

The Experiences of Women Leaders in the Higher Education Sport Sector: Examining the Gendered Organisation through Bourdieu's Model of Field Capital and Habitus

Abstract

This article is the first to examine experiences of women with leadership roles in the United Kingdom Higher Education sport sector. We carried out detailed interviews with women leaders. We utilise Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) model of habitus, capital, and field, Acker's (1990) concept of "gendered organisations" and Shilling's (1991; 2004) concept of physical capital. Our findings show Higher Education operates more inclusively than the wider sport sector, which has potential to advance gender equality. However, gendered practices remain with women working harder to accumulate and convert capital. Motherhood negatively impacts upon conversion of capital and respondents without children felt this benefitted their career. Finally, we discuss the impact of the menopause on the careers of women and suggest this can impact self-perception.

This article examines the experiences of women who hold non-academic leadership roles within the United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) sport sector. We aim to understand the relationships between women leaders and the context in which they work, with a particular focus on an industry that remains largely dominated by men (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Piggott, 2021). In doing so, we apply a framework of habitus, capital, and field derived from the work of Bourdieu (1984; 1986) to our analysis because this framework ultimately aims to understand and explain where power resides in societies. Habitus explains how people think and act according to context, often without consciously doing so (Joy et al., 2020), while capital can be understood as 'a resource that generates power and determines the capacity that individuals or groups might have to influence or control specific situations' (Piggott et al., 2019, p.107). The framework we use is informed by Shilling's (1991; 2004) concept of physical capital and Kraus' (2006) argument that habitus is gendered. We combine this with Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations to explore the concept of a gendered organisational habitus. Gender affects the accumulation and conversion of capital, experiences of the workplace, and directly informs habitus. We are interested in the capacity of women leaders to dynamically apply their own agency to their working lives, whilst being

aware that gender can be a limiting factor in societies that still privilege the experiences of men.

The principal research questions examined in this article are:

1. What are the structural factors that affect women's capital to access leadership positions in sport, within the context of UK HE sport institutions?
2. What are the factors that can prevent women from accessing leadership positions in sport, within the context of UK HE sport institutions?

While changes have taken place at the middle management level, senior managerial work 'is still primarily a male domain' (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008, p.93). As such, it has been suggested that gender inequities have become institutionalised, such that women are disadvantaged from gaining access to leadership positions (Ahn & Cunningham, 2017; Walker et al., 2017). As women are certainly underrepresented in leadership roles, it is vital to examine the experiences of those who hold such positions. This is achieved here through detailed interviews with leaders in the HE sector.¹ All of the leaders interviewed are current or former senior managers in HE sport. This particular field was chosen because while women are underrepresented across the board, women are particularly underrepresented in sports leadership globally (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Piggott, 2021). This is perhaps unsurprising given that modern sport was created by men, for men and initially leadership positions in sport were exclusively held by men (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012).

This article offers an original contribution as the first to examine the relationship between gender and leadership within the UK HE sport sector. Therefore, the research carried out for

¹ The term leadership is difficult to define despite having been widely researched and can mean many different things to different people (Banu-Lawrence et al., 2020). Adriaanse & Claringbould (2016, p.550) define sports leadership as 'people in decision-making positions in the realm of sport'. However, this is a broad definition which includes coaches, paid executives and board members. In the context of HE sport 'leadership is largely understood as holding a position of authority, typically as a higher level administrator' (e.g., Director of Sport, Assistant Director of Sport, Head of Sport) (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019, p.80).

this article addresses this knowledge gap. The UK HE context provides a particularly interesting case study focus to examine the experiences of women leaders. While there are no official statistics regarding the gender makeup of leaders within the field, in one of the institutions where participants in the study worked, a couple of years prior to the study, all four of the senior leadership positions were held by women. This is highly unusual within the wider field of sport, and anecdotally is also very unusual within the subfield of HE Sport. This led us to explore the relationship between gender and leadership with HE Sport to understand how this context may be different from other sporting contexts. Unlike UK Sports Clubs, HE sport encompasses a wide variety of sports and caters for (predominantly) students participating at a variety of different levels. For managers and leaders within the HE Sport sector, there are many potential conflicting agendas and stakeholders including ‘increasing student sports participation to contribute to raising activity levels of the nation, supporting the agenda around mental health and supporting elite sport’ (Brunton & Mackintosh, 2017, p.379). However, most UK universities are only answerable to their Board of Governors for their provision of sport (Brunton & Mackintosh, 2017). In addition, British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS), which is the lead body for UK HE sport (Brunton & Mackintosh, 2017) state financial sustainability as one of the enablers of achieving their 2023-2027 strategy (BUCS, 2023). They state that they are ‘acutely aware of the financial pressures faced by the higher education sector and students and will seek ways to progressively reduce the costs they have to pay to engage with student sporting competitions, events and activities’ (BUCS, 2023). By contrast, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the equivalent body for the US, has an annual revenue of roughly \$1 billion, which it uses to equip ‘student-athletes to succeed on the playing field, in the classroom and throughout life’ (NCAA, 2023). Therefore, while US HE sport can be considered big business, the UK HE sport sector is less resourced and is often only

considered by senior university leaders in terms of increasing overall student experience (Brunton & Mackintosh, 2017).

Existing research on gender and leadership within British sport has largely focused on sport governance within English National Governing Bodies (NGBs) (Aitchison, 2005; Piggott, 2019; Piggott, 2021; Piggott & Matthews, 2020; Piggott & Pike, 2020; Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003). Existing research within HE sport has exclusively focused on US intercollegiate athletics (ICA) (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Sagas & Cunningham, 2004; Wells & Kerwin, 2017; Wells et al., 2021; Whisenant et al., 2002). Research that has been conducted within UK HE Sport has largely focused on drinking culture within university sports clubs (Groves et al., 2012; Partington et al., 2013) and to a more limited extent, policy (Brunton & Mackintosh, 2017). Therefore, this article offers a new contribution by focusing on women leaders' experiences in the UK Higher Education sports sector.

The Experiences of Women Leaders in Sports Organisations

There are a number of interrelated factors that contribute to the lack of women leaders in sport. The concept of gender segregation is critical to the context examined. There are two forms of gender segregation in organisations that may result in unequal distribution of power and status: *vertical* and *horizontal* (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Within sports organisations, there is a trend of vertical segregation, with increased seniority of position being inversely related to female representation (Yiamouyiannis & Osbourne, 2012). Within both English sports organisations and ICA departments, women have been found to be underrepresented in leadership positions and over-represented at the bottom and at the periphery of the organisational hierarchy (Piggott, 2019; Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). This phenomenon is often referred to as the 'glass ceiling', which acts as an invisible barrier to women's upwards progression (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

Horizontal gender segregation refers to the pattern of certain disciplines being dominated by one gender (Piggott, 2019). This is resonant of Connell's (2006, p.839) 'gendered division of labour' in which 'production and consumption are arranged along gendered lines'. Within sports organisations it has been found that even when women do break into leadership positions, men still retain the roles with the most economic and/or symbolic power (Piggott, 2019). For example, a study conducted by Sibson (2010) found that female directors were expected to take on responsibilities related to catering and secretarial work, whereas the male directors undertook more meaningful roles related to facility management. Within the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) it was found that women were over-represented on committees that were consistent with the stereotype of women as nurturers and moral guardians, while men served in more powerful decision-making roles (Yiamouyiannis & Osbourne, 2012). This type of segregation is also known as the 'glass wall' as it creates an invisible barrier that precludes women from moving sideways to positions with more potential for promotion (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019).

It has been argued that the relationship between gender and leadership is not an issue of the under-representation of women, but the 'dominant presence of groups of men and valued forms of masculinities' (Ryan & Dickson, 2018, p.329). In relation to this, Bourdieu (2001, p.62) views gender as a hierarchical construct that is dominated by men because 'the definition of excellence is...charged with masculine implications and the symbolic systems that profit men are legitimised and normalised'. This relates to the concept of *masculine hegemony*, 'a condition in which masculinity and its attributes are lauded, whereas femininity and its attributes are viewed as inferior' (Whisenant et al., 2005, p.912). In addition, Bryan et al. (2021) argue that men's club football is an extremely gendered organisation due to the lack of women in senior roles, particularly those that closely interact with the male players and 'naturalise male dominance in core roles' (p.958). They suggest that this could be a

theoretical avenue for understanding how women are included and excluded not only within the ‘extremely gendered’ organisation of men’s football but also within other sporting contexts. The issue of masculine hegemony appears to be relevant across sport in a range of geographical contexts.

Gender can be understood as something that is done (or undone), and in this sense it refers to the use of normative gendered attributions in social exchanges and engaging in behaviour that reinforces gender differences (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008). Although ‘doing gender does not mean the same thing to everyone everywhere; it does not even mean the same thing to every individual in a single society’, the fundamental characteristic of gender is arguably not its manifestation in specific social situations, but its ‘omnipresence in every situation’ (Krais, 2006, p.128). Essentially, although we accept there are other available perspectives, we find value in Krais’ (2006, p.124) reading of gender and habitus: it is ‘through the habitus that the gender classification, like every other social institution, is kept alive’. We take the position that while gender is socially constructed, it loses none of its power or importance for being a social construct. Rather, it can unconsciously affect everyday experiences and the “rules” that structure these. Ultimately, as Krais (2006, p.121) argues, the ‘symbolic order of gender is embodied in the individual’s habitus as a gendered view of the world’.

Theoretical Considerations: Acker and Bourdieu

Understanding the relationship between women leaders and the context in which they work is our principal aim. To achieve this we apply Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organisations and Bourdieu’s (1986) framework of habitus, capital, and field.

Acker (1990, p.154) contends that the everyday processes that define how organisations operate have a ‘deeply embedded gendering’ and rather than considering the abstract “ideal

type” of employee (which is itself a male ideal type), the female body should be an essential consideration within analyses of organisations. Acker (1990, p.152) also suggests that:

‘the maintenance of gendered hierarchy [within organisations] is achieved partly through [...] controls based on arguments about women’s reproduction, emotionality and sexuality’.

These in turn legitimate organisational structures that legitimate “abstract” ideas about ideal employees; Acker’s (1990) contention is that these actually legitimate organisational structures in which the “ideal worker” is the male worker. As we discuss below, this maps onto the concepts that Bourdieu outlines, and most particularly to the concept of habitus. The ideas Acker (1990; 2006) discusses are certainly relevant to our discussion here, as the body itself is a frequent referent within the responses.

Bourdieu’s (1986) framework ultimately aims to understand and explain where power resides in societies. We utilise Bourdieu in preference to other available frameworks such as those developed by Coleman (1961; 1990; 1994) because while we are interested in the rational choices made by women leaders to maximise the “value” of their capital, we see such choices as bound within the wider social relations under which they work and live. As Blackshaw and Long (2005) discuss, one key value in Bourdieu’s work is that it allows for analysis of both individual agency and the structural determinants of experiences, while not placing these in opposition to each other. While there have been feminist criticisms of Bourdieu, Metcalfe (2018, p.683) argues that it is appropriate to apply Bourdieu’s work when gender is seen as a social construct ‘formed through the intersubjectivity of lived human relations’. In addition, Thorpe et al (2011, p.116) argue that:

‘Bourdieu’s key concepts of capital, field and habitus offer new ways to productively reconceptualize the relationship between gender, power, structure, agency, culture and

embodiment expressed in the often-contradictory forms of women's social experience in contemporary sport and physical culture'.

It is in this spirit that we utilise a framework developed out of Bourdieu's pioneering work.

Habitus

Interestingly *habitus* can be conceptualised using terms familiar from the analysis of sport: Bourdieu (1992b, pp.120-121) describes it as a kind of 'sense of the game'. While Bourdieu's (1986) original framework introduces *habitus* as an individual notion, the concept of organisational *habitus* is particularly useful to our study. The organisational *habitus* 'focuses on the informal, unconscious practices which interact to guide the dispositions of the organisation as a whole' (Kitchin & Howe, 2013, p. 129). Within NGBs it has been found that the deep-rooted and masculinised organisational *habitus* is not able to be disrupted by gender-equity policies (Piggott & Matthews, 2020; Shaw & Penney, 2003). In this regard, Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organisations is useful for considering the organisational *habitus*, especially given Kraus' (2006) argument that *habitus* is gendered. Acker (1990) argues that 'to say an organization...is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.' In this respect, gender should not be considered as an addition to organisational functioning but as an integral part of all organisational processes, which cannot be understood without examining gender (Acker, 1990). If we return to the idea that *habitus* relates to a "sense of the game", the "rules" of the game are tilted towards male workers.

Capital

Four principal types of capital are discussed by Bourdieu (1986): economic, cultural, social and symbolic. These capitals are the basis for power (Joy et al., 2020). As Collyer et al.

(2015) note, Bourdieu borrows ideas from Weber about the need for analysis of capital to take into account resources that are not directly related to money. However, *economic capital* is related to material and financial resources (for example property or income) and Bourdieu sees this as the foundation of other forms of capital. While there is a plethora of research and media attention on the gender pay gap among professional athletes (for example Culvin et al., 2022 and Wicker et al., 2021), economic capital within sports leadership has received relatively little attention (Hindman & Paulsen, 2022). However, it has been noted (in line with Acker's work on gendered organisations) that structural barriers lead to lower paying jobs for women (Wells & Kerwin, 2017) and Piggott (2019) found that women had to make difficult decisions in regard to their employment to maintain the household income, because on average they held less economic capital than their partners. This is an important factor in the decisions made by the leaders interviewed for this article.

Cultural Capital concerns resources obtained through socialisation, such as academic qualifications, past work experience, or modes of dress. As Brittain et al. (2020, p.215) suggest, 'institutionalised cultural capital consists of institutional recognition, often in the form of academic qualifications, of the cultural capital held by an individual'. Within British NGBs it has been found that gender does not influence the accumulation of institutionalised cultural capital, but women needed to accumulate more capital than men to obtain leadership positions (Piggott, 2019). This again suggests a gendered organisational habitus is present. Similarly, women recruited to National Olympic Executive Committees were found to exhibit higher levels of institutionalised cultural capital than their male counterparts (Henry et al., 2004). The apparent requirement for women to acquire greater levels of institutionalised cultural capital than their male counterparts is an important factor in the discussion below.

Bourdieu (1986) conceives *social capital* as the resources that people acquire through membership of social networks. This can be differentiated into bonding and bridging social

capital, with bonding social capital being accumulated between those who have similar social identities and bridging capital accrued through the transcendence of 'social and political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves' (Putnam, 2000, p.411).

Burton (2019) notes that social capital is important to leadership development and women's development can be impeded by having less access to opportunities that build social capital.

Furthermore, Sagas & Cunningham (2004) found that even when men and women did not differ in their social capital investments, men were more likely to reap the benefits through promotions. The strategies used in the accrual of social capital, and conversion of it into

successful leadership careers by women leaders is an important element of the analysis that follows. This does seem to suggest that organisations are gendered, or at least that the structures that "scaffold" such organisations are navigated differently by men and women.

Again, the "game" needs to be played differently by men and women, which is clearly inequitable. Although Acker's (1990) observations on the way organisations operate are now more than thirty years old, it appears clear that gender remains central to how organisations are structured.

Symbolic capital has been described as the recognition that individuals achieve once the other types of capital have been legitimated (Thorpe, 2009). Once an individual has gained symbolic status within a field, they are designated with authority and prestige (Bourdieu, 1986). Within sports organisations, men, masculinity, and male work/life arrangements are privileged and legitimated as per Acker (1990), meaning that women are often disadvantaged in accruing symbolic capital (Elling et al., 2019). Where women do accrue such capital, it is important to understand how this was achieved, and the differences this can make to the wider sector in which they work. It has been suggested that gender influences the ability of women to accumulate, convert and maintain capital (Piggott, 2019). Therefore, whilst there is

value in increasing the capital of women leaders, this needs to occur alongside cultural change (Piggott, 2019).

In addition to these four principal types of capital, Shilling (1991; 2004) proposed *physical capital* as a fifth type. This is an adapted version of Bourdieu's (1986) embodied cultural capital and argues that the body is a form of capital in its own right. Shilling's (1991, p.657) argument is that while gender is not absent in Bourdieu's work, Bourdieu's 'treatment of class makes it difficult to focus on women's bodies as affected by a society which is patriarchal, as well as capitalist in its central features'. In this sense Shilling's (1991) work and Acker's (1990; 2006) arguments have a similar focus on the female body. The framework is therefore useful for considering issues that uniquely impact upon women such as pregnancy and menopause and this relates to Shilling's (2004, p.477) argument that 'different bodily forms are implicated in the production of unequal quantities and qualities of physical capital'.

While class remains important in Shilling's (2004, p.477) analysis as it does in Bourdieu's, the argument that different 'bodily orientations provide different opportunities for converting physical capital into other forms of capital' is certainly relevant to our findings and prompts us to utilise this fifth type of capital, informed in turn by the centrality of the female body within the concept of the gendered organisation. This theoretical approach is outside the norm within studies that utilise or are influenced by a Bourdieusian framework but not entirely novel; for example, Piggott (2019) found that the female body as the bearer of children can negatively impact women's physical capital. Given that one of the fields we analyse is sport, it is also important to examine the impact of physical capital as it appears to impact upon the gendered organisation.

Field

Bourdieu's (1986; 1992a) concept of *field* is essentially the social context which gives capitals their value. It is a social space but importantly for our study, it is also a network of relationships within which power is distributed. Field has been conceptualised as 'a social arena where people compete for resources, making it a system of social positions based on structure' (Brittain et al., 2020, p.216). This is important; any network has a finite amount of resources (Parnell et al., 2019) and both individuals and organisations are in competition for these within a capitalist system.

As Joy et al. (2020) note, multiple fields can coexist within one social context and these may be "nested" within each other – Joy et al.'s (2020) example of disciplinary subfields being nested within an educational field is particularly useful. Each field, and the subfields within them, may have their own "rules" and these may contradict each other in certain circumstances. One of the professional fields we examine is the UK HE sector, with HE sport nested within this wider field. However, most of our participants also situated their experiences within another field; the wider field of sport.

The field of sport is gendered, and it largely operates within a hegemonic masculine norm (Burton, 2015). While most scholarship assumes that gender segregation is not preferable, codified gender segregation in sport is generally accepted and unquestioned (Pape, 2020). This acceptance of the different and superior abilities of male athletes also shapes the field more broadly through informal gender segregation and therefore contributes to women's under-representation within leadership (Knoppers et al., 2021; Pape, 2020). Rosa's (2022) review of the "work-life balance" in the global HE sector reveals this field is also gendered. We agree with Kraus' (2006, p.128) position that 'gender does not constitute a specific social field as is sometimes assumed, but enters into the "game" of the different social fields in ways specific to each field'. In essence, if the habitus of organisations are gendered, then in turn the fields relevant to those organisations are also gendered. Our aim is to demonstrate

how gender impacts the two principal fields we examine; HE and sport, along with the subfields we identify.

Methodology

The research participants for this article were current and former leaders within the HE sport sector. There were seven women participants in total. Five of the interviewees were current leaders within the sector and two are former leaders. The interviewees consisted of four senior leaders (those with job titles equivalent to Director of Sport or Head of Sport) and three with responsibility for a specific operational area (e.g. Marketing Manager). Six of the interviewees identified as White British, while one identified as mixed race (see Table 1).

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who would be able to provide ‘information rich cases’ based on their experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.70). In particular, criterion-based sampling was used to select those who held or had held management and leadership positions within the HE sport sector (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The decision to include senior women who had left the sector was based on calls for more research to explore the experiences of women who have left leadership positions (Evans & Pfister, 2021; Pfister & Radtke, 2006; Sibson, 2010).

Table 1

Demographics of interview participants

| Participant | Senior leader (Y/N) | Current / Former leader (C/F) | Ethnicity | Age | Marital status | Children (number) | Educational level |
|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Participant 1 | Y | C | White British | 42 | Married | Yes (2) | Working towards masters |
| Participant 2 | Y | C | White British | 51 | Married | Yes (4) | Bachelor’s degree |

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|------------------|----|---------|---------|--------------------------------|
| Participant 3 | Y | C | White British | 40 | Single | No | Bachelor's degree |
| Participant 4 | N | C | White British | 29 | Single | No | Bachelor's degree |
| Participant 5 | N | C | White British | 38 | Married | Yes (2) | Master's degree |
| Participant 6 | Y | F | White British | 38 | Married | No | Master's degree |
| Participant 7 | N | F | Mixed race | 40 | Married | No | Double Bachelor's Degree |

Data was collected by the first author using semi-structured interviews to allow topics to be discussed in more detail, to allow the interviewer to prompt the interviewee to consider questions further and to allow new lines of enquiry to be explored (Skinner et al., 2015). In addition, semi-structured interviews have been used as the primary method of data collection in the majority of studies researching gender equity within sports leadership. Interviews lasted between 36 and 70 minutes. The purpose of the interview was to gain information on individual's thoughts and experiences of the fields of sport and HE, and the subfield of HE sport. The interview guide covered five broad topics: background and motivations for becoming a leader; leadership in sport; culture of the organisation; barriers to being a female leader and supporting women in leadership.

Different interview guides were used for current and former leaders (Piggott, 2019). The guide was adapted for former leaders in order to ascertain their motivations for leaving the field and the phrasing of some of the questions was changed to make them more appropriate. Adapting the interview guides ensured reliability by ensuring that the technique measured the

concepts it was designed to measure (Skinner et al., 2015). External validity is achieved in qualitative research by using rich, thick description, as it allows readers to vividly understand the setting and recall their own circumstances that might reflect that of the research situation. This was gained by prompting interviewees to give in-depth answers and interweaving direct quotations from participants in the findings and analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

The data set was analysed manually using thematic analysis. Braun & Clarke's (2012) six phase approach was chosen because of its methodical structure and strong focus on familiarity with the data. The first phase of the analysis, 'familiarising yourself with the data', was achieved by manually transcribing the data and thoroughly reading through all the transcripts before beginning to code (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.60). In the second phase codes were developed using the research questions, the theoretical framework, the literature and the data itself. This meant that codes were formed inductively and deductively, which Braun & Clarke note is often the case in thematic analysis. The third phase is 'searching for themes' (p.63), which involves grouping codes to make themes which represent a patterned response to the data. At this stage, seven themes were initially developed. However, in phases four and five ('reviewing potential themes' and 'defining and naming themes') (pp.65-66), the themes were renamed and regrouped in order to create four main themes, which was deemed more appropriate for the scope of this project. Despite the relatively small sample size, theoretical saturation had been reached as no new themes were emerging. The final phase developed as themes were refined and deeply analysed.

Findings:

Our findings highlighted four main themes: the illusion of a gender-neutral field and organisational habitus; the impact of gender on the accumulation and the conversion of capitals; physical capital, menopause and motherhood and gendered expectations of

femininity. The participants felt that the field of HE sport was gender neutral, especially when compared to the field of sport. However, when they spoke about their experiences a gendered organisational habitus was revealed. This is unpacked in the other three themes, which draw on the interacting processes that Acker (1990) suggests contribute to organisations being gendered.

The illusion of gender-neutrality in the field and organisational habitus

Our participants clearly differentiated between two fields that they operate within.

Participants described the field of HE and the subfield of HE Sport as progressive and inclusive, for example: ‘Simply by nature higher education is a bit more progressive than a lot of other sports organisations’ (Respondent 6). This was attributed to organisations being part of universities, with formal equality and diversity policies: ‘In HE I think it’s fine because you have to follow all the HR policies and processes and fair recruitment to the nth degree’ (Respondent 5). In fact, Respondent 5, for whom her current role was her first within HE sport, noted: ‘[It] was the first time I’d actually done an application process followed by an interview.’

Respondent 4 also suggested that the fact that HE sport is less commercially focused may create a more equitable environment:

‘I think in higher education sport it’s easier to put the support in place, I think it’s less commercially driven, there’s a greater focus on a better-balanced team and ensuring there is the professional support base for women to feel comfortable and confident at senior levels.’

This suggests that there may be a higher level of gender equity within the subfield of HE sport than in the field of sport due to the influence of the broader HE field and its commitment to equality and diversity. This contrasts with existing literature in relation to

recruitment and selection in the wider sport sector, particularly the finding by Shaw and Hoeber (2003) that female candidates were subjected to harder interviews. Interestingly, this also contrasts with previous research within the field of HE. In their research on women sport management faculty in the USA, Taylor et al. (2018a; 2018b) found that women felt that they were marginalised and placed in an ‘out’ group and as a consequence experienced incivility and sexism from colleagues, including in promotion processes.

Participants contrasted the field of sport negatively with the subfield of HE Sport. Though not deemed acceptable in society, sexism in sport is ‘tolerated and even expected’ (Cunningham & Ahn, 2019, p.86). However, when speaking about HE sport, Respondent 2 commented: ‘I think that the sector is quite inclusive’ and similarly Respondent 5 said: ‘I think everyone tries to make sure there’s equality across the board, I would say that the managers across all areas of the business try to have that equality.’ Acker (1990) argues that organisations are gendered and those we examine here are not an exception to this. However, our findings suggest that the greater level of formalisation in terms of the way that HE sport departments operate, leads to the perception that they offer a more equitable working experience for women than non-HE sport roles do. In particular, the formalisation of gender equality practices in the context of UK HE sport was perceived by our respondents to be positive. Our findings contrast to an extent with previous work in the area (for example Taylor et al., 2018a; 2018b) and it is noteworthy that while the field of sport outside HE was perceived by our respondents not to be equitable, formalised HR practices were perceived to have a moderating and ultimately positive influence.

Despite this finding, however, when participants discussed the culture of their organisations, a gendered organisational habitus was revealed. A common theme was that organisations were not attracting women at entry-level positions: ‘Sometimes it can look unbalanced because we just don’t get females through the doors’ (Respondent 3). While several of the

interviewees noted that this was a problem, they were unsure why it was happening and tended to put the onus on individual women: ‘They are just simply not applying, I don’t know why that is’ (Respondent 2). Interestingly, while our respondents reported a gendered habitus, most did not consider this a barrier with regard to other women applying for roles in the field suggesting that there may be ‘gender passivity’ at an institutional level through assuming that women are not interested in the roles and that those who are, are difficult to find (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012, p.411). This also suggests a rationalisation of gender inequities among the respondents, understanding them as ‘expected, natural or normal’ (Hoeber, 2007, p.270). The themes that follow provide further examples of the existence of these inequities through gender impacting on different types of capital, challenges around motherhood and menopause and gendered expectations of femininity.

The Impact of Gender on the Accumulation and the Conversion of Capitals

To be successful in obtaining and maintaining leadership positions, individuals must accumulate the forms of capital most highly valued within the field and convert these into positions of power (Piggott, 2019). The accumulation of economic capital was seen as a particular issue for women within the field of sport, through sideways and downwards career moves, as well as the existence of the gender pay gap. The accumulation of economic capital is strongly affected by women’s choices to have a family in a way that was not perceived to be apparent for men. There was a recurring theme of women taking a drop in both pay and responsibilities on their return from maternity: ‘We actually got quite a lot of our front of house team that were way over-qualified, some of these had actually worked in leisure, in management positions, but because of their family they then had to go to part time work...covering reception’ (Respondent 3). In another example, there was a discrepancy in the salaries of men and women: ‘I think I’ve always been able to negotiate quite good salaries, but I’ve always been below guys’ (Respondent 7). Although Respondent 7 felt

comfortable with the salaries she had negotiated, she still felt that men in the same positions were being paid more. This suggests that even when women perform the same roles as men, they may not be accumulating the same level of economic capital. This strongly suggests that the fields of HE and sport are gendered in terms of economic outcomes for women.

Three of the seven respondents all noted that they had made sideways career moves, either in terms of pay grade or responsibilities, in order to reach their current positions. In terms of habitus, these respondents had the freedom to make a sideways career move, but felt that this had to be justified within the “rules of the game”. Respondent 3 said of one of her career moves: ‘It was actually a step up, even though in terms of pay grade and money, if you look at it from that perspective, it was equally matched, so it wasn’t as though it was a money increase, it was the title and more responsibility’. The economic value of the role was not as important as the title that came with it.

Participant 7 felt that sideways career moves are less prevalent for some men as they are able to trade on the symbolic and physical capital of having been an athlete:

‘A professional sportsman has literally just finished their career, done the job that I have been doing for a year and got a job as a performance lead manager out of nowhere. It’s like his second job!’ (Respondent 7).

This confirms that playing and coaching experience acts as an important form of symbolic capital within the sport sector (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Joseph & Anderson, 2016). In relation to the concept of physical capital, this is also important: Shilling (2004) notes that in the field of sport, male experience is privileged because professional sports were, for a long time, a male domain.

In line with Kraus (2006), gender beliefs and stereotypes were found to be influential in the ability of leaders to accumulate and particularly to convert capitals. A common theme

amongst the women interviewed was the perception that women have to work harder and prove themselves more than their male counterparts. For example, Respondent 7 noted: ‘I think women have to work a lot harder to get up there and have really, really diverse experience to be respected’. Respondent 1 concurred, noting: ‘I still feel we have that sense that we have to prove ourselves’. This supports previous findings that women believe there is a double standard with regard to workrate and rewards in the workplace (Aitchison, 2005; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Ridinger & Pastore, 2019).

It is noteworthy that the women felt this way despite all having accumulated high levels of institutional cultural capital. All of the women held a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, and three either held or were working towards a master’s level degree. This is not unusual as a trend of women attaining higher levels of education than men, giving them more cultural capital has been noted (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019). Generally, within our participants, there was an understanding that the “rules of the game” as they currently stand require them to work harder than men to acquire the same levels of capital.

Another significant challenge to the accumulation and conversion of capitals is time. Sports leadership roles are time intensive and while this is sometimes assumed to be gender-neutral, it often influences men and women differently (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012; Burton, 2015). When asked whether anything had prevented her from pursuing sports leadership positions, Respondent 5 stated ‘Really for me it is about time, about how much you can put into the role’ and particularly noted that she no longer had the extra time to commit now she had a family. Therefore, the accumulation of economic capital and the conversion of symbolic capital was affected by trying to balance the time commitments of a career with having children.

Notably, all participants said that they regularly exceeded their contracted hours, indicating that although the field of HE appears to be more inclusive than that of sport, organisational culture valorises time in the office in both fields (Burton, 2015; Rosa, 2022). This is not uncommon: leaders and managers are often evaluated on their ‘face time’ at work (Acker, 2006, p.59), with time acting as a benchmark of quality and those who have no life outside of work being glorified (Pfister, 2010; Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Rosa 2022). This configuration institutionalises the gendered division of labour within organisations and heterosexual relationships (Acker, 1990; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008), and perpetuates the ideal of the ‘unencumbered worker’ (Acker, 2006; Rosa 2022). There is tension between the time demands of holding a leadership role and a woman’s decision to have a family.

Studies have shown that many women believe that the combination of having a family and a career is ‘incompatible and unsustainable’ (Aitchison, 2005, p.438). For women who do pursue a career in sport and have a family, these joint responsibilities mean that they often lack the time or capacity to partake in the networking needed to build social capital to progress within the work environment (Burton, 2019). Respondent 5 noted that time acted as a barrier to the accumulation of social capital through networking: ‘I think you can be quite successful as a female if you've committed to the network, if you commit to trying to keep your name and face seen; but if you realise actually that's not what you find enjoyable and you move away from that network, then I think you're perhaps limited again because you have to be reliant on what you've delivered’.

Belonging to a network is important as a way of navigating fields and gaining more power within them (see for example Parnell et al., 2019; Millward, 2017). However, it has been found that informal networks within US ICA are gendered and as such contribute to the to the underrepresentation of women in sport leadership (Katz et al., 2018). While the respondents suggested that formal networks within UK HE sport were not obviously gendered,

nevertheless, the time commitment needed to remain part of the network makes it harder for women, especially those with children, to accumulate and convert social capital. Again, it appears that in addition to organisations being gendered as per Acker's (1990) argument, the networks and "scaffolding" for organisations are also gendered. Time acts as a barrier to the accumulation and conversion of capitals. The decision to dedicate less time to a network is not a "rational choice" nor a way of maximising power, but one necessitated by factors which are external to the workplace, and one which is likely to reduce power. Where there is competition for power, time is an extremely valuable resource.

Physical capital, menopause and motherhood

Beliefs around biological sex differences between men and women have long been used to explain the marginal position of women athletes in sport (Messner, 2011). Our findings show how perceptions around such differences are also used to reinforce inequalities in leadership roles. Shilling (1991, p.657) notes the importance of physical capital and argues that the perception of the 'weak' female body is responsible for the subordinate position of women in society. Respondents 3 and 5 both noted that they were perceived as weak by male colleagues. Respondent 3 described a particular experience:

'I was in one weekend and the guys were setting up a gymnastics event, so we had to put all of the judo mats down and I was like "Oh I will come and help" and they go "Oh no, it's alright, you go sit down". I was like "No, I am here to help, I have set up a million and one of these events" and it was very much "the mats are too heavy".

Similarly, Respondent 5 commented:

'you know when you're helping clear away stuff in the sports arena or something and you're lugging stuff and actually you enjoying it as a bit of a workout because you're office based most the time but you don't mind shifting a few tables or say whatever in

that kind of way, sometimes you get the guys come up and go ‘oh it's OK I can help you with that’ and you are like well no I’m perfectly capable I'm actually looking to get a bit of a work out.’

Both women were eager to demonstrate their strength in order to preserve their physical capital and demonstrate their power and authority. This also demonstrates that benevolent sexism, which portrays women as nurturers and delicate creatures that need male protection, can threaten women’s retention of physical capital and thus impacts on their symbolic capital (Whisenant et al., 2015). This can lead to the normalisation in sport of viewing women as unsuitable for certain jobs due to their gender, despite the fact that gender is completely unrelated to their success (Fink, 2016).

Motherhood was identified by all the interviewees as a barrier to career progression: ‘I think also there is that personal challenge around being a female, if you are having children, you're the one that has to give birth and typically it is the majority of women that are the ones that go on maternity leave’ (Respondent 2). It was also noted by several participants that the age that the majority of women have children coincides with the age where women are likely taking strides in their careers, which presents an extra challenge. Respondent 8 commented: ‘Women often have to take a career break due to family commitments at the time they're starting to progress into those leadership roles. That's really hard to overcome’. The decision to have children prevents women from fulfilling the gender-neutral role of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990; Rosa, 2022) but also directly impacts women’s careers as they often take a backwards step in order to maintain their work/life balance. Respondent 5 reflected that having children had had an impact on her career: ‘I think if I hadn’t have gone for the family route, I think I...probably could have progressed more’.

The impact of maternity on women's careers also may lead some women to make the decision not to have children. Respondent 4 reflected: 'In my experience of working with female leaders at [University], none of them had children apart from [colleague] who had much older children, so I think that does paint a bit of a picture actually that to get to those levels, whatever decision they've made, it has resulted in not having children but having reached that management level'. Respondent 5 similarly said:

'I think what you find look at sport is that quite a lot of people that get to the higher levels don't have a family and I think that's still sad. So even when you look at [University] [woman leader] didn't have children, [woman leader] didn't have children [woman leader] didn't have children yes [woman leader] does but actually they were of my age or younger and they've got to a higher level because they probably hadn't stopped part way or a couple of times'.

Respondent 6 also discussed this issue, suggesting that women may be discriminated against in terms of obtaining positions even when they chose not to have children, simple because they are at childbearing age:

'there's still a lot of discrimination against women who are either at the age of potentially having children or who have children, in terms of do we want these people in our organisation because they're mothers and you know they're likely to have to take a day off cause the kids are ill...all these kind of unconscious biases that are still in there mean that women are often overlooked for roles'.

Overall, the perception held by these participants is that women who have not become mothers have higher levels of symbolic capital. Within organisations, childbearing intentions can be seen as a choice that women freely make, positioning them as absent due to their own choices, and therefore making it their fault that they don't get promoted (Connell, 2006;

Knoppers et al., 2015). Therefore, unsurprisingly, it has been shown that both single women and women without children are disproportionately represented amongst women who do reach leadership positions (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Thus, family duties and responsibilities act as one of the most important obstacles to women. It is clear that the decision to have children negatively impacted on physical capital for our participants who made that decision in ways that were not apparent for men. The concept of the gendered organisation and Shilling's (1991) physical capital seem to intertwine where motherhood is concerned.

The three mothers in our sample all noted varying degrees of challenges when returning from maternity. Respondent 2 reflected: 'I remember coming back to work... and straight away I almost did feel like I had to prove myself again because people would see me differently'. Furthermore, Respondents 1 and 5 both shared that their positions had been threatened on return from maternity. Respondent 1 explained: 'I was bullied in the workplace when I returned from maternity leave... when I returned...it was very evident that they wanted me to leave so they made it very uncomfortable. They made it very difficult. It was very hostile.'

These experiences demonstrate that gender is highly influential in the accumulation of physical capital and although it impacted the women differently, the assumption that they were weak threatened their competence and autonomy, limiting their authority and power (Bourdieu, 2001). They also show that even when there are equitable policies in place, the reality experienced by women in the workplace is sometimes very different to what the policy suggests (Aitchison, 2005). There appears to be a difference between policy and habitus, at least as perceived by some of our participants. This is certainly in line with what Acker (1990) suggests and is an important finding. Even where policies exist to support women in the workplace, underlying issues related to the habitus of organisations can negatively impact women. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions has often been framed based on essentialist assumptions about 'Women's reproductive capabilities and

responsibilities as primary caregivers' (Knoppers et al., 2015, p.260). However, for women who chose to have children the situation was more complicated and was impacted by an array of intersecting structural and cultural barriers.

An additional and important finding relates to the impact of the menopause. Respondent 2 discussed the impact of the menopause on her ability to feel competent in her role:

'I experienced what I would call brain fog so I would be talking to you now and forget what I was going to say. So when I'm standing up doing a presentation and talking to people that's really, really off putting and then I'd like mix up my words so I'd say a completely random word in a sentence which made no sense whatsoever... I do remember at the time it actually made me feel, because of the position I was in, not as competent at my job. It's only recently now I just openly talk about it because the menopause subject is quite taboo with a lot of people'.

While Respondent 2 noted that nobody knew or would be able to tell, this gender specific lack of control of her body, impacted her ability to do her job and her accumulation of physical capital. Experiencing the menopause is not a matter of personal choice, and certainly not a matter of "rational choice". As such it may be that an individual could accumulate significant symbolic capital and still feel disempowered by a bodily process that is beyond their control. Although recent work by Whiley et al (2023) and Atkinson et al. (2021) is very welcome, we argue here that greater academic attention should be paid to the impact of the menopause on physical capital, and potentially to the impact of the menopause on self-perception in the workplace.

Gendered Expectations of femininity

Gender can be understood as something that is done (or undone), and in this sense it refers to the use of normative gendered attributions in social exchanges and engaging in behaviour that

reinforces gender differences (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008). The respondents all commented that gendered expectations played a role in their working lives and often presented a challenge. Several of the women interviewed noted that one of the biggest challenges that they faced was not being taken seriously in their jobs. Respondent 3 noted ‘I think sometimes you’re just not taken fully seriously and you have to explain more or go into more detail about what it is you’re trying to get across’. Respondent 3 also noted that women are: ‘Sometimes perceived as being a bitch, being a hard-nosed person when actually we’re not, we’re just doing our job’. Respondent 5 commented: ‘I think female leaders can sometimes be put in that bossy category rather than assertive... but actually she’s just showing leadership’. Bourdieu’s (2001, p.67) concept of the ‘double bind’ for women is relevant to our findings:

‘If they behave like men, they risk losing the obligatory attributes of ‘femininity’ and call into question the natural right of men to the positions of power; if they behave like women, they appear incapable and unfit for the job’.

Women are encouraged to take on masculine traits to succeed (Shaw and Hoerber, 2003) but when they do, it may not be to their advantage and they can be seen as a negative role model. Interestingly with relation to this, Respondent 3 asserted: ‘I think there are some women in business that give other women in business a bad name because of how they come across’. This shows that women leaders, not just men can perpetuate the double bind. It also suggests that for this particular participant, there are “rules to the game” which codify different ways of behaving for men and women, as per Kraus’ (2006) argument about the gendered nature of habitus.

Some participants also noted that they struggled with being seen as too ‘feminine’.

Respondent 4 explained that being seen as emotional acted as an obstacle in her career: ‘As a

female sometimes my emotions can get the better of me in a situation and therefore that stops me bringing difficult conversations forwards especially to management... so I think there are occasions where maybe if I were male in that situation it would be different'. However, there is clearly a double-bind for women here who are trying to balance not being perceived as too 'feminine' or 'masculine'. For example, Respondent 7's experiences, highlight the importance of considering intersectionality in women's experiences of leadership. She discussed how due to her identity as a black woman, she could not be as direct as a man leader: 'I would probably say as a black female I probably modify myself a lot more because I'm not as direct as I would like to be in leadership'.

It was notable that all of the women leaders in our research made claims to be in some sense "different". These claims tended to be subtle and noted through asides, such as: 'I'm probably going to be clearly against the norm of everybody else you speak to' (Respondent 2). They also noted a preference for the company of men and feeling comfortable in an all-male environment. For example, Respondent 2 confessed: 'I think I'm quite unique because, this sounds a bit strange but sometimes when I go into a room and I sit in a lot of meetings where I'm the only female...I quite like that'. Their perception of habitus, certainly within the field of sport, is that to differentiate themselves from other women is advantageous. This may be the result of the relatively low numbers of women leaders in the field of the sport as a whole. This aligns with Acker's (1990) suggestion that gendered processes in organisations may produce gendered components of individual identity, including members of the organisation presenting themselves in specifically gendered ways. Other studies have similarly shown that some women identify more strongly with men in male-dominated sports spaces such as football fandom in an attempt to prove their authenticity and belonging in such spaces (Pope, 2017).

Conclusions

This article makes a scholarly contribution to knowledge in examining the ways that women leaders accumulate and convert capital. Despite the wealth of literature on gender and sports leadership and a particular focus on collegiate athletics in North America, this is the first article to specifically examine the experiences of women leaders in the UK HE sport sector. It was stated by our respondents that the field of HE appears to operate more inclusively than the sport field as a whole, which could be explained partly by the fact that these organisations have to adhere to wider university equality and diversity policies. The perception that there is greater equality in HE sport than in the broader field of sport was clearly stated by several respondents, contrasting with previous research into HE and gender (for example, Taylor et al., 2018a; 2018b). Despite this, however, there were still underlying gendered practices and assumptions in both fields. Therefore, while the habitus discussed by participants is implicitly gendered, the field of HE acted as less of a barrier to women obtaining leadership positions than has been shown in other sport settings. Future research could consider the UK HE sport sector as a research setting, particularly with regard to the perceptions of organisational culture and equity in the field discussed by our participants. Furthermore, as noted in other studies (Burton, 2015; Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008; Taylor & Wells, 2017), there is a need for research into gender to also understand the effects of intersectionality and how this may affect respondent's perception of the field. While the intersection of gender and race was briefly touched on in this research, our sample was largely white, heterosexual, able-bodied women. Therefore, future research could explore how gender intersects with other inequalities such as ethnicity, sexuality and disability.

The use of Shilling's (1991; 2004) concept of physical capital in addition to the four types of capital discussed by Bourdieu was valuable for our study. Greater understanding of the impact of the physical body on capital and power is particularly valuable where the body has a direct impact on the accumulation and conversion of capitals. We call for wider application

of physical capital in work that utilises Bourdieu's ideas, as particularly where experiences are gendered, we agree with Acker (1990) and Shilling (1991) that differences between male and female experience are sometimes not considered to the extent that is warranted, even some thirty years after these landmark studies were produced.

This article highlights an unexpected new topic in discussing the impact of the menopause on women's physical capital. To date there has been very little research into the impact of menopause, certainly within the field of sport, and therefore further research is required in this area. Experience of the menopause involves little personal agency and while it does not appear to directly impact on existing economic or cultural capital, it certainly impacts on physical capital. We tentatively suggest that it also has the potential to impact on self-perception and call for more research in this area.

Membership of networks is important within any field, as Bourdieu argues. However, the time constraints felt by participants limited the extent to which they could engage with networks in their fields. These constraints were based on the perception that women have to work harder to accumulate and convert capital, as discussed by Claringbould and Knoppers (2012) and Ridinger and Pastore (2019), and in line with Acker's arguments regarding gendered organisations. Motherhood also impacted on the capacity of three of our participants to convert existing capital, and a loss of economic, symbolic, and physical capital was felt. Participants who had not had children felt that this may have had positive benefits for their career. This is highly inequitable and demonstrates how gender inequality is still so strongly entrenched within the workplace.

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