

## **A POST-STRUCTURALIST FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF GENDER EQUITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN A SPORT ORGANIZATION**

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There has been a significant amount of research devoted to examining gender equity in sport organizations and the movement (or lack thereof) to becoming more gender equitable. Many of the studies have identified individual and structural reasons for gender inequities in sport (cf. Doherty & Varpalotai, 2000; Hall, 1996). While this research has been helpful in demonstrating that inequities continue to exist, it does not explain the deeper mechanisms that often protect the status quo. Knowing that feminists are “interested in changing the rules of the game, not playing by them” (Rao & Kelleher 2000, p. 74), research on gender equity should be directed towards an examination of organizational culture in sport organizations

Although underutilized as a conceptual framework in the sport management literature, post-structuralist feminism offers a useful lens for examining organizational change as it relates to gender. Specifically, it draws attention to the complex relationships between knowledge, power, and gender (Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, & Rennie, 1994; Weedon, 1997). It recognizes that power is located “in systems of shared meaning that reinforce mainstream ideas and silence alternatives” (Fletcher, 1999, p, 17). Additionally, it acknowledges that assumptions about gender are embedded within organizational cultures in areas like organizational values, formal and informal practices, symbols, rituals, and social interactions (Acker, 1990; Alvesson, 1987; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000; Rao, Stuart, & Kelleher, 1999). The aim of post-structuralist feminism is to disrupt the status quo and traditional power structures by critiquing taken for granted assumptions and establishing contexts whereby individuals can draw upon other vocabularies to produce new meanings and practices (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This presentation will focus on the use of post-structuralist feminism to understand and critique the meanings of gender equity for athletes in a Canadian university athletic department.

This study was based on case studies of four sport programs (basketball, ice hockey, rugby, and swimming) at a large Canadian university. Although gender equity was deemed an espoused organizational value, gender inequities were evident in each of the selected sport programs. Researchers operating from a post-structuralist feminist perspective seek out marginalized voices to disrupt the status quo and surface alternative understandings (Fletcher, 1999; Rao et al., 1999). Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 administrators (3 women, 2 men), 6 coaches (1 woman, 5 men), and 17 athletes (10 women, 7 men) for a total of 28 interviews (14 women, 14 men). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data were coded and categorized using Atlas.ti.

Three dominant meanings of gender equity were identified: i) equality, ii) conditional equality, and iii) it is a women’s only issue. Gender equity as equality was understood as providing men and women with the same opportunities and treating them in the same manner. The conditional equality meaning was one in which respondents supported equal opportunities, resources, and treatment to male and female athletes as long as existing privileges were not threatened. Gender equity was also understood as a women’s issue likely because it was taken for granted that all women were disadvantaged and undervalued as athletes and thus they required special attention and support. While these findings illustrated multiple meanings of gender equity, overall the emphasis of each of them was on upholding traditional patriarchal values and practices. None of the meanings served to disrupt the traditional and taken for granted assumptions about university sport.

From this one can conclude that the organizational culture of the athletic department was not receptive to change. In spite of this lack of receptivity to change, research on gender equity by Fletcher (1999) and Rao et al. (1999) provides a number of strategies to engage organizational members in the process of encouraging alternatives to the current power relations. Here the goal is to establish, through a collaborative process,

conditions in which individuals can establish or draw upon counter vocabularies to produce new meanings of the phenomenon or ways for understanding reality in local contexts (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This will be challenging, however, as sport organizations are situated in larger historical, economic and political contexts that reinforces dominant discourses. Yet, Foucault (1980) contended that meaningful change can begin with micro practices in local sites where broader power relations are inscribed.