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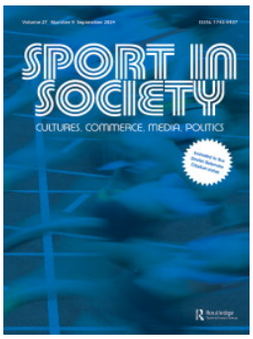

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The anatomy of body shaming in sports coaching

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ABSTRACT

Stories of body shaming in sports coaching are becoming widespread, and can intentionally, unintentionally, or inadvertently be used in different sports coaching practices. These practices do not necessarily intend to harm athletes. The aim of this paper is to explore body critical and body sensitive sport coaching practices that have the potential to be shaming, or as we call it in the title, the 'anatomy' of body shaming. The study used photo elicitation interviews including vignettes for data generation with 12 coaches from nine different sports. The results demonstrate that body criticality and body sensitivity function in different subtle ways and that coaches were well-aware of the potentially damaging influence that they can have on athletes. The article concludes with recommendations for further research exploring how athletes experience the most subtle and invisible ways of body critical and body sensitive practices, and how they internalize this well-intended but still potentially shaming advice.

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Body shaming; body criticality; body sensitivity; coaching; elite athletes

Introduction

> You need to lose weight
>
> You need to lose x kg to ever be free from your injury
>
> It's normal to lose your period, it only means that you train hard enough
>
> You are thinner now than before, good
>
> We are gonna check our weights after Christmas and you need to pay for every kg you have gained

These are only a few of the comments I've heard as an athlete. Unfortunately, this kind of talk is normalized in track and I know from my own experience how big of an impact just one comment like this can have on a person. […] As an eighteen-year-old, I just wanted to do everything right to reach my goals and I started to cut out more and more food. I lost a lot of

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> weight and got super thin. In the end I lost my period for 8 months, my body was constantly sore and I was miserable. I constantly looked at my stomach in the mirror to see how much more 'fat' I could get rid of. I did my worst year so far performance wise and in the end, I got injured so I had to end my season. (Instagram post by the track and field athlete Kaiza Karlén, www.expressen.se 14 April 2023)

Stories of body shaming like these are regularly published in the media, particularly by elite athletes. Body shaming is understood as the act of humiliating someone by making inappropriate or negative comments about body size, body weight, or body shape (Gilbert and Miles 2002; Schlüter, Kraag, and Schmidt 2023). Body shaming can also, if used more explicitly and repeatedly, be understood as a form of bullying (McMahon, McGannon, and Palmer 2022) and as a form of social aggression or emotional abuse (Willson and Kerr 2022) Research suggests that coaches adopt body shaming practices because they believe athletes need to be fat-free to succeed (e.g. Barker-Ruchti et al. 2017; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008; Willson and Kerr 2022). The assumption is that if athletes can attain a particular body shape, body composition, and body weight (e.g. child-like in women's gymnastics; extremely thin in rhythmic gymnastics; slim but toned in swimming; thin and light in running), they are more likely to reach peak performance. To reach such ideal body shapes, coaches have been found to criticize athletes' bodies, particularly female athletes' body shape and weight, joke about young athletes' bodies, not select athletes because of body composition (despite sufficient performance), demand extreme weight loss, and claim that weight loss would enhance performance (Barker-Ruchti et al. 2017; Kerr, Berman, and De Souza 2006; McMahon, McGannon, and Palmer 2022; Willson and Kerr 2022). For the purposes of this paper, we define this criticism from coaches towards athletes' bodies as 'body criticality', and the practices that they use, as 'body critical practices'.

Coaches' critical comments have been found to cause athletes to experience social physique anxiety, disordered eating, and unhealthy dieting (e.g. binge-eating; dietary restraint), and feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety (Greenleaf 2004; Kerr, Berman, and De Souza 2006; Ryall 2019; Vani et al. 2021). Athletes may be distressed when coaches compare their bodies to those of others because they feel pressure to conform to body ideals (Mosewich et al. 2009), and as early as 1999, Thompson and Sherman (1999) recommended that coaches should avoid making critical comments to and comparing the bodies of athletes.

Studies on issues related to body shaming have been conducted for some time, particularly on body image and eating/exercise disorders in athletes (e.g. Greenleaf 2004; Kerr, Berman, and De Souza 2006; McMahon, McGannon, and Palmer 2022; Reel et al. 2013; Vani et al. 2021; Willson and Kerr 2022). Findings reveal that athletes are at greater risk of developing eating disorders than non-athletes. Significantly, aesthetic sports, which have been shown to focus on appearance and leanness, entail an additional risk factor for athletes to develop an eating disorder (Krentz and Warschburger 2011; Torstveit, Rosenvinge, and Sundgot-Borgen 2008).

While critical comments about weight and the shaming of bodies can entail a broad spectrum of definitions and demarcations (see e.g. Schlüter, Kraag, and Schmidt 2023), body shaming can and is being intentionally, unintentionally, or inadvertently used in different sports coaching practices. Research has shown that also more body sensitive practices, like caring for an athlete in terms of controlling weight, can have unintended and potentially shaming consequences, not least during transitional life periods such as puberty (Desbrow 2021). Body sensitivity can thus be defined as empathetic and thoughtful actions

towards athletes' bodies, which can also have unintentional harmful effects, i.e. they can be shaming in its consequences. So, how body criticality and body sensitivity function in different coaching practices, or as we call it in this paper, the anatomy of body shaming in sports coaching, is thus a significant issue to be explored to understand its negative consequences on athletes' health, body- and self-esteem, and general well-being. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore body critical and body sensitive sport coaching practices that have the potential to be shaming. The uniqueness of this paper is that we explore the deep roots of body shaming, that is an exploration of both body critical and body sensitive practices, as most studies have focused directly on more explicit body shaming instead of investigating the unintentional underlying practices that have the potential to be shaming.

Mapping body shaming in sports coaching practices

Body shaming has been recognized in different spheres, including the fashion industry (Lewis 2019; McClendon 2019), schools (Gam et al. 2020; Novitasari and Hamid 2021), social media in general (Hamid 2018; Hamid, Ismail, and Shamsuddin 2018, Mitra 2020; Mustafa et al. 2022), social media related to physical activity and health (Goodyear et al. 2022; Goodyear and Quennerstedt 2020), and professional sports (MacPherson and Kerr 2020, 2021; McMahon, McGannon, and Palmer 2022; McMahon et al. 2023; Willson and Kerr 2022).

Research on body shaming among young people has shown to have damaging effects on self-esteem and emotional well-being (Cherian and Mukherjee 2022; Syeda et al. 2023). Social media in particular has been proved to facilitate body shaming in young people and to have negative effects on self-esteem (Annah and Heriteluna 2023). Body shaming has also been shown to be a modern form of cyber aggression among young people (Židová, Kurincová, and Turzák 2022), and to have an association with sexting behaviours through social physique anxiety and SNS addiction symptoms (Ruiz et al. 2021). Significantly, a study conducted with 919 high school students in Rome showed that one in four students reported experiences of weight-related body shaming by peers or family members (Cerolini et al. 2024).

Research within sports has aimed to explain *why* coaches consciously or unconsciously adopt body shaming practices. Findings show that coaches adopt these practices because they believe athletes need to be fat-free to succeed (Barker-Ruchti et al. 2017; McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008). The connection between a fat-free body and sporting success is, however, socially constructed. Significantly, such as in the case of swimming, the notion of 'slim to win' is deeply entrenched, which may lead coaches to adopt practices that are assumed to achieve this body ideal (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008). In this regard, the notions of performance enhancement and perfectionism apply not only to the mastery of specific sport skills but also to the attainment of an idealized body shape, body composition, and body weight (McMahon and Penney 2013). For instance, using a Foucauldian perspective, McMahon and Penney's (2013) research showed that fat, weight, and food numbers are a focus of surveillance and regulation by coaches and others and by swimmers themselves. McMahon, McGannon, and Palmer (2022) also explored the role of the athlete's entourage, showing that athletes were subjected to body shaming from members of their entourage when their bodies failed to meet sociocultural expectations. Willson and Kerr (2022) investigated the experiences of body shaming as a form of emotional abuse among

female National Team athletes in aesthetic sports, showing that athletes experienced negative verbal comments about their bodies, body monitoring, forced restrictions of food and water, public criticism of their bodies, and punishment when body-related standards were not met.

Previous studies have shown that female athletes who are immersed in sports with a focus on leanness are more likely to develop eating disorders (Papathomas and Lavallee 2010). Some research has demonstrated that male athletes are also shamed for their weight and bodies (Atkinson 2011; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2016). 'Big and strong to succeed' is another aspect of body shaming practices, but also here a fat-free body is normalized, especially in masculinity-connoted sports. Significantly, body-shamed male athletes were also found to suffer from eating disorders (Freedman, Hage, and Quatromoni 2021). For example, Atkinson (2011) investigated the influence of specific sport cultures on normalized disordered eating behaviours and body attitudes among male athletes. Body shaming has, therefore, been found to have serious short- and long-term consequences, including disordered eating and eating disorders (Flack 2021), body dissatisfaction (Neves et al. 2017), and the consumption of medication to lose weight (e.g. laxatives) (McMahon, Penney, and Dinan-Thompson 2012). Research has shown that coaches sometimes implicitly adopt body shaming in their coaching and in so doing, discourses of performance and (body) perfection have been found to seemingly pervade coaching pedagogies in different sporting contexts (McMahon and Dinan-Thompson 2008). Particularly important is when body shaming is explicitly, implicitly, or inadvertently used in coaching practices to achieve this 'perfection', as this can carry negative consequences for athletes' wellbeing. That is, body shaming can be used in obvious ways (i.e. explicitly), in a way that it is not directly expressed (i.e. implicitly) or without knowledge or intent (i.e. inadvertently). While more explicit body shaming has been lately researched in sport related literature, there is a need to further investigate the underlying body critical and body sensitive assumptions and omissions that have the potential to be shaming.

Methods

In this section, we describe the participants and context of this study and the methods used to generate data. We also provide information about the ethical considerations of the study, and we describe the analyses carried out with the data.

Participants and context

The study involved 12 coaches from nine different sports in Sweden who coached mainly adolescents under the age of 18. The sample size was purposely selected so that we could have participants representing coaching in individual and team winter and summer sports that are femininity-connoted (artistic swimming; gymnastics), masculinity-connoted (boxing; American football; ice hockey; shot put and discus), and more 'gender-neutral' (cross-country skiing; orienteering). Overall, the recruited male (9) and female (3) coaches had different levels of coaching experience, ranging from five to 35 years. All coached high-level athletes (who trained at least 15 h per week), and all coaches except for one were former elite athletes themselves. All but two coaches coached both male and female athletes. An ethics application was submitted to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Etikprövningsmyndigheten Dnr

2021-03550). Informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to data generation, and all names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data generation

This study used photo elicitation interviews including vignettes for data generation because such tools have been shown to generate rich, in-depth, and detailed insights into the complexities of bodies in physical activity contexts (see e.g. Azzarito 2010, Lambert 2020, Varea and Pang 2018). Coaches were presented with short scenarios about the topic under study. These vignettes were created by the authors of this paper and portrayed different scenarios related to weight gain, weight loss, performance, and body shape (Figure 1).

Additionally, photographs of a variety of bodies were sourced from different media and were used as a means of interview elicitation. Pictures were purposely chosen and agreed upon by all authors. They displayed different athletes' body shapes practicing different sports and included male and female athletes. Pictures of athletes of the sport the specific participants coached were shown, as well as pictures of athletes of 'opposite sports' than what they coached (e.g. photographs of rhythmic gymnasts to the boxing coaches and vice versa). However, most of the pictures were the same for all coaches. The coaches were invited to comment on the photographs and talk about issues related to health, (un)healthy bodies, fitness, fatness, and health and performance advice (Figure 2).

The interview questions focused on the perceptions of body size, possible advice given to athletes, weight, levels of fitness, and lifestyle. Examples of questions included: 'What do you think about this scenario?', 'How would you act in a scenario like this?', 'Can you identify yourself with this story?', 'Do you think she is a successful athlete?', 'Would you provide him with some advice?'. Vignettes were used at the beginning of the interview (prior to showing the coaches the pictures) to avoid them having an image already in their minds while talking

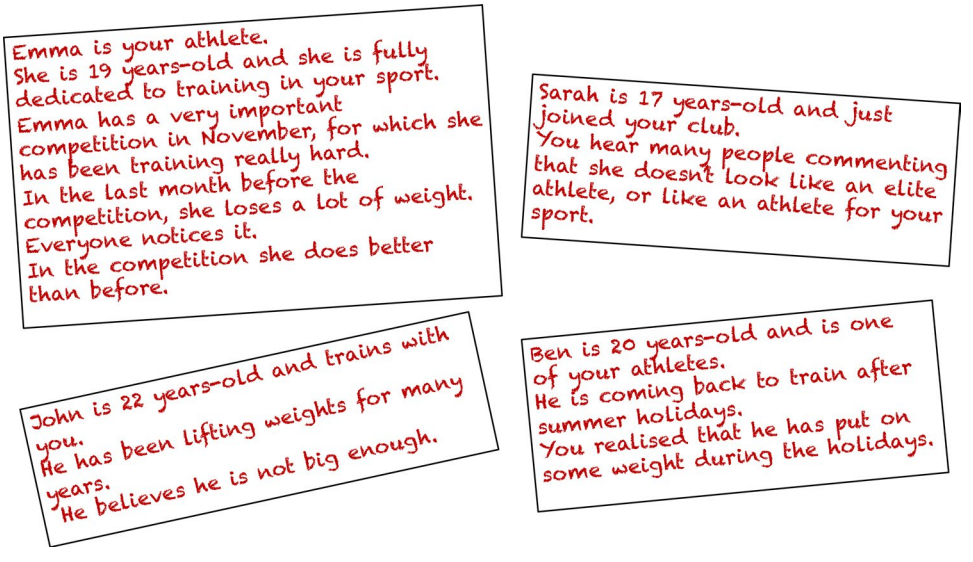

Figure 1. Examples of vignettes used for data generation.

Figure 2. Example of the pictures shown to participants.

about the vignette scenarios. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, transcribed verbatim, and the quotes used for this article were translated to English by Authors 2 and 4.

A pilot study was conducted prior to data generation. The participants of the pilot study were two colleagues (at the time of data collection), who had experience in coaching elite athletes, one in a team and the other in an individual sport. They both confirmed the relevance of the vignettes and pictures and stated that it was an easy starting point to comment on topics related to bodies and weight. However, they advised modifying the vignettes to take into account season, sex, and age so it would align better with coaches' different sporting contexts. Following this suggestion, we tailored the vignettes prior to each interview, but without changing the scenario frameworks.

Data analysis

Critical reflection, as described by Fook and Gardner (2007), provided a framework to deconstruct the data and explore the interviewed coaches' assumptions and taken-for-granted truths. Critical reflection is thus used as a foundation for approaching this research, and it involved a process of deconstructing and reconstructing assumptions related to body critical and body sensitive practices. The analysis of data entailed five steps.

First, all interview transcripts were read through by all researchers to familiarize themselves with the data and formulate analytical questions in relation to our aim. Second, we used the analytical question: what types of body criticality and body sensitivity can explicitly, implicitly, and inadvertently be identified in coaching practices in the different sports? That is, we looked for body critical and body sensitive practices used in obvious ways (i.e. explicitly), in a way that it is not directly expressed (i.e. implicitly) or without knowledge or intent (i.e. inadvertently). The analytical question was used independently by the researchers. In so doing, each researcher formulated initial themes representing various types of body critical and body sensitive practices that have the potential to be shaming. Third, potential

themes underwent thorough dialogue to agree on the themes that were 'in common'. Fourth, the nuances within each theme were unpacked in terms of body critical and body sensitive practices using further agreed upon analytical questions: (i) What is the logic within the theme? (ii) What are the assumptions around body weight within the theme? (iii) How do body criticality and body sensitivity function in coaching practice? All co-authors were, throughout the whole process, given the possibility to make judgements in relation to different points of view and positions in relation to research in the field. The four authors' diverse backgrounds and experiences (history, sociology, education) also acted as a quality check of the research. Fifth, after reaching collective agreement on the identified types of body critical and body sensitive practices that have the potential to be shaming, the themes were discussed again to deliberate the presentation of each theme and claims in terms of the logics and assumptions of body critical and body sensitive practices. The constructed themes are presented below and were classified into seven types of body critical and body sensitive practices that have the potential to be shaming.

Results

In the study, seven types of coaching practices that have the potential to be shaming were identified. These were: (1) unrecognition and avoidance; (2) 'good' body talk; (3) education of athletes; (4) the use of humour and irony; (5) the use of science and tests; (6) the making of weight gain a lack of motivation; and (7) Individualization. Under each of the categories presented below, the identified logics, assumptions, and functions of the body critical and body sensitive coaching practices that have the potential to be shaming are clarified.

Unrecognition and avoidance

Unrecognition and avoidance involve approaching body sensitive issues by denying their existence or avoiding the issue in the coaching practice. More specifically, two of the coaches argued that issues related to body shaming do not occur within their sports, or at least not in their club. The logic communicated was that coaching practices in Sweden do not include body shaming since the culture and history of coaching in Sweden are different to many other countries. For example, the artistic swimming coach affirmed, 'Abroad yes. I can say that with certainty. But we have a better body culture in Sweden'. The assumption here is that coaching practices in Sweden do not include body shaming since the culture and history, in a sense, are different than in many other countries.

Furthermore, topics related to body weight and shape were, according to a couple of the coaches, avoided and not talked about, as they were not considered necessary to address in coaching in their sport. The few times that the issue was explicitly addressed by the coaches was when the athletes themselves initiated a conversation. This logic implies that if the athletes do not discuss these topics with the coaches, it is because there is no need to do so. It also has the function that by not talking about these issues, they are non-existent.

Almost half of the coaches are hesitant to talk about bodies and weight because the issues are taboo. The cross-country skiing and orienteering coaches acknowledged this as follows:

> Why it is taboo …? Body shape is still very sensitive. I don't think there is enough support around athletes to take care of. It's a fear that we say things and that they, as a consequence, end up in these problems. That's what I think. (Cross-country skiing coach 1)

> But, not talking much about it while she, the other one in the national team, who I think … well, it fits because they talk about these things, keep track of your weight and stuff. So why shouldn't we bring up and talk about these things? (Orienteering coach 2)

Further, while the gymnastics coach says that she is quite explicit when talking to gymnasts who weigh too little, she would not act if it were the other way around, as she would be afraid of what it could initiate.

> Well, I wouldn't have acted just because we have a problem at the other end, and I know how triggering it can be and what consequences it can have, so I think I'd have let it be. (Gymnastics coach)

The above quotes illustrate that the coaches are aware of how sensitive body and weight can be and that they do not always feel well-equipped to deal with these issues. They try to be sensitive and do not want to risk causing harm by attempting to engage in conversations. Hence, the logic is that by starting conversations on body weight, coaches feared that they might trigger eating or exercise disorders among their athletes. In so doing, coaches were clearly aware of the potential risks that their comments entail and the damaging effects they might cause their athletes.

A strategy to avoid discussions or confrontations regarding body-sensitive topics, which half of the interviewed coaches suggested, is normalization and routinization of body-related practices, such as weighing athletes. Here, it is assumed that the repetition normalizes these practices, reducing potential damaging effects. There is, accordingly, a logic of denial of the existence of body shaming in this type of coaching practice. Further, body shaming is perceived as something that can be avoided by making it 'normal'.

The 'good' body talk

Another type of coaching practice that has the potential to be shaming refers to the idea of 'good bodies', i.e. what a reasonable and good body weight (and shape) would be in each sport. The logic here is that certain bodies enhance performance. The coaches' comments indicated that it is 'obvious' to them what such 'good bodies' are. Losing weight was considered a related, positive effect:

> If this person would come back and be in this environment and want to train … then you start with … Okay, what are your goals? I want to come back to top 10 in Sweden. Okay. What do you need to do then? It isn't enough with five practices a week, you need to do ten practices a week, and how should they look like? What should you train? Quite often, this person will lose weight just by the change of lifestyle … and then it'd be really strange if the person did not realize that weight is a factor. (Orienteering coach 1)

However, almost all of the coaches acknowledged that different body types can be 'good'. When asked to elaborate on the typical swimming body, the swimming coach said: 'But they [bodies] come in different forms and sizes. Long, short, a little wider, stocky, there are many shapes, so it's difficult to say what this one [a swimmer] looks like'. The presence of different body types was undeniable in the comments by the American football coaches, explaining that different bodies are necessary for the different player positions. Thus, body suitability influences coaches to constantly compare the ideal body profile to the different positions of American football in drills and tests.

The ice hockey coach further explained that in his sport, big and muscular bodies used to be idealized, but that this has diversified. However, this coach felt that it would be good if coaches talked about these issues more explicitly, as many players cannot become big and strong. This coach had heard from a friend who plays in the NHL that he is being asked to eat more and become bigger (Ice hockey coach). It is assumed that a big body is a good body in terms of ice hockey performance. Similarly, one of the American football coaches offered an example of referring to what a good body is: 'I have said to many of our players 'don't get too ripped. Don't mortify yourself. This is not bodybuilding or gymnastics. You should be able to move yourself, but you also have to be able to take a hit'" (American football coach 2). What is communicated here is that a good body is a body that is devoid of fat.

Within this type of practices, the logic is that since there are 'good bodies' for performance, there are also 'bad ones'. What constitutes a 'good' or 'decent' body was obvious to the coaches, which also entailed moral connotations of how such bodies look like. These practices function through normalizing bodies, portraying actions such as weight loss as something easy while weight gain as something problematic.

Education of athletes

The education of athletes on issues relating to body and weight is about addressing body and weight as a question about the lack of knowledge regarding nutrition and training among the athletes. The logic is that the reason why athletes do not eat or train in the right way, and therefore weigh too little or too much or do not perform as expected, is that they lack nutritional and training knowledge. Consequently, the coaching strategy entails the education of athletes and was expressed by all the coaches. This includes recommendations by the coaches regarding lifestyle and diet. For example, the ice hockey coach commented that if a player looked too thin or, which is more common, has gained weight during a summer break, he would introduce a dietary scheme to show them what they need to do food-wise to train and perform better (Ice hockey coach).

Furthermore, one of the cross-country skiing coaches highlighted how a particular incident encouraged them to educate the athletes about what to eat and not to eat:

> We have had occasions last year when moving from the tunnel [indoor snow facility] to outdoors, then some athletes bought a Snickers bar and it was like sugar sort of and something to drink. But then we took an hour going through the difference between a snack and a snack. We separated them regarding how it'd look like and what happens to the blood sugar and so on. So, we tried to educate them in doing the right thing instead of snapping them off about what not to eat. That's what we did. (Cross-country skiing coach 1)

The education of athletes also includes lectures on nutrition offered by clubs and given by external educators. One of the coaches, for example, stated that:

> We just try to communicate that energy is a precondition, 'you have to eat', and we really don't lay any value in what they eat, but it is… just in our case we have not had any problems with, well at the other end, so to speak, only that they eat too little. (Gymnastics coach)

This coach also recalled a lecture where the message was, 'well, you think you eat good? No. I can tell you that each and every one of you eat too little'. The lectures could also contain

what the gymnastics coach called, facts-based information on what protein, carbohydrates, and fat the body needs. This is also a strategy used by the artistic swimming coach:

> We always have lectures about diet where we bring in an expert because it doesn't have to be me as a coach. Instead, I think it's good to bring in others, so they hear that it isn't only me thinking certain things.

The logic of these preventative measures is that athletes should be better equipped to make informed decisions regarding their diet and training. Further, the use of external experts positions this knowledge as objective and valid. The expert role assumes that coaches are not qualified enough to educate athletes on certain sensitive topics. As a consequence, they do not carry the risk of 'getting it wrong' and trigger athletes to adopt harmful practices. Another assumption was based on a right or wrong way to educate athletes.

The use of humour and irony

One way to downplay or comment on sensitive issues or ideal bodies is through the use of humour or irony. More specifically, a couple of the coaches recounted communicating a particular way of how to look or be, or how to act or not act, by presenting it in an ironic way or as a joke. By doing this, the 'saltiness of a message' can be 'sweetened'. For example, one of the orienteering coaches recounted how he had been approached by his athletes, telling him about another coach who joked in front of his athletes, saying, 'rather light than full' (in Swedish: *hellre lätt än mätt*). What that coach can be seen to have communicated is that a light body is better for running than eating until you are full. Even if said as a joke, the athletes did not understand it in this way and told their orienteering coach because they understand what such comments can trigger in athletes (e.g. eating disorders).

The interviewed orienteering coach then started to reflect on his own coaching practices and realized that he may have made similar comments about bodies. He recounted that in the gym, while strength training, he had made comments such as 'beach 2021, here we come' (in Swedish: *mot beach* 2021). While meant as a funny comment about himself (i.e. trying to lose weight and build muscles to show off at the beach), the orienteering coach reasoned that his comment could idealise the lean and muscular body, which may make athletes who overhear this comment feel bad.

Another illustration of the use of humour and irony to communicate that a light body is the right body was provided by one of the cross-country skiing coaches. Reflecting on the past, the coach thought that maybe 10–15 years ago, when an athlete returned from a summer break and had gained weight, coaches may have said something like, 'too little training?' However, this coach has witnessed a shift lately towards greater awareness of what coaches can say and what they should avoid. Consequently, this coach is avoiding making jokes or ironic comments today (Cross-country skiing coach 2).

The use of science and tests

The practice of using science and tests refers to making issues of bodies and weight 'objective' by using medical or physiological science and measurements. More specifically, what the

majority of the coaches say they do is to tackle potentially sensitive situations by making body weight a question of quantified data, i.e. only science and tests can objectively judge whether something is right or wrong. This logic implies that if the numbers show desired values, then the athlete is fine. Producing such data also demonstrates that numbers are valid. The function is that it allows coaches to use the numbers to communicate an issue to athletes, such as weight gain, rather than formulating a reasonable argument.

The practice of using science and measurements to address issues regarding body and weight is evident in the coaches' statements. For example, the ice hockey coach expressed that in one of the training environments he is working in, the testing regimes and follow ups of individual players are extensive, including nutrition and monthly muscle mass and fat percentage measurements. These measurements are not taken by the coach, but the physiotherapist, which adds to the perception of body and weight being someone else's responsibility.

The use of science and tests was further illustrated by one of the American football coaches. His general approach is that a coach does not know anything about an athlete until they are tested. According to the coach, the common practice in American football is to use evidence-based physiological profiles of the different player positions. Taking age and sex into account, the profiling entails the comparison of the position's prescribed weight and performance with that of the players' body and weight (e.g. strength; speed; mobility). When asked to elaborate on how he would approach the fictive player Emmanuel from the vignette used in the interview, who quickly lost a lot of weight but still performed very well, the coach said:

> I'd be very concrete. We'd look at his numbers. I guess that's a part of it – what do the numbers say? It's both his status now and his journey to be able to identify cause and effect. What is it that has this effect? (American football coach 1)

This coach also recognised that 'soft values' are important. However, these aspects are, according to the coach, much more challenging to deal with:

> But we can approach this on several levels. Is this more psychological? How does Emmanuel feel mentally? In that case, it's much more about asking Emmanuel about how he feels and let him describe his own situation, in addition to what his numbers say. And that's of course much harder. (American football coach 1)

The quote illustrates that since 'soft values' are more challenging to manage, coaches may focus on 'scientific' data as they are assumed to provide information on body weight more precisely.

One of the orienteering coaches offered another illustration of tackling potentially sensitive situations and issues regarding bodies and eating. When facing the situation of premature performance peaking through intentionally losing weight, and to prevent this practice from spreading to junior athletes, he described how he frames his talks about nutrition and energy intake using a 'scientific' vocabulary:

> But it [that senior athletes intentionally lose weight to peak their performance] can be a bit problematic, for sure […] Then we, for example, can talk about the energy intake when training and competing. We can kind of highlight what we do and what we don't do. How it should look like. When we train at night it's very important to eat like this and when we are on training camps one eats a little bit more. (Orienteering coach 1).

A common practice to get 'the objective numbers' is to weigh the athletes. Several of the coaches said that they do this on a regular basis. Some of them are, however, aware that this can be a potentially sensitive situation and, therefore, try to frame the weighing as part of a more extensive routine.

> Coach: We weigh everyone in the lab. Well, *I* don't weigh them. […] I cast an eye on it and then they write themselves. […] I don't stand with a pointer and say 'now we will take your weight and I will take notes'. They also measure their height, and they should also fill in other things – so it becomes a natural part of that. […] If you'd weigh them regularly at the upper secondary school, it might have consequences, but to be in the lab, it's like going to the school nurse or to the doctor or something, and then it becomes natural. So, we have not got any complaints about that at all. (Cross-country skiing coach 2)

However, the weighing is not primarily about ensuring the athletes do not gain too much weight. In orienteering and cross-country skiing, for example, it is rather to control that they are not losing too much weight, as the coaches understand that this is a problem in their sports.

No matter what the intentions are and no matter how weighing is framed, the logic of weighing has the function of making weight crucial for optimal performance. Through bodily measurements, it is assumed that bodies can be quantified and judged according to sport-specific requirements. Numbers thus have the function to transmit messages in more straightforward ways than other means to communicate how performance can be enhanced. The logic of using measurements is that numerical data is generated to determine athletic performance. The prioritizing of numbers, however, carries the risk of overshadowing the well-being of the athlete. Hence, what is assumed is that if the numbers show that the athletes perform well, there is no problem.

The making of weight gain a lack of motivation

Making weight gain a lack of motivation entails describing weight gain as a problem. In contrast to losing weight, which most of the coaches considered a medical issue, gaining weight is constructed as a matter of having personal problems or lacking motivation to perform better. As an illustration, one of the cross-country skiing coaches explained that if an athlete gains weight, she would think that it had to do with lack of motivation that could come from illness or a problem in the family (Cross-country skiing coach 1). Similarly, although the coach felt that weight gain during holidays is normal, if the athletes are unable to lose that weight after being back in training, the weight gain is problematized as a motivational issue:

> So, I'd ask … now that you are back in school [a school for elite athletes], how is it with your motivation? What do you think about that? Now we need to come back to our routines, and so forth. So, then he [the athlete] should talk about his routines during the summer holiday. It might have been more sleep in the mornings … But what about other routines with breakfast, lunch, and dinner, maybe he can say something about that. It might have been negligence and I'd ask what he thinks about that (Cross-country skiing coach 1).

The boxing coach argued in the same way, indicating that losing or gaining weight is very much about how the athlete feels more generally. Thus, the logic is that athletes who cannot get rid of rapidly gained weight lack the motivation to be elite athletes. This practice

assumes that it is easy and unproblematic to lose weight. The function then becomes that elite athletes prioritize weight loss, otherwise their motivation is questioned.

Individualization

Individualization is about coaches suggesting a certain way of eating or training to get athletes back on track to perform better, avoiding telling them they weigh too much or too little. The logic is that being implicit and focusing on the solution or a specified goal is better than being explicit and focusing on the problem. To achieve this, several of the coaches individualize performance in the sport.

The ice hockey coach offered an example of individualization by recounting that when one of his players lost too much weight, he, out of concern, gave him a personalized training program and a dietary scheme. Such an approach would also be used if a player had gained too much weight, which, according to the coach's experience, is much more common. 'Then, we used to talk a little bit about a dietary plan, and I ask them: "But is it [a plan] something you would be interested in, to get you down to where we… [want]?"' (ice hockey coach). In addition, the coach argued that to be able to control what the players are eating, they are offering them lunch boxes. The main logic for doing this is that organized meals are convenient for the young players who arrive at training directly from school. This strategy also prevents the players from getting restaurant or fast-food. It is thus in relation to this general offer of food that players can be proposed a specific dietary plan. However, the ice hockey coach emphasized that neither lunch boxes nor taking on a dietary scheme are mandatory; it is up to the individual player to assume their responsibility.

One of the American football coaches offered similar examples as the ice hockey coach. He had experienced that players needed to become stronger and, therefore, needed to consume a special diet.

> One needs to help them with extra snacks and monitor their nutrition, but it was almost impossible to make them gain weight because of their bodies… the whole system has made it difficult, so we needed to get help from RF's [the Swedish sport confederation] nutritionists and specialists at Bosön to make it happen. That was messy. (American football coach 2)

Also, when a player has what the American football coach referred to as an unhealthy weight and needs to lose kilograms, the strategy is to individualize the issue.

> We can't make a 145 kilo-guy run 5 kilometres because his knees can't handle it. Instead, it's biking or swimming, but the discussion always starts from a sport performance perspective. 'I think you will be a better football player if we can do something about that [the unhealthy weight]'. (American football coach 2)

This coach also stated that it is better to talk about skills than a specific weight. The focus should be on how to be stronger and faster so the player can enhance performance.

The gymnastics coach provided an example of being more explicit and not allowing room for alternatives. She stated that at the moment, one of her gymnasts is too thin, so the coaching team has given her an ultimatum: if she wants to train, she has to eat properly. The coach has also recommended that athletes contact eating disorder specialists or the nurse at the athletes' schools. When it is not acute, she said she can be a little bit more subtle and say something like: 'During this period, we will have a little bit more strength training, so try to get some more proteins in you' (Gymnastics coach).

Discussion

Results from this study show that coaches use unintentional and inadvertent practices in their coaching that have the potential to be shaming. In contrast to the findings from Willson and Kerr (2022), the coaches in our study did not in any way intend to shame the athletes, on the contrary, they aimed to give well-intended advice or use ways to objectify or not recognize the issue. The coaches in our study were well-aware of the potentially damaging influence that they can have on athletes, and therefore, they preferred not to intervene in possible sensitive topics.

In general, the coaches demonstrated that they care about the athletes, similar to the coaches in Gano-Overway (2023) study, where coaches tried to understand the athletes holistically. However, by not intervening or ignoring pertinent issues relating to body and weight, the coaches do not necessarily care for athletes as they assume that everything is fine. In so doing, the coaches were simultaneously saying that they cared for athletes, but at the same time, their fears overrode and showed 'inaction'.

By making everything related to performance and numbers as 'normal' and not sensitive could be problematic. Aligning with McMahon and Penney's (2013) research we would argue that if coaches do not initiate these sensitive conversations, it can be more harmful to athletes than risking possible triggers. Coaches are just too concerned regarding what the most appropriate way to do something is. In contrast, Becker's (2009) study showed how athletes described their best coaches as those who were not afraid to make mistakes. The fears of this study's coaches about doing something wrong prevail, and therefore, they prefer not to do anything if there is nothing too visible that needs to be done. In so doing, it could be too late, and the coaches are operating only in a preventive way, and importantly, they are not aware of this.

Coaches also showed uncritical statements about education and the use of science in their coaching practices. They did not question or challenge the veracity or the dominant discourses related to performance and health when it comes to the education of athletes and scientific tests. Furthermore, by normalizing and routinizing certain body sensitive practices, the assumption was that athletes would not feel uncomfortable.

Of course, we can ask ourselves what coaches should do then, as they seem to be in a no-win situation. In alignment with McMahon et al. (2023) study, we believe that coaches should adopt a critically reflective stance in relation to analyzing body sensitive practices and that there is a need to develop more critical education programs that teach about body shaming in sport. In doing so, coaches will be better prepared to challenge dominant discourses about performance, and they will be able to educate their athletes in critical ways to include more than just one approach to coaching for high performance. Coaches need to work on creating awareness together with the athletes and being pro-active rather than re-active or avoidant. Coaches are just as responsible for what they teach as for what they do not teach making well-informed judgements about their coaching. Coach educators should also promote reflexivity and criticality in their programs.

Further research is also needed to investigate the possible gendered nature of body shaming, as coaches from this study described how, in some cases, they would act differently if they were dealing with a male or a female athlete. They were also aware of how female athletes were more sensitive to certain topics. While the focus of this paper was not on gender, we cannot ignore the gendered nature of the body since fitness, according to

Brabazon (2006), can be understood as a feminist issue (Brabazon 2006), and women continuously have been shamed in sport (Liston 2021). Gender is closely related to the body in general and body shaming in particular including body sensitive practices such as weighing athletes and measuring body fat. Hence, more research focusing on gender is needed to explore how athletes experience the most subtle and invisible ways of body critical and body sensitive practices and how they internalize this well-intended but still potentially shaming advice from the coaches.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore body critical and body sensitive sport coaching practices that have the potential to be shaming, or as we call it in the title of the paper, the anatomy of body shaming. The results demonstrate that body critical and body sensitive practices function in different subtle ways in coaching practice. For example, it functions through avoidance and denial, through talking about 'good' bodies, through the education of athletes, through the use of irony and humour, through making weight gain a lack of motivation, and through individualization. Of course, at the centre of these concerns is athletes' health and well-being, which inspired the idea for this paper.

Our study also shows possible implications for coach education and practice. Coach education programs should ensure that coaches are well-prepared to address sensitive issues in coaching practices and that they are capable of initiating these kinds of conversations with athletes. While there have been some attempts to educate both coaches and athletes on different kinds of abuse (see e.g. McMahon et al. 2023), coaches are still showing fears, indecision and re-active practices in relation to these issues. We hope that by conducting more research in this area, coaches become more pro-active in critically reflecting on their practices relating to bodies and weight in order to prevent body shaming in their practices.

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