



## Article

# Sexual Harassment or Just Coaching? Sport Students Making Sense of Possibly Sexualising Coach Behaviours

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that athletes are divided in their assessment of possibly sexualising behaviours from coaches towards athletes. How they arrive at their conclusions has received less attention—yet it is crucial to understand as a basis for safeguarding measures. Using video-elicitation focus group interviews with sport students, we zoomed in on different types of ‘grey area’ situations involving coaches and athletes. We drew on social script theory to highlight the cultural tools sport students use to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable coaching behaviours. Our analyses showed that the students drew on two types of scripts in their interpretative work: (1) *sport scripts*, denoting templates for ‘normal’ coach–athlete interactions (typically with a performance and/or caring rationale), and (2) *sexual harassment scripts*, encompassing beliefs and expectations of how sexual transgressions play out and among whom. We discuss how the students evaluated concrete grey area situations by comparing and contrasting them with both scripts. In these assessments, the students relied on cues and clues from the portrayed interactions, including the gender of the coach and athlete and knowledge about the specific sport setting. Our analyses demonstrate how views about sexual harassment in sport relate to the specificities of the sport setting and the gendered social dynamics in the situation.

**Keywords:** coach–athlete interaction; grey area; sexual harassment; social script; gender; video elicitation interview



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## 1. Introduction

Young people experiencing sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) when attending organised sport activities has been a persistent social problem. It is also a gendered issue, as girls and women are more often subjected to SHA compared to boys and men (Vertommen et al. 2016), thus hindering equal access to and enjoyment of sport activities. Reflecting developments in society at large (Skilbrei et al. 2019), sport organisations are increasingly committed to preventing SHA—particularly by people in authority positions—and providing support for the victims. These efforts are also spurred on by a growing research interest in the prevalence (Johansson and Lundqvist 2017; Parent et al. 2016; Vertommen et al. 2016) and dynamics of the phenomenon (Bjørnseth and Szabo 2018; Hartill 2016). As the general research consensus points towards considerable ‘dark figures’, investigation into how SHA in sport can (continue to) go by undetected is important. An inroad into this question, which we take here, is to ask: how do insiders to sport differentiate between what is appropriate and not in coach–athlete interactions? With this approach, our study contributes novel insights that can inform and strengthen sport organisations’ work to safeguard athletes.

The scholarly debate about “no touch policies” is testament to the challenges involved in identifying and regulating problematic coach–athlete interactions in sport. The controversy revolves around SHA policies that restrict physical contact between coaches and athletes (Lang 2015). While intended as a measure against SHA, several authors have questioned the rationale for positioning touching as being risky or threatening, cautioning that

such policies—in evoking insecurity and making coaches refrain from physical contact—potentially do more harm than good (Piper et al. 2013; Öhman and Quennerstedt 2015). This strand of research, while focused on one specific side to coach–athlete interactions, illustrates that sport-related situations may not always be easy to define as appropriate or inappropriate. To denote such instances, we found the concept ‘grey area’ suitable, as it signifies ‘a (moral) situation that is not “clear-cut” and . . . [is] therefore particularly demanding of observers’ sense-making practices and judgement formation’ (Mulder and Olsohn 2021). In the present paper, we zoomed in on sport-related ‘grey area’ situations, which we defined as situations characterised by coaching behaviours that are potentially sexualising (e.g., spontaneous celebrations with hugging and kissing and instructional and motivational touching). While such behaviours may be harmless, they can also be elements in a sexualised culture and may serve as a form of grooming or ‘scaffolding’ of sexual abuse (Gavey 2018). As noted by Brackenridge (2001, p. 52), the ‘push[ing] back [of] interpersonal boundaries through ambiguous sexual behaviours (touching, massage and nonverbal flirting)’ can be part of a broader pattern of abuse.

Research to date on grey-area situations has focused mainly on the types of behaviours athletes consider sexual harassment (Volkwein et al. 1997). A key finding in previous research is that athletes hold divided views on grey-area situations; some deem them problematic, while others do not (Auweele et al. 2008). However, little is known about the interpretative processes that lead to different conclusions on specific behaviours and interactions. Our study contributes to filling this gap by exploring the interpretative repertoire athletes draw from to give meaning to sport-related grey-area situations, thereby acknowledging young athletes as active co-constructors of contemporary sport cultures (Stefansen et al. 2019). Simon and Gagnon’s (2003) concept of social scripts provides a useful theoretical lens for this purpose. Our contribution relates to the types of scripts sport students activate and alternate between to make sense of grey-area situations in sport. Identifying what sport students pay attention to when interpreting coach–athlete interactions is part of the essential groundwork for crafting initiatives that safeguard athletes.

Our data were derived from video-elicitation focus-group interviews among bachelor-level sport students with extensive experience with organised sport growing up. We considered them a particularly suitable group for this study since they, as young adults and students, were well-positioned to reflect on grey areas in sport as insiders to contemporary sport cultures. It is worth noting that the students had been active in sport at a time when sexual harassment was receiving increased attention within the sport community both in Norway (Solstad et al. 2021) and internationally (Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2018). Still, as shown by Solstad et al. (2021), they were generally unaware of the mandatory guidelines against SHA in Norwegian sports organisations that were issued in 2010 (Fasting and Sand 2014).

### 1.1. Previous Research

Sport as an arena for sexual harassment has been receiving increasing attention among researchers since the mid-1990s. Research has focused on a range of topics, including the prevalence (Bjørnseth and Szabo 2018; Fasting et al. 2000, 2014; Johansson 2017; Ohlert et al. 2021; Parent et al. 2016; Hartill et al. 2021), consequences for athlete-victims (Fasting et al. 2002; Parent and Fortier 2018), athletes’ coping strategies and responses (Fasting et al. 2002) and preventive measures (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Solstad 2019a). Various aspects of coach–athlete relationships have received particular attention (Fasting et al. 2018; Johansson 2017; Nielsen 2001; Stefansen et al. 2019). Several studies have addressed how athletes draw the line between what is and what is not appropriate in ambiguous and possibly sexualising coach–athlete interactions. As this is our main concern, we restricted our review to studies that explicitly addressed this topic.

Volkwein et al. (1997) conducted the first study of interest and developed a methodology adopted by other researchers. The study examined US female college students’ perceptions of sexual harassment experiences with coaches and the students’ emotional

responses. Data were gathered through a 27-item questionnaire describing behaviours ranging from the presumably harmless (such as touching an athlete's shoulder or arm while giving instructions) to more problematic behaviours (such as kissing an athlete). The participants rated the behaviours on a scale ranging from 1 (absolute certainty that the behaviour constitutes sexual harassment) to 4 (absolute certainty that the behaviour does not constitute sexual harassment). The researchers grouped the behaviours into five categories. The first category encompassed instruction-related behaviours, such as touching an athlete's arm while giving instruction, which 3 percent perceived as probably or definitely constituting sexual harassment. The second category comprised behaviours such as inviting an athlete to lunch, which 18 percent considered as probably or definitely constituting sexual harassment. The last two categories—sexist comments and verbal or physical advances—were categorised as sexual harassment by most participants (63 and 95 percent, respectively).

With some adjustments, the same methodology has been employed in several other studies (Ahmed et al. 2018; Fejgin and Hanegby 2001). Together, they revealed some cultural variation in what is considered sexual harassment: The students from Israel (Fejgin and Hanegby 2001) rated more items as inappropriate compared with the North American students (Volkwein et al. 1997). Ahmed et al. (2018) likewise found that female student-athletes in India labelled more actions as sexual harassment compared to students from Europe and North America, while Danish athletes' perceptions more or less resembled those of the North American students (Nielsen 2001). The Danish athletes seemed, however, to be more tolerant of sexual innuendoes from coaches and other athletes. A general pattern in these studies is that athletes consider unwanted verbal and physical sexual advances the most unacceptable behaviours from a coach, while other types of behaviour are considered less serious but still unacceptable. Examples of the latter are sexist behaviours, sexist comments and unwanted sexual intimacy (Ahmed et al. 2018).

The existing studies on grey area situations in sport have shown variation regarding how athletes understand such behaviours. However, none of these studies have analysed *how* athletes come to see grey area situations as ethically questionable, and the role of specific sport cultures and broader cultural frames of gender and sexuality in such processes. Our study aimed to fill this gap by drawing on qualitative, and 'thicker', data that encompass the context of possibly sexualising behaviours. We took the cue from sociological and feminist studies on the labelling of sexual assault. These studies point to labelling as a complex social process for both victims (Stefansen and Smette 2006; Khan et al. 2018) and bystanders (Katz et al. 2017) and as something that is informed by a range of relational and situational factors.

### 1.2. Theoretical Lens

Sexualising coach behaviours represent a form of unwanted sexual attention. As noted by Smart (1995), unwanted sexual attention is both objectifying and destabilising; it reduces the affected person to a sexualised object and rips them out of the normal flow of things. Her own example is street sexual harassment. When a woman is suddenly grabbed, felt up, and so on in a nonsexual situation where she is minding her own business, the situation flips into something else, something sexualised. When people make sense of grey-area situations, this deviance from what is expected can help to distinguish unacceptable from acceptable behaviour. Following this train of thought, our analysis focused on what the sport students viewed as normal coach behaviours in different types of coach–athlete interactions and sport settings.

We found social script theory a relevant tool for this end. Social script theory, as formulated by Simon and Gagnon (1984, 2003), distinguishes between social scripts on three levels. *Cultural scenarios* provide the context for and the appropriate content of the enactment of roles in a particular situation. They are shaped in part by the media and institutions such as the educational sector, religious organisations, law and state apparatuses and establish rough boundaries between desirable and undesirable, appropriate and

inappropriate, and expected and unexpected behaviours from different types of actors in different realms of society, such as in sport. *Interpersonal scripts* relate to the interactional level and capture how a person adapts ‘the general guidelines he or she learned from his or her experience in the culture to the specifics presented in each social encounter’ (Wiederman 2015, p. 8). In a sporting context, for instance, the coach will draw from the cultural scenario on roles and responsibilities in coach–athlete relationships but adapt their practices to the specific situation, for instance, the type of sport and the age and gender of the athlete. *Intrapsychic scripts* represent each individual’s unique experiences and dispositions, including thoughts, beliefs, preferences and emotions, as well as more or less tacit strategies to handle difficulties involved in enacting interpersonal scripts within the general context of cultural scenarios (Wiederman 2015).

Social scripts are interwoven with gender scripts (Simon and Gagnon 2003); this holds especially for sexual scripts. Scripts of vulnerable and accommodating women and assertive men (Powell 2008) point in the direction of persisting, though not always explicit double standards. In light of other studies on sexual grey area situations (and the gender culture of sport), gender will probably also be intertwined with the employed scripts in our case. To understand how athletes make use of social scripts on different levels to make sense of sport-related grey area situations, we followed the lead of other studies on scripts and sexual grey areas (Mulder and Olsohn 2021) and asked the participants to describe what they felt was happening in hypothetical scenarios presented by the researchers.

Our aim in the present study was to better understand how sport students arrive at their conclusions when interpreting grey-area situations in sport, the interpretative repertoires they draw upon when making their assessments, and if there is something about sport as a sociocultural field that renders the separation of acceptable and unacceptable coach behaviours especially challenging. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the scripts sport students draw on in their sense making of grey area situations?
2. How do they negotiate the relevance of various scripts?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Our data come from a focus group study among first-year bachelor-level sport students (Stefansen et al. 2019; Solstad et al. 2021). Along with a broad range of topics from physiology, coaching, sociology and history, the study programme they attended included (but had, at the time of the interviews, not yet covered) sexual harassment and abuse. A team of researchers and PhD students (10 women, 5 men<sup>1</sup>) conducted a total of 20 gender-mixed focus group interviews with a total of 112 participants (52 percent women and 48 percent men<sup>2</sup>).

The participants filled out a one-page questionnaire at the end of the interview. The data showed that 58 percent were 19–22 years, 30 percent were 23–24 years, while the remainder were 25 years or older. Of the participants, 59 percent had been active in team sports, 32 percent had been active in individual sport and 8 percent had not been active in any organised sport. Most of the participants had played grassroots-level sport, while some had experience in elite sport. In addition, 60 percent of the participants had coaching experience, and 21 percent had experience with administrative tasks in a sport club.

### 2.2. Procedure

We informed the Norwegian Social Science Data Service about this study. Since the study did not involve the collection of personal data, formal approval was not needed. The interviews were conducted at an institution for higher education in Norway. The first author introduced the study to the students during a lecture before inviting them to participate. Students who wanted to participate gave their informed oral consent prior to the interview and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They also received written information that included the first author’s email and

phone number in case they wanted to talk about anything in relation to the topic of sexual harassment and abuse after the interview.

The participants were allocated into groups of approximately five to six persons. The interviews lasted between 50 and 60 min and were recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised.<sup>3</sup> Quotations in the results section were translated by the authors and lightly edited for clarity.

We chose focus group interviews for this study because the method provides access to the interpretative repertoire that people can draw on to make sense of sport-related grey-area situations. It also allows observation of the process through which different scripts are activated, confronted and dismissed among participants, offering information that represents 'more than the sum of separate individual interviews' (Morgan 1996, p. 139). In the interviews, we used *video elicitation* as a methodological tool, inspired by other studies (Henry and Fetters 2012; Kwon et al. 2020). As part of the interviews, the students watched four short video vignettes involving a coach (about 25–26 years old) and an athlete (about 20 years old) in situations that could or could not be interpreted as having a sexual or intimate dimension. The vignettes are part of a series of short videos entitled 'The coach's responsibility', which were originally produced by The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports to spark debate among athletes about grey area situations (see Solstad et al. 2021).<sup>4</sup> Hence, it suited our purpose well. The content and design of the films were inspired by the confederation's guidelines and other initiatives against SHA in sport. The amateurish feel of the films, with sport students cast in the roles of coaches and athletes, helped to loosen up the conversation in the interviews by creating an informal atmosphere.

The present analysis is based on the two films that were most relevant to our topic to allow more focused analyses. Film 1 shows a female coach and a male track-and-field athlete alone in an indoor athletics hall. As the athlete stands in a crouched sprinter's starting position, the coach asks if the athlete's injury is OK, and the athlete responds that it is fine. The coach then strokes the athlete's thigh in an upward motion from the knee. The athlete turns sharply towards her, saying, 'Can you stop that?' She retorts 'Focus!' Then the athlete performs the sprint. Film 2 takes place in a hotel room. A male coach is sitting on the bed with his computer, presumably planning the next training session, when a slightly younger female athlete knocks on his door. She is obviously upset: 'I did not do very well today, and I am very disappointed in myself'. The coach invites her into the room, and they sit down, right next to each other on the bed. Both films end with the topic appearing on the screen ('Touching an athlete' (Film 1) and 'Inviting an athlete into the hotel room' (Film 2)), followed by the question 'What is OK?'

In the interviews, the students were asked to describe and evaluate the situation portrayed in each film. Variations of the following questions were asked: What is going on in this situation? Is the coach's behaviour appropriate? Why/why not? Are the intentions of the coach important? How do you interpret the athlete's reaction? What situations in sport require physical contact from the coach? Could the coach have done something differently? The interviewers also explored how the students would perceive the situation in each film if elements such as age, age difference and gender varied.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, we identified all passages in the transcripts related to the two films. Second, we read these passages to identify the types of interpretative frames—scripts—the students activated and alternated between to make sense of the situations. In this step of the analysis, we moved back and forth between the transcripts and tentative interpretations that we discussed in meetings that included all the authors. We identified two main types of scripts that functioned as reference points in the students' interpretative work (embellished below). Finally, and drawing on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), we



looked for situational characteristics that drew the athletes' interpretation in one direction or the other. The importance of gender was revealed in this final step.

### 3. Results

The discussion in the interviews was nuanced and revolved around several topics—among them, coach–athlete sexual relations (Stefansen et al. 2019), guidelines against sexual harassment and abuse in sport (Solstad et al. 2021), and how the ages of the athlete and the coach influence the evoked scripts.

Two main types of social scripts were salient in the sport students' interpretations of sport-related grey-area situations. The first type, *sport scripts*, describes perceivably normal athlete–coach interaction, typically following a clear performance rationale and often with certain forms of emotional closeness considered to have a value of care. Sport scripts contain programmes for action in a given sport situation (cultural scenarios), related expectations for coach–athlete interactions (interpersonal scripts) and the athlete's frame of mind or 'project' in the interaction (intrapsychic scripts). The second type, *sexual harassment scripts*, describes sexualised or objectifying behaviours that are contrary to the subjected person's will. They revolve around expectations about the type of settings in which sexual harassment happens, how such interactions unfold and between whom, and how people normally react when subjected to unwanted sexual attention. In the context of coach–athlete interactions, sexual harassment scripts typically describe sexualised behaviour that disrupts the normal flow of things.

Below, we first present how the students drew on and alternated between these two types of social scripts when they assessed the grey-area situations portrayed in the video vignettes. We then turn to how gender was tangled up in the scripts and served as a central reference point for assessing the appropriateness of the situation.

#### 3.1. Sexual Harassment Scripts vs. Sport Scripts

What was seen as normal coach behaviour in the given sport scenario provided an important frame of reference for assessing the interactions portrayed in the video vignettes. Alignment with or deviation from these expectations was a focal point in the group discussions as a first indication of what type of situation the students were dealing with. Further, the students were meticulously attentive to relational cues in the situation. (Was the coach's behaviour appropriate within this particular relationship? Was it in line with or contrary to the athlete's will?) The students attempted to grasp the particular coach–athlete relationship by reading the coaches' and athletes' behaviours, body language, reactions and expressions.

The students generally drew upon sexual harassment scripts in their reactions to Film 1 in which a female coach strokes a male athlete's thigh, arguing that her behaviour was inappropriate or at least odd. In these initial discussions, sport scripts worked as a contrasting device, as the students offered examples of *similar* situations in which touching *could* have been okay and even valuable if handled somewhat differently by the coach, as illustrated in this dialogue.

Male Student 2: I feel that physical touching, that depends. The way it comes across [in Film 1], it's almost sexual, the way she went about stroking him. But if you do it in a different way, I think it is okay.

Male Student 3: Like a pat on the shoulder. That is . . .

Male Student 2: Yes, a pat on the butt, like 'well done'. But [the stroking shown in the film], no . . . it doesn't make sense . . . 'Is your groin okay?'. Are you supposed to rub others down there? I don't think that's okay. (Interview 12)

A recurring theme in the interviews was that even though touching and intimacy can make sense in light of a sport script, not least for instructional purposes (cf. Öhman and Quennerstedt 2015), how the coach in this film behaved did not quite make sense when

seen against a sport script. The students reacted to how the coach's behaviour disrupted the flow of the sporting situation:

Male Student 2: And he stands there, ready to run. What's that? Suddenly, the coach comes and touches you, at the moment when you're about to get going. If they approach each other to talk, then she can touch him, or [ask] 'How is it going?' when they stand in front of each other. But when he is bent over and ready to run, it's a bit weird. (Interview 12)

These immediate reactions to the first film illustrate that some situations in sport, such as running practice, are highly routinised and governed by distinct behavioural expectations—clear scripts. Any deviations from the script for these situations are therefore likely to stand out as inappropriate. The coach's hand on the athlete's thigh was seen by most participants as such a case. The coach's behaviour clearly disturbs the athlete's state of mind in the situation and is therefore interpreted as something other than just coaching—a sexualised touch or something inappropriate, and hence evoked a sexual harassment script.

Sexual connotations were often the first aspect of the films to be brought up. This might relate in part to the pedagogical purpose of the films, which was to provoke reflection and discussion about sexual harassment and boundaries in athlete-coach relationships. However, alongside or immediately after these sexual interpretations were introduced, students in many groups turned to interpretations revolving around the potential value of touching and physical intimacy in coach-athlete interactions. This was particularly prominent in discussions about Film 2, involving a male coach and a female athlete in a hotel room. In one group (interview 9), a female student associated this situation with a top-level football manager famous for nurturing close and caring relationships with players: 'He [the football manager] is in a way, he cares [about the players]. And you see in a way how good that is for the players, that he genuinely cares' (Female Student 3).

This student interpreted the situation in the hotel room as, at least potentially, an example of a coach's genuine care for the athlete, and fitting into a sport script. She saw a caring attitude as positive both for the well-being of the athlete and for athletic performance. Her comment led to a discussion in the group about boundaries and what the coach could have done differently to avoid any sexual undertones in the interaction without compromising relational closeness. Many groups had similar discussions about how good coaches must strive to build and maintain rapport with the athlete, as seen in this dialogue:

Female Student 1: I think it is important to have that room for spontaneity [in the coach-athlete interaction]. That not everything has to be planned. I think it is important to establish a bond with people . . . But it's maybe more about the body language in there, in the room, that he sits down so close, more than [the fact] that the athlete approaches the coach, in a way.

Interviewer: You also found it a bit weird that he sat down close?

Female Student 1: Yes, I found that a bit weird; everything else, I found a bit nice, really. I think it's great that you care that much about the athlete. That is a very important coaching skill as well. (Interview 2)

The interview excerpts we have offered exemplify a typical way in which the students' discussions alternated between sexual harassment scripts and sport scripts. Sport scripts were quickly evoked by the participants in many groups in discussions of why, when and how similar touching and emotional closeness in the athlete-coach relationship can be valuable from a sporting perspective.

The students also expected coaches to be able to manoeuvre a complex landscape of potentially valuable and potentially problematic aspects of touching and intimacy. Coaches should ideally be attentive towards and close to the athlete and be capable of considerately and appropriately handling physical contact in sport settings. At the same time, coaches should be aware of and never overstep athletes' intimate boundaries. The students frequently used the word 'professional' to describe this balancing ability in coaches

and ‘professional relationship’ to describe the ideal rapport between an athlete and their coach: ‘I think that in a way it is okay to be close to one’s coach, in a way it is okay to have a nice relation, and thus, it is safer. But it has to be a close *professional* relationship’ (Female Student 4, Interview 9). Being professional here does not refer to being formally employed or educated but to an ability to balance closeness and personal boundaries.

So far, the analysis has illustrated the malleability of grey-area situations and how they can be drawn in different directions. Next, we turn to the role of gender in the students’ evaluation of the portrayed coach–athlete interactions.

### 3.2. Gendered Sexual Harassment Scripts

Gender featured prominently in the discussions. On a general level, most participants stated that in principle, the gender of the involved persons should be irrelevant to the assessments of acceptable behaviour from coaches. ‘Generally speaking, no’ was the default answer when we asked whether gender mattered for the evaluation of the situations:

Male Student 3: Regarding the difference between men and women, there is no doubt about how it should be in practice, that it should be equal, but without doubt, there are prejudices in society—or not prejudices, [peoples’ viewpoints] are often based on experience—meaning that one is a bit more sceptical if a man does [something] than if a woman does [the same]. (Interview 4)

As the excerpt exemplifies, the students were acutely aware of the inconsistency between holding the general view that gender is irrelevant and seeing gender as highly significant when evaluating specific situations.

Across the groups, the gender of the involved persons was a key relational element when the students worked to make sense of the portrayed interactions. Both male and female students clearly expressed that they would have been more likely to view the coach stroking of the athlete’s thigh in Film 1 as fitting into a sexual harassment script if the gender roles had been reversed.

Female Student 1: I think it would have been worse if it was the other way around. Simply because, generally, women will be ‘the weaker sex’. In a way, they will be in a vulnerable position. (. . . ) But really, it is the same thing happening [when a female coach touches a male athlete]. (Interview 1)

For Film 2, some participants said that reversed gender roles would likely have led them to view the situation differently, as they would more easily second guess a male athlete’s intentions in coming to a female coach’s hotel room. In line with gendered sexual scripts portraying men as the initiators of sexual interactions, suspicion of sexual harassment would follow the male person, regardless of whether he is the coach or the athlete.

Male Student 1: If you, for example, put a boy together with many pretty girls, people perhaps think that, well, [the girls] can touch him and that is okay. If you had done that with men and put a girl there instead, then that would have been an entirely different thing. Then it is more like . . . what should you call it? You immediately feel that those men are abusers, in a way. (Interview 12)

Notions of women’s vulnerability and cultural scenarios—‘what most people think’—were core to the students’ arguments. Particularly female students tended to express this notion with a sense of regret, potentially experiencing it as offending or uncomfortable to describe women in general as more vulnerable than men—which makes sense in a culture that highly supports gender equality (Kitterød and Nadim 2020). Furthermore, some participants drew explicitly on cultural scenarios for sexual harassment and abuse with male perpetrators and female victims to explain the relevance of gender.

Female Student 3: I think it is due to the situation one is in—that men have, in a way, the physically superior power. And that is what sexual abuse is about, really. So we probably still have some difficulties in our society accepting that women can be sexual abusers as well, generally. (Interview 16)



Discussions of situations involving a female coach and a male athlete indicated that the students lacked a clear and culturally shared script to make sense of this situation as sexual harassment. We see this tendency in two ways. First, in response to the film portraying a female coach/male athlete situation, many of the participants expressed that the coach's behaviour, as well as the athlete's reaction, was 'unexpected' or 'unusual' because of their respective genders. Besides indicating a lack of scripts for situations involving a man in a vulnerable position (e.g., athlete) and a woman in a dominant position (e.g., coach), these comments can also reflect the fact that in Norwegian sport, women rarely coach male athletes, while the opposite scenario is common (Fasting et al. 2017). In other words, there is probably also a lack of sport scripts involving female coaches and male athletes. Second, some groups discussed how men can be unsure about how to deal with being uncomfortable with touching and intimate situations with women; they lack a template for 'doing' victimhood—a phenomenon known from research on male victims of alcohol-related sexual assaults (Stefansen et al. 2021). In the present study, some male participants were explicit about not knowing how to interpret or react to such situations:

Male Student 2: I think that girls might have more focus on what is OK. 'Is it OK that others touch me or do something to me or say something to me?' While I, as a man, I have kind of not been informed as much about what is OK with regards to how others treat me because that has not been a problem. But, if it was to become a problem, I don't know what I would do, whether I should tell someone if I did not think it was OK. (Interview 13)

This type of response can be seen as reflecting the 'male sex drive discourse' (Hollway 1998) that posits that men, regardless of situation and interest in women, should welcome sexual advances. To some students, this was the main reason why the negative reaction from the male athlete in Film 1 appeared odd: 'You are a bit surprised, you do not really expect that from a man being touched by a woman' (Male Student 1, Interview 8). Both the female and the male students also noted that the lack of sexual harassment scripts with male victims meant that it can be more difficult for men to report unwanted incidents: 'It is more difficult for a man to report because he should, in a way, almost want it' (Male Student 1, Interview 8).

What we see in the analysis is how sexualisation takes on opposite meanings in situations involving male and female athletes. If not always the case, situations that quickly evoke sexual harassment scripts when involving a female athlete are more likely to activate normal sexual scripts when involving a male athlete, describing, for instance, the coach's behaviour as a welcome invitation.

#### 4. Discussion

A starting point for this paper was that sport includes a range of situations and interactions that are difficult to pinpoint as either sexual harassment or just coaching. They are located in a 'grey area' between the acceptable and unacceptable and are open to different interpretations. In contrast to previous quantitative research that has studied the (un)acceptability of concrete behaviours (Ahmed et al. 2018; Auweele et al. 2008; Volkwein et al. 1997), we have focused on the process of meaning-making related to grey area situations and the social scripts activated for that purpose. Our methodology differed from that employed in previous research. We wanted thicker data that could enable us to delve into the interpretative processes underlying and informing evaluations of grey-area situations—which we obtained through video-elicitation focus group interviews.

The first main finding was the constant shifting between scripts in the students' discussions of the situations displayed in the video vignettes. The students described aspects of the portrayed scenarios that pointed towards sexual harassment and underlined how similar situations could be perfectly appropriate and illustrative of ordinary or even ideal coaching behaviours. The sport scripts defined what was normal in the type of situation that was portrayed. Measured against sport scripts, the coach's behaviour in the films could seem odd and inappropriate—if it disrupted what the students considered

to be normal modes of interaction in running practice (Film 1) or in one-to-one player conversations (Film 2). On the other hand, the students used sport scripts to illustrate how similar behaviour could be in accordance with coaching ideals, including care and focused attention on the athletes and their well-being (cf. Öhman and Quennerstedt 2015). Their assessments depended on cues and clues drawn from the context and the coach's behaviour and the athlete's reaction: their facial expressions and body language.

One of the things that seem to make grey-area situations difficult to categorise is the *surface resemblance* between emotional and caring coaching and sexualising or intruding behaviours: without contextual knowledge, they can be confusingly similar. Surface similarities between sport scripts and sexual harassment scripts, and the students' inclination to consider grey area behaviours from a sporting point of view, raise concern that problematic coach behaviours that *do not* collide with sport scripts can slip under the radar. For instance, the value placed on toughness and hardening in sport can make athletes endure authoritarian and harsh behaviour from coaches (Solstad and Strandbu 2017). The same can be the case with sexualised banter, for instance, as well as the types of behaviour we have studied here. It should also be underlined that different sport situations have different 'programs for action'. Notions about what constitutes such programs in a given sport setting provide an important frame of reference when athletes interpret a situation as sexual harassment or not.

How the discussions often seemed to gravitate towards sport-related implications of inappropriate coach–athlete interactions points to another issue. The importance of sport in young athletes' lives can, in itself, constitute a form of vulnerability (Demers et al. 2021; Solstad 2019b), which can translate into reluctance to say or do something that potentially disturbs or damages social or achievement aspects of their sport community. Athletes might also have reasons tied to social and economic circumstances for not labelling an experience as sexual abuse. They may have a lot riding on their athletic success, including potential economic and status gains.

The second main finding relates to the role of gender. We noted with interest that the gender constellation in the video vignettes mattered for the students' evaluations, even though they insisted, when asked directly, that it should not. There was a split in the students' deliberations between 'gender in theory' and 'gender in context' that played into their assessment of the portrayed situations as either sexual harassment or just coaching. The gendered nature of culturally available sexual harassment scripts seemed to create a barrier to reading situations that deviated from the male aggressor/female victim template as sexual violations. Including both men and women in our study—contrary to earlier research on grey-area situations (Ahmed et al. 2018; Auweele et al. 2008; Volkwein et al. 1997)—enabled us to shed light on how the sexualisation of male athletes can be difficult to acknowledge. It was not the potential sexual violation from the female coach in the running situation (Film 1) that evoked a reaction initially, but the absurdity of the coach approaching the athlete the way she did at that particular moment when he was ready to perform his run. Although her actions deviated from common sport scripts, the students were still hesitant to see them as a violation of the male athlete's sexual integrity as the gender dynamics of the situation deviated from the sexual harassment script. This is likely to be the case also for other violations that do not match the male aggressor/female victim template, such as those that occur within same-sex social dyads (Hartill 2009; Johansson 2018).

The students' shifting between sport scripts and sexual harassment scripts when discussing grey-area situations has a gendered dimension. While variations occur across contexts and depend on the measures used, statistics have, with some important exceptions (Hartill et al. 2021), shown that female athletes more often than male athletes report experiences of sexual harassment and abuse in sport—also in children and youth sport (Vertommen et al. 2016). Failure to recognise problematic behaviours will numerically affect more female athletes and allow male coaches who are overstepping intimate boundaries the benefit of the doubt. As organised sport remains a societal sphere in which women struggle for recognition and equal terms and conditions as men (Schailée et al. 2021; Persson 2022),

a gendered lens on potential sexual violations is not only appropriate, but also necessary. A limitation of the present study is that the discussions were facilitated around the male coach–female athlete, and female coach–male athlete situations portrayed in the films. This is a regrettable limitation in light of research indicating that queer athletes are especially exposed to sexual (and other forms of) violence in sport (Vertommen et al. 2016), and that boys also experience sexual violence from male coaches (Hartill et al. 2021). Going forward, research on sexual harassment in sport should also address these situations.

Previous studies (Ahmed et al. 2018; Auweele et al. 2008; Volkwein et al. 1997) have revealed the types of coach behaviours that athletes consider as appropriate or non-appropriate. Script theory has helped us understand how insiders to sport reach such conclusions—and the interpretative repertoire they rely on. Overall, our study points to the importance of understanding possibly sexualising coach–athlete interactions as situated in their specific sport context and embedded within broader cultural framings of gender and sexuality. Such a perspective, we suggest, can yield important insights for further prevention efforts both in sport and beyond.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Including the first three authors of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> The percentages are based on information from a short questionnaire that 96 of the 112 respondents received.
- <sup>3</sup> In the few cases where indirectly identifiable information was revealed, it was anonymised during transcription. The transcribed interviews were slightly edited by removing some repetitions and ‘hmms’ to make the text more readable (Rapley 2001). Relatively lengthy passages of the transcripts are presented in the Results section to allow for an understanding of the collaborative production of meaning in the interviews, as recommended by Wibeck et al. (2007).
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.idrettsforbundet.no/tema/seksuell-trakassering-og-overgrep/filmer-til-opplaring/> (accessed on 26 August 2022).

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