ABSTRACT

TANNER, CARLY RAE. Athletic Peer-Leaders in a Co-ed Team: Gender Inequities as Microaggressions. (Under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Taylor.)

This case study pursues a deeper understanding of how, and under what material and discursive conditions, do gender inequalities arise in college athletics. Aligning with critical ethnography, I studied a Division 1 co-ed team at a large Southeastern university where I interviewed male and female captains and their coaches, as well as conducted observations of the team’s practices and competitions. Through the application of Sue’s (2010) and Kaskan & Ho’s (2014) use of microaggressions, this study illuminates the day-to-day, granular reproduction of gender stereotypes that reinforce power relations between men and women as athletes and athletic leaders. These often unacknowledged and occasionally unintended acts of marginalization, such as interpersonal, technologized and ritualized microaggressions, serve as reminders that women in sports are the “other” and naturally inferior to men. This study also sheds light onto the gendered enactment of heroic and postheroic leadership styles (Fletcher, 2004) in a conventionally masculinized context like organized college athletics.
Athletic Peer-Leaders in a Co-ed Team: Gender Inequities as Microaggressions

by

Carly Rae Tanner

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APPROVED BY:

_______________________________  ______________________________
Dr. Sarah Stein                  Dr. Nicholas Taylor (Committee Chair)

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Dr. Elizabeth Nelson
DEDICATION

To mom and dad – my two pillars – without whom I could not stand.

Thanks for always reminding me I could do anything I set my mind to – and coming to every swim meet along the way.

To Michael, for always being my person, even from Florida.

And to all the little girls who are starting their favorite sport.

May your journey be even greater than mine.
BIOGRAPHY

I grew up in an old house in Northern Virginia with my older sister and two parents. We ate homemade pizza and went to swim practice religiously. I graduated from Osbourn Park High School three years after my sister and went on to swim for a Division 1 swimming and diving program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. There, I fell even more in love with the sport, grabbing two individual school records and three relay records, and I received the Thomas V. Moseley Award for Outstanding Female Student Athlete in 2013. I competed nationally at the 2013 NCAA Championships, where I finished 21st in the nation in the 100-yard breaststroke. Also at UNCW, I met my partner, Michael, and began a career in Communication Studies, which brought me to graduate school at North Carolina State University. In the future, I plan to pursue my Ph.D. and become a full-time professor.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my chair, Dr. Nicholas Taylor, whose expertise, guidance and kindness has been irreplaceable throughout this entire process. Thank you for sharing your brilliance.

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And to Megan Fletcher, my thesis-partner-in-crime. We did it!
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Introduction

Sport is argued to dramatize and reinforce power relations between men and women (Lenskyj, 1986, p. 144).

I spent the majority of my life in or around a pool. Weeknights were spent at practice, weekends at long meets. My earliest memories of swimming competitively are centered in racing and eating lots of food after practice. I enjoyed beating those around me – boys and girls – but as we grew older and our bodies developed, the boys’ responding differently to puberty than mine, the differences among our performances widened. The young men started leading the lanes more often, creating the pace for the lane during each set and winning the races. Sometimes, the power developed in their bodies translated to an entitlement to become in charge of everyone else in the group, telling people what lanes to go in and what to do if the coach wasn’t listening. Disagreeing with the fastest, most popular guys in the group when they told me what to do did not make me the most popular girl in high school. This may have the first time I felt like my athletic experience was shaped by my gender, but it most certainly was not the last.

In Division 1 college swimming, weightlifting becomes a major aspect of training. When I got to college, I loved weightlifting; it made me feel powerful both in and out of the water, my muscles growing stronger and more noticeable as I progressed. However, it was not unheard of for my fellow female teammates to limit themselves in the weight room. “I don’t want to get bulky,” they’d say as an excuse to not go up in weight. As swimmers, our shoulders were already broad from the yardage pounded into us over the years, and many young women in their senior year would count down the days until they were finished swimming, saying “I can’t wait for my man shoulders to go down.”
The National Eating Disorders Association reports that when female athletes retire from their sport, they are at more of a risk of gaining an eating disorder than men. It is crucial to acknowledge the cultural pressures on female athletes to fit narrow definitions of femininity, and with broad shoulders and thick, strong thighs that rarely fit into “women’s clothing,” we were deviant from the white, Western ideal of the slender woman (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008). This constant reinforcement that our muscular female bodies, as athletes, were aberrant and something to be rejected, echoed either consciously or unconsciously in our minds every time we picked up a heavier weight in the weight room. I constantly told others it was worth the “sacrifice,” that we only have four years to give swimming all we’ve got, but the notion that making our bodies more muscular and powerful was any type of sacrificial behavior as women is problematic in itself, and rooted in highly-constrained understandings of femininity.

One of my favorite coaches in college, a male, once told me, “I love training you because you train like a guy. You just put your head down and do it.” At the time, I felt like this was a huge compliment. Not only did my coach acknowledge I was a great swimmer to train, but I was one of the guys! Later, however, I questioned this. Why does doing what you are supposed to be doing, and doing it well, equate to “training like a guy”? This may have been a context-specific comment, as most of the guys on my team at the time were more focused than the girls in practice. But with different expectations and accepted behavior for each gender, however, it was almost to say that since I was performing so well, I must not be a true woman after all (Messner, 1988). The women were expected to be weak and whiney, but the mentally and physically strong women were like men.

I was a captain (an elected peer leader) in my junior and senior years on my college
swimming and diving team. It was an intensive yet rewarding position; as I faced what it meant to lead among peers, I felt that I constantly had to balance my likeability with directness. Often I felt that I could not enact the more firm, autocratic leadership that felt natural to me, and instead had to soften my conviction in order to still be well-received among my male and (especially) female teammates. It fascinated me how difficult I found it to stand up for what I felt was right or necessary for the betterment of the team, while my male counterparts seemed to do so with ease. I was happy to graduate after experiencing being a captain - I felt prepared to handle the difficulties of leadership in sports but also relieved that my time as a peer leader was over.

Now I coach young swimmers, ages ranging from nine to twelve. When I first arrived in the group, there was a main coach (an older male named Dave) and an assistant (a recent college graduate named Peter), both of which apparently despised leading the swimmers through dryland, which is about thirty minutes of callisthenic exercises to strengthen the swimmers’ bodies. I enjoyed leading dryland, so I took over every other afternoon while the other two coaches managed another group. I missed a dryland once due to being out of town, and when I returned, I was told that I wasn’t going to run dryland anymore. During the dryland that I missed, one of the young boys in the group called another girl in the group a “bitch,” and told her to “suck his dick.” When Peter told me about the incident, he immediately followed up with “so we’ll be doing things differently from now on,” meaning that he’ll be taking over. I had been removed from leading dryland because of what was said in my absence, and I was given no further explanation and no further recourse to regain a responsibility that I was good at and enjoyed. It was one of those moments when you walk

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1 All the names in this account, whether individuals in my social network or study participants, have been changed.
away and think, *did that really just happen?*

These instances of gender-focused “microaggressions” are not isolated to my experience only. Through lack of attention by the sporting world, lack of equal leadership and symbolic status, and persistent stereotypes of women as inferior athletes, gender still plays a definitive role in shaping athletic experiences (Burton, Borland & Mazerolle, 2012; McDonagh and Pappano, 2008). While conducting the pilot study that led to this current one, I interviewed women who considered themselves leaders (both officially as captains and unofficially) on a large Southeastern university’s swimming and diving team. Most participants echoed my prior experiences, emphasizing the men’s team’s proud and rich history, the notion of men as “natural” leaders versus women as “fragile”, and the perception that women have to overcompensate in their leadership roles and monitor their directness and likeability. Furthering my focus of inquiry, the critical ethnographic case study I report on here focuses on the same large Southeastern swimming and diving team a year later, but involves interviews with both male and female captains and their head and associate head coaches, as well as periodic observations of practices and meets. It is important to investigate the lived experiences of these captains to form a deeper understanding of how, and under what material and discursive conditions, do gender inequalities arise. This study is situated within and contributes to our ongoing understandings of gender inequalities in sport, and may shed light on how these inequalities permeate different levels in sport, ultimately supporting the cyclical male hegemony that discourages and disadvantages female athletic leaders.

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*2 Microaggressions are defined by Sue et al., 2007 as the “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (as cited in Sue, 2010).*
**Literature Review**

Through my review of literature, I explore how sport historically serves as an institution created by and for men, positioning women as the “other,” therefore supporting the “naturalness” of male superiority over women. Additionally, I examine previous research on “heroic” (socially ascribed as masculine) and “postheroic” (socially ascribed as feminine) descriptions of leadership, focusing specifically on women’s’ experiences as sports leaders. Finally, I conclude with a theoretical framework that connects Connell’s (2005) understanding of gender, masculinity and hegemony to micro-level analyses of everyday aggressions.

*Sport and “Natural” Inequality*

Women pursued equality in organized sports throughout the twentieth century, and in 1972, the passing of Title IX provided women with the opportunity to participate in collegiate sports. Forty-two years later, there are over 200,000 female intercollegiate athletes (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). However, McDonagh and Pappano (2008) argue Title IX provides *opportunity* for women in sports, not *equality*. It opened the door to organized athletics for women, but a “sex-segregated door” (p. 105) that reinforces the idea of women’s inferiority to men. They elaborate on the issue:

The *system* of sports – which reflects the fallback mind-set of athletic culture – presumes that males are better athletes than females. From idiosyncratic differences in rules between male and female versions of play that bear no relation to any sex-based physical differences, to the quiet reinforcement of the presumption that male athletic events are more worthy of media coverage and attention, the institution of organized sport constructs and reinforces assumptions that women are inferior to
men, thereby maintaining, rather than challenging, stubborn barriers to women
seeking equality in society (p. 236).

Because sport appears to rely on “natural” physical skills and capacities and is seen as
based in biological rather than cultural abilities, “sport presents these ideological images as if
they were natural” (Clarke and Clarke, 1982, p. 63). This notion of “natural” superiority is a
result of positioning men as the default subject of the majority of our social institutions -
because these institutions, such as sport, have been created by and for men (de Beauvoir,
1953). As in other societal institutions (de Beauvoir, 1953), women are often positioned as
the “other” in sports, and are therefore under constant scrutiny as athlete, coach, manager or
leader (Kane, 1995). Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) argue, “the invisibility or seemingly
common sense nature of these gendered constructions often masks how they are sustained
and challenged by practices at all levels of an organization” (p. 405).

Sports are a male-created homosocial cultural sphere that actively encourages boys
and men to value and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity (Anderson, 2009; Messner,
1988). Historically, this sphere has given men a “psychological separation from the perceived
feminization of society while also providing dramatic symbolic proof of the ‘natural
superiority’ of men over women” (Messner, 1988, p. 200). This homosocial culture is
essentially synonymous with the seemingly impermeable “boys’ club” often referenced by
women trying to make it in the athletic world (Burton, Borland & Mazerolle, 2012;
Theberge, 1993). Thus, separate does not mean equal and is rather a reinforcement of
inequality and male superiority.

Along with the idea of superiority of men over women as natural athletes comes the
social backlash that views strong female athletes as deviant from the ideal slender woman of
white, Western culture (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008, p. 70). To say a woman is good at sports is often correlated with “playing like a man” - disguised as a compliment, but actually acknowledging that “since she is so good, she must not be a true woman after all” (Messner, 1988, p. 205). Female athletes have to negotiate these social risks when striving for excellence. In an interview with Pappano, Dr. Carol Otis, internationally recognized authority in women’s sports medicine, blames “cultural pressures, even on top female athletes, to fit narrow definitions of femininity” (Pappano, 2003). These pressures can restrict female athletic achievement, leading to lower levels of success, which then serve to support the notion that gender is a fixed cause of athletic performance.

Complicating the sex-based dichotomy that sport as an institution helps create, Connell (1987) points out that there is more difference within the sexes than between them. The social organization of bodies according to biological sex works to flatten the enormous variability within categories of “male” and “female.” A recent example is Indian sprinter Dutee Chand, who was banned from internationally competing because of her naturally high testosterone, only to return if she lowered them beneath the “male range” as deemed by the International Olympic Committee (Macur, 2014). Camporesi (2015) argues that female athletes are pressured to prove themselves as feminine enough. Since other genetic and biological variations that grant athletes an athletic advantage are not regulated, it shows that Chand’s naturally-occurring high testosterone level “challenges our deeply entrenched social beliefs of women in sport” (Camporesi, 2015). Bryon (1987) argues that only through understanding and confronting the construction and reconstruction of male hegemony in sport, exemplified by Chand’s experience and many others’, can we hope to break this domination (p. 349).
Women as Sports Leaders

Discussing contemporary social constructions of power, gender and leadership, Fletcher (2004) differentiates between the more traditional form of leadership, “heroic” and the newer “postheroic” leadership. Heroic leadership is socially ascribed to men and masculinity, based on assertiveness and individualism, and “postheroic” leadership is socially ascribed to women and femininity, and is rooted in empathy and community. The two leadership styles are further characterized by different distributions of power, as heroic encompasses a “power over” others, suggesting submission within a hierarchy, and the postheroic, “power with” others, suggesting collaboration and flattened hierarchies (p. 650). Fletcher (2004) argues that while some organizations may strongly advocate for distributed and follower models of leadership, the masculine culture of many organizations, such as athletics, means that the kind of relational practice connected with the postheroic leadership philosophy is often associated with powerlessness. Therefore, in an institution that so highly values power and masculinity, displays of femininity or socially ascribed feminine traits associated with leadership are often considered powerless and weak. In other words, "heroic" leadership is still expected in contexts, like organized sport, that are conventionally masculinized.

Following the passage of Title IX, male leadership began to dominate women’s athletics. When many schools combined the separate men’s and women’s athletic departments, nearly all administrative positions were appointed to men. The increased status of women’s sports also saw an increase of men interested in coaching women’s sports because of increased funding and salary levels (Cahn, 1994, p. 260). Men are regarded as able to adapt to leadership roles in women’s sports, but women are assumed to have much
more difficulty coaching men (Theberge, 1993, p. 307). Masculinity informs the criteria by which coaches are evaluated, which is a standard women are regarded as incapable of fully achieving (Williams, 1989; Theberge, 1993). As a result of this masculinized domain, women coaches are “less attracted and less likely to remain in coaching” (Walker and Bopp, 2010, p. 101). Furthering this notion in sport leadership, Burton, Grappendorf & Henderson (2011) contended that when a woman was seen as equally capable as an athletic director as her male counterpart, athletic administrators still perceived her to be less likely hired as one.

Qualitative research has shown that females holding leadership positions in sports do not perform their duties without resistance related to their gendered identity. Theberge (1993) studied the construction of gender in coaching concerning the careers and work experiences of female coaches in high levels of organized sport. The coaches in her study reported feeling highly visible as compared to the males, and had to overcompensate performance and competence in order to live up to the highly scrutinized role as female coach. They also tried to attempt become “one of the boys” in order to fit in with the male-dominated culture, suggesting that femininity has no place in sports. At the root of this ideology is “an assumption that men are naturally superior athletes and on this basis also superior coaches” (p. 305).

Burton, Borland & Mazerolle (2012) explored issues of power and gender stereotyping in women athletic trainers, specifically focusing on the lack of women in high positions in intercollegiate athletic training positions. The participants interviewed noted that many male coaches think women should not work with men’s sports (Burton et al, p. 309) and that the male coaches “challenged the professional knowledge of female athletic trainers, and as a result our participants felt they had to continually prove their competence” (p. 311).
Respondents in the aforementioned studies both referenced the “old boys network” that shapes their sport. (Theberge 1993; Burton et al, 2012). As one respondent in Theberge’s (1993) study elaborated, “I just saw no way of breaking into it” (p. 303).

On the international level, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) requests that 20% of leadership positions in National Olympic Committees (NOC) be held by women. However, many NOCs struggle to meet this standard; within the 204 NOCs, 174 (85.3%) have all-male leadership teams, 29 (14.1%) have male/female leadership teams, and one (.5%), Zambia, has an all-female leadership team (Smith and Wrynn, 2013, p. 8). Smith and Wrynn (2013) argue “with so few women serving in leadership positions and lack of commitment among the male-dominated leadership, there has been little progress on supporting women as athletes and leaders, from the grassroots, developmental levels all the way to the upper echelons of competitive Olympic and Paralympic sport” (p. 2).

Previous research has explored constructions of gender in sports, but has not focused as much on the mundane, day-to-day reproduction of gendered stereotypes. Small reproductions of gendered stereotypes work to reinforce power relations between men and women, therefore stifling female power and leadership. In order to do investigate these day-to-day reproductions, I turn to the emergent notion of “microaggressions” as a means of attending to the minor, often unacknowledged and occasionally unintended acts of marginalization and othering that go on, particularly around a specific category like gender.

**Theoretical Framework**

My attention to microaggressions and to granular considerations of gendered dynamics in varsity athletics is rooted in the theoretical foundations established by Connell (2005), who views gender as “a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what
bodies do, it is not social practice reduced to the body” (p. 71). Connell states that the social organization of body-reflexive practices in a patriarchal gender order “constitutes bodily difference as dominance, as unavoidable hierarchical” and further, intimate supremacy (2005, p. 231). Connell argues that immediate social relations, including physically violent acts such as rape or psychically violent act such as the interruption of women’s speech in conversations, are enactments and reproductions of hegemonic masculinity in everyday life (2005, p. 232). Thus, I seek to understand the micro-level enactments of hegemonic masculinity in a co-ed Division 1 sports team in order to understand how those moments connect to the broader cultural understanding.

Burton (2014) explains that research at the micro-level of analysis “focuses on individuals and how they make meaning of their experiences, their expectations, understandings of power, policies, and procedures operating at the organizational level” (p. 161). She also makes note that micro-level analysis can be used to “explore the assumptions made by individuals in how they interact within an organization, and also the self-limiting behaviors individuals engage in within their work” (p. 161). Finally, Burton calls for further research at the micro-level of analysis to “continue to examine the impact of gender roles and stereotyping of leadership positions on women’s perceptions of their leadership abilities in sport organizations” (p. 163). Thus, microaggressions are particularly relevant to this study, as I am most concerned with understanding the role that mundane, unremarkable interactions play in reproducing highly constraining notions of what women are capable of as athletes and as leaders.

Microaggressions are the “everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory,
or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue et al., 2007, as cited in Sue, 2010). According to Sue, microaggressions come in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are conscious beliefs acted out intentionally against the target party (i.e., using racial slurs or other derogatory language), while microinsults (subtle snubs at gender orientation, i.e., "you train well for a girl") and microinvalidations (denial of difference, i.e., "when I look at you, I don't see gender") can be unconscious snubs or behaviors, but can be the most insidious, damaging, and harmful forms (Sue, 2010).

Kaskan and Ho (2014) applied the concept of microaggressions to a study of female athletes, transforming Sue's taxonomy into specific gender-based actions, and developing three thematic microaggression categories, including sexual objectification, assumption of inferiority and restrictive gender roles. I focus on these categories here in order to offer a framework for making sense of the subtle, utterly mundane, and therefore often underexplored ways that gender is policed in day-to-day interactions.

*Sexual objectification* is defined as “the act of reducing a woman to her body or body parts with the misperception that her body or body parts are capable of representing the woman as a whole” (Kozee et al. 2007; p. 176). Kaskan and Ho (2014) argue that sexual objectification of female athletes are often excused as attempts to attract media exposure. For example, before the 2012 Olympics, female beach volleyball players were required to wear bikinis when they competed, with no similar apparel requirement for male players (2012 Olympics Volleyball). Daniels and Wartena (2011) found that when shown pictures of female athletes either sexualized or performing in their sport, adolescent boys and girls focused more on the appearance of the first and the athleticism of the second. Kaskan and
Ho (2014) argue that both women and men desire to be admired for their physical attributes, but “they should be emphasized in a way that relates to their athletic function and not simply their visual appearance in order to avoid sexual objectification” (p. 4). *Assumption of inferiority* aligns with the “naturalness” of male supremacy in sports mentioned earlier, referring to the idea that women are less physically and/or mentally capable than men (Sue, 2010). *Restrictive gender roles* pertains to the rigidly defined confines of acceptable and stereotypical behaviors based on one’s gender (Sue, 2010). Davis-Delano et al (2009) surveyed female student-athletes from Division I and II teams, assessing their attitudes regarding stereotypes of female athletes and how those stereotypes might alter their appearance, aggression, and heterosexuality. Over 70% of respondents expressed that they behaved in some type of apologetic nature as a reaction to these stereotypes, such as an overemphasis on appearing feminine (Davis-Delano et al, 2009). Further, in the leadership roles, women are evaluated unfavorably because they demonstrate attributes and behaviors perceived as inconsistent with their gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

**Methodology**

Adhering to a social constructivist approach, I aim to acknowledge and reconstruct the cultural understandings held by my study participants about leaders in athletics (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Social constructivism views gender as continuously “constructed through engagement in particular local practices” and is performed through language use (Cameron, 2005, p. 322), access to and use of technologies (Wajcman, 2010), and is “constituted through bodily action in sexuality, in sport, in labour, etc.” (Connell, 2005, p. 231). Through this lens, I am able to “look locally for explanations of gender-related patterns” (Cameron, 2005, p. 322) in athletic peer-leadership, and further, how the institution of sports may
perpetuate these constructions of gendered power and ability. Acknowledging my personal experience as a captain on a NCAA Division 1 co-ed athletic team, I act as a “passionate participant” (Lincoln, 1991) while observing and interviewing participants.

My case study utilizes qualitative methodologies so that rich personal stories can be collected as data. Aligning with critical ethnography, I make no attempt to be purely detached and scientifically objective during research (Simon & Dippo, 1983). Critical ethnography “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Soyini, p. 5). In this particular study, I feel a responsibility to address the lived athletic peer-leadership experiences of myself and of my participants. Taking a critical feminist perspective, my case study aims to “explore the ways gender becomes encoded and communicated in multiple and complex ways in daily organizational life” (Mumby, 2013, p. 219). Further, my case study strives to acknowledge intersectional perspectives (Calafell, 2014) with goals of positive structural creation or change (Ashcraft, 2005).

Participant Population

The participants for this IRB-approved study are male and female NCAA Division 1 athletes and their coaches in an elite co-ed athletic program at a large Southeastern university. The team consisted of predominantly white athletes (five minority athletes in a team of over sixty) and coaches, and all study participants identified as white. This is somewhat unsurprising, given the history and ongoing conditions around racial segregation in organized swimming (Witlse, 2014; Irwin, Irwin, Martin & Ross, 2010). The ages of the participants range from 18-23 for athletes, and 30-40 for coaches. All athlete interview
participants are current junior or senior captains\(^3\). Freshman and sophomore swimmers and divers have little to no leadership experience in the specific team and were therefore excluded from the study. Other junior and senior non-captains were excluded from the interviews to maintain an equality of status within the participant group. Two coaches and six athletes responded to the recruitment emails and subsequently participated in interviews.

In the recruitment emails to the coaches, brief information about and reasoning for the proposed study was provided, with the request to study their team. Upon agreement to participate, I obtained consent through an informed consent form sent via email ahead of the interview and signed in the physical interview space. I conducted individual interviews with the Head Coach and Associate Head Coach. In order to observe practices involving the entire team, I obtained blanket approval through the Head Coach, acting as gatekeeper (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989).

Since captainship is not public knowledge, the coaches were a source of information concerning which athletes have been elected into the peer leadership roles during the time of the study. Personalized recruitment emails were then sent to the list of captains. Upon agreeing to participate, I followed the same consent process with captains as I did with the coaches. I conducted a focus group interview with the captains, followed by individual interviews with each of the six captains. During the focus group, I assigned numbers to the athletes in the order they sat in, taking note of their gender. Later, when the interview was done, I assigned pseudonyms to the numbers for confidentiality. The pseudonyms were used consistently during the individual athlete interviews as well.

**Data Collection**

\(^3\) In most team sports, “captains” are chosen, either by coaches, teammates, or both, to act as a liaison between coaches and teammates, an organizer, and overall leader among her or his peers. All captains in this study were white and cis-gendered.
I used semi-structured focus group and individual interviews, and observations of publicly accessible practices and meets. These interviews ranged from 18 to 48 minutes and were recorded using an audio-recording device and later transcribed for coding. I used a theoretically guided, semi-open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach for identifying themes in the data.

Considering the practices of NCSU are held in a public place during public recreation hours, blanket approval from the gatekeepers (coaches) was gained to observe practices. During these observations, I followed a standard observation protocol (see appendix) that has been tailored for this specific context. I conducted a dozen total observations of afternoon practices and local meets using either a laptop or notebook to take field notes. I often sat relatively close to where the coaches stood (at a specific side of the pool in a sitting area such as bleachers), where the swimmers were located during times of rest in between sets. I was visible by the swimmers and coaches but not intrusively located as to interrupt their practices (i.e., located directly next to the coaches, interacting with swimmers, etc.).

**Thematic Observations**

Though semi-open coding of interactions among swim team members as described in interviews and observed by me during practices, I identified several themes, each of which (as I explain below) speak to a particular form of gendered microaggression. These themes include ‘postheroic leadership as affective labor’, carried out in particular by female leaders; ‘gendered use of technology in sport’; and ‘rituals of cyclical male legacy’.

**Heroic & Postheroic Leadership**

The qualities of postheroic leadership were stressed by many of the captains in the interviews, both male and female, due to their position as a peer leader and the importance of
fostering team unity (i.e., community) and working together for a common goal. That said, while all captains seemed to partake somewhat in (and acknowledge the importance of) community- and relationship-building, notions of who could rightfully and effectively assume ‘heroic’ leadership performances were much more contentious.

*The “ideal” heroic leader*

When I asked for the head coach’s description of an ideal captain, he focused mainly on heroic leadership traits and disregarded the importance of postheroic leadership, saying,

> “Having someone there who’s the person ‘to go to’ - people are going to go to who they’re going to go to, regardless. I need someone who’s willing to be like, ‘we’re going to win, and here’s how we’re going to do it, and this is what you’re going to do and you’re not going to bitch and you’re not going to complain because this is what you signed up for.’ So I really feel like it’s the alpha. It’s like the person who you know is the alpha on the team.”

His description of the ideal captain being the “alpha” exemplifies how the masculine culture of athletics permeates his value of the “power over” others associated with heroic leadership and devalues postheroic leadership and affective labor (i.e., having someone “to go to” in times of need) as unimportant.

Within the two groups of captains, there was one female, Maggie, and one male, Brad, that took on more outspoken and assertive roles -- more closely resembling the ideal of heroic leadership. The head coach emphasized in his interview that it was key to have this type of leader within the groups of captains, but I recognized through the captains’ interviews that the social repercussions for Maggie and Brad taking on “heroic” leadership roles were different and heavily gendered. Maggie mentioned her tendency to be more direct in her
leadership, saying “I’m a no BS type of person, so sometimes it’s like I want to charge head first into something and just fix it, when really I just need to like step back and think about it, maybe consult the other captains, see what their take is on how to deal with the situation, so that it’s more politically correct.” Further, she said that her leadership qualities are “parts of me that I need to grow as a person,” suggesting that as a result of her enacting the more heroic type of leadership, she has been policed by the other women on the team who become defensive. She elaborated further, voluntarily comparing the men and women by saying, “we [the women’s team] always have the discussion about holding ourselves accountable and being willing to accept when other people hold us accountable, but especially amongst the girls team, it’s a lot harder. I think the guys achieve that kind of stuff a lot better, like they can yell at each other and not take it too personally, but on the girls’ team it’s not well received, even though we say we’re going to work on it.” When I asked her why she thinks there is a gender difference here, she said “I don’t know [laughs]. I think it’s just like girls are really emotional, we like to take things personally, even though it’s not always meant to be personal.”

In contrast, the autocratic male captain that was described by one of his fellow male captains as “power hungry,” described his personal role as “I’m in charge of making sure everyone’s doing what they’re supposed to,” later elaborating that he likes “to be ahead of everybody, not like cocky wise. I like to be in charge, just making sure everyone’s doing what they’re supposed to.” He personified heroic leadership through his assertiveness and power over others, and did not reference any social struggles associated with being this type of leader. He was also the sole captain to stress that he wanted to pursue a career in college coaching.
Postheroic leadership and/as affective labor

A theme that echoed that of my pilot study, all of the women I interviewed stressed being responsible for the work of emotionally supporting other team members in their leadership roles. The men agreed in the group interview that maintaining relationships with teammates is very important, but in their individual interviews, they reported more focus on leading by example and making sure their teammates are “doing what they are expected to,” reflective of heroic leadership. Conversely, the female captains identified aspects of their leadership-related activities that, I argue, constitute heavily-gendered practices of affective labor – defined by Hardt and Negri (2004) as historically “women’s work” that includes “repetitive material tasks such as cleaning and cooking, but it also involves producing affects, relationships, and forms of communication and cooperation among children, in the family, and in the community”.

The affective labor carried out by all captains included the relational work of postheroic labor; that said, female captains took this work much more seriously and reflexively, while also undertaking additional physical and emotional work in terms of preparing for, and forgiving, male captain’s lack of care, therefore ensuring cooperation within the community (Hardt & Negri, 2004).

The female leaders stressed throughout their interviews the importance of maintaining relationships. Sonya, in response to a question about how she perceives her personal role as a leader, said “I’m just someone who is always there that they can come to.” Additionally, when asked about her most successful moments as a leader, Sonya said, “I try to pay attention to everyone at meets and make sure they’re getting feedback, if the coaches need something, you know, I feel like that’s when I’m doing the most.” Providing support for
both her teammates and coaches in competitions is demonstrative of the forms of affective labor she sees as central to her leadership role.

Echoing other aspects of affective labor, female captain Diana stressed the importance of “servant leadership”, which she describes as “being the first person to help – help a person, help clean up, leading through example, and just being the first person out there to be cheering, to be working hard, and trying to meet people where they’re at, trying to meet people’s needs.” In contrast, a male captain, Dave, described his personal role as a leader by explaining “you gotta make sure during practice everyone’s doing what they have to do. That’s something that I’ve tried to do at least once or twice a practice, whether that’s like making sure people clean stuff up or if you see someone not giving their all, one-hundred percent effort, you gotta get on them.” Diana’s work of actually helping clean up versus Dave’s work of telling other people to clean up parallels the affective labor, or lack of, embedded in these gendered expressions of postheroic vs heroic leadership.

The female captains’ labor extended past just maintaining relationships to accommodating the male captains’ lack of care. In response to a question about if and when their team of captains has not worked well together, Maggie discussed weekends when they were responsible for planning activities for recruits, responding, “I mean, boys will be boys, they like to change their plans at the last minute and not really tell you, so like the three of us [girls] are super organized, we have a list of things of exactly where and when to be. And then the boys will be like, ‘oh yeah, we decided we didn’t want to do that.’ And we’re like, ‘okay, back to the books’ [laughs].” This excusing of their male colleagues’ lack of organization -- and in turn, the male captains’ flippant regard for their female colleagues’ work of organizing -- exemplifies the forms of affective labor that are typically reserved for
women, such as both covering for and excusing the mistakes and negligence of male peers. Thus, their affective labor does not just entail the work of emotional support commonly expressed as ‘postheroic leadership’, which both men and women do, but also those highly-gendered forms of work historically reserved for women that ensure community and stability (Hardt & Negri, 2004).

**Restrictive roles**

In describing what he looks for when choosing the group of captains, the teams’ head coach said, “we go with what we feel is the best combination and not necessarily the best person,” stressing the importance of intersubjective dynamics in the teams of captains rather a balanced combination of personalities. When he described the two groups of captains, he provided a kind of shorthand label for each female captain’s role in this combination, explaining that he saw Sonya as the “safety net,” Maggie as the “Kristy-type” (Kristy was a former captain that he had mentioned earlier in the interview that “wasn’t afraid to be a bitch”) and Diana as the “ra-ra” type. When listing off the male captains, however, he did not provide similar categorizations of their roles. The omission of roles, either internally (they do not have specific roles they play) or externally (he did not feel that I needed to know them), speaks to the often narrow boxes in which women in these positions are placed (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kaskan & Ho, 2014; Sue, 2010). Further, the women were also policed if they stepped out of these roles.

When discussing a specific instance of the challenges she’s faced as a leader, Sonya described a situation in which the assistant coach, who exemplifies heroic leadership in his coaching style, was giving directions to the group when she commented to him “c’mon, we never do that.” This comment took her out of her normal supportive, postheroic, “safety net”
role by challenging his authority. The head coach, who was within earshot, pulled her aside and told her “the attitude is not needed.” She described that even after apologizing to the assistant coach, she still heard about it from another coach three days later. She elaborated, “that’s a struggle for me, just because I feel like I’m perfect 98% of the time and then the one time I’m not perfect, it’s like you don’t stop hearing about it.” This policing of her role as the “safety net” serves to keep her from branching from postheroic to heroic leadership, denying her assertiveness. By reprimanding her on several occasions for this transgression, the acceptable behaviors of her restrictive gender role are reinforced (Sue, 2010).

**Gendered Use of Technology**

Through my observations, I came to perceive a gendered use of various technologies by the team. The technology used, such as long rubber bands that are attached at the swim for the swimmers to swim against for resistance training, were both distributed and described by the team leadership in gender-specific, gender-segregated ways.

During one practice, the head coach announced to the group before a set using the long rubber bands, “guys need to get the thickest ones, then the ladies.” The thicker bands provide more resistance, and require more power and explosiveness to work against; they were assigned to the men first, with the women picking up the remaining thinner bands. In another group during the same practice, the male and female swimmers were using parachutes, which is another type of resistance training technology worn around the waist with various sized parachutes attached. Men were given the larger blue parachutes, women were given smaller yellow parachutes. In addition, the coaches distribute ‘kick socks’, which are a mesh bag-like technology worn around the ankles in order to slow kicking. There are two sizes, longer (providing more resistance) and shorter (providing less); male swimmers
were given the more difficult longer socks, and the shorter ones given to the women. The socks were deemed ‘men’s socks’ and ‘women’s socks’ by the team.

At times, stronger women on the team were allowed access to these larger, more challenging technologies and the weaker men were given the smaller, less challenging technologies, but for the majority of the teams’ training, the technologies were distributed by gender. Under different, less-gendered sets of circumstances, this might be imagined as a contextually-based assignation, aiding to manage the total time the coaches want each swimmer to spend in the extreme fatiguing resistance training. For example, a larger individual might take ten seconds to get across the pool with a larger parachute, which might take a less powerful swimmer fifteen seconds. However, grouping “men’s equipment” as the more powerful and “female equipment” as the less powerful, rather than a more individualized approach of assigning resources by strength and level, both symbolically and materially impedes female swimmer’s capacities to become more powerful. If they do reach these levels of power, they are considered “one of the guys,” and therefore not a true woman after all (Connell, 1987). The consistent referencing of swimming technologies as gender-specific implies that through the use of these gendered technologies, the swimmers were either being true, or not, to their gender. Thus, gender relations are materialized in these technologies, and “masculinity and femininity in turn acquire their meaning and character” (Wjacman, 2010, p. 149).

In my observations, I saw another form of technology that was not explicitly acknowledged as gender-specific, but served to manifest the team’s understandings of gender and power dynamics. At the end of one practice, two male and two female athletes were standing in a public outdoor shower located over a large tub on the pool deck, talking. The
four athletes stood in the hot shower, the two men (captain Brad and one of his teammates) directly under the running water and the girls off to the side in the tub, apparently waiting their turn. One woman, Lana, eventually got into the shower spray but the men barely moved to accommodate her, claiming their space underneath the warm water. They stood like this for a couple of minutes until Lana moved back to the edge of the tub with the other girl. Brad’s teammate, who was under the shower with him, exited the shower after a few minutes, and Lana took his spot, but Brad did not move. Eventually, Lana moved out from underneath the shower, the women got out of the tub, and more of the men stand in the shower together, talking until they moved to the locker rooms. This occupation of space and technology exemplifies an enactment of male hegemony (Connell, 2005, p. 232), by which men monopolized the shower in the face of women waiting their turn, who only gained access once one of the men decided to move on to the locker rooms.

**Rituals of Cyclical Legacy**

As Carey (1979) stated, “Culture is not merely a structure, a thing; it is a creative process of growth and achievement, a daily struggle that involves a selective recovery of the past in order to endow the present with meaning, significance, purpose and, above all, hope” (p. 27). This view of communication as *ritual* provides a lens on certain gendered practices upheld within the team. It was evident in the interviews and observations that the men’s swimming and diving program had a rich history at the university, which was prominent in their talk about the program. Echoing the history of organized sports more broadly, the university’s swimming and diving program was originally created as a men’s-only sport. This history manifested in various traditions, one being the involvement of male alumni to support the
men’s team. The head coach explained that at the start of every year, the male and female teams have separate gatherings to discuss their goals and vision for the coming season. The coaches invite speakers to this meeting; in this season, there were two male alumni that came to speak to the men’s team, and the year before that, four male alumni. This year for the women, the head coach invited the university’s Athletic Director, “so they feel a little more attention from her, because the guys just get all the attention. And I want the girls to get the attention, I want them to start feeling like they’re not behind the guys, you know, I want them to be their own more.” In the year previous, one female alumnus spoke to the women. The sheer number of alumni support is significant in itself, but the head coach’s connection between the lack of attention from the Athletic Director and the women feeling “behind” also signifies how the cyclical legacy of the men has greatly overshadowed the women.

One of the most prominent traditions on the men’s team was a drawn symbol that the men’s team marked on their bodies during competitions. While I did learn that this symbol has been a significant tradition on the men’s team for over twenty-five years, I was not told what it meant; I was not granted access to the meaning of this male-only ritual. The head coach even had direct connections to the history of the marking due to his participation on the team shortly after the tradition was created. This rich, special and exclusive representation of history serves as a tie within the men’s team, creating meaning and loyalty to each other. However, it also serves as a reminder that the women on the team are the “other,” the “lesser,” with less history, success and ties to the coaches.

Sport is itself, a set of rituals that cement social norms, “providing dramatic symbolic proof of the ‘natural superiority’ of men over women” (Messner, 1988, p. 200). Sport is at the same time, comprised of and constituted through little rituals such as the symbol drawn
on the men’s bodies. In this way, the ritualized elements of sport serve to reify conventional gendered hierarchies, presenting as “natural” that male bodies and male athletics are superior.

**Discussion**

Each of these three themes offer a different and slightly more nuanced understanding of when and how microaggressions take place in co-ed Collegiate Division 1 sports teams such as swimming and diving. By looking at these three themes - the enactment of postheroic and heroic leadership, gendered use of technologies, and rituals of male superiority - we can come to an understanding of the granular, day-to-day ways that, taken together, contribute to the highly gendered and unequal experiences of female leader-athletes. The microaggressions analyzed here are rarely as explicit as previous literature has constructed them to be. Although spectacular microaggressions, such as derogatory language or the sexual objectification of female athletes (Kaskan and Ho, 2014) are extremely important and worthy of attention, it is also crucial to note the mundane, exhausting and often excused ways in which female athletes are put down and excluded from an equal athletic experience. Through this, we can come to a better understanding of how to affect real change in these athletes’ lives and further in the system of sports.

*Interpersonal microaggressions*

Echoing Kaskan and Ho’s (2014) study on microaggressions on female athletes, the theme of restrictive gender roles provides a basis for understanding how the women in my study experienced microaggressions on an interpersonal level related to their work as leaders and team captains. These rigid confines of acceptable behaviors based on their gender were evident when the women both performed, and strayed from, their leadership style.
Although the ideal leader was described by team coaches and captains in terms associated with heroic leadership, the female captain who enacted heroic leadership faced much more social backlash from her peers than the male heroic leader. This act of interpersonal, within-group policing acts as a microaggression that keeps this captain from more fully embracing the leadership roles that are socially ascribed the men. Additionally, we might also read restrictive gender role policing in Sonya’s experience being reprimanded multiple times for transgressing her “safety net” role when challenging an assistant coach’s direction. This excessive scolding works as a microaggression to keep her from stepping out of this gendered role again, ensuring that she understands this behavior is not acceptable for her.

Finally, while all captains mentioned the centrality of ‘postheroic’ forms of leadership in their work, the female captains’ affective labor extended past maintaining relationships on the team to covering for and excusing the mistakes and negligence of male peers. The negligence shown by the male captains when they changed their recruitment weekend plans at the last minute is a microaggression against the women’s work of organizing. Not only do the women need to do extra work to make up for the men’s lack of care, but they also receive snubs toward that work when the men dismiss it, causing them to go “back to the books” (Maggie, interview). This microaggression also takes form in the understanding that the women will excuse the men’s microaggressive behavior because “boys will be boys” (Maggie, interview).

*Technologized microaggression*

Additionally, microaggressions did not just occur interpersonally. Microaggressions happened through the assignation of lower status objects to people based on sex. These
possibly unintended microaggressions are displayed in routinized and otherwise unremarkable acts, such as when the head coach announced during a practice “guys need to get the thickest ones, then the ladies.” This distinguishes the technologies in relation to bodies and levels of importance, as in “guys first, more powerful,” followed by the “girls get the rest, less powerful.” This act – a microaggression carried out through a gendered distribution of resources deemed ‘natural’ -- serves as an assumption of inferiority (Kaskan and Ho, 2014), that the women, as a group, are less physically capable as than even the youngest and least developed men.

Other instances of these technologized microaggressions were ingrained in their culture so deeply that most of their technologies were referenced as gender-specific, with men using the more elite equipment. This naming of technologies as gendered implies that if they stay with their ascribed technology, they are being true to their gender. Aligning with Wajcman (2004), these technologies are both “a source and consequence of gender relations” (as cited in Wajcman, 2010). The more the men use the elite technologies, the more powerful and distanced from the women they become. Additionally, if any woman uses the more elite technologies, then are training like a man, and they must not be a true woman after all (Messner, 1988).

Additionally, in my pilot study, the female leaders interviewed mentioned that they gained access to new swimming technologies that the male alumni donated to the men’s team because they all practiced together anyways. This second-hand use of new technologies also exemplifies that men deserve these technologies first and foremost. Microaggressions such as these confirm that certain objects/technologies are for certain bodies and not others.

*Ritualized microaggression*
The men’s history was largely privileged over the women’s through the rituals on the team and the interaction with and support from more male alumni than female. From the interaction with the alumni to the symbol used and understood exclusively by and for men, the entire team history and tradition was heavily gendered. This selective recovery of the men’s athletic history of success over the women’s is an institutionalized issue across all sports (McDonagh and Pappano, 2008). These environmental slights serve as microaggressions toward the women’s team as a whole to remind women that they are the “other” in sports. Although it makes sense to prize the most successful aspect of an entire team, to have a culture that focuses so heavily on the men continually undermines the efforts of female athletes and, crucially, the female captains who are so integral to the everyday emotional and material maintenance of the team through their invisible, affective labor.

**Conclusion**

Building off of existing literature on the gendered experiences of female athletes and sport professionals, this study sought a deeper understanding of the experiences of peer-leaders within a Division 1 swimming and diving program. Through the use of semi-structured focus group and individual interviews and observations of practices and meets, I studied issues of gender inequity that permeate the experiences of athlete peer-leaders, paying particular attention to the routinized, unremarkable microaggressions that characterized so much of the female captains’ work.

Through the application of Sue’s (2010) and Kaskan & Ho’s (2014) use of microaggressions, this study sheds a light on the day-to-day, granular and mundane reproduction of gender stereotypes that reinforce power relations between men and women. These often unacknowledged and occasionally unintended acts of marginalization, such as
interpersonal, technologized and ritualized microaggressions, serve as reminders that women in sports are the “other” and naturally inferior to men. This study also sheds light onto the gendered enactment of heroic and postheroic leadership styles (Fletcher, 2004) in a conventionally masculinized context like organized college athletics. As desired by the head coach, the male captains more successfully enacted heroic leadership than the sole female captain who took on this role. The female captain experienced social pushback from her use of this direct and authoritative leadership style, which caused her to articulate that this was a part of her personality she needed to ‘work on’. In contrast, the male captain that personified the heroic leader had little to no social push back and was the sole captain to articulate his desire to stay in college athletics professionally after college.

Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to the relatively unique practices of this co-ed team. In many other collegiate sports contexts, men and women are segregated, sometimes with different coaches, practices or facilities for each gender. However, as I was searching for details and perceptions, not a single “truth” for athletic experience as a whole, the intensive gender-integrated interactions I observed enrich rather than devalue my results. Also, the men’s team was ranked higher than the women’s in relation to their segregated NCAA standings, which could have greatly contributed to the gendered differences of experiences. Further research in this area might include a comparable qualitative case study in which the women’s team is ranked higher than the men’s. Such research, in dialogue with this study, could provide insight on whether or not gender is enacted more prominently in a scenario where the men are ranked higher than the women. Also, a study on a women’s-only program would provide insight on how the women enact their social roles without the
presence of and constant comparison to male counterparts and how that contributes to their team culture.

Additionally, future application of Sue’s (2010) taxonomy of microaggressions is suggested for further study of gender inequities in collegiate and professional athletic contexts. Sue’s work also deals with microaggressions associated with other identities such as sexual orientation and race, so future research using this framework can be used to study the experiences of athletes who hold other forms of intersecting identities aside from the white, cis-gendered subjectivities of the participants I studied. Considering the racially homogenous make-up of this study’s participants and the team (five minority athletes in a team of over sixty athletes, and no racial diversity among the captains and coaches), a race-based analysis was outside the scope of this study.

As Fink (2008) argues, "we must continue to examine the issues of gender and sex diversity in sport organizations in order to make these organizations accessible, comfortable, and beneficial to all (women and men) not considered status quo" (p. 147). This study’s analysis speaks to a greater understanding of Title XI and the system of sports as a whole, in which men are so highly privileged over women. Indeed, perhaps it is fitting to consider our broader understanding of women’s sports under Title IX as a macroaggression, insofar as rituals, technologies and interpersonal exchanges work collectively to undermine the legal status of women as ‘equal’ even when they are granted opportunity. Women’s participation in sports is only tolerated because they have to be. Even when it is a ‘co-ed’ sport, it is still, and will remain, a men’s sport until we understand and challenge these gendered rituals, technologies and interpersonal exchanges that undermine female athletics.
References


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