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**BREAKING STEREOTYPES AND BARRIERS TO WORKING WITH MUSLIM AND WOMEN OF COLOR**

*Latisha Forster-Scott and Heather J. Peters*

There is silence about the intersection of sport, race, class and gender. Just as feminist sport psychologists appreciate that women are not men with breasts, sport psychologists must appreciate women of color within a cultural context. *(Hall, 2001, p. 396)*.

Cultural competence is needed to effectively work with Women of Color (WOC) in sport, exercise, and educational contexts and cannot take place without a high degree of self-critique on the part of sport psychology practitioners. In this chapter, we, two sport psychology practitioners, provide our experiences and reflections using feminist sport approaches when working with WOC. I, Latisha Forster Scott, identify as an African American, cisgender, heterosexual, abled body, married mom. I, Heather Peters, identify as a heterosexual, abled body, cisgender, upper middle class married mom with a learning disability. I also identify as White and European American. In using the term “European American” I acknowledge that I am not the “real” American and am clarifying my European ancestry as has been expected, historically, of people of color (e.g., African American, Asian American, Latino American, and Native American). Our identities have shaped how we move within society and our worldviews, which in turn impact our experiences within sport psychology. These experiences demonstrate the need for sport psychology practitioners, whether they counsel competitive athletes, work with recreational athletes or fitness enthusiasts, conduct research, teach in academia, or work in behavioral health to consider the complexities of personal identity, cultural identity, and feminist thought in each setting.

**Latisha**

I have worked in fitness for over 30 years, been a college professor for over 12 years, and have worked directly with athletes in academic and competitive settings
As a life skill counselor and independent consultant. As a female and racial minority in sport psychology, I have had my personal experiences in dealing with issues of racism and sexism in the practice of sport psychology. At times it can be difficult to shift between someone who consciously experiences the impact of racism and sexism routinely, and someone who is trying to operate in a way that is fair and open minded when consulting and teaching. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I will primarily focus on my experiences as a practitioner providing services to my clients and students.

Not long after the terror attacks of 9/11, two women walk into my classroom covered in hijab and niqab. What stood out to me is that one of the ladies had her face completely covered via the niqab so that all you could see were her eyes. I was immediately taken aback. In part because I was always accustomed to seeing my student’s faces and this was the first time that I was teaching women who wore traditional Muslim clothing. Although I was no stranger to Islam, I had to accept that most of what I knew was steeped in stereotypes. For example, Muslim women were forced to wear this type of clothing, they were not allowed to be “free” thinkers, and were forced into some type of restricted and subservient role as women.

As the semester continued, the two women stood out as two of the best students I have ever had, and their easy-going exchanges within the classroom allowed me to see beyond the stereotype. A third female, who was clearly friendly with the two women, and also Muslim, did not wear traditional clothing. In fact, there were no clear visible signs that she was Muslim. She dressed very modern, wore make-up and earrings, and I could always smell her perfume. Because I was curious about these differences, towards the end of the semester, I asked the more non—traditional woman about these differences. She explained the differences in their dress as a choice within the Muslim culture because their religion did not explicitly require them to wear specific attire. There were aspects of Islam and the different cultural beliefs that impacted how traditional or non—traditional males and females dressed. I was told that the student who was completely covered with the exception of her eyes chose to adhere to a stricter form of dress because she believed that her beauty was her gift to her husband only to be seen by him, or only to be seen in the presence of all females in private settings.

I personally know devout Christian females who never wear pants, wherein young girls are not allowed to wear earrings or earrings that dangle, no nail polish, and nuns wear something similar to hijabs. Christian females are able to express themselves differently through various clothing choices. So why would I expect that there would be a difference in Islam? I had to let that narrow way of thinking about Muslim women go and it was a real “a—ha” moment for me. As a culture dominated by Christianity and prejudices toward other religions, we have to examine our belief system when it comes to religion, the role of women, and beauty.

This experience affected how I view religious headwear worn during sport, the types of uniforms women are expected to wear and the discrimination women face when they want to participate in physical activity and sport. This is an issue that many White women and Christians, including Christian WOC, take for granted. It is a largely unexamined privilege. Headwear as it relates to religion and beliefs about wearing clothing that is too revealing, is an issue that keeps many women from participating in certain sports or physical activity. My American, Christian, heterosexual way of thinking tells me that “freedom” for women is being able to choose to wear whatever women want. I had to consider the idea that some women, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or any other religion, happily embrace or choose more traditional styles of dress because there is actual freedom in that too. There is freedom from the need to adhere to society’s judgements based on superficial aspects of beauty which include fashion trends, hair styles, make-up, or jewelry. This is not to imply that traditional or more conservative dress, as it relates to religion, means there is no concern about beauty; it is simply the idea that beauty is not heavily based on superficial adornments.

Years later, I had a similar experience once I opened my own fitness studio and offered group fitness classes and personal training. Two young professional Asian Muslim women signed up to take group fitness classes. One of the women wore pants, long sleeves, and a head scarf, which is different from a hijab in that it is a scarf simply draped over the head and lightly pinned to stay in place. My client would happily remove her head scarf to work out whenever there were only females present, and if she had on a short sleeve t-shirt, she would bring a long sleeve t-shirt or jacket to cover up if a male were present. If she anticipated that a male would be there, she would call ahead to verify. My clientele was about 85% female, so most of the time there was no male present. However, there was one particular Asian male who did come to many of the group fitness classes. He often arrived early before her class was over. There were times that she ran to put her head scarf back on once she realized he was present. At some point, he realized what was happening and became more cognizant of her presence and respected her by staying unseen in the waiting area until she was done. I do not know if he was Muslim, but I know that he took notice of the issue and was respectful of her without me saying anything.

This dynamic made me think about what we consider “modesty” and fitness apparel, and the lines that get drawn when it comes to male and female respectability politics. The man in the above example clearly had some cultural knowledge of this circumstance and responded accordingly. However, WOC cannot assume or expect in public spaces that most males would respond the same, even once he is informed. Despite the subjugation White females experience from males, they are more likely to be respected and protected in comparison to WOC. White male dominance has historically magnified the virtue and femininity of White females and degraded that of WOC (Cahn, 1990; Vertinsky & Captain, 1998). While it is important to note that Muslims are racially and ethnically diverse, WOC who also identify as Muslim are faced with an added layer of bias based on the intersectionality of religion, race, and gender. Additionally, fitness clothing, and sports uniforms are very revealing, and if it is a female’s desire to dress more modestly to exercise or participate in sport, she may find herself uncomfortable and unwelcomed in certain settings based on the explicitly expressed or
implicitly implied dress codes. Clothing that is not part of mainstream sport culture turns into a structural barrier to sport participation (Erickson, 2017); combined with racism and sexism, it becomes an intricate web of concerns that WOC are forced to face if they want to engage in physical activity in public spaces.

Sport psychology practitioners are often unaware of the delicate balance many WOC face when choosing the type of sport or physical activity that she will participate in based on stereotypes and the desire to function in a sport setting that is physically and psychologically safe. To better understand these concerns, feminist sport psychology practitioners will need to increase their knowledge of and advocate for women who uphold more modest styles of dress in sport settings. Practitioners will also need to expand their viewpoints on self-expressions of beauty and understand the identity politics associated with the intersectionality of religion, race and gender.

Heather

I have been practicing sport psychology for the past 16 years with individual athletes and teams at Division I, II, and III schools. For the past 12 years I have been a faculty member at the University of Minnesota Morris, where I teach classes related to multicultural psychology, psychopathology, and multicultural counseling and engage in community-based participatory action research in collaboration with Dr. Teresa Peterson, Darlene St. Clair, and the Dakota Wicohan Community. Below I reflect on some of my experiences within sport psychology that have challenged my worldviews and understanding of societal norms and improved the work I do with clients of color. I believe sport psychology practitioners, must reflect upon our errors, missteps, and shortcomings, and talk about these experiences with our supervisors and peers.

While I worked with a Division I Women's basketball team, coaches encouraged an African American player, who was struggling with mental health symptoms and behavioral problems, to meet with me individually. In our meetings I, like the coaches, focused on how the athlete could improve her behavior and manage her mental health. During this work I failed to examine how the player's experiences of oppression (i.e., growing up in a dangerous low socioeconomic environment, experiences of racism, and past physical trauma) contributed to her mental illness and behavior. By focusing on her thoughts, feelings, and behavior I failed to consider the larger context in which she lived (Gill, 2001) and unintentionally suggested that her problematic behavior and mental health issues were the result of personal deficits and not the systematic exclusion, silencing, and oppression due to membership in a non-dominant group in society (Crowder, 2016; Evans, Kincade, Marbly, & Seem, 2005).

Unfortunately, my mistake is common among many White European American sport psychology practitioners because of the cultural environments in which we were raised. From a young age I was taught that the United States of America is based on the political philosophy of meritocracy, the notion that economic goods or power are given to people on the basis of effort, achievement, and talent rather than other factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation or wealth. Further, I was raised within an individualistic cultural orientation which taught me that a person's successes and failures are the sole responsibility of the individual. Believing in the myth of meritocracy and working from an individualistic focus lead me to ask "What is wrong with the client", rather than "What happened to the client", and to attempt to "fix" her without understanding the individual or context in which she had to function. My mistake is an example of a microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007) in that I negated the client's thoughts, feelings, and experiential reality as a person of color. Further, my identity blind approach probably exacerbated the client's stress, which in turn negatively impacted her mental health.

Although the client showed some improvement, I knew our therapeutic relationship was weaker than I'd like and my interventions were not as effective as I'd hoped. Unfortunately, I did not fully understand my errors until half way through my internship at UC Davis. My clinical and sport psychology supervisors both routinely encouraged me to use a person-in-context framework and explore how my identities (i.e., White, European American, cisgender, abled bodied, heterosexual, woman) influenced my counseling approach and the clients with whom I worked. This self-critique helped me realize that I grew up believing in the myth of meritocracy and in a "color blind" society that valued White people and considered them the norm. I was taught "not to see color" (as if that is possible) and to focus on the similarities, not the differences, between myself and People of Color. Further, I learned that by not seeing color I was a "good person" and not racist. It's ironic that while being taught "not to see color" I was simultaneously told that White people are better than People of Color, we are successful because we work harder than People of Color, and we are the standard to which all else should strive to emulate. These beliefs prevented me from seeing how systems of oppression operate within society and negatively impact People of Color; exploring how my identities afford me privileges that provide me greater opportunities and advantages than people from marginalized backgrounds; examining my implicit biases towards People of Color; and challenging how my biases influence my thoughts, feelings and behaviors. I began understanding how my beliefs, lack of awareness, and denial lead to racial microaggressions in session, weak therapeutic alliances with clients of color, and subsequently poor therapeutic outcomes for clients of color.

I used this information to reflect on my work with the previously mentioned African American basketball player. I realized that WOC operate outside the boundaries of what I, a White European American woman, recognize as my stereotypical norm based on Western ideals of appropriateness. My error taught me, that issues of marginalization, bias, powerlessness, discrimination, and oppression along with gender and gender role socialization influence WOC. This new awareness motivated me to examine presenting issues within the individual client as well as their sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Evans et al., 2005). Further, my goal became to assist clients in perceiving their current situation from a person-in-context perspective by examining how the various layers of context surrounding them such as family, school, community, society, significant others, and social
support have influenced them and their problems (Crowder, 2016). Also, I began focusing on WOC’s strengths and coping styles rather than on deficits, validating their feelings, thoughts and choices, and empowering them to use their personal and social power to take actions that enhance their well-being (Tzou, Kim, & Waldheim, 2012).

After, I realized how my unconscious biases (e.g., people control their own destinies, privilege and systems of oppression do not exist, White is the norm) negatively impacted the clients of color with whom I worked. I began openly discussing my mistakes with colleagues. Peer consultation provides supportive spaces to interrogate whiteness, privilege, bias, and cultural awareness. During one such discussion a colleague shared an experience they had while working with a highly diverse and successful Division I school that was close to downtown and in the center of a predominantly African American, economically depressed community.

I witnessed foul calls being called almost exclusively against “the diverse” team. In a conversation about this issue one coach revealed that “friendly” officials had told her that our teams were universally characterized as playing with a “rough style”. Our racially diverse players, as compared to other teams in the region, contributed to an expectation of “rough, out-of-control”, play. Because the biased refereeing occurred at almost every game we framed it as an ‘expected’ home court advantage to opponents.

After sharing this experience, my colleague and I discussed the importance and centrality of race, the impacts of institutional racism, and that female athletes of color experience added stressors because of stereotypes and bias from referees, teammates, coaches, media, and fans. We agreed that we needed to learn how to help WOC develop active problem-solving skills to deal with referees’, judges’, and coaches’ implicit biases and acknowledged that our work had to shift from the individual to the social in an attempt to create societal transformation.

While pursuing societal change I keep two things in mind in an attempt to avoid falling prey to either the “White savior” mentality, assuming I have all the answers, or complacency. First, people understand their realities better than I, thus before taking action I first listen and then, when appropriate, ask if and how I can be of assistance. Second, I cannot sit back and expect others, especially people from marginalized backgrounds, to do this work. I, as a privileged person need to use my privilege to educate others with privilege. For example, if I find myself in a situation similar to my colleague, I will talk to the coaches and ask what ideas they have regarding how to address the referee’s biased calls. Through conversation we may determine that I will approach the organizational body overseeing the referees, explain my observations, and offer to develop workshops that would address the referees’ implicit biases. I will not act without the coach’s approval because my privilege may blind me to consequences that could negatively impact the coaches and players. This approach is in line with two of the major tenets of feminist psychology which include seeking equal status and empowerment in society not only for women but for all oppressed minority groups and maintaining a commitment to action for social and political change (Worell & Remer, 2003).

In conclusion feminist sport psychology practitioners provide services that empower rather than oppress WOC and are mindful and respectful of WOC’s gender, racial, religious, cultural, immigration and historical characteristics. Further, feminist sport psychology practitioners work to understand the importance of race and the fact that rather than leaving their culture at the door (Dewar, 1993) WOC bring their culture into all exercise, educational and sporting arenas.

**Key terms**
- Color blindness
- Cultural competence
- Hijab
- Islam
- Intersectionality
- Microinvalidation
- Muslim
- Niqab
- Privilege
- Stereotypes
- Whiteness
- Women of Color

**Discussion questions**
1. How do culture and religion intersected by sexism and racism impact the experiences of WOC as they engage in sport activities?
2. What is the difference in taking the “what happened to her” vs. “what is wrong with her” approach to supporting WOC as they improve their life and sport experiences?

**Reflection questions**
1. We all have some degree of personal bias towards others. What are yours?
2. How have your personal biases affected your interactions within a sport, exercise, or educational context, particularly when it comes to WOC or Muslims?
3. Do you have a person or resource you can utilize to help answer your questions, or address concerns, when dealing with issues of cultural competency in your profession?
References


When systems fail: our role as feminists

In 2017, former USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar “pled guilty in federal court and two Michigan state courts, and he was sentenced, cumulatively, to between 140 and 360 years in prison” (McPhee & Dowden, 2018, p. 2). In 2018 survivors of Larry Nassar spoke truth to individual and collective power, testifying about years of sexual abuse perpetrated by Nassar. Following his conviction and sentencing, an independent investigation was commissioned by the board of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and performed by law firm Ropes and Gray. Ropes and Gray uncovered a system that failed girls and women participating in USA gymnastics and at Michigan State University stating, “these institutions and individuals ignored red flags, failed to recognize textbook grooming behaviors, or in some egregious instances, dismissed clear calls for help from girls and young women who were being abused by Nassar” (Meyers, 2018). In an opinion piece by Lindsay Gibbs (2018) titled, “The Time Has Come for Congress to Dismantle the USOC”, Gibbs reviews the findings of the Ropes and Gray report which simply are: USOC “took absolutely no action to protect athletes from Nassar after it found out about the allegations of sexual abuse” (Gibbs, 2018). Gibbs argues the failed system is due to multiple complex motivations including the USOC’s desire to win and remain an Olympic powerhouse and willingness to exploit athletes to do so; as well as its economic based fear of doing damage to an “iconic brand”. Gibbs solution: dismantle it. When reading this piece, our first thought was, “hey, hey slow down there..” But maybe Lindsey Gibbs is right. Perhaps her sentiments really aren’t that radical, but practical or as Angela Davis’ has said, “radical simple means grasping things at the root.” Recognizing the USOC and Michigan State have failed our women and girl athletes, to bring justice to this system