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## **Female Collegiate Athletes' Perceptions of Psychological Safety in Team Environments**

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*The purpose of this research was to examine female athletes' perception of psychological safety in the collegiate athletic team environment. This included identifying dimensions that both cultivate and deteriorate psychological safety. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants representing two NCAA Division I – Autonomous conferences. Four themes were constructed including: (a) interpersonal relationships, (b) consistency and accountability, (c) fostering vulnerability, and (d) athlete voice suppression. These findings further exposed the central role of the coach in cultivating a psychologically safe team environment for collegiate student-athletes. However, the results also provide practical insights into specific behavior and communication necessary to cultivate psychological safety within a team as well as behavior and communication that can deteriorate perceptions of psychological safety within a team.*

*Keywords: Team Climate, Team Culture, Psychological Safety*

**S**port can be a space for participants to create purpose, develop positive self-identity, promote self-worth, and even aid in further academic and social growth outside of athletics (Bardick et al., 2009). However, despite the many positives that sport can offer, it is also a space ripe for issues of bullying, as well as physical, emotional, and even sexual abuse. The impact of coaches on the performance of their athletes is well established, but many times the power and control coaches have over their athletes can result in unethical and abusive behavior (Taylor et al., 2020; Weiss et al., 2008). Former Ohio State University football athlete K’Vaughan Pope was quoted as saying, “You only go to OSU if you want to be... highly disrespected by the coaching staff” and explained that during his time there he was subjected to racial stereotyping and disrespect, as well as lacking the ability to contribute his opinions in relation to his own mental and physical health (Harrington, 2022, para 1). Auburn University swimmer Anna-Julia Kutsch quit the team during her sophomore year and was quoted stating,

The existing culture of the Auburn swim program—in terms of both the athletic and psychological climate— was not allowing me to maximize my potential as an athlete and person. The [coaches] lack fundamental traits which prevent them from connecting with their athletes, having positive communication and creating an environment of trust and understanding. This made it increasingly difficult to grow as a person and athlete. (Ortegon, 2021, para 8)

Several high-profile women’s basketball coaches have been fired or resigned in the midst of allegations of abusive behavior toward their players and creating a toxic team environment (i.e., former North Carolina coach Sylvia Hatchell, former Georgia Tech coach Ma Chelle Joseph, former Texas Tech coach Marlene Stollings; Bower, 2021). Consequently, in recent years there have also been incidents of sexual abuse of athletes from peer athletes, coaches and support staff (i.e., Larry Nassar at Michigan State and USA Gymnastics, Jerry Sandusky at Penn State, and the culture of silence at Louisiana State University).

Each collegiate athletic team has a distinct culture, but there are underlying trends that warrant further exploration into collegiate athletic team climates and the student-athlete experience. The 2019 NCAA GOALS study revealed that only 63% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I female athletes believed their coaches cared about their mental well-being. This was a decrease of three percentage points since the last GOALS study conducted in 2015. Additionally, this was 7% less than the reported average for male athletes within Division I teams. Furthermore, only 65% of Division I female athletes (excluding women’s basketball which reported only 60%) believed that their coaches and teammates created an inclusive team environment for all members of the team (NCAA Research, 2019).

The aforementioned perceptions of inclusivity and lack of care from their coach warrant further exploration into the team climates within Division I athletic teams. Nearly 90% of NCAA Division I female athletes choose their institution because of athletics and spend more than 30 hours per week on athletics (NCAA Research, 2019). This demonstrates the centrality of athletics to their experiences and the importance of intentionally establishing a team climate that is psychologically safe. Psychological safety being an emergent state within a team climate that enables team members to feel safe to show up authentically, engage in learning behavior (i.e., ask questions, seek feedback), and experiment with new tactics to enhance performance.

Research has clearly established that the coach is central to establishing the team environment (i.e., Gosai et al., 2021; Jowett, 2017; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Wachsmuth & Jowett, 2020). Coaches that provide high levels of encouragement, support, and autonomy are more likely to create positive experiences and even lead to higher athletic performances (Horn, 2008). Furthermore, quality coach-athlete relationships can foster a sense of enjoyment in the activity, reward, fulfillment, and satisfaction (Wachsmuth & Jowett, 2020). Transformational leadership, positive coach-athlete relationships, and team psychological safety lead to athletes feeling like they flourish in their sport environment (Gosai et al., 2021).

However, coaching relationships and the team environment can also cause issues related to psychological safety, and instances of psychological or even physical harm (i.e., Gearity & Metzger, 2017; Gearity & Murray, 2011). Athletes have reported feelings of demotivation and distraction from their coaches resulting in divisions within the team (Gearity & Murray, 2011). Furthermore, Gearity and Murray (2011) found instances of coaches degrading their athletes and causing them to create patterns of self-doubt, “often because poor coaches didn’t instruct athletes, but rather constantly degraded them, athletes determined, and believed, that they must indeed be horrible” (p. 216). Similarly, Gearity and Metzger (2017) illustrated that poor conduct from coaches, specifically language and actions that reflect racial and gender microaggressions and microaffirmations greatly impact the psychological safety of the athletes involved in these team cultures. Thus, continued research must be conducted to understand the role, power, and domain of coaches over their athletes, as the aforementioned examples and research have pointed to the short and long-term impact of environments where athletes are unsafe and unheard.

This research explores psychological safety within the collegiate athletic team from the female athlete perspective. Moving beyond the aforementioned statistics, NCAA Research (Goals Study; 2019) demonstrated that women were less likely than their male counterparts to agree or strongly agree with the statement “my coaches and teammates have created an inclusive environment for all members of the team” (Slide 38). This was the case for female athletes within all three NCAA divisions. Furthermore, research has also found that women in sport organizations both as participants and leaders experience barriers and circumstances that their male peers do not (Burton, 2015). Additionally, women’s collegiate teams are primarily coached by White men, leaving room for potential issues of power and abuse (LaVoi, 2019). Thus, understanding the experiences and perceptions of female athletes in relation to their team is particularly salient. This study provides an in-depth understanding on the manifestations of psychological safety within the team environment as well as the behaviors that deteriorate psychological safety in the team environment, an important research contribution as there is limited research on how psychological safety is conceptualized and applied within the sport domain. This is important to understand because psychological safety leads to both increased wellness and performance among other outcomes (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017; Saxe & Hardin, in press). These are critical outcomes for both individuals and teams within collegiate athletics, and coaches need to understand how to cultivate psychological safety within their team climates to further protect the present and long-term well-being of their athletes as well as facilitate athletic success.

## **Team Culture and Climate**

An optimal team environment is critical to the collegiate athlete experience and performance (Fransen et al., 2020), and the collegiate athletic team environment is synonymous

with its culture and climate. A team is defined as a “group that exists within the context of a larger organization, has clearly defined membership, and shares responsibility for a team product or service” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 351). The collegiate athletics system is organized into teams, but each team is distinct through its team culture and team climate. Team culture refers to the underlying values, beliefs, and attitudes that drive daily behavior (Baer & Frese, 2003). The team climate refers to the manifestation of the team culture into daily practices such as communication, decision-making processes, group interactions, leader behavior, and job conditions (Hansen & Wernerfelt, 1989). Climate is important to understand and intentionally cultivate because research has consistently linked it to valuable individual outcomes (i.e. satisfaction, commitment, turnover intentions) and organizational outcomes (i.e., team performance, innovation; Kuenzi & Schminke, 2009). Kuenzi and Schminke (2009) posited that “research has demonstrated conclusively that climate matters” (p. 698).

### *Psychological Safety Construct*

Psychological safety is a potential emergent state within team climate. Psychological safety is a “shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Psychological safety does not propose a sense of unconditional leniency or a constant state of “positive affect, but rather a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354).

As organizations began relying heavily on work teams, increased scholarly attention was given to explore team effectiveness and explain why some teams learned, adapted, and performed better than others. Some scholars pointed to resources (i.e., facilities, equipment), structural features (i.e., hierarchy, leader competence), and reward incentives (i.e., bonuses) as possible explanations (Edmondson, 1999). However, interpersonal explanations emerged as well. Interpersonal explanations explored how information was being transferred within the team and psychological safety emerged as a potential explanation (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety was first addressed by Schien and Bennis (1965) and was regarded as necessary for individuals to “feel secure and capable of changing” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). However, Edmondson’s (1999) study further distinguished psychological safety as a distinct construct worthy of exploration within work teams. Edmondson’s (1999) study utilized a mixed-methods approach to further explain the relationship between team learning behavior, psychological safety, and performance.

The study included 53 teams (496 individuals) within the same organization. Results indicated that psychological safety significantly predicts team learning behavior (i.e., seeking feedback, experimenting, asking questions) and team learning behavior is significantly and positively associated with team performance. Additionally, context support (i.e., resources, information, rewards) and team leader coaching predicted psychological safety. However, different types of teams (i.e., product development, management, cross-functional) and team tenure (i.e., how long the team had been together) did not significantly affect psychological safety and had no effect on team learning behavior. Edmondson (1999) stated, “The results of the study supported the proposition that team psychological safety affects learning behavior, which in turn affects team performance” (p. 376). These results began to elicit explanations for *how* teams with context support (i.e., access to information and resources) and supportive coaching function more effectively. However, it is also important to note that teams that did not

necessarily have strong leadership or lacked resources (i.e., short team members) yet engaged in team learning behavior were able to overcome these obstacles and still perform at a high-level.

Many studies since Edmondson (1999) have further refined the antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety as well as its role in facilitating team effectiveness (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). However, psychological safety is many times misunderstood as an environment without conflict. Rather, it is an environment that can handle conflict and adversity constructively and efficiently to adapt to the demands while still performing at a high level (O'Donovan et al., 2021). O'Donovan et al. (2021) wrote:

Psychological safety does not imply a team where people are necessarily close friends and where there is never any conflict or problems...psychological safety can facilitate the necessary “functional” and constructive conflict that is required to learn and improve how teams work together. (p. 2)

While psychological safety bears similarities to other constructs such as trust and team cohesion, there are distinct differences. Trust is the perception that “other’s future actions will be favorable to one’s interests” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Psychological safety is the perception that one’s team understands their intentions and will give them the benefit of the doubt (i.e., trust). Cohesion references the team’s proclivity to remain united in the pursuit of their objectives (Eys et al., 2021).

There has been extensive research on psychological safety in management and organizational science literature (i.e., Carmelli & Gittel, 2009; Edmondson 1996, 1999; Hu et al., 2018; Liu & Keller, 2021; Liu et al., 2016; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Remtulla et al., 2021; Rozovsky, 2015), but there is limited research on psychological safety in sport (Fransen et al., 2020; Gosai et al., 2021; McLaren & Spink, 2021; Smittick et al., 2019). However, psychological safety elicits many desirable outcomes for sports teams such as learning behavior, communication, creativity/innovation, increased job attitudes, increased performance, and wellness (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017) and warrants further exploration in this domain.

### *Psychological Safety Research in Sport*

Fransen et al. (2020) explored the extent to which psychological safety mediated the relationship between identity leadership and outcomes such as satisfaction with team performance and team resilience as well as individual health and burnout. The results demonstrated that psychological safety in the athletic team environment is related to “better team functioning, improved team resilience, and ultimately greater satisfaction with performance” (Fransen et al., 2020, p. 8). Fransen et al. (2020) used psychological safety to explain why and how identity leadership led to these outcomes. Findings from this study demonstrated both individual (i.e., higher health) and team level outcomes (i.e., higher performance) were mediated by psychological safety.

Smittick et al. (2019) found leader incivility was negatively correlated with team cohesion, psychological safety, and performance. These results reinforce the importance of leader behavior on emergent states within the team. Leaders that behave brazenly toward team members will corrode perceptions of psychological safety among team members and therefore diminish team performance (Smittick et al., 2019). Similarly, Gosai et al. (2021) found that both

relationship quality and psychological safety predicated athletes' development and success. Collectively, these findings suggest that coaches as leaders have a significant role to play in creating an environment where athletes feel valued, connected, confident, and comfortable.

The aforementioned studies have initiated psychological safety research in sport, however, there are still gaps that remain. Research has established the antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety within organizational behavior literature, but there is a gap regarding specific behavior and communication that cultivate and deteriorate psychological safety within the team environment. Therefore, this study, using Edmondson's (1999) seminal work as a base, sought to fill this gap by interviewing female student-athletes about their team climates and perceptions of psychological safety within their team environments.

## Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research design was utilized to gain an in-depth understanding regarding the manifestations of psychological safety (or lack thereof) within collegiate athletic team climates from the perspective of the female athlete (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). Thus, the goal of this study was to provide "factual responses to questions about how people feel about a particular space, what reasons they have for using features of the space, who is using particular services or functions of a space, and the factors that facilitate or hinder use" (Jiggins Colorafi & Evans, 2016, p. 17); particularly of interest to the researchers was the factual responses related to psychological safety, features of psychological safety, and the factors that facilitated or hindered psychological safety for the participants.

Sandelowski (2000) described a benefit to this descriptive qualitative approach is the ability to provide "a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" and furthermore, to "stay closer to the surface of words and events being described by the participant" (p. 336). This particular qualitative inquiry was used because it allows the researcher to gain deeper understanding and practical application regarding how a theoretical construct "shows up" in human experiences (Tracy, 2019) and provides a broader exploration of the topic (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). Although other options and methodologies were explored for this study (i.e., phenomenology, grounded theory, etc.), the researchers felt that rooting this work in a descriptive qualitative approach following the general principles of naturalistic inquiry as well as the ability to use "an often-eclectic compilation of sampling, data collection, and data analysis techniques" (Jiggins Colorafi & Evans, 2016, p. 18) was beneficial and fitting for the research design and purpose. This descriptive qualitative approach allowed more freedom to exclusively describe the experiences of the participants without strict adherence to pre-existing theoretical or philosophical commitments that are often specific to disciplinary traditions (i.e., ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology; Jiggins Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Again, the purpose of this research was to examine female athletes' perception of psychology safety in the collegiate athletic team environment. This included identifying dimensions that both cultivate and deteriorate psychological safety.

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited through purposeful criterion sampling. Potential participants were identified through publicly available university email database systems. The principal investigator (PI) emailed prospective participants (3,037) directly with information about the

study in order to solicit participation. The inclusion criteria for participation included being a current female athlete at an NCAA Division I – FBS Autonomous institution. Respondents represented a variety of sports from two different FBS conferences and were at least juniors in their class standing (see Table 1). This promoted a depth of experience and understanding about their collegiate athletic team environments. Respondents from different sports were chosen because Edmondson’s (1999) study demonstrated that psychological safety is a group-level construct. Therefore, while participants in this study represented different sports and institutions, group experiences are generally salient because of the shared experiences and context within the team environment (Edmondson, 1999).

Table 1

*Participant demographics*

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Black	1
Biracial	2
White	9
<b>Sport</b>	
Equestrian	1
Rowing	1
Softball	1
Swimming & Diving	5
Track & Field and Cross Country	4
<b>Class</b>	
Junior	4
Senior	7
Graduate Student	1

*Data Collection*

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained prior to participant recruitment and data collection. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to ensure that the interview addressed the root of the phenomenon while also allowing for flexibility based on each participants’ experiences. This less-structured form of an interview guide allows for probe questions and is intended to “stimulate discussion rather than dictate it” (Tracy, 2019, p. 139). The quantitative instrument measuring psychological safety was used to develop the interview guide (Edmondson, 1999; Tracy, 2019; see Table 2). This ensured that the questions appropriately targeted the construct of psychological safety while also eliciting depth and further understanding of this construct in athletic team climates. Additionally, each participant answered demographic questions and chose a pseudonym to represent them in the research. Each interview was conducted via video conferencing and was approximately one hour. This allowed for geographic flexibility as well as safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcript was sent to the participants for member-checking

resulting in no significant changes from the participants. Member-checking consists of “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and the narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis was rooted in an iterative analysis approach. This is the vacillation of analysis between the emerging themes within the current study and the previous literature and theoretical underpinnings of the study (Tracy, 2019). Data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) 6-step thematic analysis. The six steps include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining the themes, and producing the report. The first step began with the PI transcribing each interview and then reading through each transcript for accuracy and understanding. Initial codes were created through primary cycle coding which begins with “an examination of the data and assigning words or phrases that capture their essence” (Tracy, 2019, p. 189). This coding was focused on “what” was in the data rather than assigning meaning to and interpreting the data. A cumulative list of the initial codes was created and then a second round of coding was conducted to begin assigning meaning and comparing the codes to one another. Thirdly, a priori, or theoretical coding was conducted based on the assessment of psychological safety provided by Edmondson (1999) and then these codes were grouped into categories (Saldaña, 2016). These categories were then further refined, combined, or fractured to create the final themes that were most representative of the data. The themes were then defined, and quotes were used to illustrate the defined themes and produce the final report.

Table 2

#### *Interview Guide*

<b>Interview Guide</b>
1. Can you tell me about your team environment?
2. Can you tell me about what creates and influences the team environment?
3. What does it feel like being a member of your team?
4. What does it feel like to make a mistake on your team?
5. Can you tell me about how issues are handled on your team?
6. How are differences among team members handled?
7. What does it feel like bringing an issue/problem to the attention of your coach(es)?
8. How does it feel offering input to your coaches and team members?
9. What does it feel like asking for help on your team?
10. What behavior/communication demonstrates the safety or lack of safety in voicing your concerns, questions, or input?
11. Can you tell me about how team members are valued on your team?
12. What does a psychologically safe team environment look like?
13. Would you describe your team environment as psychologically safe?
14. Is there anything that we have not discussed that you would like to add?



## Findings

Four themes were constructed from the data analysis: (a) interpersonal relationships; (b) consistency and accountability; (c) fostering vulnerability, and (d) athlete voice suppression. The first three themes had the potential to establish psychological safety within the team environment when utilized appropriately; however, there was also a dark side to these which detracted from psychological safety. The final theme, athlete voice suppression, exemplified distinct barriers for athletes to engage in learning behavior and honest discussion within the team environment which exemplifies a lack of psychological safety in their team environments.

### *Interpersonal Relationships*

It became evident that an antecedent to psychological safety involved high-quality interpersonal relationships. This reinforces the literature regarding the antecedents of psychological safety within a team (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017; Saxe & Hardin, in press). Participants generally spoke about the coach as the driver (or deterrent) of psychological safety in their team environment. The term “top-down” was frequently used to describe how a team environment is cultivated. However, participants also described having an “outside of the coaching staff” culture among just the team members. When describing her team environment, Laura said, “there's one with just your athletes and then there's one with the coaching staff involved.”

Some participants described feeling psychologically safe among teammates but not in the presence of coaches. For example, Hannah described what it feels like to be a member of her team by saying:

I'm very proud to be on this team, and to be able to work alongside these girls. I think we all have a mutual respect for each other. I don't know if safe is the right word or comfortable but I know no matter what they'll have my back whether it's every time I walk in for a meet (competition) or if something happens in my personal life. Their reaction is never something I have to worry about.

However, Hannah described this feeling within her teammates, rather than with her head coach. This sentiment was echoed with other participants (i.e., Sally, Marie). Additionally, Hannah said that she had to wait to create this environment after certain upperclassmen left the team. When Hannah was a freshman, there was an environment that was dictated by hierarchy and motivated with fear. However, as Hannah stepped into a leadership role as an upperclassman and those seniors left, her peers discussed the culture and climate they wanted to create on their team and worked toward implementing it.

It was evident that a true psychologically safe environment requires high-quality interpersonal relationships with both peers and leaders. High-quality interpersonal relationships began with an acknowledgement and care for the participants as people rather than simply athletes. This was primarily referenced from the head coach or leader of the team. Grace said, “he (head coach) preaches himself as a guy that's going to be like a dad to us, but he's never tried to invest in us as people and have conversations about us outside of the pool.” Behaviors that cultivated this included when a coach asks how the athlete is doing and truly listens to the answer. Likewise, when a coach is aware of a change in an athlete's demeanor and body

language and checks in with them to see how they are doing. Behaviors such as these build a baseline level of psychological safety because of an established coach-athlete relationship with consistent communication, care, and concern. Elle described this by saying:

When he [primary coach] asks me how I'm doing... he's not just checking a box. He is very aware of how we answer. For example, I decided that I was going to break-up with my boyfriend. I was at the track and I'm doing my workout and...I'm not feeling super perky or anything. And [primary coach] asked me, (name) how are you? And I was like I'm okay. And then he started questioning that...Like why are you just okay today? I think that made me feel seen. I feel like he's observant of changes in my behavior and things like that which makes me feel valued as an individual like outside...He was concerned for me outside of my running. I was doing all the running perfectly fine, but he could tell that, like my demeanor was off and I think that creates a good environment.

Meg described a situation that helped strengthen her relationship with her assistant coach after the head coach directed an emotional outburst at her. She said:

[Assistant coach] called me after that, and really just spent a long time on the phone with me and listened to me cry and really apologized for him [head coach] and tried to explain as much as she could his behavior and just tried to convince me that it was going to be okay. Then she called me throughout the next week or two... to check in on me sort of thing and make sure that I'm okay. Just as a human being, not as an athlete. And that was a big shifting point of when I knew I could trust her from then on out. She did prioritize me as a person over an athlete. Very unlike [the head] coach.

However, participants also described experiences of when they realized the care was disingenuous, performative, or conditional. This conditionality affected their feelings of psychological safety within their team environment. Elle said, "Our head coach will ask you, 'what's going on (name)' and I respond, but you can tell, he mentally is already moved on. He was just checking a box. He's already over to another place." Additionally, Grace said, "If you didn't [perform your best] or where he [head coach] wanted you to be, he [head coach] didn't give you attention. He didn't give you encouragement."

Another detractor from psychological safety in the team environment was emotional outbursts from a coach. Many participants described how a coach's reaction may shift irregularly depending on other circumstances such as their mood, the athlete they are coaching, and the time of season. This lack of consistency and dependency on performance for value, communication, and attention left the participants with unease and the need for self-protection. Meg said:

...he (coach) can be really supportive, but if you haven't been [competing well] and then you don't [do well in a workout], he can just rip into you. There's a little bit of fear of the unknown. Like you don't know when it's going to happen, unless you really can assess coaches' mood beforehand, and know if it's going to be okay or not...There are times where it's totally fine if you are not hitting it; coach will even [shorten a workout] if there's a group of girls that just aren't doing well in a workout. There's just a lot of unknown with that.

Meg described how she felt safe on her team her freshman year because at this time she was consistently receiving positive feedback and support from the coach. However, her sophomore year when she hit a performance slump, she began to realize that her relationship with her coach was only positive her freshman year because she was performing well. This realization affected her perception of her coach as well as her own safety and security in the team environment.

However, it was not only the coaches' treatment of the participants that influenced their perceptions of psychological safety within the team. The participant's observations of how coaches treated other athletes as well as other staff members impacted their perceptions of psychological safety within the team. Holly described how she observed the head coach express anger to other coaches on staff if the head coach thought they were not instructing the team properly. She said:

I lost a little bit of respect. I'm like you've been doing this for so long, and you haven't managed to communicate in a more effective way or control your reactions, control your anger. So, I do lose a little bit of respect [for the coach].

Similarly, Meg described the empathy she felt for her teammate's who had to experience bullying from her coach. While she felt fortunate that she was not the chosen one, it still impacted her perception of psychological safety on the team. Meg said:

I was definitely kind of the favored freshman that year from Coach. Whereas another roommate of mine who came in that year with about the same times as me and improved, but not significantly. And [Coach] decided that she needed to lose weight. And she has just been constantly bullied by Coach...for the first two years. She never left his office without crying because of the things he would say, and she didn't tell me what he said, but it was obviously a very bad relationship. And that it is just scary to think that that could have been me if I didn't have a radically good season.

Interpersonal relationships throughout the hierarchy of the team affected perceptions of psychological safety among team members. This perception was impacted not only by their own interpersonal relationships, but also observations of how leaders interacted with other members of the team. Interpersonal relationships that fostered psychological safety in the team environment were built upon respect, trust, communication, and care for the person, not just the athlete. Research, along with this work supports that psychologically safe teams built on quality interpersonal relationships function more cohesively and effectively (Fransen et al., 2020; Gosai et al., 2021). Interpersonal relationships that detracted from perceptions of psychological safety were conditional based on performance and had unpredictable interactions (i.e., emotional outbursts) based on the context of the situation (i.e., losing a meet, losing a recruit) which could lead to diminished performances (Smittick et al., 2019).

### *Consistency and Accountability*

Psychological safety was synonymous with consistency and accountability. It was evident that the participants wanted a level of consistency when it came to words, action, and treatment. There was an expectation from participants that words and action would align, particularly when it involved discipline. The participants began to feel unsafe when there was

incongruence between words and actions because they were unsure of the truth and what the expectations were on the team. The participants expected all team members to be held accountable to team expectations, but they also expected to have behavior separated from their personal character. Marie gave an example of this when she broke the team dry season (no drinking alcohol during certain parts of the season, even if you are of legal age to do so) rules. She said:

Me and my roommates messed up this year and had a glass of wine during the dry season, which obviously is not right. We apologized to the team...[and] we had a meeting to tell the coaches where I was told that I am toxic, selfish and I'm dead weight.

Rather than the behavior being addressed and consequences being enforced based on the rules of the team, Marie felt as though she was diminished as a person. Additionally, Marie pointed out another example where she was called into the coaches' office for a formal meeting about the coach's suspicions of her going out (to the bars) on a Saturday night. However, her teammate (who exhibited the same behavior as her but was a top team performer) was addressed by the coaching staff with a casual conversation on the pool deck. During these instances, Marie was willing to accept the consequences and had an understanding that she made a mistake, however, when it was addressed as a personal attack on her character and teammates were treated differently based on their performance ability, it diminished her perception of psychological safety moving forward with the team. When expectations were set and actions were not taken evenly across the team, it devalued people on the team and led to the belief of favoritism. Elle described her experience with this by saying:

There were kids who lied and they were reprimanded with threats of kicking them off the team. But none of that happened. They were at the meet next time we were competing. So, it's kind of like punishment or handling those situations, sometimes words are said but actions aren't always done.

Elle went on to describe that she began to notice a trend within the coaching staff and the lack of action following their words. This caused her to feel like they were not willing to achieve the expectations they said they had for the team because when people did not abide by the rules and hold themselves accountable, they were not held accountable by the coaches. Therefore, her respect for the program, its goals, and those in leadership diminished over time. Elle began to disregard the coaches' requests to bring issues to the attention of the coaches because she did not believe they would take any action. When she further theorized about this, she reasoned that the coaches have pressure on them from administrators to perform. She hoped that administrators would back the coaches following discipline of high performers on the team and the coaches felt safe to manage the team as they felt necessary; however, she did not know if that was the case.

Other participants had similar experiences. When concerns were raised to coaches or administrators, there were words said that reassured them that there would be some sort of follow-up and communication about the issue. However, this usually did not happen. Emily said, "I think that they don't understand how non-response to small issues just compound and break down trust in their ability to lead." The participants expected to be held accountable and for others to be held accountable, and when they were not, the psychological safety on the team

diminished. Lexi discussed the difference between constructive accountability and destructive accountability. She said:

Instead of being like “Hey, you know, pick it up, I know you’re not having the best day.” Being like “Gosh, you suck because you’re having a bad day, like, why are you sucking today?” That’s when you’re coming for someone instead of just...disciplining someone. You are not giving them criticism that is going to help them in the long run.

One participant described how her coach would always hold the women on the team accountable to the expectations. However, when consequences were delivered they were delivered in a way that reinforced the expectations of the team and the coach’s belief and care for the athlete rather than demeaning the person who violated the expectation. Grace said:

If you messed up in practice, you got the consequences. If I overslept practice, I got the consequence. But, it was more like, I’m doing this because I care about you and because I want you to learn and grow from it, not because I hate you.

This illustrates the importance of intentions and communication when holding someone accountable to the team expectations. Mo also described how her coach held her accountable because he cared for her and believed in her. Mo said:

I’m very thankful because I know he only does it because he cares about me. If he thinks that we can do something, even if it’s the hardest thing in the world, he is not going to hold us to an inch of a lower standard.

Consistency and accountability were important to the participants’ perceptions of psychological safety within the team. The participants expected consistency (i.e., team members being treated similarly for similar behavior, coaches behaving according to their values rather than their mood) and accountability (i.e., team members being held accountable to team expectations and standards). This also highlights the need for communication when a coach deviates from what the apparent decision may be based on team expectations and standards or consistency. Therefore, in instances such as these participants described their frustration deriving from actions not matching words. Therefore, if coaches do not plan to act or do not agree with the student-athletes’ perspective, it is important to communicate this with the athlete and describe the logic behind a particular decision.

Participants also described practical implications for how to hold team members accountable that reinforce the expectations of the team and intentions of the leader rather than degrade the individual. This coincides with Edmondson’s (1999) findings regarding the importance of understanding team leaders and team member’s intentions when accepting feedback. This provides coaches with clear examples of how to frame accountability in a way that reaches the desired outcome (i.e., behavior change and recommitment) rather than other potential outcomes (i.e., tension in the relationship, resentment).

### *Fostering Vulnerability*

Another theme that emerged from the data was the importance of fostering vulnerability within the team environment. This theme illuminates how displays of vulnerability, from a teammate or coach, impacted the perception of psychological safety within the team environment. Many times, there was an intentionality with fostering vulnerability on the team. The intentionality came from a coach or a team member who had influence. Laura described vulnerability on her team by saying:

I'm not saying we cry to each other every day. [It is people] that you can be honest and yourself around. Usually people that you can do that around recognize that people make mistakes. That people are not always there on their "A" game.

When another person displayed vulnerability, particularly a person in a position of power (i.e., coach, upperclassmen, team captain), it showed others that it is acceptable for them to display vulnerability. This particularly impacted the perception of making a mistake and the perception of speaking one's mind. On some teams, making a mistake was still taboo and was punished punitively. However, on other teams, vulnerability was used as a way to show that mistakes are opportunities for learning. This allowed participants to shift their attention from focusing on not making a mistake to focusing on performing well. Hannah described the cultural shift in her team by saying, "It feels more like we're all there as a whole, working towards the same thing. I think it's just made everyone a little happier, and a little more willing to try. Because, you're not going to get in trouble if you make a mistake." Elle described how vulnerable interactions with her teammates led to respect and understanding which created a stronger bond and trust within the team. She said:

It's definitely scary the very first time you're being very vulnerable with the team. I think once you're on the other side and you're hearing someone else speak about something that you may not have known that they went through and you may have experienced something similar, it's very comforting. I think it creates a very strong bridge of trust between our teammates.

Mo described the vulnerability her coach displayed when he shared his own experiences during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. Mo said, "it reminded me he's a human too. It reminded me that he's just a man that is incredibly knowledgeable in the sport of [sport]. Yeah, but he is just a man."

While vulnerability was a key element of creating a psychologically safe environment, vulnerability was first preceded by indicators that lead the individual to feel able to take the risk to be vulnerable. One of the elements that preceded vulnerability was listening. Lexi said that when she is in a conversation with her coaches, they give her their full attention and listen to understand rather than listen to respond. This helped her feel comfortable approaching them and sharing information with them. Another indicator was the observation of others' vulnerability being met with acceptance and support. Laura described this as "a domino but it goes from like one line, to two lines, to three lines but each line is a personal choice but the line before it, kind of helps it be unlocked." Therefore, an initial display of vulnerability can help unlock another act of vulnerability and keep reverberating throughout the team and its hierarchy. However, this

initial display of vulnerability needs to be met with support and acceptance in order to unlock the next display. Similarly, Mo said, “if you say something, there's a high chance someone will say, me too.” Anna described an experience when her coaches admitted that they made mistakes in the training plan during the season. This admission of mistake could have diminished Anna's trust in the competence and ability of her coaching staff. However, it had the opposite effect. Their display of vulnerability by admitting their mistakes only strengthened her trust in her coaching staff. She said that by admitting their mistakes she realized that they were willing to hold themselves accountable and they were willing to tell her the truth, even if it was not favorable for them.

However, it is also important to note that the vulnerability, at times, was used as a mechanism which deteriorated psychological safety. Meg told her coach about her deep-rooted fear of not being successful, and her coach used this as a mechanism to berate her after a poor performance. Similarly, when speaking about an ideal psychologically safe environment, Sally said, “A space where you can actually be vulnerable. It drove me insane because [the coaches] would always be like we're creating a space of vulnerability. Anyone share, what do you want to share? It's like, no it's not. You can't be vulnerable with you guys because it's just turned back on you.” Sally described an instance of this with one of her teammates. She said:

She [Sally's teammate] talked to [coach] about how she was just struggling mentally and was having a hard time with [sport]. She wasn't even asking to take anything off. She just wanted him to know where she was at and that she might seem different or off because she's struggling. And then literally ever since then [the coaches] told her that she wasn't going to go to [conference meet], because she didn't even want to be there...she didn't take advantage of any situation. She didn't understand what an amazing opportunity she had, and she was just throwing it away or giving it up, because she wasn't all there mentally.

Laura used a metaphor of an ATM to describe this phenomenon of destructive vulnerability. When there is a lack of response or active listening in response to a vulnerable act, Laura said, “it's like going to put something in the ATM and not getting any cash. Like no, no I'm not going to go back there. You just ate my money. You ate my energy.”

Participants recognized vulnerability as an important element to cultivating a psychologically safe environment. The aforementioned story from Sally noted that her coaches recognized the importance of vulnerability since they would tell the team they were creating a space of vulnerability. However, their action did not allow the team to feel safe being vulnerable. Therefore, it is not enough to ask the team to be vulnerable or say that the team is a space that values vulnerability. It is imperative to show vulnerability (i.e., own your mistakes) and allow a space that fosters vulnerability (i.e., show appreciation for vulnerability, initiate vulnerable discussion, and continue to support team members during times of adversity). Coaches that not only express, but also emulate this type of vulnerability and transformational leadership are more likely to create an environment of psychological safety and team success (Gosai et al., 2021).

### *Athlete Voice Suppression*

The theme athlete voice suppression reverberated throughout nearly every interview. This concept suggests the athlete is “only an athlete” and the coach is the holder of knowledge and

power which can be projected onto the athlete. This extended to a hierarchy within the team where upperclassmen had voices, but underclassmen did not or top performers did, but other team members did not. Athlete voice suppression was characterized by one-way communication from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy rather than in both directions. Many times, the participants felt comfortable listening to the coach's feedback, but there was clear discomfort with providing feedback to the coaches. Lexi said, "I don't feel like that's my place. They've been around it for a longer time than I have. So, I feel like constructive criticism... I wouldn't feel too comfortable giving that out." Similarly, Elle said:

I feel very comfortable going to them to ask for advice. Like you know how would you handle this situation? Or what could I do better? But then, on the other side, I think, bringing attention to something that might be an issue with the way the coaching staff is interacting with the team, or something that you think is kind of an issue. That's a big, no, no, like something that I think people feel very uncomfortable doing. It just doesn't really occur.

Elle went on to describe an end-of-season survey that was distributed to her team from the coaching staff. The survey focused on trust among teammates, how the team can improve, and other team dynamics. However, not a single survey question assessed the athletes' relationship with coaches or ways that the coaching staff can improve. Additionally, Mo said that there are explicit expectations on her team for the athletes to listen to coaches rather than offering any opinions. She said,

There are boundaries set by the coaches because they'll be like I've been coaching [sport] as long as you've been alive. I know more [sport] than you've forgotten. They'll be like, no, you are not the coach. I pay you (referring to her scholarship). You will do what I say, when I say.

While many times the participants agreed that their coach is an expert in their craft and they appreciated and respected that, there were also some downfalls to not allowing a space for feedback. Elle said:

It feels very frustrating like you're not being truly seen or heard for your perspective. I think oftentimes the coach's perspective of what happened in a [competition] is projected onto your experience, instead of like my experience being heard and evaluated and then discussing.

Emily said:

I don't really perceive any desire from the coaches to adapt or change or try to be innovative. They're more of the mindset like I've been doing this forever. I know what I'm doing. You have to listen to us. We know best.

Hannah said that her assistant coach is receptive to feedback because she is a young coach and fairly new to the profession. However, when speaking about her head coach, she said:



In contrast, our head coach, she's been doing this for like 20 something years. [She] is kind of like I have my program and I stick with it. If you don't like it...sucks to suck. But I don't interact with her like a whole lot. I have no issues with her really but she also doesn't coach me. She always says she wants feedback, but I don't really think she does.

Hannah also described how her first two years on the team there was a clear hierarchy within the team. She said:

When I was an underclassman, it was very hierarchical. There was a lot of like "Oh well, you're just a freshman, you're just an underclassman, you don't get it." Or like "You have to do this because you're an underclassman." They definitely thought they were better or thought they deserved better or should have been treated better just because they were upperclassmen.

Hannah has been intentional in trying to empower all members of the team to have a voice now that she is in a position of power (upperclassmen). Lexi described a similar situation to Hannah. As she enters more of a leadership role on her team, she said she is "really going to focus on being balanced. Anyone can say anything to each other, because we're all a team, and we all have the same goals at the end of the day." This is the approach she wants to have within her team, however, when she was an underclassman there was more of a hierarchy with giving and receiving feedback. Lexi described her experience as a freshman by saying, "we were freshmen. We were scared. We don't want to do anything wrong. We don't want to do the wrong thing. We wouldn't want to say the wrong thing. So, I think we all just stayed quiet for a long time." While many participants described a form of voice suppression on their team, some also addressed how this impacted their personal or team performance. Laura said, "Some things were left unsaid, but there was so much emotion in like frustration in the silence of it. I think [that] honestly really hurt our team. I think those results showed at conference."

When speaking about this, most participants said something to the effect of "I'm *just* an athlete." There was a lack of empowerment or partnership between the coaches and athletes regarding their performance. However, the environment created, and the compounding effects of their experiences also impacted their comfortability speaking up or remaining silent. Laura said, "vulnerability takes trust and comfortability and we have that on our team. If I didn't have that my mouth would be shut." Therefore, she recognized that the environment had an impact on her willingness to speak up, rather than her own personal preferences or personality.

Another nuance to this theme was when a concern or feedback was raised to the coaching staff, many times it was interpreted as a lack of commitment or trust by the athlete. Elle said:

Questioning even a singular decision of a coach is seen as if you question that one thing, you're questioning everything. That means you don't trust the process and you don't trust the training. And if you don't trust that then how are you going to [perform] well?

Laura described the idea about giving feedback to coaches as formulating a very intense recipe. When addressing how it feels to give feedback to coaches, she said, "sometimes it's hard, because in that specific situation, you're not the teacher. It's like you're the one that's receiving the coaching. But every good relationship is a back-and-forth relationship." She went on to say, you have to be very precise and intentional about the wording to ensure that you don't "express

that you don't trust them; you're not committed, or you don't like the sport.” Laura specifically addressed the risk in raising concerns to the attention of coaches because they ultimately decide your position on the team. Grace also addressed the risk associated with sharing one’s perspective on her team. She said that her coaches seemed to favor the women on her team who stayed silent and only listened to the coaches. Anyone who voiced feedback or concerns was characterized as someone who complained. Grace spoke about offering feedback to her coach: “He was not going to take it seriously because it was just you complaining. And he would say we weren't raised right and stuff like that.”

Voice suppression within workplace teams is not a new concept within organizational behavior and management literature (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson & Besieux, 2021; Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Edmondson & Besieux (2021) demystified the common idea among leaders that cultivating a space that is psychologically safe, where team members feel safe to voice their thoughts, will create confusion and chaos and result in unproductive behavior. Rather, their research suggests that both voice and silence can be productive and unproductive. Leaders should strive to cultivate an environment where productive voice (i.e., thoughtful contributions) and productive silence (i.e., processing) is channeled while unproductive voice (i.e., speaking over others; speaking only to those who agree with you but are not in a leadership position to make change) and unproductive silence (i.e., withholding information because of fear) are dismantled. The theme, athlete voice suppression, falls within unproductive silence. Therefore, if an athlete does not have any ideas to contribute, it is acceptable to be silent and defer to the coach. However, when they intentionally withhold information from coaches because of fear, this detracts from the quality of discussion, idea generation, and ultimately results needed to be successful in the sport itself (Bradley et al., 2012).

## Discussion

This research adds to the existing literature on psychological safety, team climate, and coaching science. Additionally, it posits a deeper understanding for cultivating a climate with psychological safety in collegiate athletic teams and sheds light on actions that deteriorate perceptions of psychological safety within team climates. From a theoretical perspective, this study both supports and extends the work of Edmondson (1999)’s seminal work on psychological safety and continues to build on the application and exploration of psychological safety within the sport domain (Fransen et al., 2020; Gosai et al., 2021; Saxe & Hardin, in press; Smittick et al., 2019).

Saxe and Hardin (in press) identified five antecedents to cultivating psychological safety in a team environment and this study extended the depth of understanding for two of the five antecedents (i.e., supportive leadership behaviors, high-quality interpersonal relationships). The themes interpersonal relationships, accountability and consistency, and fostering vulnerability collectively support the antecedents of supportive leadership behavior and high-quality interpersonal relationships. Saxe and Hardin (in press) point to respect as a key component of high-quality interpersonal relationships. However, as demonstrated through these findings, it is important that the person is respected holistically rather than simply as an athlete. For example, some participants described coaches that asked how they were doing and participated in non-verbal communication (i.e., listening to the answer) which contributed to whether the athlete perceived this as genuine or performative respect.

The themes accountability and consistency and fostering vulnerability exemplify aspects of supportive leadership behavior. For instance, fostering vulnerability was largely dependent on leader inclusiveness and their ability to both model and encourage vulnerable behavior within the team. Additionally, there was a level of consistency that was necessary to build psychological safety through high-quality interpersonal relationships and supportive leadership behavior. Sally shared a story where a teammate of hers was encouraged to be vulnerable; however, then her vulnerability was used against her later in the season. Lack of consistency in any of these themes left participants feeling the need for self-protection and a general sense of unease. For example, when Meg's coach directed an emotional outburst at her this was catastrophic for their relationship. However, this experience did not affect the relationship in a vacuum. This experience was compounded with her observations of her coach bullying other teammates as well a lack of accountability for his own actions (i.e., no apology). An emotional outburst by a coach may not have catastrophically damaged their relationship and her perception of psychological safety (or lack thereof) in the team environment if this happened as a singular occurrence with an apology from the coach. In fact, this experience could have been used to strengthen Meg's perceptions of psychological safety within her team as it did when Anna's coach admitted his mistakes to her.

However, while the first three themes (i.e., interpersonal relationships, accountability and consistency, and fostering vulnerability) all worked to build psychological safety (when used appropriately), athlete voice suppression was the most common theme expressed by the participants within the study. Therefore, this suggests that most of these team environments are not psychologically safe enough to overcome the risk of voicing their ideas, concerns, or suggestions for improvement to coaches. This could be partially explained by the culture of sport as coaches hold the power dynamic. This can also be explained by a lack of consistency. While participants may have described glimpses of supportive leadership behaviors and high-quality interpersonal relationships, they were not consistent enough to compound into a climate of psychological safety which led them to believe that they could safely voice their ideas without repercussions. Additionally, this research provided practical examples and scenarios of when psychological safety is deteriorated and results in distrust, conflict, and poor performance.

### *Coach Education*

This study further exposed the central role of the coach in establishing the team climate. The word coach emerged more than 400 times in the interview transcripts despite the word coach only appearing in two out of 14 questions on the interview guide. When the participants described what it felt like to be a member of the team, make mistakes on their team, and what a psychologically safe team environment looks like, their answers almost always returned to the concept of their coach and the coach's influence on the team climate.

However, a clear problem existed in the sharing of information between the athlete and the coach. Most athletes described clear barriers and expectations that athletes could not offer input or feedback to the coach. The athlete's job was to receive information and respond accordingly rather than offer feedback. The focus for improvement was constantly focused on the athlete. However, an integral aspect of effective coaching is the ability to reflect on their coaching practices and adapt for future improvement (Cote & Gilbert, 2009; Hague et al., 2021). This study demonstrated that coaches were not seeking feedback or creating an environment

open to feedback from their student-athletes regarding their coaching practices. Therefore, this limited the amount of feedback and reflection possible to guide strategic improvement efforts.

The importance of the coach-athlete relationship is well documented (i.e., Gosai et al., 2021; Jowett, 2017; Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016; Wachsmuth & Jowett, 2020) and there is abundant literature and research on the interpersonal skills of coaches. However, coach education lacks content on interpersonal skills (Hague et al., 2021). Lefebvre et al.'s (2016) review of coach education found that the majority of coach education focuses on technical aspects of the sport rather than interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Research, including the current study, clearly indicates that interpersonal skills (i.e., framing feedback and discipline, accepting feedback, communicating intentions) and intrapersonal skills (i.e., emotional regulation) within the team climate is central to team effectiveness; however, this importance is not being stressed in coach education and within sport practices (Hague et al., 2021; Lefebvre et al., 2016) and is thereby limiting team effectiveness.

### *Emotional Regulation*

Emotions are a central feature of the human experience and sport. Coaches are central to the experiences of college athletes, and their emotions can bleed into the experiences of the athlete (Allan et al., 2016). The literature refers to this as emotional contagion (Doron & Bourbousson, 2017). The majority of emotion research in sport has been focused on emotional regulation of the athlete within the scope of performance, but research is beginning to recognize the importance of emotional regulation in coaches. Allan et al. (2016) wrote, "there is also evidence that emotional characteristics of coaches can influence a range of athlete outcomes including...sport experiences and the quality of coach-athlete relationships" (p. 860).

Additionally, a coach's emotional intelligence is highly correlated with the perceptions of coach efficacy among their athletes (Allan et al., 2016). Therefore, the coaches' ability to regulate emotions and build emotional intelligence can have a profound impact on the student-athlete as well as the team climate (Allan et al., 2016). This study exemplified that coaches who fail to regulate their emotions (i.e., Meg's coach) can have a negative impact on the athlete experience, perceptions of psychological safety and ultimately team performance. Examples of these behaviors included emotional outbursts, treating athletes differently depending on their personal mood, and avoiding athletes or offering the silent treatment when an athlete does not perform at the level of the coach's expectation.

Emotional regulation of coaches may increase athletes' perception of unconditional positive regard (UPR) from their coaches. UPR is the "acceptance of every momentary experience of the other. The good, the bad, and indifferent momentary experiences are accepted with equality" (Bozarth & Wilkins, 2001a, pp. xii). Furthermore, unconditional positive regard encompasses:

respect for the other's core worth as a human being, acceptance of the other's state of being and feeling in each moment, consistent belief in the other's potential, and a call to challenge the other to continue to grow toward her potential. (McHenry, 2018, pp. 4-5)

Many participants described experiences of conditional regard within the coach-athlete relationship. Conditional regard refers to the act of offering positive regard only when an athlete fulfills a particular expectation. Negative regard is given if the expectation is not met (i.e., silent

treatment, yelling; McHenry, 2018). However, the participants craved unconditional positive regard within the coach-athlete relationship. Elle experienced positive regard from her coach her freshman year when she performed better than expected. However, as her performance began to decline her sophomore year, the relationship changed because she realized the positive regard was dependent on her performance, and she was not recognized or cared for by her coach outside of her athletic identity. Additionally, it is important to note that an integral piece of unconditional positive regard is “a call to challenge the other to continue to grow toward her potential” (McHenry, 2018, p. 5). This is integrated into the concept of consistency and accountability. The participants wanted to be held accountable for their actions in a way that drew and reminded them of their potential. Accountability was viewed positively, especially when it was done in a way that continued to demonstrate unconditional positive regard within the relationship. Therefore, the way a coach simply frames a particular situation will affect the coach-athlete relationship as well as the perception of psychological safety within the environment.

## Limitations and Future Research

The present study explored perceptions of psychological safety within the collegiate athletic team environment from the perspective of the female student-athlete, and the limitations within this study deserve acknowledgement. First, recruitment materials for the study included the phrase “psychological safety.” Therefore, participants who had distinct experiences, positively or negatively, that they wanted to share were likely to self-select into the study. Additionally, the racial representation of the sample was primarily White, which is not wholly reflective of the female student-athlete population. It is important to recognize that persons with minoritized group identities may have different perceptions of psychological safety within team environments (Callahan, 2004; NCAA Research, 2019). Therefore, future research should consider focusing on the perceptions of psychological safety specifically from the perspective of persons with identities (e.g., racial, gender) in minoritized groups. Additionally, future research is needed to explore potential group differences in perceptions of psychological safety from other perspectives (e.g., individual vs. team sport, NCAA division status, youth sport).

This qualitative research provides depth of inquiry and a deeper understanding of the manifestations and deteriorations of psychological safety specifically within collegiate athletic teams from the perspective of the female student-athlete, but questions remain. Further understanding is needed to fully grasp how psychological safety is not only cultivated but maintained over time. As staffs, teams, and coaches evolve, how can a psychologically safe environment remain consistent? Additionally, research is needed to explore this construct from the perspective of the coach. More specifically, research is needed to better understand how and if coaches are continuing education and what resources coaches source for information regarding building team cultures and team climates. Additionally, further research is needed to understand if coaches feel psychologically safe in their roles and athletic department climates. Exploration is needed to expose if there is a trickle-down effect. For example, if a coach does not feel psychologically safe in their position and the overarching athletic department, does this limit their ability to cultivate a psychologically safe team environment? Examining these topics in more detail can potentially offer solutions to creating a positive team environment which in turn could lead to improved team performance.

## Conclusion

Psychological safety is an emergent state that can be intentionally cultivated within the athletic team climate to elicit its desired outcomes. This research provides more specific examples for coaches to understand the behavior and communication necessary (i.e., consistency and accountability, emotional regulation, fostering vulnerability, and soliciting feedback from student-athletes) to elicit psychological safety in their team climate. Additionally, this provides administrators with further insight and understanding into areas they should provide support and education to coaches in their athletic departments. This research also strengthens an administrator's ability to evaluate team climates within their supervision, specifically giving behavior and communication cues to look for during an evaluation.

Coaches are constantly strategizing for ways (i.e., upgraded facilities, new equipment, state of the art technology, top recruits) to improve their team performance. Coach and athlete education focusing on interpersonal and intrapersonal skill development (i.e., emotional regulation, fostering vulnerability, framing) offers a method for improving team climate and team performance (i.e., current athletes, coaches, and support staff) without the financial drain and length of time to build a new facility or offer other resources. There is no distinct answer to one's full potential, or the full potential of a team. However, the question becomes how can coaches cultivate team environments where athletes embody their potential rather than hinder their potential?

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