

Sub-theme 04: Practices of Intersectionality in Organisations.

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Good news or bad? The shifting points of intersection in the elite sport development game.

Introduction

Critical and postmodern approaches remain on the fringes of sport management research (Skinner and Edwards, 2005). The purpose of the study proposed in this paper is to broaden the scope and conceptual complexity of a topic that matters to New Zealand (NZ) and globally; elite sport performance. The intent is to use an intersectional approach to highlight the interplay over time between macro - societal institutions and meso - organisational factors and the impact on the work-life experiences of amateur elite athletes. The concept of intersectionality is used in women's studies and feminist theory to understand the relationship between interrelating categories of inequality and unequal power relations (Acker, 2006; Calas and Smircich; Holvino, 2008). Different approaches to the theorization of intersectionality has stimulated a rich scholarly debate as to its strengths and weaknesses as scholars seek further understanding and explanation of the concept (eg Bilge, 2010; Dill, McLaughlin and Nieves, 2007; Holvino, 2008; McCall, 2005; Naples, 2009; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Yuval-Davies, 2006). Bilge (2010) summaries this debate as one that exists on two levels: level one, discussions on theories and methodologies and level two, praxis or the application of intersectional knowledge to advance equality. Considering the scholarly debate, this paper represents our initial thinking on how to conceptualize an intersectional research project: what to include and what to exclude or see as peripheral to the analysis (Naples, 2009).

There is little evidence of an intersectional methodology being used in the analysis of high performance sport systems. In a review of the work-life literature,

Ozbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli and Bell (2010, p.4) make a similar claim and argue a case for intersectional research to address conceptual “blind spots” and gaps. While the setting for their analysis is labour markets similar analogies can be made between an elite athlete’s sports ‘work’ in high performance sport systems and life beyond ‘work’. The central argument in this paper is that the delivery model for elite sport provision constructs and reinforces an ‘ideal’ elite athlete worker. This ‘ideal’ is problematic for amateur, elite Olympic and Commonwealth Games athletes, in particular, athletes involved in team sports. Our objective in this paper is limited: the goal is to bring together strands of interdisciplinary research and outline an intersectional framework for future research development. We argue that it is critical to capture the ‘lived experiences’ of elite amateur athletes over a period of time and this needs to set within the regional context (McCall, 2005). Only through this understanding can organizations involved in the elite sport network address the disjuncture between desired performance outcomes and the fluidity of ‘life’ experiences of elite amateur athletes. This paper aims to address the theme: Intersectional practices of organizing and their consequences.

The intersections between macro-level government policy and the creation of a meso-level “sports industry”

Research shows a growing number of nations are prepared to “pay up” and play a strategic “elite sport development” game (Green and Houlihan, 2008, p.291). Maguire (2009, p.1256) portrays this obsession for sporting success as “the equivalent of the arms race in which ever greater resources have to be invested in order to maintain or improve the position of the nation”. New Zealand (NZ) is a relative newcomer, joining this particular sports strategic ‘game’ in 2002. The impetus was a shift to centralized control of the sport and recreation sector through the creation of the quasi-government agency Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) (see Collins, 2008; Martin, 2009). Their mandate, to provide ‘strong leadership’ saw a philosophical shift in the policy definition of ‘public good’ (Sport, Fitness and Leisure Ministerial Taskforce, 2001). Influenced by a combination of localized neo-liberal macro-policy thinking and the sport policies of other countries (Green and Houlihan, 2008), no-where has the re-definition of ‘public good’ been more overt than in elite sport development [also termed high performance sport]. Recent changes to SPARC’s

structure¹ and revisions to the High Performance Sport Strategy (see www.sparc.org.nz) highlight how the initial policy choices made in 2002 have become entrenched. The relationship between Ministerial appointments², government policy and commitment and, the impact of policy instruments in revealing and allocating a hierarchy of societal values (Sam, 2007) is illustrated in the following quote:

“Winning in international event helps create a strong sense of national identity, pride and social cohesion; creates a healthy image for marketing New Zealand goods, services and experiences abroad; helps attract high profile sports events to New Zealand and encourages New Zealanders to be active” (<http://www.sparc.org.nz>, 2010, p.3).

The outcome of policy choices has required all contributors to elite sport development to adapt quickly to the ‘rules’ of the strategic sport ‘game’. A key driver has been successive Government’s use of tax payer’s money, something prior Governments had not done. Results based ‘investment’ in contrast to the previous more inclusive entitlement model, signals the crux of the policy change. What, in effect, has laid the ground-rules for a process of rationalization, is particularly significant for National Sports Organizations (NSO’s). NSO’s now shoulder sole responsibility for the high performance status of their sport and, subsequent funding implications. The premise that it is ‘the sport’ which should determine its own destiny (Martin, 2009) has intrinsic appeal. The reality however, in a small, geographically isolated country, where alternative funding options beyond public money are very limited, is that the high performance team at SPARC holds considerable power and influence (Piggin, Jackson and Lewis, 2009).

In this instance, the imposition of corporatist styles of management (Collins, 2008; Sam and Jackson, 2004) has defined ‘best practice’ for financially dependent NSO’s. Accountability, quantifiable performance targets, good governance and structure, strategic planning and an expected return on investment determine if an NSO is worthy of inclusion as a strategic partnership with SPARC. Such parameters, written as ‘Key Tactics’, aim is “to ensure that its [SPARC] high performance mission is achieved” (SPARC High Performance Strategy 2006-2012, p.7). Voiced concerns that recognize any change is, in practice, experimental (Wilson, 2009) appear silenced

¹ in the form of a new High Performance Institute as a separate entity within SPARC

² NZ has a Minister for Sport and Recreation who also holds the portfolio Minister for the Rugby World Cup, 2011.

as sanctions against NSO's who fail to comply with the terms of partnership, emerge³ (Collins, 2008). Elite sport development in NZ is aptly described as bureaucratic and quantitative (Sam and Jackson, 2004), that in practice is, "deadly serious and thoroughly professional" (Maguire, 2009, p.1258).

The sport industry has spawned a network of people with a vested interest in the 'successful' delivery of sport policy. It is a network of sport organizations and specialist relationships, which in part, may explain why there, appear to be few dissenting voices critical of the shape and focus of policy choices. New categories of specialist sport specific career pathways have emerged as a result. The Academy of Sport (NZAS), a brand name registered by SPARC, is the delivery arm that oversees regionally based high performance support services. NSO's, are encouraged to employ full-time staff in a variety of specialist roles (eg High Performance Manager, Coach/s; technical and administrative support) solely dedicated to the production processes of developing elite athletes. In effect, what has evolved is a professionalized growth industry in elite sport specific knowledge delivered by a raft of contracted service providers, university researchers and full-time employees whose sole focus is the maximization of athlete performance (see Martin, 2009; www.sparc.org.nz). Aptly described as "manufacturing champions, hopefuls are spotted young, less talented methodically weeded out and those who remain are systematically orientated according to their potential" (Brohm cited in Eitzen, 1989, p.101). An expectation of collaboration and knowledge transfer between parties in the network is signaled by SPARC in recent changes to the NZAS; "There is a new level of teamwork between the NZAS – South Island and North Island, as well as NSO's, SPARC and the New Zealand Olympic Committee, united by a shared vision and focus on medal success" (SPARC High Performance Strategy 2006-2012, p.11).

The goals of collaboration and knowledge transfer are in sharp contrast to an 'investment ethos' that constructs 'winners' and losers'. The targeted 'winners' (until 2012) are the six targeted sports, all of whom are Olympic sports (reaffirmed in 2010, athletics, cycling, rowing, sailing, swimming⁴, triathlon – receive 70% of the funding pool). In addition rugby, cricket and netball are named as targeted sports (non-

³ Fro example funding is withdrawn; direct intervention in governance.

⁴ The funding for Swimming is conditional on an independent review of their high performance programme – funding is contingent on recommendations from the review being implemented (www.sparc.org.nz – 31-12-10).

Olympic) but receive limited funding⁵. One wonders however, if the ‘winners’ to-date are the support personnel and specialist sport specific providers in the network structure who accrue human and social capital, resources, and financial benefit from the strategic “elite sport development” game (Green and Houlihan, 2008, p.291). Conversely, non-targeted sports have had to adapt to an environment of uncertainty around whether high performance support from SPARC will be forthcoming. The core question is, can their sport “compete creditably in events on the world stage”⁶ (SPARC High Performance Strategy 2006-2012, p.8). Effectively, NSO is pitched against NSO to see who can ‘win’ a ‘slice’ of a contestable fund cake (2010, approximately 20%). Judgments on ‘who gets what’ funding are made by an investment panel at SPARC. Alone, this act illustrates the power of SPARC. Organizing processes in sport have constructed different categories of organizations and multiple patterns of hierarchy around ‘what gets to count as elite sport [and] whose sport gets to count the most’ (Collins, 2007, p14).

The preceding paragraphs have demonstrated that the intersections between macro-policy choices and meso-level network organizations are substantial. In less than a decade, New Zealand has cultivated a “very hard-headed, cost effective, non-egalitarian” approach to elite sport provision (Green and Houlihan, 2008, p.276). The change is dramatic in a context where the notions of the ‘level playing field’ and ‘fair play’ speak to the inherent justice of sport, equal opportunities and egalitarianism (Hokowhitu, 2007), values which have been long internalised, if not practiced, in NZ. Green and Houlihan (2008, p.287, 289) ask, in relation to NZ’s domestic response, “Was there an alternative path available ...a different ‘route’ to international sporting success”? Other questions emerge: Can NZ sustain involvement in an ‘out of control’ global game given its’ small population and geographic isolation? Sports performance involves the integration of many factors (Maguire, 2009). Luck or as the Roman philosopher Seneca is cited to have observed, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity” (South, 2011, p.15). How then is it possible to make quantitative judgments on actual medal prospects at, for example, the London Olympics? The essence of good competition is after all, unpredictability. Answers

⁵ Cricket (Men’s) and Rugby (Men’s) are two of the few ‘professional’ sports in NZ - generate substantial external revenue from global contracts. Netball (Women) is semi-professional – ‘investment’ is subject to review on the basis of need.

⁶ World stage is defined as Olympics, Commonwealth and Paralympics, sport specific World Championships.

depend on the perceptions of those most affected by processes that determine inclusion or exclusion. Certainly, with few voices included in the decision making (Sam and Jackson, 2004) the speed and singular trajectory of change has had real consequences for local sports communities and elite athletes (Sam and Jackson, 2004). One consequence of heightened expectations is the construction of the 'ideal' elite athlete 'worker'. It is to the intersections with this newly reconstituted category that the paper now turns.

Intersections with 'high performance work systems'

Critical management literature draws attention to the powerful influence economic rationalization and utilitarian instrumentalism has exerted on workers, globally (eg Casey, 2004). Two issues that have been much discussed in relation to workplaces are 'work intensification' and 'disciplined conformity' to managerial requirements (eg Bryson, 2010). The singular trajectory of change in elite sport development draws attention to comparable issues. For example, in the Human Resource Management literature, the topic of high performance work systems (HPWS) are discussed. HPWS are underpinned by the idea that "there exists a system of work practices for core workers in an organisation that leads in some way to superior performance" (Boxall and Macky, 2009, p.3). Described as a "fuzzy notion" it is as a concept, of interest to practitioners, policy makers and global industries seeking ways to build and retain competitive advantage in the face of intensified global competition (Boxall and Macky, 2009, 2010). The inherent tensions between employee involvement, work intensification and possibilities of 'win-win' outcomes for both employees and employers in global industries are unresolved (Boxall and Macky, 2009).

Similarly, and as discussed previously, high performance sports systems could equally be described as a "fuzzy notion" yet, as a competitive asset, is prioritized by many nations. The pinnacle event, the Olympic Games, is now unparalleled in terms of the globalization of the consumption of sport and commercialization of a sport mega-event (James and Osborn, 2011). This "Olympic Brand" is in sharp contrast with the narrative of Olympism, "a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind" (The Olympic Charter n4 cited in James and Osborn, 2011, p.411). What is illustrated is how the ethos and legacy of the Olympics – generally seen as a good thing - have become subordinate to profit

and commercialization. Indeed, at another level forms of amateur sport flourish in spite of societal forces that have transformed the elite counterpart into ‘a commodity’ of national importance. Traditional values such as amateurism and volunteerism are the essence of organized sport in NZ. Interestingly, most ‘elite’ athletes and coaches come from an amateur system which extols the gains derived from the cultural sport experience, rather than extrinsic rewards (Collins, 2008). To shift into the elite ‘treadmill’ where, on the one hand, escalating benchmarks of success demand athletes total commitment, yet on the other, cling to a ‘fiction’ of an amateur ideal embodied by Olympism, appears somewhat hypocritical and potentially damaging for athletes (Eitzen, 1989; Houlihan and Green, 2008; Maguire, 2009). In effect, policy level change in NZ has constructed the ‘ideal’ elite athlete worker on the ‘fiction’ of an amateur ideology, where the ‘intensification of work’ and the ‘disciplined conformity’ to managerial requirements is part of an implicit ‘job description’. These attributes are embedded features of what is portrayed as the sport ethic:

“A willingness to make sacrifices; a striving for distinction; an acceptance of risk and the probability of participating while enduring pain; and a tacit acceptance there is no limit to the pursuit of the ultimate performance” (Maguire, 2009, p.1257).

Intersections with the ‘ideal’ athlete ‘worker’ and life

Assumptions based on the ‘ideal’ elite athlete worker, frame expectations at multiple levels; government, agencies acting on their behalf (SPARC), the sports network (NZAS; NSO) and, the individual athlete. Importantly, it is assumed that elite athletes – like the specialists employed to maximise athlete performance - are dedicated, full time, to the task. The reality however, is not so clear cut. Few athletes in the six targeted sports or non-targeted funded sports are ‘professional’ in the sense that a livable income can be derived from elite sports participation in NZ. So while Maguire (2009, p.1256) comments “the days of the amateur elite athlete are long gone” this is not the lived experience of many Olympic, elite athlete hopefuls in NZ. For the majority of Olympic (including Paralympics) and Commonwealth Games participants, the ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ are indistinguishable – they are one in the same. The scenario outlined shows how an athlete’s ‘real work’ is constructed around performance in sport, ‘life’ is all else. Conceptualizing ‘life’ in its totality as suggested by Ozbiligin et. al (2010, p. 10) is critical to understand the full extent of the work-life interface of unpaid elite athlete workers. Moreover, it is estimated to

take ten years to ‘make a champion’ (Maguire, 2009). This means athletes in, for example, amateur team sports, are not only at different stages of a performance continuum but also, different stages of ‘life’.

Recognition that athletes may need assistance to manage their lives has seen further specialized jobs evolve to support the ‘Athlete Life Programme’ (Athlete Career Education – ACE). Here “Athlete Life Advisors work with carded athletes⁷ to minimize constraints and maximise opportunities that have the potential to impact upon sport performance” ([www.sparc.org.nz/en-nz/high performance/Athletes/ACE](http://www.sparc.org.nz/en-nz/high-performance/Athletes/ACE)). The programme is promoted as a form of compensation, albeit meager, for an elite athletes’ labour. In one of the few NZ studies that has explored the perceptions, experiences and identities of elite amateur athletes, the tensions this sample faced through the policies and messages delivered by ACE and NSO’s, is highlighted (see Ryan and Pope, 2008). For example, athletes felt it necessary to put all their time and energy into sport regardless of what else may be on offer to them. The study suggests that for those athletes who had reconciled the place and value elite sport played in their lives, perceptions of improved sport performance followed. The overall focus, however, of ‘Life Advisors’ is not to question structural power imbalances (Casey, 2004) nor question what constitutes how ‘life’ is defined; it is to assist athletes to ‘manage life’ effectively so that their unpaid sports ‘work’ is prioritised. That the boundaries between work and life are permeable and interdependent (Ozbiligin et.al, 2010) suggest elite amateur athletes choices of how to ‘manage life’ are considerably constrained by systems and processes over which they have little control. Given the paucity of empirical research it is the intersectional practices of organizing and their consequences that the projected study of amateur elite team athletes aims to explore.

Intersections at the micro-social level

McCall’s (2005) intercategory approach influenced our thinking on how to frame analysis at the micro-social level of the research project proposed above. The previous sections of the paper have identified processes and systems, positioned as “relationships of inequality”. To “explicate those relationships

⁷ SPARC, New Zealand Academy of Sport (NZAS) and National Sport Organisations (NSOs), work together to make sure that funding for elite sport is invested in the areas that will give the most return.

Athletes who are 'carded' are eligible for an allocation of funding for performance services, as determined by their national sport organisation. A NSO’s allocation is performance dependent. <http://www.sparc.org.nz/en-nz/high-performance/NZ-Academy-of-Sport/Carded-Athlete-Programme/>

requires the provisional use of social categories as anchor points” (McCall, 2005, pgs. 1784-5). To do so however, brings to the fore a raft of methodological questions, two of which we highlight here. Firstly, the realisation that difference social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, class and age are analytically distinct yet interconnected means that the socially ascribed understandings given to each category may vary in different contexts (eg Gatrell and Swan, 2008; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). To illustrate and pertinent to this research project, Yuval-Davis (2006, p.201) states, “age represents the dimension of time and the life cycle and shows more clearly than other social divisions how categories and their boundaries are not fixed, how their political meanings can vary as well as being continually challenged and restructured both individually and socially”. Equally, identifying the most salient categories in a given context is also contentious but an essential consideration (eg Britton and Logan, 2008; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). For the purpose of micro-level analysis we agree with Acker (2006) that class is a necessary category of analysis. Elite sport is by its very nature, exclusionary. Elite amateur sport historically and today in NZ, “is a mechanism of class hegemony” (Eitzen, 1989, pgs.97-99). Ongoing practices and processes outlined previously intertwined with the time it takes to ‘make an elite athlete’ also point to gendering, ageing and ethnicity as equally contributing categories to situations of disadvantage. “These differences must be analyzed together if we are to understand the complex lived realities of women (and men) and the social/economic processes that set the conditions for their lives” (Acker, 2006, p.39).

Concluding thoughts

The goal of this paper has been to bring together strands of interdisciplinary research and outline an intersectional framework for future research development. It is argued that change at the macro-policy and meso-organisational levels have created an ‘ideal’ elite athlete worker and work-life balancer (Ozbiligin et.al, 2010). This scenario appears particularly applicable to amateur Olympic sports solely dependent on government ‘targeted investment’ to fund their high performance programmes. New categories of specialist sport specific career pathways have emerged – all of which are dependent on the funding ‘merry-go-round’. Change is a process that can have negative or positive consequences; it depends on perceptions of those affected by it. The same can be

said of sport. It is a context that often reflects or even reinforces wider social inequalities (Spaaij, 2009). For these reasons there is a clear need for intersectional analysis of the work-life experiences of unpaid athletes involved in elite sport development processes. Theoretical and methodological contributions of intersectional scholars (eg Bilge, 2010; Dill, McLaughlin and Nieves, 2007; Holvino, 2008; McCall, 2005; Naples, 2009; Ozbiligin et.al, 2010; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Yuval-Davies, 2006) among others give much needed conceptual and methodological guidance on intersectional research. What to include and what to exclude or see as peripheral to the analysis, in other words, operationalise intersectionality is, work-in-progress (Naples, 2009). Our intent, outlined in this paper is to use intersectionality as a conceptual framework to explore the concurrent interplay between gender, class, ethnicity and ageing and the power differentials embedded in policy initiatives that are implemented by dependent national sport organisations in NZ. Our aspirations, to shift the discussion - open up the debate, remove the hypocrisy - call it professional sport and treat athletes fairly as professionals - in other words, in a similar manner as the support personnel and specialist sport specific providers in the sport network structure. It is after all, the celebration of sporting endeavor that the elite sport development game is about, isn't it?

The final word is left to a female double Olympian in an amateur team sport; "I don't regret one minute of it, but I do go through times when I wish I had some money and a real job....it makes it tough financially" (Maddaford, 2010, p.B12).

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