greatly valued than female ones (Beard, 2017; Drury & Kaiser, 2014), a sentiment echoed by participant 2: “if a man was called out by another man for being sexist it would have a bigger impact than a woman” (P2). All participants noted that male voices carried greater weight behind them, where in contrast female voices were easily overlooked or dismissed.

Benevolent sexism was also found to be problematic for the participants, which is unsurprising given that hostile sexism and benevolent sexism work in tandem (Glick, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The participants reflected that benevolent sexism had manifested itself in their lives in the form of: inappropriate familiarity, objectification, patronisation, assumed fragility, and assumed domesticity. Inappropriate familiarity manifested itself in different ways, Participant 3 noted unsolicited comments on their appearance: “… he said "Alright
sweetheart! You look like you've lost weight, looking good!” in the middle of the workplace.” (P3). These comments serve the purpose of ‘rewarding’ women for conforming to stereotypical gendered expectations (Glick, 2013). Five of the practitioners also reported being objectified:

I might have been treated as a little- I don't know, again this is where that slight benevolent but still deeply sexist thing- but as brightening up the environment or being something ‘nice’. (P9)

This is indicative of both the insidious nature of benevolent sexism, and the need for male education around distinguishing between hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Benevolent sexism maintains gender inequality, which may at face-value appear acceptable, but needs to be recognised by men as: restricting, condescending and unfair (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). As Participant 2 states: “So again we are hindered, but in the things that are insignificant. The seemingly innocuous creates an awful lot of problems”.

This illustrates the difficulty benevolent sexism places on women, whereby responding to it as the sexism that it is, would be perceived as socially unacceptable. There were consequences to both hostile and benevolent sexism, expressed here by Participant 1 who expounded on the emotional toll that acts of sexism had on their emotional well-being: “I kind of went to that place of 'freeze' because I was so humiliated and most of my attention was focused on not going red and not looking embarrassed or ashamed or upset” (P1).

The Feminine
The general dimension The Feminine was comprised of the following higher-order themes: managing femininity, women’s power, psychologist as ‘mother’, and assumptions of promiscuity (see Table 4).

[Table 4. General Dimension: The Feminine]

Participants recounted that in the workplace they had to monitor and construct their femininity, essentially: ‘do gender’, in an environment which does not view femininity positively:

And men never have that problem, they just rock up. And it's like how do I present myself? What is the image that is going to be the most palatable and the most acceptable to a load of coaches who are then going to take me seriously? (P11).

Further, Participant 4 noted that what other women wear could also affect how men judge her:

P4: ...she turned up in the most inappropriate dress I have ever seen in my entire life. I'm talking, like, her tits were out, dress just about came to the bottom of her bum. It was skin-tight and she had like massive heels and like, caked in make-up, and strutting around. And she just- I just- I just wouldn't- I wouldn't wear that anywhere, but I certainly wouldn't wear in that environment. And it really annoyed me because I
understand she should be able to wherever she wants. But when- when someone like
that dresses in that environment not that it perpetuates this- or this belief that we're
just there to shag the players.

P5: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it sort of undoes everything that you've done.

P4: And equally I'm annoyed at myself for getting annoyed at that now because it's
like well why can't-

P5: Why can't she? Why shouldn't she?

In this way, the individual actions of each woman are attributed to all women. The
practitioners found that balancing their own professional identities with the aesthetic
expectations of the organisations they worked in to be frustrating and tiring. Thus supporting
Roper (2008), who also found that her participants deliberately ‘managed’ their gender.

In these focus groups, it was found that female sport psychologists were assumed to
inhabit either the ‘mother’, or the ‘promiscuous woman’ stereotype. The lower-order theme
of ‘psychologist as ‘mother’ emerged, whereby the practitioners were imbued with maternal
qualities, as this was how their role was often constructed:

I have seen the, the notion that "ah the psychologist is there to give the cuddle" or
that mumsy nature of like a woman in that role because people need a shoulder to cry
on (P10)
The conceptualisation of the psychologist as ‘mother’, serves as a direct conflict to the idea of ‘male’ performance-orientated sport psychology. In contrast to this, practitioners also noted being cast as ‘promiscuous’, where it was assumed that their only intention was to “shag the players” (P4).

Implications for practice

The lived experiences of the participants in this study clearly demonstrated that power discrepancies between men and women, and the low status of sport psychology as a discipline, resulted in challenging and difficult working environments. Participants shared their experiences which illustrated the current state of sexism in sport in the UK as being insidious. Being both a woman and a sport psychologist was perceived to have a negative impact on their working lives. In this way, occupying the positions of both ‘woman’ and ‘sport psychologist’ compounds the difficulties of practicing within sport in the UK. The participants were affected by the culture of hegemonic masculinity that flourishes because of systemic power differentials and the hyper-masculinised sporting environment, thus supporting previous literature (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2016; Krane & Waldron, 2020; Roper, 2008). In turn, hegemonic masculinity was shown to create fertile ground for acts of sexism that serve to further undermine female sport psychologists.

This study both contributes to the larger conversation on sexism in sport and focuses on how this situation specifically affects female sport psychologists. It raises issues around discussing the impact of sexism on practice as an ethical issue, as this is currently absent. Moreover, it lends support to the idea that equal female representation in more sports would be of enormous benefit (Anderson, 2008). Movements such as the Everyday Sexism Project and the #MeToo movement are creating social change with far reaching ramifications. The
#MeToo movement has begun to address the issue of sexual exploitation in sport, however there has been no unified reaction to sexism in sport specifically, let alone within the governing bodies of Sport Psychology in the UK that inform and regulate practice. Until the issue is addressed, little progress will be made.

With the above in mind, this study makes the following recommendations:

- Women’s voices should be represented in all Sport Psychology professional bodies in the UK, namely: BASES and the BPS. Further, it is incumbent on these professional bodies to denounce the systemic inequality prevalent in sport, even in the absence of women.

- The profession should consider how Sport Psychologists might report incidents of sexism, and where they might receive support after these occurrences if the institutions they work in will not do so.

- Sporting institutions, and indeed other Sport Psychologists, need to be held accountable if they create environments in which sexism is permitted to flourish. Currently there is no mechanism to do this, which contributes to the perpetuation and tacit acceptance of the male-dominated status quo.

- Sport Psychology should embrace the ‘soft’ side of Psychology and ensure that all potential Sport Psychologists are taught these skills. Sport Psychologists should not be allowed to practice without demonstrating these core competencies of psychological practice.

- Sexism should be taught as an ethical issue at postgraduate level and included as an issue of concern in supervised practice. Education should be provided to lecturers and supervisors to enable this where needed.
Because in sport, men and maleness are held up as the “norm”, they are not required to change. Thus, for the status quo to transform it is critical that male sport psychologists, and indeed all men in sport, call out sexism wherever they see it.


