Is the world ready for a woman coaching a top male athlete? Analysis of online reactions to Mauresmo’s appointment as Murray’s coach

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and lesbian studies and sport sociology.

**Literature review**

Gender, contrary to biological sex, is not assigned at birth (Shively & De Cecco, 1977). Gender instead is a social, cultural and personal construct that relies on the notions of masculinity and femininity (Mikkola, 2012; Palan, Areni, & Kiecker, 1999). In the words of Butler (1990), we should “understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts” (p. 15), which means that gender is fluid and may change according to contexts and periods. It is in constant movement.

**Gender and sexuality in sport**

Despite a recognized difference between biological sex and gender, the sporting world generally still forces men and women to occupy two separate spaces, whose definitions have not changed throughout the years. This leaves little room for individuals who do not fit into this binary model (Aitchison, 2007; Broucart, 2012; Messner, 2007).

**Sporting gender duality**

Many scholars agree that the ubiquitous duality in the world of sports does not reflect today’s real world, in which sex segregation is declining and gender is inherently different from biological sex (Aitchison, 2007; Anderson, 2010; Connell, 1993; Messner, 2007; Whannel, 2007). But as Anderson (2010) writes, sports “naturalize the segregation of men and women … near perfectly” (p. 123), often opposing masculine men to “ambivalent” women (Messner, 1988, p. 203).

This duality does not mean that all male athletes are the same and all female athletes are the same. Connell (1993) and Messner (2007), among others, recognize that the concepts of femininity and masculinity “differ from one culture to another, and change (even in our own culture) over time” (Connell, 1993, p. 75). As Kimmel and Aronson (2004) explain, there is not “one monolithic experience of masculinities,” (p. 387) but a competing set of definitions constructed by different groups. Nevertheless, the masculinities found in sports are built around the same main values – such as aggressiveness, competitiveness and heterosexuality – and the same goal: prove supremacy over both women and other men (Connell, 1993; Messner, 2007; Whannel, 2007).

The fact that masculinities are built by different groups (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Messner, 2007) also implies the existence of female masculinities –i.e. women whose appearance and/or behavior tend toward male-perceived societal norms– which disrupt male masculinities insofar as they challenge the hegemony of what is perceived as male masculinity. However, as Reeser also notes, female thought to be masculine are generally “collapsed into the category of lesbian” whether they identify as such or not (Reeser, 2010, p. 136). The fluidity of gender is perhaps best summarized by Dworkin and Messner (2002), “today the mere inclusion of physically powerful female athletes or the inclusion of muscular queer men in hegemonic sports challenges conventional binary understandings of the Western triad of sex and gender, masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality” (p. 348).

Because the gender duality in sport generally privileges men to the detriment of women (Bryson, 1987; Hall, 1987; Messner, 2007), Messner (2007) qualifies the sporting world as “an important organizing institution for the embodiment of masculinity” (p. 54). He further argues that it not only subdues similarities between the sexes, it also establishes differences, which are in turn naturalized “largely through the media” (p. 54). In other words, sport is by nature “a sexist culture” (Anderson, 2010, p. 131), and, in conjunction with mass media, sport assists “in the preservation of hegemonic masculinity” (Kian, Anderson, Vincent, & Murray, 2015) in society.

**Hegemonic masculinity and homophobia**

Raewyn Connell first introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity in the 1980s, but refined it in 2005 (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain the “concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities” (p. 846) and that of women. Also pointed out was the importance of marginalization (whether it be the marginalization of women, people of color or other men for not being man enough, i.e. gay men), and the fact that even if very few men can attain the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, the majority of them benefit from it, and therefore are complicit to this hegemony.

The concept of homophobia is older, first defined by George Weinberg in 1972. Weinberg was the first to coin the term, which refers to prejudice against homosexuals. He wrote about it at length in the first chapter of his book *The Healthy Homosexual*. More recently, examples of homophobia include hate crimes, derogatory comments, jokes that slander, denial of services, and other oppressive actions or beliefs (Bonner Curriculum, 2009).

Hence, homophobia appears as a way of exercising hegemonic masculinity: by rejecting and not identifying with any form of homosexuality, one proves his masculinity is superior to that of a gay man. Eric Anderson tried to nuance Connell’s theory by devising the inclusive masculinity theory (2009). Instead of seeing masculinity on a hierarchical vertical axis, as Connell did, Anderson sees it on a horizontal axis: multiple masculinities co-exist with no particular hierarchical organization. Anderson also notes that homosexuality is more accepted than ever before, in part, to the growth of the Internet.

Scholars have thus recently studied displays of homophobia on the internet. A recent study by Jamie Cleland (2015) found support for Anderson’s philosophy. Cleland analyzed more than 3000 posts on UK football (soccer) forums and concluded that a majority of supporters rejected homophobic posts thus showing more inclusivity. However, Kian et al. (2011), who agreed that the internet is “an interesting location for examination of how embedded hegemonic masculinity persists” among sports fans (p. 683), found hegemonic masculinity through the use of sexist and homophobic language in posts by registered users of the two most popular US football message boards. These findings once again show that not all sports fans accept homosexuality. Some are likely to be prompted to use disparaging humor in an attempt to mask their homophobia.

**Homophobia and humor**

The use of humor when communicating about serious issues activates a playful mindset that keeps one from interpreting any underlying sentiment (Berlyne, 1972; Bill & Naus, 1992; Ford, Wenzel, & Lorion, 2001). As such, Ford (2000) and Ford et al. (2001) suggest that sexist humor creates a normative standard, or a “norm of tolerance,” which means that such disparaging humor is not scrutinized as much as other potential comments. It has also been found that people are more likely to “engage in discriminatory social judgment upon exposure to disparaging humor” (Ford, 1997, p. 272; See also Ford, 2000).

When it comes to the perception of homophobic humor by self-identified gay individuals (whether they identify as gay or lesbian), very little, if no research is available. The majority of the research is about the use of homophobic humor, and even such research seems to be scarce. However, the general consensus is consistent with that of the body of research about disparaging humor and sexism. Indeed, homophobic humor has been found to be used in the construction of heterosexual masculinity (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; McCann, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2010; Roininen, 2010). More particularly, users of such humor tend to distance themselves from femininity and assert their heterosexual identity (Dalley-Trim, 2007; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; McCann et al., 2010). The exclusion of the feminine other, represented here by Amélie Mauresmo, is thus related to a form of misogyny, and the use of homophobic humor creates a heterosexual community with its own codes and regulations, excluding anyone who
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