THE GENDERING OF LEADERSHIP IN SPORT ORGANISATIONS

Post-structural perspectives

Annelies Knoppers

Overview

Gender continues to be one of the most frequently used categorisations in societal and organisational life and is often a focus for researchers and policymakers as they strive to reduce gender inequities in organisations, including those in sport (e.g., Hoeber, 2007; Pfister and Radtke, 2009). Gender equality and empowerment of women is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals that the United Nations developed in 2000. Today that goal is still relevant (Grown, Rao Gupta and Kes, 2005). The Olympic Charter (IOC, 2013) states that ‘Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender, or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement’ (p. 12). Yet women continue to remain relatively under-represented in positions of leadership, including those in sport (see Burton, 2015, for a summary of the research).

Much of my life as a scholar has been devoted to looking for clues and untangling a tangled clew (ball of yarn) that could help understand dynamics of gender such as these, especially in organisational life and leadership. Such understandings are needed, not only because gender inequality is unacceptable, but also because much of the inequality in society is produced in organisations (Acker, 2006). Although scholars have used a variety of scholarly perspectives to explore this topic, I argue that the gendering of leadership in sport organisations has generally been under-theorized. In this paper, I describe my search for clues that began long before I wrote the 1992 article (Knoppers, 1992), which might add to the theorizing about gender and especially to that about gender in sport organisations.

Process

The article I wrote in 1992, its critique of an individual and of a structural approach, and its advocacy of a relational perspective to investigate the relative lack of women in positions of leadership, does not stand alone; its development was part of a long process involving my personal and scholarly life. My mother was one of the first female theology students in the Netherlands...
and my father was involved in the underground resistance during World War II. Together they imparted to me sensitivity to injustice. Due to a combination of circumstances, I attended a girls’ high school in Montreal. I had only female teachers; the high school had its own gym meaning that girls had every opportunity to be involved in sport. The gym was ours every afternoon! I considered this to be normal. When I subsequently attended college in the USA, I was shocked to discover that there were few opportunities for women to compete and be recognised for their accomplishments in sport and other subjects. As a coach, I had to literally smuggle a volleyball team off campus so we could compete in a regional tournament. There was no money for such outings by women athletes and we were assumed not to be interested in, or able to handle, such competition. I worked primarily in physical education and athletic departments of colleges and universities where women in positions of leadership were rare. As a faculty member, I experienced first-hand how much of my behaviour and that of my few female colleagues was attributed to being a woman. In contrast, my male colleagues tended to be described as scholars/faculty members/coaches first. As a developing scholar in the social sciences in the 1980s, I wanted to understand why so many people thought this situation was normal, why it continued and why it was difficult to effect change.

I began to read scholarly research on the subject, thinking that somewhere I could find the clue that would give me the explanation. Although a great deal of research on gender and organisations/leadership had emerged by then, at that time it was still possible to read much of it! Through my reading, I discovered that scholars approached gender in various ways. Much of the scholarship I read in the 1980s saw gender as a dichotomous category consisting of women and men and used theories about individuals (human capital) and/or structure to explain the absence of women in male-dominated occupations. The individualist approach suggested that the lack of women could be attributed to their lack of qualifications and overall work behaviour. For example, since women had not played men’s football they were assumed to be unqualified to coach it. Or, women might experience role conflict between their femininity and the masculine orientation required to be a good coach (e.g., Wrisberg, 1990). I had written a conceptual critique of masculinity, femininity and androgyny as fixed categories earlier, so I was rather critical of the explanatory power of the individual approach (Knoppers, 1980). In addition, women were moving into positions of leadership in other organisational sectors, suggesting women were qualified to take on high-level jobs, but sport lagged behind in this regard. Moreover, men who had never played a women’s sport were hired to coach such sports. How could they be seen as qualified if experience in the sport was an important criterion? I therefore began to look for explanatory theoretical explanations or clues with a focus on the clew of structure. I focused first on Kanter’s (1977) theory about structure as a possibility in explaining this under-representation of women.

Kanter (1977) argued that not individual characteristics, but ostensibly gender-neutral structural determinants of opportunity, power and tokenism in organisations could explain the under-representation of women. I explored the role these structural determinants might play in explaining the lack of women in coaching. I presented and discussed these determinants and what they might mean for research on coaches in a conceptual article (Knoppers, 1987). I subsequently engaged in an empirical quantitative project of collegiate coaches to compare women and men on these determinants (Knoppers, Meyer, Ewing and Forrest, 1989, 1990, 1991). Statistical differences between women and men for each of these determinants did partially explain the under-representation of women. In other words, the results suggested that gender differences were more a function of structure than of attributes of individual women and men.

The findings also raised more questions, however. Research by others (e.g., Ott, 1989; Zimmer, 1988) suggested that structure itself is not gender neutral. Men and women were treated differently
within the same structure. Thus, the structure of ‘structure’ tended to favour men. I began to realise that gender was much more complex than only a categorical concept that reduces it to a static dichotomy of women and men or of fixed ideas about femininity and masculinity. I also understood that the focus on only essentialist categorisations of individuals or on structure ignored the complex and layered dynamics of gender and perhaps explained why relatively little change in this dominance was occurring. I began to read scholarship in the literature on gender, organisations and leadership that saw gender not so much as a category or as a structural outcome but as a complex relational construct. This idea seemed to hold many potential fruitful insights that might help explain some of the ways in which gender manifested itself in organisations.

This realisation was not as straightforward as it sounds. Although I wanted to focus on this complexity, I did not know what that complexity might contain or where my search to unravel any part of this complexity might lead me. I wrote the 1992 article as a summary of what I had read and as a way to offer another way of looking at gender other than the individual or structural approach. I argued that when scholars and policymakers tended to reduce women’s under-representation in leadership positions in sport organisations to a structural problem and/or to a problematic deficit in skills women needed to perform well on the job, they ignored part of the bigger picture. I therefore proposed that gender should be seen and explored as a relational practice that varies by time and place. The foundations for that article were laid by my earlier conceptual articles, one that critiqued the notion of sex roles and the other that explored what a focus on structure of organisations might mean for research on gender and coaches. In addition, my empirical research on structure led me to the realisation that although structural theories might have some explanatory power, they were based on assumptions that the latest literature showed were not gender-neutral. These research projects therefore led me to gender as a relational concept, an idea I tried to develop in the 1992 article. After I had written that article I wondered how I could capture this concept at least partially in empirical research.

Fortunately, the tools available for exploring gender evolved a great deal since 1992 and allowed me access to theoretical sophistication that gave me greater insight into the failure of sport organisations to reduce gender inequalities significantly (see also Connell, 2005; Knoppers and McDonald, 2010; Sterk and Knoppers, 2009). Various experiences helped me realise that capturing the complexity of gender required other ontologies and epistemologies than the positivist approaches and quantitative methodologies I had used until then. I needed additional tools to capture invisible dynamics of processes. A pivotal moment was a course I audited in Qualitative Research Methods that was grounded in cultural anthropology and social constructionism. The contents of this course made me realise how much of what individuals think and do is based on their social constructions and assumptions about reality. The concept that organisations, gender and leadership were all social constructions was an exciting eye-opener for me. It opened up vistas of possibilities for research and for change since it assumes that individuals are active social beings, who shape and are shaped by structures. The idea of agency suggested there was room for transformation and also that structures could be changed. At that time, scholars such as Ann Hall, Nancy Theberge and Susan Birrell had already begun to pay attention to and uncover the relationality of gender in sport. Other scholars, such as R. Connell, Mike Messner and Don Sabo, began to focus on masculinities not as static categorisations but as constructions embodied in practices. These conceptual tools and the way these scholars employed various methodologies not only inspired me but also gave me other ways of looking at gender and leadership in sport organisations than I had used in the past.

I therefore chose to focus on gendered organisational processes and underlying assumptions using qualitative methodologies rather than looking at gender differences and quantifiable outcomes. Through (more!) extensive reading about gender in organisations and in the critical
sociology of sport and attending various conferences such as North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, I discovered two possible perspectives that could give me further insight in gender as a relation: a processual approach based on the work of Joan Acker and a discursive approach based on the work of Michel Foucault.

**Extensions and applications**

Acker (1990, 1992) has argued that organisations consist of often invisible processes that together gender an organisation. This gendering of organisational processes occurs at minimally four levels: (a) gendered identity work that employees do to fit in the organisation and enables them to do the job; (b) informal interactions between employees in which gender is always involved; (c) definitions and assignment of tasks that lead to a gendered division of labour; and (d) a gendering of organisational culture and images. In other words, gender is ‘done’ and embedded in an organisation through its culture and images, its division of labour and tasks, the content of formal and informal interactions, and the identity work of organisational members. Together these (overlapping) processes describe an organisation and its work and how it is gendered. I found this approach to be helpful in making visible some of the complexities of (categorical) gender segregation in sport organisations and specifically of the gendering of leadership.

We (Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2005, 2008; Claringbould and Knoppers, 2007, 2008) used Acker’s approach to study how men and women in senior positions in management and governance in sport organisations negotiated gender. We found, for example, that women who served on boards of national sport organisations did their best not to be seen as feminist because that was associated with being bitchy; they wanted to be seen as competent as defined by the male defined norm. In other words, they were doing identity work in their interactions with others so that they might be constructed or seen as acceptable leaders who fit the norm informed by images of men as managers and leaders. These practices constructed or reinforced images that suggested who was suitable for which position and consequently produced a gendered division of labour. Specifically, I discovered that the four interdependent processes produced regimes of gender inequality that were invisible, tended to be legitimised and accepted as normal or common sense and helped explain how men could dominate positions of leadership in sport organisations. Such processes resulted in complex organisational patterns of ‘advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity’ (Acker, 2006, p. 146; see also Acker, 2012; Benschop and Doorewaard, 2012). In other words, gender was more than a categorisation but was also a verb, a relational process involving both women and men.

I thus expanded on the ideas I discussed in 1992, especially that of gender as a social relation, but also now saw structure and deficits/capital as social constructions. This insight into the layeredness of gender as a social constructed relation helped me, therefore, to identify several clues in my search for explanations why the conditions described at the beginning of this chapter continue to exist. I continue to find Acker’s approach useful in untangling questions of gender in organisations. The prevalence of these processes means that even when sport organisations strive for gender equality by focusing on reducing the male to female ratio, they continue to (re)produce social relations based on gender. The explanatory power of this approach did not mean I had completely unraveled the ball of yarn or clew that explained gender inequality in sport organisations.

Insight into these complex processes did not help me to explain how and why these often invisible regimes of inequalities (Acker, 2006) continue to exist and how they had become
common sense, despite organisational commitment to equality and fairness and laws and policies, such as those of the IOC and UN that forbid discrimination. These results led me to focus especially on the process of the production of culture and images and to ask questions about possible sources of common sense, ideologies on which assumptions are based and why some assumptions become known as truths. The preparation of my inaugural address for a chair in the pedagogy of sport at the University of Utrecht, extensive reading and discussions with colleagues led me to post-structural perspectives based on the work of Michel Foucault. In preparation for my inaugural address I read Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and punish* and Markula and Pringle’s (2006) translation of his work to sport, because I wanted to understand possible sources of underlying assumptions people have about the pedagogies of sport participation. As I read his work, I realised that several Foucauldian concepts could give me more insight into the complexity of gender in (sport) organisations although Foucault did not write about either.

A Foucauldian framework suggests that language and discourses often serve as sources of common sense and of invisible underlying assumptions and are seen as truths, that are internalised by individuals and become embedded in organisational processes and structures. These notions gave me an awareness of the role that language and seemingly invisible ideologies form organisational discourses that may play a role in the gendering of leadership in sport. Organisational discourses are formal and informal rules that shape what are considered to be good, appropriate and bad management practices and organisational behaviour. In other words, discourses are knowledge and a source of power because they shape thought and practices (see also Markula and Pringle, 2006; Mills and Denison, 2013). This approach assumes, therefore, that practices are based on discourses and vice versa. To understand how I could use such Foucauldian insights to explain gendering of sport leadership, I again turned to scholarly literature but this time that which was based on a post-structural perspective that often relied on such insights. This extensive reading included the critical management studies literature in which Foucauldian notions are often used. According to Foucault (1977, 1980), discursive practices shape reality. In other words, practices are rooted in dominant discourses. I realised that this includes gendered organisational processes and that I needed to move from a focus on men and women in these processes to concentrate on practices.

**Future: post-structural perspectives**

The use of a post-structural lens led me to questions such as: What is considered the implicit norm for managerial work/sport leadership and how is it constructed? Which practices sustain it? On what is this norm based? How congruent are assumptions about this norm with social constructions of masculinity and femininity? In other words, I began to see Acker’s processual approach through a discursive lens. Specifically, I understood that gender as a social relation was constructed by discourses about gender that informed ways in which identity work was done, shaped organisational culture and images, impacted divisions of labour and was embedded in interactions. I now saw all of these as practices. Colleagues and I undertook a series of studies with a focus on how discursive practices about masculinity and diversity might limit diversity in sport management (Knoppers, 2011; Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2003, 2005, 2008; Knoppers, Claringbould and Dortants, 2014). The results suggested that assumptions about the ideal manager or director were associated with practices of heroic masculinity that included a competitive sport background and ability to give 24/7 to the job, and that such descriptions of managerial work were seen as neutral and common sense.

So what might the individual, structural and relational approaches I discussed in 1992 look like from a post-structural perspective? A post-structural perspective would require a scrutiny
of expressions used to describe aspects of capital (and the words ‘capital’ and ‘deficit’) and structure. For example, my finding (Knoppers, 2011) that senior managers in non-profit organisations value someone with a competitive sport background as fitting the profile of an ideal manager could be seen as a statement about ‘capital’ needed for the job. This emphasis on competitive sport background as part of the profile of an ideal manager can be seen as a possible deficit for women aspiring to high positions of leadership, especially in sport organisations. Women will rarely be able to build enough capital or might be constructed as being deficient because they rarely participate in men’s sport. Instead of accepting this deficit as a fact and then looking for ways women could compensate their exclusion from men’s competitive sport, however, a post-structural approach would require researchers to explore what exactly it is about a competitive sport background that is assumed to qualify men for a top position. How could such a qualification be deconstructed? What do those hiring managers associate with a competitive sport background? Which images and skills are associated with that? Hovden (2000) used this approach by looking at the practice of selection of high-level positions in governance of sport and found that although members of selection committees assumed criteria for selection were neutral, they implicitly wanted candidates who embodied what they saw as heroic masculinity. Similarly, Shaw and Hoeber (2003) used discourse analysis to explore assumptions held by staff in national sport organisations about positions. They found that jobs associated with discursive practices of femininity tended to be marginalised, while senior management positions that were associated with discourses of heroic masculinity were valued. This research made me realise that post-structural perspectives could provide a lens that enables researchers such as myself to look at such assumptions and to draw attention to the multiplicity and complexities of gender in sport organisations.

Claringbould and I (2013) drew on the empirical literature to explore the under-representation of women managers/directors in sport organisations by combining a post-structural discursive approach with Acker’s processual theory of gender in organisations. We attempted to show how discursive practices informed each of the four processes. We also tried to break new ground by suggesting several practices that may not explicitly be part of Acker’s four processes, such as use of liminality (unawareness), privilege and societal discourses. In addition, my relatively recent work suggests that embodiment or bodywork in (sport) organisations also merits attention (Knoppers and Van Amsterdam, 2014), since it also may play a role in the privileging of certain practices. This, however, needs further research.

These ideas about the use of post-structural theorizing are not meant to be exhaustive, nor do I mean to say that other approaches that might capture complexity are not legitimate. Yet a post-structural focus on discourse as knowledge and power, and their possible use to explore which knowledges about gender, work, sport and organisations are produced, problematised and challenged in different settings, is needed (Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014). It can produce new and needed insights about the ways in which leadership is gendered and how that gendering is maintained, produced and challenged in sport organisations. I recognise that although I have paid some attention to the intersectionality of social relations (Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2001, 2005), it is my theorizing that more work is needed that includes it. Gender is not a universal construct. I understand that practices of masculinity and of femininity are embedded in practices of whiteness, ableness, class privilege and of heteronormativity and that this intersectionality also needs more attention and theorizing from sport management scholars including myself (see for example, Bendl, Fleischman and Walenta, 2008; King, 2008; Kitchin and Howe, 2013; Knoppers and McDonald, 2010; McDonald and Toglia, 2010).

I see my own research development, especially with respect to theoretical perspectives, as fluid and as continually going one step further, often without being able to see what is ahead.
It is as if each time I focus on one thread of the complex clew that comprises gender in organisations, other threads become visible or are created. Developing theories and explanations is a dynamic process. I assume there is no grand theory that will eventually explain how gender works in sport organisation. Yet, I do believe that research can reveal different dimensions that may have been invisible, and that may generate ideas for organisational transformations that may reduce inequalities produced in sport organisations.

Note
1 This chapter reflects on Knoppers (1992) and the work related to it.

References
Applying the three-tiered approach to male dominance and sex segregation in coaching

Marlene A. Dixon

I first became aware of Knopper’s (1992) work during my master’s degree programme at the University of Texas. In conjunction with Janet Fink, Maureen Fitzgerald and Dorothy Lovett, I was developing a literature review on burnout in coaches, and female coaches in particular. This literature review was both personally and professionally motivated as I was also coaching college volleyball and basketball at the time.

What initially drew me to this work, along with her earlier pieces on coaching, was the articulation in theory of what had been happening in practice for many years, especially within college and professional sport. That is, she articulated that the rules of the game and the basic assumptions within the coaching profession were fundamentally different for men than for women. She also argued that the policies, norms and work cultures surrounding the management of coaches typically operated on the assumptions of the men’s rules, which, consequently, did not always fit well for the management of women. Finally, without explicitly using the term, she outlined a multi-level approach (individual, structural and socio-cultural), which I have also utilised heavily in my own work. I have found this work, over the past twenty years, to be of profound influence on my research, teaching and practice.

I relied heavily on Knopper’s (1992) work in the development of mine and Jennifer Bruening’s (2005) multi-level model for work–family conflict in coaching mothers, as well as the subsequent empirical testing of that model (Bruening and Dixon, 2007; Dixon and Bruening, 2007; see Chapter 15 of this volume). Several tenets of Knopper’s (1992) work were particularly salient to my own exploration of the coaching lives of mothers.

First, and most strongly, Knoppers argued that the traditionally masculine model of coaching was built upon structural assumptions that impact the management of coaches. For example, she argued that it is assumed that coaches (men) have a full support system for their non-work/family life, and thus can devote their full time and effort just to coaching. This assumption has profound implications for mothers who are coaches, because they do not necessarily have those resources to support their non-work lives or coaching careers, yet their administrators manage them as if they do. This leads to early burnout and exit for many women coaches.

Second, she argued that coaching and administration could be distinguished by traditional assumptions about men’s and women’s abilities and roles in the workplace. In our work on gender roles within college athletics administration (Bruening and Dixon, 2007), this line of thinking has been valuable for exposing stereotypes about women’s interests and capabilities that keep them from advancing in administrative roles in particular.

This framework will continue to have application in many ways. In my own work, it is already showing value, as I begin exploring the work–life interface of coaching fathers (Graham and Dixon, 2014). That is, men also work within a traditionally masculine coaching culture that is generating increasing tension with changing socio-cultural notions of fatherhood and dual-earner families. As men confront the powerful culture of coaching, they will encounter these structural and socio-cultural assumptions that will continue to shape both families and coaching as a career.
Note

1 Marlene A. Dixon is a Professor at Troy University.

References


