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'You don't realize what you see!': the institutional context of emotional abuse in elite youth sport

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ABSTRACT

Various discourses construct youth sport as a site for pleasure and participation, for positive development, for performance and for protection/safeguarding. Elite youth sport however continues to be a site for emotionally abusive coaching behaviour. Little attention has been paid to how the institutional context may enable or sustain this behaviour. Specifically, how do coaches and directors involved in high-performance women's gymnastics position themselves in relationship to these discourses to legitimize the ways they organize and coach it? We drew on a Foucauldian framework to analyse the technologies and rationalities used by directors and coaches of elite women's gymnastics clubs to legitimize and challenge current coaching behaviours. The results of the 10 semi-structured interviews showed how coaches and directors legitimized coaching behaviour using discourses of pleasure, protection, performance and of coaching expertise and assigning responsibility for current coaching behaviour to athletes, parents, (other) coaches and global and national policies.

Introduction

Various discourses, in which adults play a central role and are held responsible for the well-being of their athletes, circulate in and about youth sport (Taylor and Garratt 2010). Youth sport is often assumed to be a site for pleasure and participation and positive development. The discourses of pleasure and participation emphasize that participation in youth is to be a source of fun/pleasure (Coakley and Pike 2014; Singer 2004). The discourse of development suggests that through their sport participation, children will learn values, norms and skills that contribute to their healthy development in a positive manner. In many youth sport programmes, participants are also taught that winning and good performance are important (e.g. Claringbould, Knoppers and Jacobs 2015; Fraser-Thomas and Strachan 2014a; Ryan 1995). Claringbould, Knoppers, and Jacobs (2015) for example, showed that the most desired reward for athletes was to be selected and/or recognized as a talented athlete.

This importance increases when a child engages in elite youth sport, especially sports that are organized for young athletes such as competitive gymnastics and swimming. This is known as the discourse of performance and may not always be compatible with the discourse of positive development (Fraser-Thomas and Strachan 2014a).

A newer discourse circulates in elite youth sport as well. In the last decade, the issue of abuse of athletes by coaches has received a great deal of attention (e.g. Brackenridge and Fasting 2005; Fasting and Brackenridge 2009; Gervis and Dunn 2004; Grahn 2014; Johns and Johns 2000; Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis 2014; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Raakman, Dorsch, and Rhind 2010; Ryan 1995; Stirling and Kerr 2008, 2013; UNICEF 2010). This issue of athlete abuse has led to a discourse of child protection and safeguarding and to the creation of policies that purport to ensure this protection. For example, the Netherlands has adopted a national policy called 'A Safe Sport Culture' (ASSC) that is meant to ensure that sport is a safe space for all children and free from abuse, exploitation and violence (VSK 2014). Currently, this discourse of child protection seems to frame abuse primarily in terms of physical and sexual abuse and pays relatively little definitive and regulatory attention to emotional abuse, although it is often mentioned.

Elite youth sport involves athletes who are children. This focus on children suggests that discourses of pleasure and of positive development should predominate in these youth sports. Yet, the discourse of performance may be used to justify coaching behaviours that normalize emotional abuse in order to produce winning athletes (Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis 2014). Stirling and Kerr (2008) defined emotional abuse as consisting of 'systematic non-contact behaviors towards a child such as shouting, belittling, name-calling and comments that humiliate, degrade or intimidate him or her'. Elsewhere, we have described how elite athletes participating in gymnastics and their parents made sense of such behaviours by their coaches (Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2016). Our focus in the current paper is on how such coaching behaviours continue to exist, despite attempts to eradicate them. This continuation of what has been defined as emotional abuse suggests that the discourses of positive development and of pleasure receive little attention and/or that the discourses mentioned above are assigned a hierarchical value in elite youth sport. The relative power of these various discourses and their related practices, their conflation and circulation in elite youth sport may however be dependent on context.

Elite youth sport takes place in institutional contexts such as sport clubs. Boards of directors of sport clubs tend to be held responsible for the well-being of the athletes and other members of the club (Boessenkool 2001). Boards of governance/directors of elite youth sport clubs may hire coaches to produce winners and also may expect them to engage in discursive practices of pleasure, protection and positive development. Their priorities may differ from those of coaches, athletes and their parents. Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which professional coaches and directors position themselves in relationship to these discourses. This paper is part of a larger project in which we investigated the continuation of emotional abuse, despite attempts to regulate and eradicate it in elite youth sport (see Knoppers, Smits, and Jacobs. 2015; Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2016). In the current paper, we examine how coaches and directors of sport clubs use discourses surrounding youth sport to legitimize the ways they organize and coach it.

Gymnastics is a site where elite athletes are quite young and may therefore be more susceptible to such abuse, where the scholarly and popular literature has reported emotional abusive behaviours by coaches in a variety of countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK,

Portugal and Hong Kong and where policy-makers have instituted policies that are supposed to reduce such conduct (e.g. Gervis and Dunn 2004; Johns and Johns 2000; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2008, 2013; UNICEF 2010). In Smits, Jacobs and Knoppers (2016), we used an interpretive approach to examine characteristics of the current gymnastics culture in clubs for elite athletes. Athletes and their parents gave many descriptions of behaviours by coaches that can be labelled as non-pedagogical and emotionally abusive (Stirling and Kerr 2008). This behaviour consisted of isolating, intimidating, regulating and belittling gymnasts. We found that athletes and their parents made sense of this behaviour by placing their sense-making within a fixed contextual frame.

Most of the research on the experiences of young elite athletes in gymnastics and swimming has focused on athletes and parents. Directors and coaches of clubs and national sport associations play a large role in creating the contextual frame, but have received relatively little attention from scholars in this area. In the current paper, our focus is on understanding the views and experiences of coaches and directors of sport clubs where elite athletes train.

Theoretical framework

We draw on poststructural perspectives to explore how coaches and directors use discourses about elite youth sport to legitimate their practices and ways of thinking about elite gymnastics in order to create 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1977). A regime of truth is a way of thinking about something that has become common sense or seen as 'fact'. A poststructural perspective assumes individuals position themselves with respect to discourses and may accept, resist or compromise in their use of these discourses. Poststructuralist perspectives also take power into account assuming it is always present, and is always productive in that it gives meaning to everyday practices (Foucault 1980). Discourses produce ways of doing and of thinking. We used Foucault's notions of regime of truth, disciplinary power and governmentality (see below) to examine how directors and the coaches position themselves in their ways of doing and thinking with respect to these competing dominant discourses at the institutional level.

The concept of governmentality is based on the assumption that control or power is exercised through implicit and explicit 'rules' that act upon the 'milieu' rather than on an individual directly (Munro 2011). An analysis of an institutional problem through the lens of governmentality explores 'the kinds of knowledge and power through which social activity is regulated' (Green and Houlihan 2006). Organizations such as sport clubs tend to engage in governmentality, that is manage and stimulate desired behaviours through a manipulation of culture with the use of rationalities and through an inculcation of the 'rules' with the use of technologies (Dean 2010; Munro 2011). Technologies are ways of doing or exercising authority, while rationalities are forms of thought, expertise and knowledge. Both are constituted by discourses. Technologies and their rationalities can become institutionalized, routinized and ritualized; they become the norm and are often accepted as common sense and act as regimes of truth (Dean 2010). Policies such the ASSC can be seen as a technology that is implemented by a club to counter all forms of abuse. Technologies continually incorporate new elements such as rules, workshops, policies, regulations, signage, covenants, etc to cope with rationalities that may expand or change discursive practices, including those of abuse in youth sport. In our analysis, therefore we looked at these discourses and their related rationalities and technologies used by directors/managers and coaches of elite youth

sport clubs. We explored how they managed possible competing demands of discourses that required them to prioritize an athlete's well-being and those that prioritized producing athletes who perform at the international level. Although others (e.g. Johns and Johns 2000; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2015; Pinheiro et al. 2014) have used a Foucauldian framework to look at elite youth sport, including gymnastics, such research has rarely looked at the institutional context. This paper, by examining the institutional context and utilizing Foucauldian notions of governmentality or of competing discourses (and how they play out in technologies and rationalities), can help scholars and practitioners understand the continuation of emotional abuse, despite attempts to eradicate it.

Methodology

The number of Dutch coaches and athletes who compete at the international level in women's gymnastics is rather small. Approximately eight sport clubs work with and produce elite athletes. This number is always in a state of flux since athletes and coaches may move to another club (as happened twice during the course of our study). We negotiated access to these clubs and their coaches and directors via the National Gymnastics Association (NGA). We also used our personal and professional contacts in the field of gymnastics and the snowball technique to obtain access to our respondents. All those we approached were willing to participate. We did not share the names of those we interviewed with anyone including the NGA. We promised all participating coaches strict confidentiality and anonymity. To prevent possible recognition of these participants, we did not assign fictitious names or give a table that describes their characteristics. Our emphasis lies on what was said and not who said what.

We used semi-structured interviews to explore the discourses and their related technologies and rationalities used by five coaches (ages 36–53 years) and five members (ages 42–61) of boards of directors of the NGA and sport clubs that produce elite female gymnasts. The respondents had an average of 15–20 years of coaching experience. All the respondents were male. We discussed the following topics with them: their perceptions of the culture in elite women's gymnastics including their interactions with other actors such as parents, athletes, other coaches and board members, their goals for the elite programme at the club, their adoption and integration of ASSC and the NGA's own policy, A Child's Best Interest (ACBI) and possible conflicts they perceived between organizing and coaching an elite youth sport and discourses of positive development and pleasure. The specific wording of the questions varied per interview. We asked coaches questions such as: How do you involve your gymnasts in decision-making processes? What does an athlete need to do to reach the top? and How do you try to implement policies such as ASSC and ACBI? Directors were asked questions such as: What are your goals for the elite gymnastics programme in this club? and How do you try to ensure that these goals are realized? We always probed further depending on what the respondent said.

Data saturation occurred in both groups. This meant no new technologies and rationalities emerged after the fourth interview per group. We used iterative methods to analyse the resulting data. This involved reading and rereading data several times to check and confirm the relationship of various coding categories pertaining to discourses, technologies and rationalities for the directors and for the coaches. The first and second authors initially sorted data into descriptions of technologies and of rationalities. The research team then

discussed and, at times, revised the results of the sorting process. This process of clarifying technologies and rationalities for both coaches and for directors took several iterations. When agreement was reached on all the technologies and rationalities, we discussed the discourses in which the resulting technologies and their rationalities were embedded. We continued revising until all three researchers were in agreement with the analysis. The technologies that were most often used consisted of assigning responsibility for the coach's behaviour and/or its consequences to parents, athletes, and other coaches and to the gendered nature of the sport. The respondents used various rationalities to justify and legitimize the use of these technologies. We describe these technologies and the related rationalities and situate those findings, where possible, in the scholarly literature. We describe the results concerning directors and then follow with the findings from the interviews with the coaches. In the discussion, we bring these findings together and discuss the insights that emerged and how they may point to possible actions that could reduce emotionally abusive coaching behaviour in elite women's gymnastics.

Results

Since sport in the Netherlands is organized through a structure consisting of autonomous clubs run by volunteers, anyone can begin a club and offer programmes for those who wish to perform at the international level. Most of those working in clubs including directors are volunteers; coaches of elite athletes tend to be paid by their clubs and/or the NGA.

Directors/managers

The directors seemed to have adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude with respect to coaching behaviours and saw themselves primarily as facilitators of elite programmes. They engaged in governmentality using policies that were designed to encourage the use of positive pedagogical practices and hiring, trusting and controlling coaches who were assumed to be able to create world-class athletes. At the same time, they also acknowledged that coaches could be emotionally abusive at times. They assigned primary responsibility for the welfare of the athletes to the parents.

Implementing protective measures

The NGA represents the sport of gymnastics at the national and international levels and is responsible for the conduct of gymnastics in the Netherlands. Legally speaking, the NGA has little to say about how clubs are operated since clubs are independent. This means that the NGA is limited in the technologies it has at its disposal.

The NGA used various technologies to strengthen its influence on the 'milieu' of the clubs that sponsor elite women's gymnastics such as developing and monitoring policies, offering courses and instituting a licensing programme for elite coaches. A director working for the NGA explained:

We monitor clubs that have an elite sport program that is associated with us. Their boards [of governance] have to take responsibility for the wellbeing of these athletes. We ask them to take courses in governance and sport, the ombudswoman visits those clubs, we organize informative gatherings, etc. A lot can happen but if a club wants nothing to do with these offerings [that is their choice], they are autonomous. Their coaches have to sign the behavioral and coaching

code and be licensed if they want to be part of the national program, however. If a club does not do so then they cannot be part of the elite sport program.

Another NGA director described what the workshops entailed:

We have workshops to raise their [the clubs'] consciousness by asking them what they could do to change things. This consists of very simple things such as the doors may no longer be locked, parents can come and watch, there should always be at least two adults present, etc. Essentially we discuss all the elements of the 10 point ACBI plan [A Child's Best Interest].

The directors of the NGA and of the clubs assumed that coaches who have indicated their agreement with the relatively newly implemented policies such as ACBI (gymnastic specific) and ASSC (national sport policy) would adhere to these policies. In other words, the directors assumed this technology of policy and licensing would control the behaviour of the coaches. In the following, we show how the directors employed this technology of policy as well as other technologies and legitimized them with the use of various rationalities.

Hiring coaches who produce elite athletes

One way to reduce unwanted coaching behaviours is to be selective in the hiring process. The main instrument or technology used by these directors consisted of hiring a coach who could develop athletes to become international competitors. These directors contended they have an elite sport programme primarily because they want to win. They draw on a performance rationality to legitimize their choices and policies. A director described his club's goals:

One of our goals is to make the group of 12–13 year olds as big as possible. We want many girls to have the possibility to develop themselves as gymnasts; hopefully a few will develop themselves into elite athletes. Our objective is to take several to competitions at the national and international level.

Directors justified their hiring procedure and choices for a specific coach by creating a hierarchy of priorities among the discourses that circulate in youth sport. Several club directors argued why the discourse of positive development is not and cannot be their first objective:

It is not in our best interest to be known as a place that works on positive development. We want to be known as a club that wins although we work with the athlete in a positive pedagogical manner. You cannot place pedagogy above everything in elite sport.

I would not be able to hire a coach if I prioritized the positive development [of athletes]. A coach wants to win.

The directors insisted that positive development and pleasure are not so important in their club since elite sport is about winning. In so doing, they seemed to suggest that the various discourses circulating about youth sport have a hierarchical disciplinary power. A director voiced a commonly used rationality:

Elite sport is primarily about winning. That characterizes elite sport. The moment you say that is not so, then there is nothing left to talk about. If you say to your coach that winning is unimportant and that pleasure or development are more important, than that elite coach will leave your club.

These directors acknowledged that this emphasis on winning comes at a price. For example, a director pointed out that:

There are few athletes who do not have a chronic injury but athletes do not dare to say anything about this; they do not talk about it because they've had such a great time and have had such great experiences.

This emphasis on hiring a coach because of his record and ability to win meant that the discourse of performance had priority over the other discourses circulating about youth sport.

Accepting abusive coaching behaviours

The directors realized that this rationality with its emphasis on winning had implications for coaching behaviours. They acknowledged that there may have been physical abusive situations in the past and are clear on what the current boundaries were. A director summarized it: 'We do not tolerate kicking, hitting or humiliating, that sort of thing'. They also admitted that some coaching behaviours may be inappropriate, but they seemed to accept those as being part of coaching young elite athletes. A director described how he saw this:

Many coaches have a split personality. When they are in the gym they have other values and norms than outside of it. They would never yell or scream at their own kids but the moment they put on their coaching clothes, yelling and screaming become acceptable behavior. They know it is not right; otherwise they would not keep the curtains and doors closed.

They acknowledged that coaches behave this way because they want control over their young athletes and that coaches create a culture of retribution to achieve that control. Two directors described this culture:

If parents complain then the next morning at practice their daughter will be told, 'You do not tell your parents those kinds of things. What we do and say, stays here and you do not share that with your mother.' She gets yelled at and is shamed in front of the others and/or is isolated during practice. You know that this girl will never say anything at home anymore. That is what I call total control.

If a coach knows someone is coming [from the board or NGA] all he has to do is say to an athlete: 'Be careful ... You know that competition you want to go to next month?'

In addition to their acknowledgement that coaches yell and scream at athletes, the directors agreed that body regulation, especially of weight, as currently practiced by the coaches could have a negative impact on the behaviour of elite athletes. Two directors described how this worked out in practice:

There are some coaches who weigh an athlete regularly, often once or twice per week. The athletes know this and go to the toilet to induce vomiting. Drinking water is important but then they do not drink and throw the bottle away. These girls are not learning to become elite athletes but [learn] how to fool each other and their coaches. They are forced to think it [elite gymnastics] is primarily about their weight.

Coaches have to allow them to eat fries once in a while. If you forbid it, then controlling weight becomes a frustrating experience.

These directors (as well as the coaches, as we show further on) did not interfere with such practices and seemed to have little understanding of the ways in which this body regulation was related to athletic identity and the long-term possibility of chronic eating disorders (see Cosh et al. 2012).

A director suggested there is a hierarchy of what are considered to be acceptable coaching behaviours. 'We have never had incidences of sexual harassment. Instead we have had situations of total control, intimidation, name calling such as: 'fat swine' or 'pig' and yelling and embarrassing these kids'. Although these directors voiced their disapproval of such technologies by coaches, they did little to stop them and rarely fired them for such behaviours. These directors seemed to suggest that sexual and physical abuse was not tolerated, while emotional abuse was constructed as an inevitable part of elite youth sport. This suggests

intimidation, body regulation and isolation, and belittling of athletes by coaches was acceptable. The directors knew how their coaches behaved and yet they often allowed them to continue in such behaviours. This dynamic confirmed their earlier statements that winning has priority in their programme. As we show in the next section, the directors based this *laissez-fair* attitude on trust.

Trusting and controlling the coaches

The directors used trust as a technology to explain how they governed the coaches in their clubs. A director summarized: 'I give coaches a great deal of room. I do not need to know everything. There are things that are based on trust'. They based this trust on the expertise of the coach. All of the coaches currently involved in the elite programme have had at least one athlete who has competed at the international level. Consequently, coaches were constructed as professionals who knew what they needed to do to produce 'winners'. This included actual knowledge of the sport, coaching methods/styles and also ways of interacting with athletes and parents. Their knowledge and expertise became a 'regime of truth'. This rationality played an important part in sustaining the status quo, as we show further on.

The directors tried to control these coaches with the use of policy technologies described earlier: 'Coaches of elite athletes want to excel and will do everything to realize that goal. If you do not control them they will push to get whatever they want/need'. Some directors acknowledged that they often did not have control over the coach as the following two quotes describe:

And then a coach says: 'Yes, I discussed this with the athlete (7 years old) and she wants to go to the Olympics eventually. And that is why we work her so hard.' I [director] think: 'What is wrong with this?' It is crazy to ask a child about the Olympics and then use the answer to legitimize your treatment and training methods and argue: 'Yes, but this child wanted this.'

All coaches have a certain amount of charm but at the same time they are also power hungry. They do not get that power from adults but [get it] only in gymnastics where there is a big difference in age, as there is between them and the girls. They are the bosses in the gym, which is why they have conflicts with the board. They do not know how to behave with adults.

At times, coaching behaviour was so normalized that directors did not realize that they witnessed what could be labelled as emotionally abusive behaviour. A director aptly summarized this: 'You do not realize what you see'. This normalization had become a regime of truth. The directors justified this normalization of their lack of control by trusting that coaches know what is best (discourse of expertise).

Assigning responsibility to parents

The directors invoked the discourse of protection to assign responsibility for the welfare of the athlete to the parents. A director rationalized this as follows: 'What is the first layer if you peel off the layers surrounding a gymnast [with respect to their wellbeing]? The parents. As parents you can never abdicate that responsibility to the NGA or the club'. Similarly, another director argued that parents have a responsibility to check out the coach:

I tell them [parents] that there is only one person responsible for your daughter and that is you. Make sure that when you allow your child to work with a coach, that you trust that coach 100% including his values and norms; you have to be completely sure [of the coach] because you have the primary responsibility for that child.

Others realized that past policies concerning parents were inadequate.

In the past, parents were seen as a burden that you wanted to keep at a distance. We now want to try to involve them, I am not saying that parents are the boss but they do still have the final say over their daughter.

Specifically, these directors drew on the discourse of protection but placed the responsibility for that with the parents, while the responsibility of the club was to ensure the athletes performed well internationally. Parents, for example, were welcome to come to the gym and watch but not for an entire practice because that might interfere with the performance of their daughters.

These directors suggested that parents also put the discourse of performance first and that this priority legitimized coaching behaviours: 'People [parents] do not come because you promise a child friendly or child focused programs. No, people who want elite sport do not come for that; they come because they want to win.' Consequently, although the directors assigned parents the primary responsibility for the welfare of their daughters, parents were excluded from much of what happened with their daughters and the effect that coaching styles might have had on them.

Blaming the context

These directors attributed the necessity of disregarding coaching styles to the desire of coaches to win and to the small number of available elite coaches. Directors who had the courage to fire a coach for abusive behaviour may hire coaches who have been let go elsewhere. This hiring is usually framed in terms of the expertise that the 'new' coach can bring to the club and the scarcity of available coaches. Two directors expressed their frustration. One said: 'Can you give me names of new coaches? They do not exist. We have to make do with those we have!' Another claimed that 'The pool of possible coaches that have a license to coach elite gymnasts is very small'. The directors of the elite clubs blamed the NGA for this small pool of experienced coaches. A director explained:

The NGA has not ensured that more coaches have been trained and educated to coach elite athletes. The ones they have were educated by coaches who wanted to remain the boss and have a say about everything; this meant these coaches had few choices and left. We now have Dutch coaches working in Canada and Italy.

In summary, these directors emphasized that they did what they could to ensure that pleasure and positive development predominated. They backed this up by pointing to their use of technologies such as requiring consent to the content of policies such as ACBI and ASSC to ensure that coaches prioritized pleasure and positive development and used positive pedagogy. In addition, they delegated responsibility for the well-being of the athletes to the parents. They were aware of abusive behaviours but seemed to think that coaches knew what they were doing and/or this was part of a coach's repertoire. There was little evidence that they saw themselves as being directly responsible for the behaviour of the coaches. The process of governmentality used by these directors consisted of technologies that included adopting child-friendly policies, assigning responsibility for current coaching behaviour to parents and to context and placing their trust in the knowledge/expertise of the coach. This expertise they attributed to a coach seemed to be more important than the coach's ability to engage in positive pedagogical practices. They situated these technologies and rationalities within the discourse of performance. These results confirm Coakley's (2011) assertion that abusive behaviours continue to occur because stakeholders in the sport context endorse harmful behaviours.

Coaches

All coaches in this study drew on discourses of pleasure/enjoyment, performance and protection to produce rationalities that legitimized and normalized their behaviour. In general, coaches positioned themselves as passionate, reasonable, knowledgeable and well-educated individuals who want to win in ways that are congruent with the adopted policies and with discourses of pleasure and protection. These coaches knew how to work the 'rules', especially in their use of the discourses of expert knowledge and of protection. They assigned responsibility for the realization of pleasure and positive development to the athletes to other coaches and the lack of it to the small pool of available coaches.

Being athlete centred

Similar to the directors, these coaches placed responsibility for the welfare/well-being of athletes elsewhere. These coaches were adamant that athletes were in charge as the following quotes suggest:

The gymnasts are the boss. We chart their progress but we never force them to do anything. It is their choice if they do something or not. They know they do not have to do something they do not want to just to be in good standing with the coach. I am surrounded by professionals who think the same way.

Although both coach and athlete are involved, it is the gymnast who has final say.

Although the coaches said they were athlete centred, they seemed to have created an atmosphere of fear (Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2016). These coaches admitted they did everything they could to have control. They put a lot of their energy into 'their' athletes and wanted them to do well. This often meant they tried to control the athlete inside and outside of the gym. A coach was critical of his own behaviour in enforcing many rules but continued to enforce them:

We are so scared that athletes will lose their elite mentality is, that they see things in life that may be more attractive and make them want to quit. That is the big fear and that is why the doors of the gym are closed and athletes are not allowed to participate in anything else. What if they find a sport they like better? Or they have a boy or girl friend outside of sport and they do not want to do gymnastics anymore? You [the coach] could try to give them more room but it is easier to close the doors, tell them to go to bed at 9 pm, no fries, no ice cream etc.

Athletes may be dependent on their coach, but coaches are also dependent on athletes for success. Coaches are hired for their ability to produce international competitors. Thus, the athlete-coach dependency relationship as described by Stirling (2011) is a two-way street, although the coaches try to control that relationship. This relationship reflects Foucault's (1977) contention that everyone is caught in a web of power, not just those who exercise it.

Constructing elite sport as tough

These coaches constructed a rationality about elite sport to justify their ways of working with athletes. The discourse of development played a minor role in these coaches' discursive practices of elite women's gymnastics. They constructed 'toughness' as a characteristic of elite sport. They said this in various ways: 'Elite sport is very tough' and 'Children need to learn to be tough'. This meant these gymnasts had to be able to take a lot of criticism:

Elite gymnastics means that athletes receive a lot of criticism every day in everything no matter how positive you as coach are. An athlete has to be able to cope with that and not everyone can.

They used the discourse of performance to construct a rationality that justified why they had to push and discipline their athletes at certain times. A coach asserted that: 'You can achieve excellent results with such young children. It all depends on your methods and techniques and discipline, demanding and enforcing it'. Pleasure was defined as an end product and not as being part of the process of learning to excel in gymnastics: 'Athletes have a sense of pleasure/achievement when they do well despite injuries and pain'. Another legitimized his ways of working and drew on both the discourses of performance and pleasure:

I stand for elite sport at the highest level. Yes, you have to push and perhaps sometimes I push too hard. But I have also had a gymnast come and tell me 'You have to become really angry with me.' Others who come and visit me when they are adults say, 'Yes it was very tough and difficult and sometimes what you said really hurt but I always felt you did it to make me a better athlete.'

It was the coach therefore who usually decided what was best for an athlete, not the athlete.

Coaches therefore redefined what could be defined as emotional abuse as a technology needed to develop the requisite mental toughness that was required to enable an athlete to compete at the international level (see also Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis 2014). They constructed toughness as a regime of truth embedded in the discourses of performance, pleasure, protection and development needed by young female gymnasts who want to excel at the global level. This coach-centred technology that purportedly develops 'toughness' has been a common feature of elite youth sport. Cushion, Ford and Williams (2012) summarized the literature on coaching styles and found that, similar to our results, a 'highly directed, autocratic and prescriptive approach to instruction' was the norm. This means young elite athletes, including Dutch gymnasts, have little voice in decision-making. This notion of the need for coaches to have complete control and to develop toughness through emotional abuse or what has been called symbolic violence is not confined to gymnastics but is reflected in other studies as well (see for example, Cushion and Jones 2006; Fox 2006; Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis 2014; Stirling and Kerr 2008). Cushion and Jones (2006), for example, showed how an authoritarian discourse is established and maintained in youth elite soccer, how it is structured by and subsequently structured the coaching context and how accompanying behaviours were constructed as legitimate by both coaches and players. In the current study, this rationale for toughness and the technologies associated with it were also informed by gender.

Assigning responsibility to gender

Some coaches used the technology of blaming the nature of gymnastics and the changing bodies of girls for making the coaching of elite women athletes a challenge. Instead of constructing bodily changes as a positive part of growing up, these coaches constructed them as barriers and used various rationalities to do so. Coaches complained that:

As coaches we are held accountable for reaching the Olympics with our athletes. Yet we have to meet that goal with girls of 15 and 16. That is what makes it [coaching] so difficult.

The most difficult aspect of coaching women's elite gymnastics is that you have to deliver an outstanding achievement with girls who are going through puberty.

Similarly, our coaches constructed puberty as an obstacle in having a trim and slender body that is seen as a prerequisite for excellence in gymnastics. Similar to the results of other studies focusing on gymnastics (e.g. Pinheiro et al. 2014; Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2016; Tan et al. 2014), coaches used the measurement of weight as a disciplinary technique of control. A coach explained:

If a child gains weight, we pay attention and talk with the parents. I try to say stuff that motivates such as: I know it is difficult; we will tackle this together; something has to happen but I will not let you down.'

These coaches blamed the structure of international women's gymnastics for their push to keep athletes small.

If the minimum age limit to participate in European and World championships would be changed to 20 then you would not have to be flat, small and skinny to be able to do things.

We can't send them to championships when they are 20 because then they have little chance of getting to the Olympics.

The emphasis on puberty as being difficult and on small bodies is not unique to gymnastics as it also plays a role in other aesthetic juried sports such as figure skating and diving. McMahon and Barker-Ruchti (2015) have shown how 'a sexually maturing body (growing breasts, female body shape and menstruating) was deemed unsuitable for performance' and how that impacts a young girl's relationship with her developing body. It is beyond the scope of this paper, however, to discuss this construction of femininity in detail or how the construction of a hierarchical male coach–young female athlete relationship may inform emotionally abusive coaching behaviours (see, for example, McMahon and Barker-Ruchti 2015).

Blaming the performance discourse

Some of the coaches realized that not all of their behaviour meant to toughen the athletes was in the best interest of the gymnasts. They used the technology of blaming the pressure for their athletes to win, for their behaviour. A coach admitted 'A coach has to score and if an athlete has to be sacrificed to accomplish that than that is how it is'. These coaches rationalized their behaviour using the discourse of performance. They assumed that a child needs to have 10,000 h of gymnastics before she reaches 16. This regime of truth was used as a rationality for pushing the athletes.

Trying to get in 10,000 h [of practice] before the age of 16 means [I have to place them in] a pressure cooker.

Before a gymnast can excel she will have to spend 10,000 h practicing. This means I was there as well; this creates a strong bond.

A coach explained why policies such as ACBI might need to be circumvented if the objective of winning is to be attained. Winning was rationalized to be in the child's best interest and as giving pleasure.

What is a [policy of] Child's Best Interest? That you constantly watch a child's face to see if she is smiling or not? And that you then go with her to a competition and she ends up as number 30 in the world? Or do you make an agreement with parents that for a while everything is going to be tough which includes perseverance despite pain and blisters? The coach has to push and be tough.

Another coach placed the notion of toughness within the ACBI policy context:

A gymnast was not good enough to go to an international competition. She then transferred from her club to mine. I worked her really hard and really pushed her. She rose four places in the rankings and could go to international competitions. This is in a child's best interest! She liked the higher rank much better than not placing.

Although these coaches continually used technologies in which they drew on the discourses of performance and pleasure for their rationale, some also blamed the NGA for their

coaching behaviour. They felt that the NGA was unclear what is meant by ACBI. A coach argued that ‘The NGA has not been clear about what they mean with the ACBI policy. Is this [ACBI] what elite sport is all about? How far can coaches go?’ The coaches also justified their emphasis on toughness, their styles and performance by drawing on the discourse of expert knowledge/expertise.

Using expertise

These coaches often claimed other coaches as their source of the expertise. The pool of Dutch elite coaches is small and many have trained each other. They used techniques that draw on methods of interacting with athletes used by coaches whose athletes have performed well internationally. A coach gave this example using a coach whose athletes did very well: ‘He proved that you made athletes better by placing them under a lot of pressure. Coaches who saw this assumed that to be the best way and did the same thing’. Another coach asserted that a few elite coaches often asked advice from a coach who was fired for his abusive treatment of athletes: ‘A number of coaches still use him as a sounding board’. This reliance on coaches of the past, including those who were the focus of complaints by athletes, explains perhaps in part why little has changed in coaching styles, despite the NGA’s efforts in changing policy, introducing positive coaching and holding workshops.

The coaches, however, were seen as the ‘true’ experts in the club. The following description seemed to typify their relationship with the board of their club. ‘The board has very little knowledge or understanding of what I am trying to do’. These coaches used this lack of knowledge and their own reputation for having expertise to their advantage.

Coaches can mislead many directors. It is not difficult. If you use some difficult words such as ‘super-compensation’ and if the board consists of people with good intentions but little knowledge and experience in the sport at the elite level, then I will get everything I want.

The policy A Safe Sport Culture? Yes, but mentioning it is also a game right? So when you are surrounded by people who think this policy is important you play along. When they are gone, you go back to doing what you did before. You just have to be smart in how you handle these things.

This small pool of available elite coaches and their expertise enlarged their web of power, not only in relationship to the athletes but also to the directors.

Blaming other coaches

Lang (2010) has described how coaches not only work hard to control the athlete and be the ‘boss’ but also to create a hierarchy among themselves as well. The coaches participating in this study not only learned from each other but also created hierarchy as a technology that allowed them to legitimize not saying anything when other coaches seemingly violated positive pedagogical practices as described in ACBI. A coach explained how this worked:

Coaches operate within a culture where they compete with each other for the scarce talent. There is little love lost between them. It is a small world in which coaches cannot afford to make enemies. They may know of unsound pedagogical practices but remain silent because their athletes may suffer for it in the next competition because that coach may influence the results or who is selected to attend an international competition.

Coaches also used the small pool of coaches and the culture of retribution as an argument to legitimize their inability to engage in peer control or report abusive behaviour to the NGA.

I have seen miserable athletes [at competitions]. I may have questions about how she is treated and I would like to report this. But if I do and others find out then eventually my athletes will pay for this.

Coaches therefore used technologies based on various rationalities to legitimize their behaviour. They assigned responsibility for their behaviour to others such as athletes, other coaches and the board of governance of their club and developed technologies with accompanying rationalities drawn primarily from the discourse of performance to enable them to work in ways they think are best for producing winners.

Discussion

Overall, those interviewed used the various discourses that circulate in elite youth sport to construct hybrid rationalities and technologies that enabled compromise, adaptation and resistance. Both coaches and directors affirmed the discourses of pleasure, performance and positive development as important discursive practices. An additional discourse, the discourse of expert knowledge or expertise that was associated with the coaches, emerged from the interviews. It was this discourse that seemed to guide the use of technologies and the accompanying rationalities. Because they were seen as experts, coaches were constructed as authorities on the process of developing athletes. By claiming expert knowledge (or having that projected on them), they became the ‘moral guardians’ of the process of creating outstanding athletes (see also Foucault 1983). In other words, their normalizing judgement was backed up by assertions of scientific rationality and validity such as the 10,000-h principle, the development of mental toughness, puberty as a barrier and the retributive culture that existed among the small pool of elite coaches. Directors emphasized the expertise of the coaches they had appointed, even when other elite clubs had fired them. Directors used this rationality of expertise as a technology to legitimate their trust in the coaches’ ways of conducting practices. Winning was the goal and when achieved, provided pleasure.

This prioritizing of the performance discourse in combination with emphasis on toughness and coaching behaviours that can be considered as emotionally abusive is not unique to elite gymnastics in the Netherlands. Other researchers described similar situations in gymnastics such as Johns and Johns (2000) in Hong Kong and Pinheiro et al. 2014 in Portugal. Others who have focused on other elite youth sports such as swimming in Canada (Stirling 2011) and various sports in the UK and Norway (Brackenridge and Fasting 2005; Gervis and Dunn 2004) also concluded that coaches systematically engaged in emotional abusive behaviour that increased as the athletes became outstanding performers. Potrac, Jones and Cushion (2001) also found that coaches of soccer used technologies of domination and power to create fear and obedience among their athletes. Our results not only echo those found by other researchers, however, but also show how such behaviour is sustained by an institutional context, specifically by directors/managers of sport clubs. Paradoxically, directors govern with an emphasis on discourses of pleasure and development while at the same time, they create a context emphasizing high performance that informs coaching behaviour in other (unintended) ways.

Governmentality is a process that attempts to regulate and prescribe possible human conduct with a particular goal for all those involved in an organization (Mckee 2009; Munro 2011). Governmentality enabled directors to frame themselves as doing the morally right thing at the institutional level using the discourses of protection and pleasure. Directors

instituted 'rules' to regulate and prescribe proper conduct by coaches towards their athletes. As long as they did not kick, hit or humiliate athletes and indicated their agreement with the policies outlined in ASSC and ACBI, these coaches of elite athletes seemed to be free to do what they wished. In part, this freedom may have been due to the multiple discourses surrounding elite youth sport. Mckee (2009) has suggested multiple and competing discourses that act upon an organization and its individuals may prevent coherence or produce contradictions. This multiplicity provided these directors and coaches with various technologies and accompanying rationalities that when employed in elite gymnastics, prevented change from occurring. In general, the technologies employed by these clubs ensured that the various competing discourses concerning youth sport were constructed as congruent with current practices and enabled coaches and directors to invoke an appropriate discourse when needed and produced contradictions that were seen as normal.

The results suggest that governmentality exerted less power on the coaches, as did the disciplinary power exercised by discourses of expertise and performance. Pleasure was constructed as a result of winning/performing at the international level. These coaches were not out to ruin the lives of the young girls but coached them in ways they had learned was the best way to reach the top. They themselves were disciplined by the discourses of expertise and performance. By claiming expert knowledge, they became the guardians of a process that shaped the behaviours and skills of the athletes and directors within sport clubs. In other words, they created a regime of truth based on their normalizing judgement with assertions of scientific rationality and validity that seemed to legitimize it. The power of discourses of pleasure, positive development and protection was secondary to the disciplinary power of the discourses of performance and expertise that acted on individual coaches. It is these two discourses, and not governmentality, that largely informed a coach's behaviour towards the athletes and the directors' ways of managing the programme. Together, these discourses and the institutional context in which they were embedded allowed emotional abuse to continue to occur. The global use of emotionally abusive behaviour by coaches of elite youth sports and the legitimization of this behaviour using technologies and their rationales suggest that this is not an individual coaching problem or confined to a specific sport, but an issue that has its roots in the institutional context in which these practices occur. More research is needed, however, that focuses on directors/managers of elite youth sport clubs to explore to what extent these results are unique to directors in the Netherlands and/or of gymnastics.

This institutional context makes change difficult. Skille and Houlihan (2014) argued that:

Elite development systems can rapidly become institutionalized and once the ambition of elite sporting success has been embedded in a policy sector it is not only difficult to retreat, but it is also difficult to avoid moving in a direction which involves incorporating ever younger people into the elite system.

This suggests that change may only be possible if the institutional context is completely transformed. Several scholars (Denison 2007; Denison and Avner 2011; Denison, Mills, and Konoval 2015; and Jacobs, Claringbould, and Knoppers 2014) have shown how coaches who engage in coach-centred practices can be transformed to think and practice in a totally different manner that is athlete centred. They found that transformation was possible when coaches learned to critically apply a Foucauldian framework to their ways of thinking about and practicing sport and especially about the notion of developing mental toughness. Possibly, coaches and directors of elite youth sport need to engage in such transformation

to change the institutional context; otherwise changes in ‘rules’ will have little impact on coaching behaviour.

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