

Microaggressions and Female Athletes

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Abstract Using a combination of scholarly literature and media reports, this paper classifies instances of subtle bias, or microaggressions, toward female athletes in the United States. We identify three common microaggression themes against these athletes based on Sue's (2010) taxonomy: assumption of inferiority, objectification, and restrictive gender roles. We apply each of these themes to explore the ways in which female athletes in the U.S. experience pervasive and subtle gender-based biases. Women are assumed to be inferior athletes and therefore receive media coverage that is dismissive of their abilities, if they receive coverage at all. The media also focus primarily on the appearance of female athletes regardless of their athletic successes, and are quick to recoil at women who do not fit into the traditional feminine mold. We examine how these microaggressions are associated with deleterious biological, cognitive, and behavioral consequences among athletes. We also explore the effect of these microaggressions on the self-image and physical fitness of female non-athletes. Finally, potential avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords Microaggression · Gender · Athletes · Women

Introduction

“You throw like a girl!”

This insult is casually tossed around in schoolyards and baseball diamonds across the United States (Sheridan-

Rabideau 2009), implying that sports are the domain of boys alone, and girls do not possess the physical prowess necessary to be a true athlete. It is an example of comments and actions that are dismissive of women's physical abilities, potentially disparaging women who choose to pursue sports. These microaggressions frequently remain invisible, however, as they are subtle by nature (Sue 2010) and may not be regarded as insults in a society that accepts sports as a male domain.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the types of subtle gender-based biases experienced by female athletes in the United States. In many ways, these biases mirror the evolving nuance of U. S. sexism, which has become increasingly ambiguous (Sue 2010). Subtle gender-based biases include praising a woman as a good driver, a compliment based on the assumption that women generally less skilled behind the wheel or displaying sexualized images of women in the workplace (Sue 2010).

Gender-based biases continue to occur despite overt changes in gender roles. This duality is evident in multiple facets of U. S. life: While it is commonplace for women to work outside of the home and contribute significantly to household income, women who work outside the home still shoulder most of household responsibilities compared to their male partners (Bianchi et al. 2000; Tichenor 2005). As another example, prevalence of the notion that girls can't do math/science has attenuated; yet, women are still grossly underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields (National Science Foundation 2013). Within the sports arena, the focus of the present paper, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 stipulated that girls and women be granted equal treatment in school and college athletics (U. S. Department of Education 2005), thus addressing systemic bias against girls and women in sports. Indeed, there have been an increasing number of women's events in traditionally men-only sports, both domestically and internationally. For example, in the recent 2014 Winter Olympic

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Games, half-pipe snowboarding, previously dominated by U. S. men, was open to women for the first time and won by an U. S. female snowboarder. Yet, despite continuing to prove their athletic prowess, female athletes are expected to remain conventionally feminine and attractive, as we will argue in this paper. These examples illustrate the cultural context of sexism in the United States, in which women are conferred increased freedom and power, while being tethered to age-old notions of femininity.

In this paper, we apply Sue's (2010) framework of microaggressions to examine women's experiences in regards to sports, and explore the potential impact of these microaggressions on female athletes and women overall. There is broad empirical evidence for Sue framework (e.g., Kimber and Delgado-Romero 2011; Sue et al. 2007a). We selected this framework because the microaggression literature addresses the ubiquity and ambiguity of subtle biases (as will be discussed later), such as those experienced by female athletes. Furthermore, Sue's work deals not only with gender-based microaggressions, but also microaggressions associated with other identities such as race and sexual orientation. Therefore, by applying Sue's framework, the present paper can serve as an example for future analyses of subtle biases experienced by athletes who occupy multiple intersecting identities.

Between spring and summer 2013, we collected the sources for this paper in two ways: 1) via Internet searches on google.com, using keywords (combinations of terms such as *sexism*; *sports media*; *Serena Williams*) that would yield hits related to sexist coverage of women's athletics in the media, and 2) with Psychinfo searches for studies done in the U.S., using the keywords *sexism*, *women's sports*, *female athletes*, *Olympic coverage*, and *media coverage*. All studies included in this review were based in the U.S. We then categorized the results of these searches within Sue's taxonomy and analyzed for their potential consequences. To start, we will briefly discuss the phenomenon of microaggressions in terms of Sue's (2010) taxonomy. In this broad overview of Sue's work, we will present the three major categories of microaggressions, applicable to multiple types of subtle biases, including those that are based on gender, race, and sexual orientation. Next, we will examine the manifestations of microaggressions that are specifically gender-based and directed toward female athletes. In this section, we will apply Sue's work to organize and conceptualize the various forms of gender-based subtle biases experienced by female US athletes that are evident in scientific literature and in the news media. Finally we will discuss broader implications of these biases as well as potential avenues for further research.

Microaggression and Sue's (2010) Taxonomy

The term *microaggression* was first coined by Pierce (1970) to describe subtle forms of racism, and has since been expanded

to include gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalized groups (Sue 2010). Sue and his colleagues (Sue et al. 2007a, 2007b, 2008) proposed that microaggressions may be understood in terms of *microassaults*, which are fairly easy to detect, and two less explicit forms: *microinsults* and *microinvalidations*. Microassaults are the most blatant form of microaggression and fit into what is primarily conceived of as sexism, racism or homophobia. They are often conscious attempts to demean or insult, and include things such as racial epithets, cross burning or sexual harassment (Sue 2010). Because these assaults are less tolerated by mainstream society, they are mostly expressed when an individual loses control, is among like-minded people, or has a degree of anonymity (Sue et al. 2008).

Perpetrators of microinsults, on the other hand, are often not consciously aware that they have said or done something that could be interpreted negatively, and in some instances are even attempting to pay a compliment (Sue 2010). For example, an individual who claims that an African American man is well-spoken or articulate may believe he or she has made a positive statement, but has actually suggested that African Americans are not customarily well-spoken, and that the individual in question is an anomaly. Similarly, when popular media use the word *exotic* to describe Michelle Kwan's appearance and routines, it may ostensibly be a compliment of the athlete's appeal, but it in fact places importance on her ethnicity over her athlete abilities. Microinsults are less obvious than microassaults, but can actually be more stressful because the target of such an insult has to spend more energy determining if a slight actually took place (Sue 2010).

Microinvalidation, the last form of microaggression, denies the experiences and feelings of the target groups. These invalidations can also be well intentioned, but nevertheless imply that any frustrations someone may feel dealing with racism, sexism or heterosexism, are overreactions (Sue 2010). The statement, "There is only one race, the human race," when made to a member of a racial minority, suggests that their experiential reality is no different than someone from the majority race (Sue 2010). Likewise, the sentiment that Title IX has been or will be solely sufficient to address gender inequality in college sports may have a marginalizing effect on female athletes in universities, as racial and gender bias cannot be addressed by legislation alone. For instance, despite Title IX women still receive fewer athletic opportunities at NCAA schools and receive less money in athletic scholarships (Women's Sports Foundation 2013).

In sum, microaggressions consist of subtle verbal, nonverbal, and environmental signals that relay alienating or demeaning messages, commonly on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation, but which are frequently not intended to cause distress or offense (Sue et al. 2007a, b). To outside observers, these comments or actions may say very little; however, they speak volumes to those who experience

consistent microaggressions throughout their lives (Sue 2010). Not only are microaggressions stressful due to their insulting underlying content, they are often so ambiguous that the targets may question their own perceptions of what actually took place (Sue 2010). If they do not confront the microaggressor, the event remains invisible; yet if they do choose to confront the microaggressor, they are often perceived as irrational, angry, or hysterical (Sue 2010) resulting in a double bind that is indicative of oppression and exists in many areas of women's lives (Frye 1983). In their interviews with 11 female rugby players, Fallon and Jome (2007) found that this double bind includes being seen as too masculine and therefore unattractive. On the other hand, Gurung and Chrouser (2007) study of undergraduate students who were shown provocative pictures of female Olympic athletes found that these athletes were deemed too feminine and therefore subpar athletic competitors. There may also be an intensified pressure not to react to or confront microaggressors due to the stereotype that women are too emotional to be effective athletes. However, remaining silent has psychological costs (Sue 2010).

While individuals can be targets of microaggressive behaviors due to any combination of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identities, this paper focuses specifically on gender-based microaggressions. Sue et al. (2008) identified nine different underlying themes that are commonly expressed towards women: sexual objectification, second-class citizenship, use of sexist language, assumption of inferiority, restrictive gender roles, denial of the reality of sexism, denial of individual sexism, invisibility, and sexist humor/jokes. These themes generally imply that women exist solely for men's pleasure and fantasy (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), is undeserving or incapable in some way, or should not deviate from a traditional feminine appearance, demeanor or career (Sue 2010). In this paper, we argue that microaggressions towards women are both rampant and public in the sports arena. Attention is inevitably paid to women's bodies during the pursuit of physical activities, including sports or physical fitness; this can elicit microaggressions not only of sexual objectification, but also of restrictive gender roles due to the perceived masculine nature of their activities or a dismissal of women's abilities to perform.

Microaggressions Against Female Athletes

To better classify and explain microaggressions against female athletes, in this paper, we simplify Sue's taxonomy into three thematic categories: an assumption of inferiority, sexual objectification, and restrictive gender roles. We argue that sexist humor and language, which Sue also includes in his thematic categories, should not be considered separately as they are both manifestations of microaggressions and not thematically significant on their own. In addition, second-class citizenship and

invisibility are both likely to occur, at least in regard to physical ability, because women are assumed to be inferior to men.

Assumption of Inferiority

Assumption of inferiority refers to the notion that women are less physically and/or mentally able than men (Sue 2010). Sue's characterization of assumption of inferiority is a relatively straightforward one, as it merely illustrates preconceived notions that someone is inherently inferior based on their membership in a particular, usually marginalized group. This attitude allows for the rote dismissal of individuals within these groups, and often involves assumptions surrounding intelligence, emotional sensitivity, or even physical ability. With regard to female athletes and women's sports specifically, Keyes (as cited in Hall 2007) noted that the victories of female athletes are often attributed to her opponent's weaknesses, rather than to her abilities, thereby invalidating her skills as an athlete. Assumption of inferiority is also often evidenced by a pervasive lack of media coverage. An analysis of televised sports coverage indicated that although there had been a decline in overtly sexist comments, the total percentage of time devoted to women's sports decreased from 1999 through 2009 (Messner and Cooky 2010), despite an increase in women's participation in sports. It is possible, as some who create sports media content have suggested, that this is largely due to budget constraints and the economic reality of showing viewers what they want to see (Messner and Cooky 2010); sports networks channel their budgetary resources towards men's sporting events, which are more popular among their viewers. However, it seems unlikely that this is the only reason women's sports remain largely invisible on mainstream television (Messner and Cooky 2010). Finally, although sexist remarks of a more blatant nature from sports commentators are less tolerated today and occur less frequently (Messner and Cooky 2010), it is difficult to assess the extent to which attitudes have truly changed. The decline of women's sports coverage, regardless of its cause, conveys the message that female athletes are uninteresting and unworthy of attention, and sends a strong message to women and particularly to female athletes: in the realm of sports, they are less valued than men.

Assumption of inferiority is also seen in the way language is used to describe female athletes. Duncan et al. (1990) noted that when female athletes are referenced in televised sports they are often referred to as *girls* whereas men are rarely described as *boys*. In other words, whereas male athletes are conferred their proper adult status by the media, female athletes are denied their adulthood—by referring to grown women as *girls*, the media imply that these adults are immature and childlike. Furthermore femininity in language is often synonymous with weakness in men's sports as well, as men who do not live up to physical expectations are referred to as *sissies* or

other derogatory terms that suggest they have female attributes (Richardson 1993). A recent example of sexist language in women's sports coverage occurred when two US women won medals in the 2012 Olympic long jump event and a commentator asked when interviewing them "Okay, ladies, where's that Olympic smile?" (Taylor 2012, para. 2). By addressing the athletes as *ladies*, the commentator reminded the athletes that they are women first, and were expected to be feminine ones (i.e., lady-like) at that (Feder-Kane 2000). Furthermore, telling a female Olympic champion to smile implies that she is expected to maintain a pleasing appearance and to demonstrate stereotypical female traits of niceness and friendliness – regardless of her physical accomplishments. Since this de-emphasizes the physical talents of these women, it also illustrates a lack of respect for them as athletes, introducing an assumption that they are less capable. It also underscores the discrepancy between female athletes' non-stereotypic behavior (demonstrating physical strength) and more stereotypically-expected behavior (smiling and being *nice*) and highlights the fact that women who do not smile are commonly judged more harshly than men and are seen as cold or unattractive (Lips 1999).

Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification has been defined as "the act of reducing a woman to her body or body parts with the misperception that her body or body parts are capable of representing the woman as a whole" (Kozee et al. 2007; p. 176). The objectification of women in general implies that their sole purpose relates to the sexual desires of men (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Although objectification has its own body of literature, Sue (2010) argues as we do here that it is also a gender-based microaggression. Acts of sexual objectification can be ambiguous because they may be seen as an appropriate manifestation of a woman's true role. Therefore, if a woman confronts such actions she is often regarded as being overly sensitive. As this objectification occurs frequently over the course of woman's lifetime, it perfectly fits into the conceptual framework of microaggressions.

The objectification of female athletes in the media is a barrier in the struggle to earn more respect for women's sports. The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2010) reported that the sexualization of female athletes was on the rise and that such objectification was present both in sports commentary and sports images, noting that one 2004 issue of *Playboy* featured eight different female Olympians. This is further indication that a woman's worth is often measured by her sexual desirability, even when she is an elite athlete. We do not argue that any focus on women's appearance is objectification, given that women, just like men, often desire to be respected and admired for their physical attributes in relation to the sports that they play

(Feder-Kane, 2000). Although these attributes may be considered attractive, they should be emphasized in a way that relates to their athletic function and not simply their visual appearance in order to avoid sexual objectification.

Media sources are not alone in sexualizing or objectifying female athletes; even the professional organizations to which these women belong attempt to highlight their sexuality instead of their athleticism. Prior to the 2012 Olympics, women beach volleyball players were required to wear bikinis when they competed (2012 Olympics Volleyball 2012). No equivalent stipulation for male players existed, suggesting that there was no performance-based reason for that rule. Olympic beach volleyball players, however, have been quoted as saying that they enjoy playing in their bikinis because it brings more attention to the game, and that people end up becoming fans once they see the level of athleticism involved (Shirbon 2012).

But research has indicated that women are taken less seriously as athletes when they are portrayed in overtly sexual ways (Daniels 2012; Daniels and Wartena 2011). For instance, after being shown images of both sexualized athletes and athletes who were depicted performing in their sport, both adolescent boys and girls in several studies focused on the physical attractiveness of the former and the skill of the latter when describing the athletes they had seen (Daniels 2009; Daniels and Wartena 2011). The boys also made more negative comments about the physical skill of the sexualized athletes (Daniels and Wartena 2011). Other research has shown that when the physical attractiveness of athletes is emphasized, for both male and female athletes, they are viewed as less capable and less aggressive (Knight and Giuliano 2001). Therefore, women in bikinis may bring more media coverage and attention, but it may be coverage that highlights players' physical attributes in terms of sexuality rather than athleticism, and could therefore undermine the goal of drumming up true respect for the sport. Underlying this coverage is a message suggesting that women must not only emphasize the attractiveness they already have—as opposed to their skills and abilities – but must also be attractive enough to garner significant interest for their sport. Inevitably, this has implications for how women obtain sport sponsorships and may mean that attractive athletes are more represented in product commercials or other endorsements and thus more prominent in the media (King 2013). Notably, there are examples of elite female athletes who defied the pressure to wear objectifying sporting attire – gymnast Mary Lou Retton, who declined to wear a French cut leotard at the 1984 Olympics, and marathon runner Joan Binoit, who chose not to wear a French cut running shorts during her gold medal winning Olympics race that same year.

Although the International Olympic Committee has since altered its rules in favor of more wardrobe flexibility in women's volleyball, the Amateur International Boxing

Association and the Badminton World Federation attempted, unsuccessfully, to force their female players to wear skirts in the 2012 Olympics (Gilmour 2012). When asked about the potential rule change, the Badminton World Federation deputy president said it was designed to “attract a wider target group” and emphasized the importance of “an aesthetic and stylish presentation” (Pearce 2011, para. 6). Additionally the Amateur International Boxing Association attempted to justify the skirts rule for their female boxers by stating that it would help to distinguish between male and female competitors (“Olympic boxing body,” 2011), implying that it is more salient for viewers to know that the boxers are women than to know that they are simply boxers. Both this statement and the mandatory skirts rule are examples of microaggressions in which the underlying message dismisses the women’s athleticism in favor of their sexuality, highlighting the pressure for these women to remain feminine. In this way, these particular microaggressions can be seen as both sexual objectification and a restriction of gender roles, the category we discuss next.

Restrictive Gender Roles

Restrictive gender roles refer to narrowly and strictly defined boundaries of acceptable behaviors based on one’s gender (Sue 2010). These boundaries are dictated by stereotypical characteristics each gender is supposed to possess. Women, for example, ought to behave in ways that are consistent with being delicate, nurturing, and soft. Sports organizations have attempted to curb so-called *masculine behavior* among their players, and the Women’s Tennis Association is currently attempting to reduce how loudly tennis players grunt during a match (Waldman 2012). Manfred (2012; para. 9) insisted that when women grunt in tennis they are engaging in unnecessary “ritualized yelling” which he described as merely a tactical decision to “focus, control breathing, and disguise the sound of the ball.” However, as one commentator pointed out, professional men’s sports are full of tactics that may intentionally or unintentionally distract opponents and grunting exists in men’s tennis as well (Ryan 2011). If the Women’s Tennis Association succeeds in having referees measure and regulate the grunts of female tennis players on the court, we believe it would send a message to the younger generation of female players to be more subdued in their games and hold back, especially since there has been no equivalent move to rein in grunting in men’s tennis. This implies that women, even when engaging in intense physical activity, must still be concerned with maintaining acceptable ladylike behavior.

Overemphasis on femininity is common in portrayals of female athletes (Knight and Giuliano 2001) and frequently the women’s sports considered to be the most feminine, such as figure skating or gymnastics, are covered more heavily in the media than sports that are perceived as masculine (Hardin and Greer 2009). This reflects an endorsement of women’s participation in sports only if they continue to be feminine (Birrell

1983). In addition, individual sports are considered more feminine than are team sports (Boutilier and SanGiovanni, 1983, as cited in Hall 2007). Commentators often focus on players’ femininity and heterosexuality, and downplay any traits that are considered to be more masculine (Carty 2005; Knight and Giuliano 2001). This reinforces traditional gender roles and alienates women who may exhibit more masculine characteristics or play in more aggressive sports. Overemphasis on femininity is also perpetuated systemically when the official name of several Olympics women’s sports blatantly refer to athletes as ladies (Feder-Kane 2000), such as *Ladies’ Figure Skating*, *Ladies’ Professional Golf Association*, and *Ladies’ Ski Jumping*, to name a few.

Female athletes may internalize these stereotypes and engage in apologetic behavior such as emphasizing their heterosexuality or ensuring they maintain a feminine appearance (Davis-Delano et al. 2009). Evidence suggests that not only do female athletes feel pressured by their peers, coaches and significant others to engage in such behaviors, but that they become more accepted as athletes once they do so. Davis-Delano et al. (2009) developed a questionnaire to assess female athletes’ attitudes regarding stereotypes of female athletes and how they might alter their appearance, aggression, and heterosexuality as a result of such stereotypes. Over 70 % of respondents, all of whom were college athletes from Division I and II teams, indicated that they engaged in some sort of apologetic behavior as a reaction to stereotypes. The most common self-reported behaviors were attempting to be seen with men in public settings and an overemphasis on appearing feminine. Davis-Delano et al. (2009) also found that the type of sport may matter with regard to which athletes choose to highlight their femininity or sexuality, as softball players in their study were more likely than basketball or soccer players to exhibit apologetic attitudes. They theorized that there may be many reasons softball players would be more likely to exhibit such behavior, including perceptions that softball is a more masculine sport, the presence of more stereotypes surrounding lesbianism and softball, and that it is a less aerobic sport than basketball or soccer resulting in less adherence to a thin feminine beauty standard. As Feder-Kane (2000) noted, “...in order to avoid being coded as overly masculine or a lesbian, the athlete will participate in her own construction as a hyperfeminine creature” (p. 210). Strict adherence to gender roles and heteronormative conventions may act as microaggressions in their own right, and perpetuate sexist attitudes surrounding women’s roles in sport (Davis-Delano et al. 2009).

Effects of Microaggressions Against Female Athletes

There has been some backlash regarding the study of microaggressions by those who feel that the impact of these

subtle indignities has been blown out of proportion (Schacht 2008; Thomas 2008). Thomas (2008), for example, stated, “it seems ridiculous, if not a bit pathological, to experience emotional distress because someone has called you ‘articulate’” (p. 274). Is it really pathological to be distressed when someone implies your race, gender, or sexual orientation is inferior, even if that person intends to compliment you as an individual? Perhaps not when such insults are a common, often times daily, narrative. Those who are not marginalized cannot identify with the lived reality of individuals who are constantly reminded that they are *other* or *less-than*, and therefore often have little patience for reactions to what are perceived as either non-existent or minute slights (Sue 2010). For example, when someone expresses the sentiment that women are now legally equal to men and therefore should cease complaining about perceived inequities, they illustrate the vast divide that exists between the perceptions of those who live with pervasive microaggressions and the perceptions of those who perpetuate them.

Although microaggressions would not by themselves be considered traumatic events, Sue (2010) theorized that their cumulative effects could be powerful, due in large part to the mental and physical consequences of many small stressors that marginalized groups experience, often throughout their lives. Although everyone, regardless of whether they are a member of an oppressed group, experiences significant stress throughout their lives from a variety of sources, such as a demanding job or a difficult relationship, there is, however, evidence that stress brought on by incidents of bias that target membership in marginalized groups (i.e., sexism, racism, or homophobia) are more harmful to mental health than are everyday troubles (Utsey et al. 2008). For example, one study found that instances of perceived racism more strongly predicted psychological distress than other stressful events that participants experienced in their daily lives (Utsey et al. 2008). If the same holds true for gender, women who are microaggressed because they have entered the masculine realm of sports, may experience far more stress than their male counterparts who mostly contend with the pressures of the sport itself. The accumulation of these small but potent occurrences can have biological, cognitive, emotional consequences, and can alter a person’s behavior.

Biological Consequences

Although research on the direct biological consequences of microaggressions is scarce, the stress and health literature suggests that stress from experiencing microaggressions may result in endocrinological, immunological, and cardiovascular changes (Sapolsky 2004). Both acute and chronic stress may trigger reactions in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, which can have deleterious effects on immune system and cardiovascular system functioning. In the short run, during an acute encounter with a microaggression, the target

experiences an increase in the stress hormones glucocorticoids, as well as elevated heart rate and blood pressure (Sapolsky 2004). However, as argued in this paper, microaggressions are experienced regularly and frequently. Moreover, the target may remain preoccupied with a recent experience with microaggression, wondering if one was overreacting, deciding whether to confront the perpetrator, and so on. This combined prolonged stress may result in glucocorticoid-induced susceptibility to infection, and vulnerability to heart disease and hypertension. Indeed, evidence for the health consequences of race-based subtle biases among people of color has been documented in research literature (Harrell et al. 2003; Gee et al. 2009), and indicates that oppression is associated with cardiovascular disease and premature death. Female athletes who experience recurrent subtle slights and insults may demonstrate similar physiological reactions.

Although athletes may be less susceptible to these biological consequences as they are often in good physical shape, if such symptoms do manifest themselves they could be even more detrimental to athletes whose performance is dependent on remaining healthy. Professional athletes could risk a loss of income or employment if their stress levels become unmanageable, their physical health declines, and they become unable to play successfully.

Cognitive Consequences

On the cognitive level, the targets of microaggressions must expend large amounts of cognitive resources trying to determine whether or not they have been discriminated against (Sue 2010). There is evidence that experiences of subtle racism can actually cause more short-term cognitive impairment than more overt racism (Salvatore and Shelton 2007), suggesting that the mental processes used to evaluate these incidents can be disruptive. This interruption may be crucial to the success of athletic performance given the complicated nature of sport activities. Batters in baseball or softball for instance must at once consider their physical form in swinging the bat, the likelihood of connecting with a particular pitch, the correct time to swing, the number of runners already on base, and the signals of their coaches on the sidelines. If a distraction keeps a player from assessing one or two of these things correctly, it could mean the difference between striking out and hitting a homerun.

Stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995) is another potential mechanism through which microaggressions drain cognitive resources needed for optimal performance (Beilock et al. 2007). Stereotype threat occurs when one is “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele and Aronson 1995; p. 797). This phenomenon has been associated with decreased working memory capacity, which in turn led to sub-par performance

in a cognitive task (Beilock et al. 2007). We extrapolate from the stereotype threat literature that microaggressions against female athletes may make salient negative stereotypes about their physical ability (via assumption of inferiority) and negatively affect athletic performance.

Objectification theory suggests that women who are objectified may struggle to maintain peak motivational states and have difficulty concentrating (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Indeed, research indicates that women who were given a leering look before a math test, for example, end up performing worse than those who were not (Gervais et al. 2011). The attention or scrutiny perceived by women causes them to view their bodies from an observer's perspective, and thus detracts from their ability to concentrate potentially on both mental and physical pursuits (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). From this, one can infer that objectification can influence how well women perform in their given sport. In a study on adolescent female volleyball players and their self-concept, one participant lamented that "every time you walk into the game, you will get at least five comments from the boys about your spandex. And they're not all good. And that brings your game down" (Thomsen et al. 2004; p. 278).

Emotional Consequences

Some possible emotional correlates of microaggressions for female athletes relate to eating disorders, body image concerns, and struggles over gender role conflicts. Eating disorders are rampant in sports where thinness or aesthetic form is valued over other characteristics—such as gymnastics and ice-skating (Robinson and Ferraro 2004). In rugby and other sports commonly perceived to be more masculine in nature, women may view their bodies positively in the context of their sport, but struggle with body image when outside that context due to fears of being unfeminine (Russell 2004). Sage and Loudermilk (1979) found that women who participated in masculine sports reported experiencing these gender role conflicts at higher levels than did women who participated in traditionally feminine sports. It should be noted, however, that Sage and Loudermilk (1979) differentiated between perceptions and experiences of gender role conflicts, and that women in both traditionally feminine and masculine sports *perceived* similarly high levels of gender role conflicts.

Studies have shown that female athletes often have difficulty balancing their desires for physical attractiveness and femininity with the rigorous demands of their sport (Russell 2004; Thomsen et al. 2004); more troubling still is that this dissonance is heightened when women view images of female athletes that highlight their sexuality rather than their athleticism (Thomsen et al. 2004). Sexualizing images are all too common and the feelings they inspire may cause women to limit themselves in terms of how athletic they wish to become (Roth and Basow 2004). This in turn undermines their

performance and can also distort women's self-concept and thus their self-esteem (Thomsen et al. 2004). Additionally, women may feel shame or anxiety about their appearance as they internalize objectifying images in the media or if they commonly experience the male gaze in daily life (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Since some athletes regularly perform in front of groups of people, it would seem more likely that many would feel the consequences of an objectifying gaze.

Behavioral Consequences

Existing under a constant threat of microaggressions can also cause people to alter their behavior. In some cases this means that women become hyper-vigilant in policing what they perceive as microaggressions, or skeptical in their relationships with others (Sue 2010). This is relevant to female athletes specifically because reactions to these perceived slights might affirm stereotypes about the emotional nature of women, causing them to be taken less seriously in their sport. We argue that if a female athlete confronts someone whom she feels has made a derogatory or disrespectful comment, she may be perceived as weak and therefore unable to withstand the rigors of being an athlete. The pressures of sport can be intense and some may assume that if a woman cannot take a mere comment in stride she will therefore be an ineffective player.

Sue (2010) described another behavioral reaction to microaggression referred to as *forced compliance* where individuals eventually succumb and adopt behavior that is consistent with cultural norms. These cultural norms suggest that sport is typically masculine in nature and that women should remain feminine. This results in women essentially apologizing for their masculine behavior on the field by overemphasizing their femininity (Felshin 1974). The female apologetic therefore can be seen as a kind of forced compliance since female athletes are adopting behavior that is more culturally palatable in order to be accepted. These behaviors can take place both on and off the field as women may wear ribbons in their hair while playing their sports (Krane et al. 2004), overcompensate with makeup, dresses, and other stereotypically feminine apparel or behaviors in their daily lives (Fallon and Jome 2007), or, as Davis-Delano et al. (2009) found, some female athletes may go out of their way to be seen with men in public. When women focus excessively on their heterosexuality, however, they may unwittingly become perpetrators of microaggressions themselves by overemphasizing hetero-normative behavior and alienating women who may not share their sexual orientation. This forced compliance to feminine gender roles may also be problematic because conformity to certain types of masculine norms could have positive influences on a woman's self-concept (Steinfeldt et al. 2011). In one study, researchers found a correlation between conformity to the masculine norm

of risk taking and an increase in body-esteem in women. Although this correlation held true for both women who were athletes and those who were not, the athletes in the sample were more likely to subscribe to this particular norm (Steinfeldt et al. 2011). If women feel forced to comply primarily with feminine standards as athletes, they may miss an opportunity to benefit from masculine ideals that could help them feel more positively about their bodies.

Wider Impact of Microaggressions

The true consequences of these microaggressions potentially reach far beyond the athletes themselves. As we have demonstrated in this review, women and girls are inundated with messages suggesting that their athleticism is unattractive, their physical appearance is more important than skill, and that their skill is inherently inferior to that of their male counterparts. Even for women who have little to no interest in athletics, we argue below that witnessing such incidents creates an environment that can lower self-esteem, body esteem, and harm physical health.

Impact on Non-Athletes' Self-Image

When female athletes are objectified, it harms not only the targeted athletes; it may undermine positive perceptions of their sport and alter the self-image of women who witness the objectification. As mentioned previously, literature suggests that sexualized depictions of female athletes can result in negative attitudes surrounding the abilities of the athletes (Daniels 2012; Daniels and Wartena 2011; Gurung and Chrouser 2007; Knight and Giuliano 2001). These objectifying images contribute to an environment where women and athletes are seen as mutually exclusive: Athletes are seen as strong, skilled, and motivated while women, due to the constant microaggressions in media, are viewed as weak and ineffectual.

These objectifying microaggressions can also have an impact on the self-esteem and body image of women who view them (Daniels 2009, 2012; Thomsen et al. 2004). Women and girls who see sexualized images tend to make more comments about their own appearance and attractiveness and these images can negatively affect how they feel about their own bodies (Daniels 2012; Thomsen et al. 2004). Such images cause women to self-objectify and to internalize media expectations of beauty that they cannot hope to meet (Daniels 2009). This may be especially difficult for female athletes who must have strong athletic bodies to excel at their sports, as these bodies may not fit in with beauty ideals.

Alternatively, images of women actively performing in a sport are more likely to elicit positive perceptions of self and a

focus on physical ability (Daniels 2009, 2012). When women are portrayed as true athletes, they are often seen as role models and sources of inspiration for other women (Daniels 2012). However, in a study of high school volleyball players who were shown images of women from fitness magazines, any positive associations with their sport were marred by a constant evaluation of their own appearance, regardless of whether they were viewing performance based or sexualized images (Thomsen et al. 2004). These girls experienced feelings of self-worth when they focused on being useful to their team, but these feelings were undermined by negative perceptions of the attractiveness of their bodies (Thomsen et al. 2004). This suggests that although an increase in performance based images of female athletes in the media is important; it may not be enough to counter the effects of pervasive objectification.

Impact on Non-Athletes' Physical Fitness

While the portrayal of women in the media is clearly linked to perceptions of body image, it may also be influencing women's physical health. Subtle messages relating to attractiveness, strength, and femininity may play a role in determining how non-athlete women exercise. For example, a common fear among women is that lifting weight will cause them to bulk up and therefore become masculine and unattractive (Salvatore and Marecek 2010). In one study where women went through a weight training program, the levels of social support the women received for being involved in the program varied, but several participants reported that friends or relatives warned they needed to "lose your weight and not bulk up" or that they would end up looking like a man (O'Dougherty et al. 2008, p. 51). Although there is little truth to such myths, they are even perpetuated by people in the media. Actress Gwyneth Paltrow's personal trainer was quoted saying that women should never lift more than three pounds because they will gain too much muscle ("Gwyneth Paltrow's workout" 2008). Comments like these suggest to women that being fit is not about being strong or about gaining functional skills; it is merely about looking good, and imply that thinness is the ideal and aerobic exercise or dieting takes precedence over resistance training. People see exercise such as weightlifting as a masculine act (Salvatore and Marecek 2010), which may alienate women who lift weights and discourage other women from even attempting it. Indeed, one study of college men and women indicated that bench pressing is viewed primarily as a masculine exercise, while using the Stairmaster is considered primarily feminine (Salvatore and Marecek 2010). Furthermore, women reported that they felt the Stairmaster would be more useful to them and their fitness goals (Salvatore and Marecek 2010).

This is problematic for two reasons. First, a focus on appearance-based fitness may perpetuate the objectification

of women. Second, there are numerous health benefits to strength training. Lifting weights can decrease depressive symptoms, increase self-esteem and body image, and decrease the social anxiety women feel about their bodies (Williams and Cash 2001; Ossip-Klein et al. 1989). In addition, strength training has been recommended to reduce heart disease, help control diabetes, and relieve arthritic pain (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2011). Perhaps most salient to women, however, is that strength training increases bone strength and helps prevent osteoporosis. Since women lose 1–2 % of their bone density every year following menopause, weight lifting may be a crucial component to staying healthy and avoiding fractures as women age (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2011).

Directions for Future Research

Microaggressions in media coverage for women's sports help to create a dismissive, hostile, and sexualized environment for female athletes at both the professional and recreational levels, which can negatively affect these athletes' performance, self-esteem, body image, and their physical and mental health. This is an environment in which the most salient characteristic of an athlete is not her dedication, her strength, or her batting average; it is her gender. Women are reminded of this fact when their athletic ability is assumed to be inferior either through a lack of coverage or through blatant comments, when they are chastised for looking or acting unfeminine, and when they are objectified in spite of their athletic accomplishments. There are numerous research avenues for further exploration including the experiences of female athletes based on the particular sport they play, the impact of microaggressions on women's fitness routines, and how the intersection of gender with other identities, such as race or sexual orientation, create new microaggressive themes for female athletes.

Sport Typing and Gender

Potential areas of study regarding microaggressions of female athletes include the qualitative, as well as quantitative, differences in the manifestations of such microaggressions based on sport type. One likely factor may be whether or to what the degree the sport is considered masculine or feminine. As noted by Kane (1996), gender is a social construct that is binary and mutually exclusive, and that therefore, the sporting world distinguishes between women's sports and men's sports. This gender binary is problematic on two counts. First, it stands in contrast to the reality that women may outperform men in certain physical and athletic tasks (Kane 1996). Second, it implies that, even among women's sports,

there are some types of sports that are more feminine, and others more masculine.

Researchers have long attempted to categorize sports in this way and to determine what sport characteristics result in differing perceptions of gender appropriateness (Hardin and Greer 2009; Koivula 2001; Metheny 1965; Postow 1980). Despite greater participation in women's sports over the years, Hardin and Greer (2009) found that the college students they sampled still maintained similar perceptions of which sports are masculine or feminine. Football and weightlifting were considered the most masculine, while volleyball and gymnastics were labeled as the most feminine (by both male and female participants). These binary constructs may contribute to the perpetuation of microaggressions as they create norms that are socially endorsed. Sport typing implies that women who participate in feminine sports are judged by how well they maintain a stereotypical female image of beauty and grace, while women who participate in masculine sports face continued scrutiny about acting too much like a stereotypical man or a stereotypical lesbian (Feder-Kane 2000).

In terms of microaggressions, perhaps a salient question is whether sports where women are continually objectified, or sports that are deemed appropriately feminine, have negative impacts on women's body image and self-esteem to a greater degree than other physical activities. This is important because microaggressions could affect both the way women feel about themselves while playing certain sports and also why they choose to play those specific sports above others.

Women in Fitness Centers

Little research has been done to discover if women's experiences at the gym mirror subtle biases as well. One study of men and women in a college fitness center (Salvatore and Marecek 2010) indicated that women felt less comfortable at the gym and experienced more of what they perceived as negative or sexual evaluation. Women also reported feeling more evaluated while lifting weights than when engaging in aerobic exercise (Salvatore and Marecek 2010). These findings suggest that women may experience microaggressions within their gyms and it is crucial to discover whether such incidents affect the way women exercise or prevent them from exercising more frequently.

Objectification theory posits that being objectified can interrupt the flow of women's activities and even inhibit their physical movements (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Given this, and the evidence that objectification can be distracting in certain circumstances, such as before a math test, more research is needed to understand how objectification might impact women when they are playing sports or working out in fitness centers. For example, if women are running on a treadmill or lifting weight at the gym do they slow down or lift less in the presence of objectifying male gazes? What about in

the presence of other factors that might cause women to self-objectify? In addition, it would be useful to understand if microaggressions with other underlying themes, such as assuming female inferiority or restricting gender roles could also change or diminish the effectiveness of women's physical activities.

Swami and Voracek (2013) found a relationship between men's desires for muscularity and their sexist beliefs. The higher the male participants scored on a drive for muscularity questionnaire, the more these participants indicated hostility towards women and additionally, the more likely they were to objectify women. The rise in female only gyms in recent years attests to the lack of comfort women may feel in co-ed facilities (Craig and Liberti 2007), and there are now women only sections in many co-ed gyms as well. Is it possible that women are being driven either from the weight room or from fitness centers themselves by their perceptions of men's behavior?

Furthermore, there may be evidence to why women stop adhering to a fitness regimen (O'Dougherty et al. 2008), but less on why they choose the particular fitness routines they choose. There are clearly many microaggressive messages in the media that perpetuate gender norms, especially in regard to sport and fitness, but more research is needed to determine what effect these underlying signals have on how women exercise. In one study (Hardin and Greer 2009), participants who reported watching more sports media tended to view certain sports as more masculine. However those who spent more time on fitness in their weekly routines saw the same sports as less masculine (Hardin and Greer 2009). This may add to the evidence that sports media's highly masculinized nature affects the attitudes of its viewers, but it also suggests that sport or fitness participation may alter attitudes in the opposite direction. However it is yet to be determined whether participation in different sports or routines elicits different attitudes towards sports in general, or whether certain attitudes make it more or less likely for women to participate in specific sports.

Some feminist literature in the past has criticized aerobics for reinforcing a patriarchal body ideal and perpetuating the notion that beauty is the goal of exercise (Craig and Liberti 2007), and although current obesity rates make it difficult to discount any form of physical activity, it is possible that exercise designed only to burn fat, and not to gain muscle or any physical skill, may be harmful or at least less beneficial. It would be useful to understand why women choose a particular workout routine or participate in a specific sport and also how different types of activities impact mental and physical health.

Intersection with Other Identities

Although we have mostly discussed microaggressions against all women in this paper, women of color, women who are gay

or bisexual, and transgender women may experience such microaggressions on multiple levels (Sue 2010); more research is needed to determine how the nature of these microaggressions change when female athletes are members of more than one stigmatized group.

Race based microaggressions in general contain a variety of different themes including denials of racial experiences, assumptions regarding intelligence or criminality, assumptions of foreign nationality, and implications that they are second class citizens (Sue 2010). A microaggressor implies negative assumptions about African Americans' intelligence for example, when he/she says "You are a credit to your race" to someone who is Black (Sue 2010). Racial prejudice and stereotypes may produce more potent examples for women of color and perhaps especially for women of color who happen to be athletes. Tennis star Serena Williams has been portrayed in the media as *animalistic* (Schultz 2005), connoting that, as a Black person, Williams was less human than a White woman.

As another example, the headline *American Beats Out Kwan* appeared on MSNBC following Michelle Kwan's Olympic loss to another U. S. athlete (Sorensen 1998). This implied that Asian Americans such as Kwan are foreign and non-American, a common theme expressed in microaggressions toward Asian Americans which Sue (2010) refers to as *Alien in One's Own Land*. Other examples of this theme are when someone asks an Asian American to teach them words in their native language or tells them that they speak English well (Sue 2010). These sentiments may undermine the performance of someone like Michelle Kwan who was representing her country or other Asian American athletes who need to form a cohesive unit with their teammates.

Not only must these athletes contend with gender based microaggressions (such as commentators making snide remarks about Williams' muscular physique) they must also endure racially motivated indignities as well. On the other hand, it is also possible that the intersections of race and gender create an entirely new kind of bias not solely based on either identity but on the combination of the two (Schultz 2005). While intersectionality research has grown as a field over the years, little research has specifically explored the possible synergistic relationship between race and gender for female athletes in regard to the type and breadth of microaggressions they endure. Given that the racial make-up of the United States is becoming more diversified (Humes et al. 2011), it is likely that women of color are beginning to constitute a larger proportion of athletes. Therefore, more research on the intersection of race and gender among athletes is timely and warranted.

It is also timely to re-examine microaggressions based on sexual orientation now that the gay rights movement is gaining momentum and some sports stars like WBNA player Brittney Griner, NBA player Jason Collins and NFL player

Michael Sam have revealed their sexuality publicly (Collins and Lidz 2013; Kotloff 2013). Brittney Griner, however, also revealed that when she played for Baylor University she was told to keep her sexual orientation private because parents might be less likely to want their daughters on her team (Kotloff 2013). Despite stereotypes that many female athletes are homosexual, there has been a significant tradition of homophobia even among team members (Barber and Krane 2007), and research should be aimed at determining if these attitudes have begun to change among younger athletes. Further research should also explore what effects apologetic behavior, especially in regard to emphasizing heterosexuality, may have on lesbian teammates.

Conclusion

In her post on the social media website microaggressions.tumblr.com (Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life, n.d.), a woman recounted,

In gym class, we were arbitrarily split into teams for flag football, but divided so that there were even numbers of girls on each team. Our teacher explained to us that any touchdown in which a girl was involved would receive double points. This was in a middle class suburban high school.

This anecdote is reflective of what we have argued in this review, which is that, as evidenced by research literature and media news reports, the public views female athletes as women first and foremost—women who do not belong in the male-dominated world of sports, are inferior athletes compared to males, who ought to adhere to stereotypic female mores, ought to want to be in romantic relationships with men, and who ought to look attractive and sexy for men. These myriad stereotypes, characterized by their subtlety and ubiquity, can be organized using Sue's (2010) taxonomy of microaggressions, with classifications that include assumption of inferiority, sexual objectification, and restrictive gender roles. Although research on the impact of microaggressions among female athletes is lacking, we propose that these subtle biases can have deleterious physical health, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional effects. Biases against women in sports is harmful not just to athletes, but to all women, because they can influence women's decisions on what types of physical fitness activities to participate in. Finally, because female athletes often occupy other marginalized identities besides gender, more research is needed to understand how these multiple identities intersect with regard to experience of microaggressions.

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