

‘Controlling the Male Ego’ and Other Discursive Practices in the Gendering of Sport Governance

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Aim and Research Question

The aim of this study was to explore how board members of a sport federation construct the role gender plays in their meetings. The research question driving this investigation was: How do board members of a sport federation describe gender dynamics that are part of their meeting culture and how do these dynamics inform the inclusion or exclusion of women?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Thirty years ago Messner (1988) characterised sport as a white male dominated occupation, numerically and ideologically. Despite sustained calls for more women to become engaged in leadership roles, sport governance remains a male dominated practice. Research into the marginalisation of women in sport leadership has primarily used a binary categorical approach to gender. Such approaches often position inequality as a women’s issue and fail to challenge the prevalence of men and existing structures as the norm. Furthermore the majority of this research has focused on women in leadership positions in sport administration and management (see Burton, 2015 for a summary) with little critical research on gender and sport governance. Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008) suggest that the lack of women in leadership roles may in part be attributed to dominant discursive practices, specifically the ways discourses about sport and gender intersect to maintain male numerical dominance. Indeed, research shows that meritocratic discourse dominates in many organisations (Adriannse, 2016; Knoppers, Claringbould & Dortants, 2015). Thirty years on from Messner’s depiction of sport, I examine the gender ideologies of those involved in sport leadership to gain insight into how power and privilege manifest themselves in sport governance.

Research design and Data Analysis

Eight women and nine men who were board members of an international federation and seven associated national federations of a sport that had a stated commitment to gender equality were interviewed about ways they thought about and acted on gender equality in sport governance. The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. Interviewees were asked general questions about their career histories, their role and responsibilities as a board member and their relationship with other board members. More specifically, interviewees were asked to describe their experience of board meetings. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data were analysed with the use of a discourse analytic method. Close reading of the transcripts allowed related discursive themes to emerge that appeared repeatedly in the ways in which these board members talked about their experiences in meetings. Through the continuous cycle of data reduction and verification two dominant discursive themes emerged: meritocracy and essentialism.

Results and Discussion

Although respondents said they valued social difference, they tempered their comments when it came to practice, drawing on discourses of meritocracy and essentialism. They used meritocratic discourses to describe board members as individuals with specific skills who are selected in an unbiased way based on ability regardless of gender. They drew on essentialist

discourses to position women as offering other viewpoints because they assumed men and women to be ‘naturally’ different. These differences between women and men were often framed as complementary so that women were positioned as being ideal agents for changing specific board behaviour. Their use of meritocratic discourses suggests the respondents value homogeneity and sameness more than they do difference. Their reliance on essentialist discourses fixes characteristics of women and men, constructing men as naturally competitive and women as peace makers who are responsible for curbing undesired male behaviour in meetings. Despite being associated with a sport organisation which is actively working towards gender equality ‘(un)doing gender’, board members involved in this study were ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These discursive practices seem to fix the characteristics of a group constricting the space for individual difference and reaffirm the male hierarchy, privilege and power associated with sport. Indeed, the regimes of truth presented as the findings of this study, construct gender stereotypes that limit the contribution and experience of male and female board members, preventing the transformation of culture to one that emphasizes gender equity.

Conclusion and Implications

I reflect on the consequences of these ideologies for practices and policies that attempt to equalize the gender ratio in sport governance. I propose that the topic of gender and sport governance may require a different theoretical lens, one that goes beyond a focus of binary categories and numeric accounts of inclusion or exclusion. Adding women to a male system does not (un)do gender. Instead we need to develop strategies that enable us to (re)do gender. Instead of looking at gender *in* sport governance we need to examine the gendering *of* sport governance. Gender and sport governance may be a complex assemblage of structures, rules, power relations and practices. We need to therefore explore how gender is embedded in the artefacts and actions associated with governance.

References

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