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"Women easily feel that they have lost a year if they don't ski faster": Finnish ski coaches' discursive constructions of gendered dual career pathways

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Earlier qualitative researchers studying athletes' dual careers (DCs) have shown that sociocultural discourses on gender are ingrained in DC policies and practices, creating gender inequalities and hierarchies. In this study, we aimed to extend this body of research by examining how Finnish elite youth ski coaches discursively construct athletes' education and gender in their talk and coaching practices. Similarly, we examined how coaches' beliefs about athletes' holistic development are interlinked with broader sociocultural discourses on gender.
Design: Qualitative study.
Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 Finnish ski coaches (seven male, three female) aged 25–62 years (M = 38.5), and then analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analysis, interpreted through a feminist poststructuralist lens.
Findings: Coaches' discursive practices regarding education depended on their athletes' ages. For athletes in secondary education, the coaches predominantly drew on DC discourses that emphasized the compatibility of sports and education, but for athletes transitioning to senior-level sports, they drew on dominant performance discourses, believing that athletes at the senior level should prioritize their sports. Moreover, coaches discursively constructed athletic development as especially important for female athletes, who were perceived as less capable of excelling in sports and therefore needing to invest in multiple careers.
Conclusions: By drawing on gender stereotypes and binary understandings of gender, the coaches discursively reproduced gender hierarchies and unequal power relations in sports. These gendered discourses influence athletes' DC aspirations and the gendering of DC pathways.

Dual career (DC) discourses have gained traction in elite sport policy. DC pathways (i.e., combining elite sporting careers with education or work) aim to ensure that young athletes receive education or vocational training alongside their sporting careers, thereby improving their employability and adaptation to life after athletic retirement (European Commission, 2012). Studies on athletes' DCs have identified multiple benefits of DCs, such as broader identity development, a balanced lifestyle, enhanced sport performance, and improved life satisfaction (for a review, see Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019).

Researchers investigating athletes' careers have recently acknowledged that athletes' relationships with their coaches play an important role in athletes' holistic development (Knight et al., 2018; Wylleman et al., 2013). Therefore, the EU guidelines on sport coaching highlight that coaches should promote athletes' education and lifelong development at all developmental levels (European Commission, 2012; Wylleman et al., 2013). The research also suggests that coaches should aim to understand and consider athletes' individual needs and sociocultural circumstances, including their genders (European Commission, 2014). Despite these policy recommendations, there are noted tensions between coaches' reported views on athletes' holistic development and their coaching practices. For example, youth coaches reported that they supported their athletes' education but could not recall specific

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examples of doing this in their practices (Ronkainen et al., 2018), suggesting that coaches struggle to transform their beliefs into actions. Researchers have reported that elite-level coaches may be especially unsupportive of athletes' academic goals because of their belief that academic study distracts athletes from developing their sporting careers (Rothwell et al., 2020; Saarinen et al., 2020). Since performance discourses that celebrate and value a single-minded focus on sport are often privileged in coach education and knowledge formation, these dominant discourses are likely to powerfully shape how coaches construct their athletic coaching philosophies and practices (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Denison & Avner, 2011).

Scholars have argued that coaches' perspectives and coaching practices are also shaped by the discourses on gender and gender equality promoted by major sport organizations and coach education programs (De Haan & Knoppers, 2020; Norman, 2016a; Norman & Simpson, 2022). Specifically, Norman (2016b) found that while coaches have to deal with complex gender issues on a daily basis, they often fail to understand and incorporate practices that promote gender equity. Moreover, discourses that privilege men's knowledge and behavior, positioning them as "better" in the gendered athletic hierarchy, may be taken by coaches as objective "truths" that inform their thinking and coaching practices (Norman, 2016b). For example, De Haan and Knoppers (2020) examined the gender discourses on which elite rowing coaches drew to frame their athletes. Their work showed that coaches employ discourses that regard female athletes as more sensible, less competitive, and less capable of high-level performance than male athletes. Similarly, Edwards (2007) examined Japanese coaches' discursive practices regarding gender and found that female athletes are continually compared to male athletes, who are constructed as the norm. In Japanese coaches' talk, female athletes were constructed as physically and mentally inferior, emotionally needy, and fragile (Edwards, 2007). Indeed, several scholars have indicated that coaching women is framed as non-normative and problematic, requiring coaches to adapt their coaching style to their female athletes (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; LaVoi et al., 2007). Moreover, researchers have revealed that the construction of the "ideal" athlete through masculinized discourses may be linked to structural inequalities, such as limited opportunities for women to develop professional athletic careers and demanding expectations for female athletes to invest heavily in their education (Ronkainen et al., 2021; Ryba et al., 2021). Therefore, we hold that it is important to address coaches' views and understandings of gender because they can reproduce (and/or challenge) gender stereotypes and inequalities in sports through their discursive practices. Although some scholars have addressed this topic (e.g., Edwards, 2007; Grahn, 2014), researchers haven't critically explored coaches' gendering of DC pathways. The purpose of this article is to enhance the understanding of how coaches' beliefs about athletes' holistic development are interlinked with broader sociocultural discourses on gender.

1. Theoretical considerations

We situated our research within a feminist poststructuralist framework (Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1972, 1978; Markula, 2018; Weedon, 1997) to emphasize the role of language and discourse in constructing ways of being, doing, and feeling. Drawing on this framework, we understand language as constructing knowledge and "reality" through discursive practices and formations (Markula, 2018; Weedon, 1997). We use the term "discourse" herein to refer to certain sets of knowledge and social practices that establish what is accepted as a reality and norm in a given sociocultural context. Cultural discourses generate power relations that are perpetuated through everyday practices, privileging certain identities and experiences and marginalizing others. Some discourses are more dominant or influential than others; therefore, they have more power to determine what is deemed true, natural, good, or scientific (Foucault, 1972). Moreover, feminist poststructuralist perspectives highlight that many discourses are gendered, with concrete implications for shaping (and/or constraining) people's behavioral practices regarding gender norms (Markula, 2018; McGannon & Busanich, 2010; Weedon, 1997). Indeed, as Butler (1990, 1993) famously argued, the concepts of sex and gender are not only constructed through language and discourse, but also by repeatedly performing them daily through ways of walking, talking, acting, and dressing. The social construction of binary hierarchies shapes individuals' conscious and subconscious thoughts, emotions, and attitudes toward themselves and others (Weedon, 1997). Despite increasing acceptance of the fluidity of gender, repeated performances of women as feminine and men as masculine have led to taken-for-granted assumptions that gender is innate and stable (Butler, 1990).

Feminist and cultural sport psychology scholars have engaged with poststructuralist theory to explain how discourses on sex and gender influence sport practices and experiences, as well as the ways athletes view their bodies and themselves (e.g., Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Kavoura et al., 2015, 2018; McGannon & Spence, 2012). For example, scholars have argued that dominant discourses on gender are deeply ingrained in sporting cultures and practices, creating gender hierarchies and inequalities (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; Edwards, 2007; Grahn, 2014; Kavoura & Ryba, 2020). Practices, identities, and experiences associated with masculinity are more valued, while feminine and LGBTIQ + identities and experiences are often marginalized (Grahn, 2014; Kavoura et al., 2018). The assumed characteristics of the "ideal" athlete (competitiveness, toughness, aggressiveness, and endurance) continue to be associated with maleness, thereby constituting male athletes as the desired norm (Francis et al., 2017). Other attributes (sensitivity, modesty, warmth, and cooperation) are attributed to females and are considered incompatible with elite sports, positioning female athletes as inferior to male athletes (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Grahn, 2014; LaVoi et al., 2007). Such discourses on gender and sex are reinforced and reproduced repeatedly by sport institutions, coach education programs, and coaching practices, resulting in taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs that are difficult to change (Grahn, 2014; LaVoi, 2007; Norman, 2016b).

Although few studies have examined athletes' DCs from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, except for Kavoura and Ryba's (2020) study exploring Finnish female judo athletes' discursive constructions of their future selves, their recent work indicates a need to critically examine athletes' (gendered) DC pathways because gendered discourses are ingrained in DC policies and practices, influencing athletes' motivations, career aspirations, decision-making, and well-being. For example, Ryba et al. (2021) explored gender meanings in the narrative construction of DC styles and how these meanings influenced the continuation/discontinuation of athletes' DC pathways. They found that male athletes are likely to invest exclusively in professional athletic careers, whereas female athletes are likely to construct DCs "within an interdependent configuration of sport and education themes" (Ryba et al., 2021, p. 2). Other researchers have observed that while female student-athletes' motivations to pursue sports may resemble those of males, they are likelier than males to invest in educational and DC goals and identities (Ekengren et al., 2019). Several sport scholars have also argued that female athletes are less likely than males to pursue professional sporting careers (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020), and they face a higher risk of withdrawing prematurely from sports (Skrubbeltrang, 2019). In Finland, researchers have shown that men benefit from the cultural privilege of being more relaxed about their career aspirations and focusing solely on their athletic careers, whereas women often experience cultural and societal pressures to excel in multiple roles (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2021; Ryba et al., 2021). Moreover, DC discourses are often mobilized at the intersection of sport and education, with each resting on stereotypical views of desirable gender identities (Ryba, 2018). Thus, recent scholarship has claimed that we may be witnessing a feminization of DC discourses linked to broader discussions about the femininization of education, resulting in more women enrolling in education programs (Brunila et al., 2011; Ryba, 2018; Ryba

et al., 2021). Similarly, the notion of the feminization of DC discourses has implications for male athletes' choices regarding their DCs (Ryba, 2022). Since coaching discourses and practices contribute to athletes' career meaning-making, feminist poststructuralist theory is particularly useful for explaining the gendered effects of discursive coaching practices.

2. Finnish context

In Finland, sports and education have traditionally been separated, and participation in sports has been organized within a volunteer-based club system. However, a few upper secondary sport schools (*urheilulukiot* in Finnish) were established in the 1990s to facilitate the construction of DC pathways in upper secondary education, and most talented youth athletes have pursued secondary education within these national talent development programs. At the time of the study, secondary education was voluntary in Finland. Upper secondary sport schools collaborate with sport academies and athletic clubs to provide daily training for athletes, offering the possibility of extending the three-year academic curriculum to 3.5 or 4 years, giving study credits for sport, and supporting DC planning (Ryba et al., 2016). Despite the structural agreements between sporting and educational stakeholders in upper secondary sport schools, no formal job description for coaches outlines their responsibilities regarding student-athletes' DCs (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2021). In the 2000s, Finland established a more extensive sport academy network to extend DC pathways to tertiary education (Lämsä, 2018). These sport academies focus on facilitating athletic training and support services for athletes, and they assist with DC planning in collaboration with tertiary educational institutes. Despite extensive development in the past decade, Finland is still among the few European countries with no sport-friendly universities to facilitate DC in higher education (Morris et al., 2021). Finland is a relatively egalitarian country in which extensive gender equality initiatives have been introduced in the past decade, both in educational and work settings, including sports (Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2015). However, structural inequalities continue to pervade the Finnish sporting system, limiting women's ability to develop professional sporting careers. For example, most DC development environments facilitating athletes' combined vocations and sports at the elite level target men (e.g., The Defence Force Programs and Player Union Programs; Morris et al., 2021), and despite the considerable growth of women's sports in 2017, only 1.6% of Finland's professional athletes were women (Lämsä, 2018). Similarly, Finnish sporting women receive less financial support from the Finnish Olympic Committee and the Ministry of Education and Culture (Turpeinen et al., 2012), and fewer than 25% of professional coaches in Finland are women (Finnish Coach Association, 2022). In this study, keeping this background in mind, we explored coaches' discursive practices when talking about DCs, especially regarding (1) the promotion of education and (2) gender.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants were seven male and three female Finnish cross-country ski coaches aged 25–62 years at the time of the interviews. The first author used her personal network to recruit participants. Whenever possible, we invited the highest-level junior coaches to participate in the study, and we expected the coaches to either work as coaches in upper secondary sport schools or as Finnish Ski Federation or junior national team coaches coaching the most talented and elite young skiers aged 15–25 years. On average, the coaches had 17 years of coaching experience and had been cross-country skiers before becoming coaches. All coaches had a minimum of five years' experience coaching DC athletes, and they all had degrees in relevant academic fields (sport pedagogy, sport coaching, exercise physiology, or physiotherapy).

Table 1
Participants' background information by pseudonym.

Pseudonyms (Gender)	Age at the time of the interview	Years of coaching	Current coaching level (age group)	Level of education (ICED, 2011)
Elmeri (M)	62	40	Sport high school (17–21 years old)	Bachelor's degree (6)
Wilhelm (M)	52	30	Sport academy (14–21 years old)	Master's degree (7)
Julius (M)	32	5	Sport high school (15–21 years old)	Master's degree (7)
Juhani (M)	41	19	National team (18–29 years old)	Master's degree (7)
Helga (F)	34	12	Individual coach (20–25 years old)	Vocational degree (3)
Birgitta (F)	36	20	Individual coach (20–26 years old) NOC coaching developer	Bachelor's degree (6)
Pirkka (M)	47	24	Sport high school (14–23 years old)	Doctorate (8)
Waldermar (M)	28	10	Junior national team, national team (20–24 years old)	Master's degree (7)
Aatu (M)	26	10	Ski Federation, ski club (12–26 years old)	Bachelor's degree (6)
Adalmiina (F)	25	5	Ski Federation, ski club, (15–17 years old)	Bachelor's degree (6)

Table 1 details the participants' background information and pseudonyms.

3.2. Procedure

After obtaining an ethical approval from the relevant university for the study, we invited participants to participate in semi-structured interviews. We informed them that the interview was part of a longitudinal study on athletes' DCs (Ryba et al., 2016) and that the interviews would focus on their coaching philosophy and everyday practices. All participants provided their written informed consent to participate in the research. We started the interviews with a broad opening question asking the participants to share their stories of becoming coaches. Thereafter, we asked them to explain their views on athletes' holistic development and their goals as coaches. We interviewed six coaches face-to-face in various locations, such as a university campus or training site. Due to the difficulty in arranging some meetings, we interviewed four coaches via Skype. The interviews lasted between 20 and 60 min, and the first author digitally recorded them and transcribed them verbatim.

To explore how the coaches contextualized DC within a holistic development framework, we invited them to share their general views (e.g., "What are your views on DCs?" "Do you think a skier can succeed in both sport and school?") and provide examples of their daily practices ("What is your club's coaching recommendation for coaches regarding student-athletes?" "Could you share some examples of your daily practices? For example, how would you follow up on your skiers' academic success?"). To explore the participants' views and beliefs regarding gender, we asked them to reflect on how they coached their athletes, to consider whether gender played a role in shaping their coaching practices, and to share specific examples of their gendered coaching practices. Throughout the interviews, many of the participants spontaneously identified the gendered practices they had observed, and we explored these further. At the end of the interviews, the coaches were invited to ask questions and elaborate on topics they considered important that were not included in the interviews. The first author interviewed all coaches in Finnish.

3.3. Data analysis and representation

The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim and then reviewed them several times to create condensed summaries for the author team. To analyze the data, we employed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) principles and phases of reflexive thematic analysis, which align well with feminist poststructuralism, to identify the discourses that coaches drew on when talking about athletes' DCs. Our analytic procedure included data-driven and theory-driven processes and involved "a dialectical movement between everyday meanings and theoretical explanations, acknowledging the creative process of interpretation when applying a theoretical framework to participants' experiences" (Ryba et al., 2012, p. 85). First, we semantically coded coaches' experiences with athletes' DCs and the explicit meanings coaches assigned to them. Second, we coded the data using a latent approach to inductively analyze implicit semantic meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The latent focus of the analysis was informed by feminist poststructuralist theory, and we developed it by linking the semantic themes (i.e., female athletes needing to invest in multiple careers) with discourses concerning athletes' DCs and gender ideologies (e.g., the Finnish "superwoman" ideal). Third, we organized the codes into theoretically relevant themes. In the fourth and fifth phases, we developed the themes further by actively engaging with feminist poststructuralist theory to interpret and theorize our findings. We combined these phases because the analysis required us to move back and forth between them, linking the content of the interview data to epistemological assumptions and our theoretically driven interpretations. We conceptualized the final themes in our study as patterns of shared meaning united by a core concept (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In the sixth and final phases, we wrote up the analysis, as partly formulated during the earlier phases of the research. Our interpretation of coaches' experiential accounts involved contextually situated meaning and meaning-making processes that were enmeshed with researcher subjectivity in knowledge construction. Throughout the analysis, the first author provided her initial interpretations, while the other authors served as friendly "devil's advocates" to refine her analysis (Smith & McGannon, 2018). To ensure the quality of our research, the first author critically reflected on her own position as a Finnish woman and sport professional with a background that combined skiing with higher education as a student-athlete.

4. Findings and discussion

We present the results of our thematic analysis under two main themes:

(1) *the fluid positioning of education*, and (2) *holistic development is important for female athletes*. The first main theme contained two supporting subthemes, and the second main theme contained three supporting subthemes. Below, we outline the main themes and discuss each subtheme according to the discourses we identified as shaping particular meanings within it.

4.1. Fluid positioning of education

The first theme that we constructed in the analysis encompassed two coexisting meanings for athletes' education. These layered meanings depended on two subthemes feeding into the fluid positioning of education: (1) *secondary education is important,* and (2) *sport is the priority at the senior level*. The subthemes showed that the coaches constructed contradictory meanings in different discourses depending on their athletes' ages. These meanings also had different implications for coaching practices. Drawing on DC and performance discourses, the coaches constituted high performance as the most central aspect of their athletes' holistic development by showing that education either had an instrumental role in supporting athletes' development or that education should be entirely neglected to succeed as an athlete (Carless & Douglas, 2013; McGannon et al., 2015; Ryba et al., 2021).

4.1.1. Secondary education is important

As found in previous research (e.g., Ronkainen et al., 2018), in our study, all the interviewed ski coaches drew on emerging DC discourses (i.e., discourses that promote the compatibility of sports and education) when talking about their school-age skiers. For example, a high school coach, Elmeri (M), said, "It is important that athletes take good care of their studies in secondary education." Coaches' talk about the compatibility of sports and education reflected the national cultural landscape, with its long-standing history of structural agreements between sporting and upper secondary institutions facilitated by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (Morris et al., 2021; Nikander et al., 2021). However, while drawing on DC discourses to justify young athletes' education, coaches highlighted their instrumental role in supporting athletic development or providing something to fall back on if athletes failed in their sports (see also Nikander et al., 2022; Ronkainen et al., 2018; Ryba, 2022; Saarinen et al., 2020). This idea is illustrated by a quote from junior national team coach Juhani (M):

> Combining sport and education is central here in sport high schools, and we try to make it work as well as possible… Athletes who really have a chance to reach the elite level one day, for whom developing an athletic career is a priority, need to have a high school diploma. It's important to make sure that their studies proceed nicely… to support athletic development. When their studies proceed nicely, so does the sport (usually). If athletes face problems in their studies, it negatively influences sport performance, as it causes athletes stress.

Indeed, DC discourses hold that education is a good backup plan for those who cannot pursue professional athletic careers or who need another profession when their athletic careers end (Ronkainen et al., 2018). As Birgitta (F, an individual coach) said, "You never know what will happen in life. You may get injured in sport, or whatever, so athletes should go to high school." Similarly, Julius (M, high school coach) noted:

> I think that having an education is vital. Even if you become an elite athlete, it is not possible to live only with that for the rest of your life. In cross-country skiing, top athletes typically terminate their careers in their late thirties at the latest, so you need to have something else in your life once your athletic career is over. Completing high school studies opens up the possibility of continuing studies after athletic retirement.

Since everyday discourses (i.e., the discourses that provide meanings to constitute our everyday practices) limit understanding and, therefore, sport coaching practices (McGannon & Busanish, 2010), the interviewed coaches were unable to provide practical examples of how their DC beliefs shaped their coaching of school-age skiers. This indicates that the current discussions regarding education in dominant DC discourses and/or a lack of engagement in educational discourses that intrinsically value education, regardless of whether sports become professional pathways for athletes, limit coaches' opportunities to transform their DC beliefs into coaching practices (Ronkainen et al., 2018; Saarinen et al., 2020). Instead, coaches ultimately reproduce the cultural practices, like focusing on high performance and centralizing winning-related concerns that prioritize sports over education. This has a potential to thwart young athletes' engagement with education (Ronkainen et al., 2018; Saarinen et al., 2020).

4.1.2. Sport is the priority at the senior level

As the main theme showed, the Finnish ski coaches constructed contradictory meanings in different discourses, depending on their athletes' ages. In line with earlier studies (Ronkainen et al., 2018; Saarinen et al., 2020), coaches predominantly drew on the dominant performance discourse in such talk to give meaning to athletes' education when transitioning to senior-level sports. The dominant performance discourse prioritizes high performance and winning over other values and is often privileged in the elite sporting world, typically

overshadowing the Finnish sporting culture (Ronkainen et al., 2016). This discourse suggests that "winning is everything," meaning that performance-related concerns infuse all areas of life, while other areas, such as education and personal relationships, are diminished or sidelined (Carless & Douglas, 2013). To understand this discursive emphasis, it is important to note that Finnish cross-country skiers typically reach professional status before the age of 25, suggesting that the early years of senior-level sports are critical for athletic development (Finnish Ski Federation, 2022). Elmeri (M, high school coach) drew on the performance discourse to explain why he believed that sport and education were incompatible at the senior level: "When you become a professional skier and join a national team, especially if you are successful, there is no time to study." Indeed, the performance discourse holds that the only way to achieve success in elite sports is to centralize sport performance in one's life, even if this means neglecting other areas of life, such as education (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ryba et al., 2021). Similarly, the performance discourse suggests that being an elite athlete is achievable only through sacrifice, and that it may be impossible to do anything other than sports (McGannon et al., 2015). For example, Birgitta (F, individual coach) stated:

> Combining sport with school is a challenge for my athlete. We often discuss whether the sport should be a priority at the moment. I don't think we can really make any compromises here, and I have tried to encourage full investment in the sport. When athletic goals and ambitions are high, if studying does not help in reaching them, the combination just doesn't work out. I have tried to help my athletes make choices, and I have told them that they should focus on sports. I give the same message to all my athletes… that there is plenty of time in life to work; there is no rush to get a university degree.

As poststructuralist scholars have argued (e.g., McGannon & Busanich, 2010), language and discourse shape the ways people think and behave, and in this case, the dominant discourse on sport performance shapes coaches' perspectives and coaching practices. For example, Wilhelm (M, junior national team coach) said:

> As a coach, I need to support my athletes' decisions. If they want to study, then they do that. However,… I don't see university studies as a positive influence on sports. That's why I don't try to convince my athletes to study… I think it's quite clear that if they choose to study, they cannot train optimally. It is okay for me if that is something the athletes want to do, but I want to make sure that they really understand what such a decision means. In that case, athletes need to accept that they must train less than others, and we can only wait to see whether that amount of training is enough.

Earlier studies have shown that when the structures facilitating the systemic integration of high-performance sport and higher education are lacking, as in Finland, athletes who invest in sports and education are at risk of lowering their athletic aspirations, while those who invest in sports (i.e., aligning themselves with the performance discourse) may experience increased tensions and discontinue education (Skrubbeltrang, 2019). Therefore, the risk is that coaches who emphasize exclusive high performance and values at the higher education level may eventually cause athletes to drop out of education *and* sports. Similarly, by drawing on the performance discourse, coaches reproduce the cultural landscape that privileges high performance over other values and meanings in sport, constructing it as a natural part of doing athletics with well-recognized problematic effects for athletes (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McGannon et al., 2015; Saarinen et al., 2020).

4.2. Holistic development is important for female athletes

The second main theme we constructed in the analysis encompassed layered meanings regarding the importance of holistic development for female athletes. These layered meanings depended on three subthemes feeding into the idea that holistic development is important for female athletes: (1) *female athletes are less capable of doing sports,* (2) *female athletes need to invest in multiple careers,* and (3) *coaching female athletes is challenging.* This main theme encapsulated multiple meanings, showing that coaches constructed female athletes as "less than" male athletes, thereby feeding into the "superwoman" expectations of female athletes. The superwoman concept refers to the national ideals of womanhood according to which women are expected to "succeed at everything" and balance the societal and cultural demands they encounter (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021). By drawing on discourses about gender differences, coaches constituted female athletes as incomplete and needing to compensate for being "less than males" by investing in multiple careers. As previously shown, female student-athletes' desire to meet the superwoman ideal is constructed within a patriarchal discourse (Ryba et al., 2021) and, therefore, we argue that the implication that holistic development is especially important for female athletes reinforces a patriarchal gender order.

4.2.1. Female athletes are less capable of doing sports

Aligned with earlier studies (e.g., de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; Edwards, 2007), the first subtheme demonstrated that coaches in the present study drew on the discourse on female biological inferiority (Kavoura et al., 2015, 2018) to explain why holistic development was specifically important for female athletes. This discourse constructs female athletes as less capable of doing sports than males by suggesting that their bodies are fragile and incapable of high-intensity training due to their reproductive nature (McGannon & Spence, 2012). Similarly, it assigns several (undesirable) characteristics to women, such as softness, passivity, fragility, pain intolerance, and less capacity to manage the physical and mental demands of elite sports (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Grahn, 2014; LaVoi et al., 2007). For example, Julius (M, high school coach) said:

> In our high school, girls and boys train together and follow the same training plan. You need to monitor the training load for girls more carefully… [because] they easily become perfectionists. They give 100% in school, and [because] they usually haven't been coached by anyone at home… it seems that they have an urge to give their best to coaches all the time. Girls' social relationships also seem to stress them. The internal competition here is high, and it is even higher for girls than for boys. All of this causes stress, and especially for girls, it is important to monitor and control the entire workload so that they can react faster. Many of the athletes do not admit that they are tired; this is the biggest challenge here—not so much with the boys, though, as most of them have trained way more… than girls. Boys are more prepared to train, and… their bodies develop in such a way that they don't have to pay for mistakes in the same way; the levels of testosterone and anabolic hormones are so high they recover, no matter what they do.

Along similar lines, Elmeri (M, high school coach) stated:

> When we talk about the physical differences, girls overtrain more easily than boys, and this is mostly because girls' levels of testosterone are so much lower… so girls overtrain way more easily… They also have periods and such and that influences [girls' ability to recover] too… Girls cannot do as much strength training as boys.

These sets of knowledge appear scientific, and because they are often included in coaching education textbooks (Grahn, 2014; LaVoi et al., 2007), coaches may accept them as objective truths and draw on them in their coaching practices or when talking about their female athletes. In doing so, coaches reproduce the idea that female bodies are fragile and flawed (McGannon & Spence, 2012) and thereby reconstruct the associated power relations and gender hierarchies in sport.

4.2.2. Female athletes need to invest in multiple careers

Our analysis showed that coaches drew on discourses about gender differences, and, in doing so, reinforced "superwoman" expectations of

female athletes in relation to multiple careers (Ekengren et al., 2019; Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2016; Skrubbeltrang, 2019). For instance, Elmeri (M, high school coach) noted that girls experienced greater societal and cultural expectations to invest in DCs, whereas boys could be more relaxed about their career aspirations:

> Completing your high school studies successfully is a phase to begin with. Thereafter, you can sign up to an educational institute to make sure that you have a Plan B if the athletic career does not proceed as well as you hoped. Here, we see a difference between girls and boys: it doesn't seem to bother boys, but it does bother girls emotionally if they don't study or do anything else besides their sports. Relatives more often ask girls what else they do besides sports, and it is more challenging for them to say, "I don't do anything else." For boys and men, it's easier to say, "I am a professional athlete."

Kavoura and Ryba (2020) argued that Finnish female athletes are subjected to national ideals of womanhood that idealize the position of "superwoman" (i.e., a strong woman who is expected to "succeed at everything" and live an independent live without complaining about the societal and patriarchal pressures she experiences; see also Kavoura et al., 2018; Ronkainen et al., 2016, 2021; Ryba et al., 2021). Nevertheless, when young women are expected to live up to this ideal, they experience increased pressure to keep up with all the sporting and societal demands they encounter. Indeed, the coaches explained that women are perfectionists for whom achieving success means that the year has been used efficiently:

> Both men and women are perfectionists in terms of achievement, but… when you give feedback after training about what went well and what could be improved, women are not as good at analyzing the feedback, going through it, and thinking, "Alright. Next time, I'll do better." They easily get stuck thinking about the things that didn't go well; they can't seem to… move on. All of this takes a lot of time. Another thing is that it is easier for men to decide that they want to be high-performing athletes, whereas women may… be more worried that they won't be able to ski faster next year; they may get the feeling that… they have lost a year and should have done something else, such as study or work (Waldemar, M, junior national team coach).

Birgitta (F, individual coach) explained that girls want to achieve good results in sports and education:

> What I have sensed from the young athletes is that it is the end of the world if they get 8 out of 10 for an exam… Perhaps here we see a difference between boys and girls: girls… try to reach perfection. I have tried to teach them to be realistic, and that you don't have to be perfect in everything.

The coaches further claimed that girls generally invest more in their education:

> Girls study at training camps more often than boys. Girls have homework clubs, and they try to follow up on what's going on at school. Boys just seem to forget the schoolbooks. I don't know if they try to catch up with the schoolwork afterwards, but [unlike girls] they don't… have homework clubs during their breaks (Aatu, M, Ski Federation coach).

While the superwoman ideal may work well to support women's athletic and academic excellence, providing an empowering discourse for women who are expected to achieve equality and economic independence through education, it is also linked to patriarchal discourses that reinforce the gender order, positioning women in "a balanced totality" of needing to handle multiple roles perfectly, such as being excellent mothers, making their own living, and being active citizens (Ryba et al., 2021). The pressure associated with this ideal makes female athletes more vulnerable, since it carries multiple risk factors for psychosocial distress, such as depression and anxiety (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020).

Moreover, the Finnish superwoman ideal is linked to national DC discourses in Finland that endorse individual responsibility and an "up to me" attitude without recognizing the cultural barriers created by gender hierarchies (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021). Indeed, it seemed that while the coaches, to some degree, recognized that female athletes had to deal with inequality and faced more demanding DCs, they were incapable of linking gender hierarchies to these experiences:

> With women, you need to talk a lot and try to convince them to enjoy the things they are doing right now instead of focusing on doing things to develop [as an athlete]… [to] understand this as a stage of life during which, even if you don't become a professional athlete, you gain many different experiences from training and traveling; this really prepares you for everything. Women are not as strong at valuing this process or valuing the things they are doing right now; rather, they want to see results (Waldemar, M, junior national team coach).

Coaches drew on discourses about gender differences and/or female biological inferiority (i.e., female athletes have different emotional, psychological, and physical dispositions from male athletes, are less likely to succeed in sports, and therefore need to invest in multiple careers). This kind of talk feeds into the superwoman ideal that, while it can be seen as empowering, continues to be linked to a patriarchal gender order (i.e., men do not have to do as much to be valued, succeed, gain respect, and access resources) (McGannon & Busanich, 2010; Ryba et al., 2021).

4.2.3. *Coaching female athletes is challenging*

In line with previous studies (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020; LaVoi et al., 2007), the coaches' stories showed that they constructed a holistic perspective on athletes' development as particularly important for female athletes by drawing on discourses about gender differences, highlighting that female athletes differ from male athletes and are therefore less capable athletes. These discourses gain their meanings from stereotypical and binary understandings of gender, suggesting that male athletes are the desirable norm in sports, whereas female athletes are deviant and disrupt this norm (de Haan & Knoppers, 2020). These discourses compare male and female athletes and construct female athletes as physically and mentally inferior, fragile, and emotionally needy (Edwards, 2007; McGannon & Spence, 2012). For example, coaches in this study did not refer to female behavior in a positive manner, but rather made comparative comments that described characteristics desirable in men as lacking in women (see also Ronkainen et al., 2016). Elmeri (M, high school coach) claimed:

> There is a big difference in how I coach girls and boys… You cannot coach girls by joking around. When they approach you with their worries and troubles… you need to listen to them and to understand. For boys… you can just say, "That's nonsense. Go and train." Girls may have worries that have nothing to do with sport or that are [only loosely] related to sport. Girls are more sensitive and more difficult, but… they are also more grateful and diligent. The psychological side of coaching girls is different. And one more difference is that girls are way more jealous than boys. Male athletes don't care if I spend more time with other athletes, whereas with girls… you need to be very careful that you spend as much time with all of them; they may easily get the feeling that "The coach only spends time with the other athlete and is no longer interested in me."

Earlier scholars have suggested that coaches may adopt normative ideas of male superiority in sports through their own cumulative coaching experience; since most of the coaches were male, it is likely that they had been coached in the past by male coaches who valued masculine characteristics (Denison & Avner, 2011). Also, coaching educational materials often emphasize practices associated with desirable athletic masculinity and male ways of doing and being, explaining

that women may differ from the (masculine) norm (LaVoi et al., 2007; Norman, 2016a). This default masculine norm was also evident in the coaches' comments, which emphasized how they altered or changed their coaching behavior when working with female athletes. These comments about altering coaching behavior revealed an implicit coaching norm that had to be changed when coaching female athletes. Earlier studies have shown that coaches often frame female athletes as mentally inferior to male athletes because they need to adapt their coaching practices for psychological reasons, such as women needing to talk more (see also Grahn, 2014):

> Training plans are the same for both [sexes], but coaching women… is different… Group training, where we do the workout and then give… feedback, is pretty much the same for both, but when we work with individual athletes, coaching women takes more time and is more challenging (at least for me as a man)… I can't always think the same way; there may be misunderstandings, and… I just don't take all the small details into consideration as well as I should. It is more difficult and more challenging for me to coach women than men. And it is not about physical coaching but, rather, understanding the psychology and the different ways women think… Women want personal attention and coaches to treat them equally, whereas men like to stay in a group with other men and enjoy doing things together; they don't want that much personal attention (Juhani, M, junior national team coach).

In discourses about gender differences, male behavior is framed as the standard, and male athletes are seen as easy to work with. In contrast, working with female athletes is seen as problematic because they deviate from the standard in undesirable ways. Helga (F, individual coach) gave an example:

> Compared to girls, coaching boys is usually more straightforward; they let you know quite soon if things aren't working. With girls, you need to sense their feelings and go with them. Girls may have moments when things aren't working, but they won't say it. You know, when you don't hear from them, something is wrong. Girls just stay quiet.

By drawing on discourses about gender differences, the coaches positioned their female athletes as problematic, disrupting the norm, not performing the role of elite athlete adequately, and therefore needing to focus on holistic development (Ryba, 2022). This construction of abnormality may undermine young female athletes' ability to see themselves as real athletes since they do not fit the standard formation of the athletic subject (Kavoura et al., 2015). The coaches' comments on this theme were based on generalizations that almost pathologized young women's behavior, potentially magnifying the problems that young female athletes encountered. By constructing female athletes as more challenging to coach, the coaches also reproduced the dominant power relations that position male athletes at the top of the gender hierarchy (Kavoura et al., 2018; Norman, 2016b; Ryba, 2022).

5. Conclusion

In this research, we explored how coaches' perspectives on athletes' holistic development connect with broader sociocultural discourses on gender. We thematically analyzed interview data from three female and seven male Finnish cross-country ski coaches, focusing on their discursive practices when talking about athletes' DCs, especially concerning the promotion of education and gender. Our work shows that coaches constructed contradictory meanings in different discourses on education, depending on their athletes' ages. For athletes in secondary education, the coaches predominantly drew on DC discourses that emphasized the compatibility of sports and education, yet assigning an instrumental role to education (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). For athletes transitioning to senior-level sports, in turn, coaches drew on a dominant performance discourse suggesting that athletes at the senior level should prioritize their sports (Carless & Douglas, 2013). These views translated into coaching practices only for athletes who competed in senior-level sports, suggesting that the current promotion of education in DC discourses is an empty ideology, as long as it is rhetorical and not put into practice. Our work shows that coaches reproduced the cultural practices that prioritize sports over education and the cultural landscape, privileging high performance over other values and meanings in sport (McGannon et al., 2015; Saarinen et al., 2020). Moreover, the coaches discursively constructed a holistic perspective on athletic development as especially important for female athletes. The interviewed coaches constructed female athletes as less capable of excelling in sports by drawing on the discourse on female biological inferiority (Kavoura et al., 2015). Moreover, by drawing on the Finnish "superwoman" ideal, the coaches constructed female athletes as needing to invest in multiple careers and succeed in everything (Ryba et al., 2021). Finally, the coaches framed female athletes as challenging to coach by drawing on discourses about gender differences that position male athletes as the desired norm and female athletes as deviant and disrupting the norm. Importantly, our work shows that coaches' talk draws on the superwoman ideal, which can be seen as empowering but nevertheless continues to reinforce the patriarchal gender order in sports. These dominant power relations are likely to sustain a status quo and an environment that is hard to change as they may infuse all aspects of the environment to be slanted in the favor of males.

5.1. Limitations and future directions

We recognize that a limitation of our study is a partial and positioned interpretation of how Finnish ski coaches' beliefs about athletes' holistic development connect with broader sociocultural discourses about gender. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework, we acknowledge the subjective and culturally situated nature of our findings and recognize that other researchers may understand and interpret the data differently. Moreover, combining multiple data sources (e.g., combining coach interviews with an analysis of national policy documents and coaching education textbooks) could provide a better picture of how national discourses are embedded in coaches' subjective experiences. Also, bearing in mind that most of the coaches in our study were relatively highly educated and experienced male coaches, future studies should continue to critically examine the experiences, beliefs, and discursive practices of coaches with different educational backgrounds, coaching experiences, and genders.

5.2. Implications

Our findings have important implications for coaching education to help coaches develop more holistic, ethical, and inclusive coaching practices. It is important to understand that coaches can actively reproduce power relations and gender stereotypes; only when they become aware of the problematic effects of these dominant discourses can they work on changing them (Norman, 2016a). Bearing in mind that DC discourses are relatively new and that clear recommendations for holistic coaching practice are lacking, we encourage coaches to critically reflect on how their coaching practices are formed, what information they privilege, and where the dominant understanding of coaching comes from (Denison & Avner, 2011). To facilitate cultural change, coaches could benefit from interventions broadening their discursive resources for holistic coaching. Since language and discourse facilitate understanding of experiences (McGannon & Busanich, 2010), it is important that coaching education programs promote language that challenges taken-for-granted gendered athletic hierarchies to alleviate some of the cultural pressures that women and girls experience. This means, for example, eliminating language that constantly compares men and women. Rather, we should encourage coaches to use language that normalizes female participation in sports and challenges limiting beliefs about what their bodies can and cannot do. We believe that this is

especially important for female coaches, who act as role models for younger generations of female athletes (Ryba et al., 2021). Male coaches, in turn, should acknowledge that males' privileged position in sports does not reflect a natural or universal "truth" but rather how it is constructed in dominant discourses and power relations; therefore, it can be changed. Interestingly, while we included both male and female participants in the present study, we did not identify differences in their discursive practices, suggesting that without critical reflection, all individuals may ultimately reproduce dominant power relations in sport (Kavoura et al., 2018). Therefore, since the leading coach education programs in Finland do not currently include courses addressing gender equality in sport coaching (University of Jyväskylä, 2022), it will be necessary to include this topic in the curricula to facilitate cultural change. Finally, structural changes in the Finnish sporting system, such as providing more DC development environments for women and allocating more financial support to women athletes, are urgently needed to effectively support female athletes' professional careers.

5.3. Final thoughts

Our work makes a novel contribution to existing feminist poststructuralist research in sport and exercise psychology by showing that language and dominant cultural discourses shape coaches' understanding of how to support their athletes' DCs. More specifically, we show that coaches play an important role in athletes' DC development, as their discursive constructions of athletes' education may have problematic effects on athletes' DCs, especially in senior-level sports. Similarly, by identifying holistic development and education as more important for female athletes and by identifying male athletes as the desirable norm, coaches contribute to the gendering of athletes' DC pathways and therefore reproduce gender hierarchies and inequalities in Finnish sporting culture. Our work also indicates that coaches' views of male normativity are likely to increase pressure on female athletes to be "superwomen," and that interventions are needed to revisit the discourses that construct women as inferior to men in elite sports. Finally, this research provides further support for previous studies on the feminization of DC discourses and practices, specifically regarding the role of coaches in this development (e.g., Ryba, 2018; Ryba et al., 2021).

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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