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

Roxane Coche[a,*], Olivier Le Blond[b]

[a] Department of Journalism and Strategic Media, University of Memphis, 324 Meeman Journalism Building, Memphis, TN 38152, United States
[b] University of North Georgia Gainesville, Department of Modern and Classical Languages, Nesbitt 4238, Oakwood, GA 30566, United States

ABSTRACT

After becoming one of the first tennis players (male or female) to come out as gay, Amélie Mauresmo once again broke down barriers when in retirement she started coaching men. This paper explores the public's reaction to the announcement of Mauresmo as Andy Murray's coach by using a thematic qualitative content analysis to study online comments made on Yahoo! in the US, France (Mauresmo's country), and the UK (where Scotsman Murray is from). Its purpose is to investigate the public's reaction to Mauresmo's appointment, and how her biological sex, gender and sexuality came into play, if at all. Results indicated that hegemonic masculinity is still omnipresent in the sport culture, and the disparaging humor toward both women and gay people is sometimes used as an attempt to make that hegemonic masculinity more acceptable.

Introduction

After becoming one of the first female tennis players to come out as lesbian in 1999, Amélie Mauresmo once again broke down barriers when in retirement she started coaching men. Her first temporary stint as a man's coach happened in the summer of 2010, only six months after she had announced her retirement, with fellow Frenchman Mickaël Llodra. But Mauresmo made headlines again in 2014 when she was announced as the temporary coach to top player Andy Murray, Scotland's most successful tennis player ever and a staple of the "Big Four," the best players since the mid-2000s (Djokovic, Federer, Murray, and Nadal). Both Mauresmo and Murray were said to struggle mentally in tough games, which is reportedly one of the reasons why Murray decided to appoint Mauresmo as his coach: If she overcame her own nervousness to win multiple Grand Slam tournaments, maybe she could help him do the same (Crawford, 2015).

After the summer tour, she was confirmed as Murray's full-time coach. While Mauresmo and Murray have since dissolved their professional partnership, she was his coach for almost two years, from June 8, 2014 to May 9, 2016, during which Murray won seven titles (but no grand slam tournaments). Despite its end, the Mauresmo-Murray pair is still worthy of consideration because it was groundbreaking. While "women coaches around the globe constantly fight to be heard, taken seriously, included, funded and respected," (LaVoi, 2016, p. 13), Mauresmo became the first –and so far only– woman to coach such an elite tennis player (Murray has been a serious contender in Grand Slam

tournaments for years) without being related to him (former World Number 1 Jimmy Connors was coached by his mother Gloria throughout his career). The partnership of Mauresmo and Murray appears to be an oddity in the sports world as the majority of coaches are men regardless of the athletes' gender (Walker, 2016). This and other such statistics have prompted Anderson (2002) to call sport "a bastion of hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism and homophobia" (p. 862). This "orthodox masculinity" (Kian, Clavio, Vincent, & Shaw, 2011, p. 680) has been upheld in part by media through the framing of stories and content.

Yet, with the rise and improvements of the internet, people can now introduce and spread stories and storylines that are not discussed in mass media. As such, individuals now have the capability to influence how the public perceives a story, a concept known as bottom-up framing (Nisbet, 2010). One of the most "popular" ways to do so, Ruiz et al. (2011, p. 464) say, is through online comments: more than three quarters of U.S. online media offer a forum for online comments. The purpose of the current research is to investigate the public's online reaction to the appointment of Amélie Mauresmo and how her biological sex, gender and sexuality came into play, if at all. The qualitative content analysis provides more insight into the subject of women coaching men, which is scant in the literature, partly because such a pair is an "anomaly" (Walker, 2016, p. 111). The study was conducted along two main analysis axes: (1) the main frames and themes found in the comments, and (2) the considerations these findings mean in the light of the proposed theoretical lenses, grounded in gender studies, gay

---

and lesbian studies and sport sociology.

Literature review

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

Gender and sexuality in sport

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

Sporting gender duality

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

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

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

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

Hegemonic masculinity and homophobia

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

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

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

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

Homophobia and humor

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

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