

Assessing the sociology of sport: On critical sport sociology and sport management

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Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, Annelies Knoppers, one of the leading scholars in understanding the culture of sport in organizational settings, considers how the critical lens of sociology can enhance and mesh with research on sport management. Knoppers argues that there have been lost opportunities and understandings from the little overlap between scholars publishing in journals in the sociology of sport and sport management. Using the topic of gender and leadership, she describes the benefits that might result from using a sociological lens and a 'critical reflexivity' to study power and social inequalities in sport management and organizations. Consideration is given to how critical understandings about gender can enhance organizational effectiveness by valuing 'hybridity' in leadership styles. The essay closes with arguments for a critical intersectional approach to the study of sport management with recognition that 'disciplinary' practices shape the wielding of leadership power within organizations.

Keywords

critical theory, gender, leadership, management, sociology, work, sport organizations

Twenty-five years ago Slack and Kikulis (1989) argued in *IRSS* that more sport scholars needed to use a sociological lens to look at sport organizations. They pointed out that much of the sport management research tended to focus on 'practical and applied issues of management' (p. 181). This neglect of a sociological lens to study sport management is problematic, given the large number of sport organizations and their social, political, cultural and economic influence and the ways they shape the participation of those involved in sport.¹ Unfortunately since then there has been little overlap between those

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who publish in sport sociology journals and those who author articles in sport management journals. Love and Andrew (2012) engaged in network analysis of authors who published in sport management and sociology of sport journals between 1987 and 2009. They found only nine authors who had published in both types of journals. They cited research that concluded that sociological theory was used in less than 20% of the doctoral dissertations in the area of sport management. In this paper I argue that sociology of sport scholars need not only pay more attention to the work that goes on in organizations that govern and/or control sport but also that their sociological lens must be a critical one. To show what such a lens might look like, I use the topic of gender and leadership as an example throughout the paper. Leaders or managers are important objects of study since they play an important role in the allocation of resources, in the motivation, hiring, promotion and wellbeing of employees, in constructions of organizational vision, mission and strategies, in shaping organizational culture and in creating and implementing rules and regulations (Collinson, 2014). Yet with the exception of research on coaching, relatively little critical sociological work has focused on leaders of and in sport organizations.

Assessing the challenges of the sociology of sport

Collinson (2014) suggests that critical research on leaders should focus on how 'situated power relations and identity dynamics through which leadership discursive practices are socially constructed, [are] frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted and occasionally transformed' (p. 37). Relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how leaders in sport organizations use or challenge common managerial modes of control and their regulatory practices and how managers strengthen and produce relations of power that privilege some and marginalize or exclude others.

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) contend that much of management research and the theories in which that research is situated, are primarily managerialist and instrumentalist in nature. Managerialism consists of policies that emphasize accountability and effectiveness. Frisby (2005) also acknowledges that much of sport management research is situated within an instrumental, that is, positivist, approach. Alvesson and Spicer attribute this positivist focus in management studies to its history. The scholarly beginnings of management studies were rooted in engineering disciplines. Organizations were assumed to need machine-like efficiency in order to function well. Sociology of sport has its roots in both physical education and sociology, both of which were initially also dominated by positivist traditions (Dunning, 2004; Sage, 1987). Sociology, including that of sport, was also influenced by the development of left oriented forms of sociology including Marxism that gave impetus to the development of critical approaches in sociology of sport.²

In contrast to this emphasis on managerialism and positivism in management studies, Frisby (2005) and Alvesson and Spicer (2012) call for research that is critically reflexive, examining how societal issues are embedded in managerialism.³ The use of a critical sociological approach also enables scholars to question assumptions about sport management, to explore practices that produce social inequalities, to pay attention to context and the role of power and to look for possible ways in which current practices of leadership can be transformed. I use three examples to show the types of topics that could be

addressed: definitions of work, leadership and employees; styles of leadership; and, relational power and knowledge construction.

Future directions for the sociology of sport

Definitions of work, leadership and employees

The use of critical sociological perspectives requires researchers to question assumptions and definitions. Such questions should pay attention to both content and context. For example, little is known about how discourses about sport and organizations inform the ways sport management is practiced and is defined. Being a leader in a sport organization may mean taking on values embedded in popular discourses about sport and about corporate life. The constructions of these values inform how problems are defined, which questions are asked about leadership and how theories about managers and management are constructed. How those in positions of leadership assign content to work in the context of sport organizations has primarily received critical attention with respect to gender. For example, Hovden (2010) and Claringbould and Knoppers (2013) show how criteria used to select board members and leaders of sport organizations favoured those individuals who demonstrated qualities and processes that were associated with and produced 'successful' men.

Relatively little critical attention, if at all, has been given to how other social relations are embedded in assumptions about managers/leaders and their work. Singer (2005) urges those who study sport management to use critical race theory to explore constructions of race and ethnicity in leadership dynamics. Few sociologists seem to have taken up that task. More research is needed, for example, that explores how ideologies about race, sport and leadership inform hiring and promotion policies within sport organizations. Little attention has been paid to how racial ideologies may be embedded in dichotomies such as transformational/interactional that are embedded in constructions of leadership styles (Collinson, 2014). The organization of sport is formally structured on the basis of dichotomies of gender and on impairment. Yet, it is men and those seen as abled bodied who primarily make decisions about the ways sport is organized. Little is known about how these formal structures of sport shape and inform the discursive practices of leaders of sport organizations and the role context plays in such practices.

More critical sociological attention needs to be paid to how definitions of the work performed by leaders/managers have become a fixed reality in sport organizations. For example, overwork by managers is often valorized and constructed as heroic (Knoppers, 2011). This valorization may have resulted in the absence of work–life balance for leaders in sport organizations, especially for women with children (see, for example, Dixon and Bruening, 2005; Leberman and Palmer, 2009). Research is needed to examine who benefits from these constructions of work–life management and of (over)work and sources for resistance to change.

Leadership styles

The emergence of post-heroic theories of leadership that emphasize how leadership is a collaborative practice, is assumed to reduce social inequities that emerge from

hierarchical social relations and to transform current managerial dynamics (Fletcher, 2004). Burton and Peachey (2013) have argued that servant leadership that asks leaders to engage in and emphasize service and collaboration, should become the new paradigm for leadership in intercollegiate athletics. Research from a managerial perspective might look for ways this can be realized. In contrast, critical sociologists could deconstruct this paradigm. Fletcher (2004), for example, argues that paradigms that are constructed as a hybrid of qualities associated with femininity and masculinity, may reify polarized gender practices. These styles tend to draw on a logic of effectiveness associated with masculinity and of collaboration and interdependence linked to femininity. This hybridity not only constructs masculinity and femininity as opposite and fixed spheres but also constructs women as 'naturally' skilled in relationships (see also Shaw and Hoeber, 2003). This may make it seem that servant leadership is a natural style for women and therefore needs not be rewarded or recognized as leadership and as work. Attention needs to be paid not only to how this gendering of leadership is practised within sport organizations but also how post-heroic leadership is racialized and challenges or reproduces racial inequalities (see also Ospina and Foldy, 2009). Such and similar critical research on managerial fashions needs to be conducted not only in sport organizations but also in educational institutions that prepare individuals to become sport managers.

Power and knowledge

Critical sociology should also be used to explore how knowledge about leaders/managers is constructed, produced and how it acts on those who are the focus of this research. Bendl et al. (2008) plead for a queering of managerial work and research. They contend that the constructions of categories used in much of the language, practices and research in the study and practice of management of diversity have an underlying subtext that reproduces heteronormativity. They propose the use of an intersectional approach that assumes that identities are fluid and that places the queering of heteronormativity at the centre of such research. Given the history of homophobia in sport and the focus on sexual identities common in much sociological research, this emphasis is not misplaced (Eng, 2008; King, 2008).

Sociologists also need to look critically at how power operates in sport organizations. The use of Foucault's notions of disciplinary power may yield understandings about how those in positions of leadership constitute organizational members and how ideologies about sport and its practices are (re)produced and challenged in these settings to produce certain ways of acting that privilege some and marginalize and exclude others. Disciplinary power should not be explored in only one direction, however. Leaders are subject to disciplinary power from above and below and discipline themselves as well (McCabe, 2014). Little is known about how disciplinary power works in sport organizations and if its dynamics are unique to these organizations. Do leaders with a sport background tend to use disciplinary methods learned on the playing fields and do employees resist and comply as they may have done during their sport career?

Obviously there is much that is unknown about the inner dynamics of sport organizations and the role that leadership plays in that. Yet sport organizations shape and regulate

sport participation and therefore could benefit from critical scholarly attention. Leadership in sport organizations is not the only topic that needs to be studied with the use of critical sociological perspectives. Other possible topics that could benefit from the use of a critical lens could include attention to the role embodied dispositions play in the selection of coaches, explore how employees in sport organizations comply with and resist dominant norms about sport and health, investigate how power circulates in the relationship between sport organizations and local/global communities and consider historical developments that produce the use of theoretical lenses to constitute sport organizations. These examples are not meant to be exhaustive since every sport management topic could be studied with and benefit from the use of a critical sociological lens. These examples are simply meant to stimulate creative and much needed critical sociological research of sport organizations and their management.

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Notes

1. My focus is on management and excludes scholarly work that focuses on sport policy and often incorporates critical social theory. Such work has been used to identify dominant macro influences that have shaped micro-practices in sport organizations and those who work there (see, for example, work by Green and Houlihan, 2004; Piggin et al., 2009; Sam and Jackson, 2004; Thibault et al., 2010).
2. These sentences do not do justice to the history of the development of either sociology of sport or sport management. Space limitations, however, mean a detailed analysis of the historical process of convergence and divergence in theoretical lenses is not possible here.
3. Whereas Frisby (2005) calls on sport management scholars to draw on critical social theory to examine issues in management, I call on sociology of sport scholars to look critically at sport management.

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