Bringing the Body into Sport Management Research

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There is a growing body of work that draws attention to the role of bodies and of embodiment in organizations and in management. Sport management scholars seem to have largely ignored the body of sport managers as well as their embodiment, however. This is puzzling since sport management implies working with or for bodies that engage in sport. A cursory review of the Journal of Sport Management suggests that researchers who have published papers in this journal tend to have a Weberian view of the body, that is, they seem to assume implicitly that individuals are disembodied. The only exception to this disembodiment seems to be research on diversity but even that focuses not so much on the body but on meanings and language used to describe constructed differences. Yet bodies are always present in organizations. The extant organizational and management literature suggests that this scholarly lack of focus on bodies and embodiment in sport organizations can mask many organizational dynamics. We draw on theoretical perspectives based on the work of Foucault, Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty and research conducted in nonsport organizations on diversity as examples to make a case for researching the body and embodiment in sport management. We briefly sketch these approaches below and intend to develop them further in the paper.

Cognitive approach: Regulating bodies

Foucauldian perspectives focus on ways in which discourses constitute bodies. This means that discourses about what it means to be a manager in sport organizations informs how managers are selected and/or attempt to shape their body to meet those criteria. These criteria are often implicit. For example, Meriläinen et al (2013) have shown how recruitment and selection practices for executives are based on implicit understandings of the ‘ideal’ executive body. Such bodies reflect self regulation or self discipline that is assumed to be part of professionalism. Little is known to what extent these results are also applicable to sport organizations. Since the primary activity of sport organizations is sport and sport is formally structured on the basis of gender, the ideal managerial body may possibly be that of a retired athlete and, depending on the sport, may vary in size and gender. Research in sport organizations could therefore, focus on how recruitment and selection procedures in sport organizations rely on discursive practices that constitute the ideal body for the selected positions, how these ideal bodies are situated in the sport context, and, how these constructed ideals exclude other bodies. Such research could enrich scholarship that focuses on diversity in sport organizations and thus far has paid little attention to material bodies.

Dispositional approach: Capitalizing on bodies

Bourdieuian perspectives suggest that each body reflects its social location and develops a habitus over time that can generate various forms of capital. A habitus consists of cognitive, motivational and embodied dispositions. These dispositions inform how individuals dress, walk and talk and can generate capital that in turn shapes the types of resources upon which an individual can draw. Witz et al (2003) for example, have shown how what they call bodywork, or aesthetic labor, requires employees to mobilize, develop and commodify embodied dispositions to be seen as competent. Little is known how the selection of employees/sport managers is confined to those with particular embodied dispositions and how those working in sport organizations have commodified their embodied dispositions, especially if they have a successful competitive sport background. Yet such research might help explain how search committees for athletic directors prefer white males for such positions.

Phenomenological approach: Experiencing bodies

An approach inspired by the work of Merleau-Ponty assumes that experiences of the body are relational. Individuals first meet each other through their bodies. Perception is ‘physiognomic’ and reciprocal. Specifically, a body is first experienced through the senses after which the perceiver translates this into conscious thought. (This differs from a Foucauldian approach that assumes that experiences/senses and sense making occur simultaneously). Individuals are aware of being perceived. For example, Ladkin (2013) explored how a transgender manager experienced her
leadership and how her employees reacted to her. Ladkin concluded that how leaders feel the experience of leadership influences their behavior and thinking. Similar research that focuses on experience in sport organizations might help explain why female leaders of sport organizations take on certain masculinist practices. Such research would focus not so much on discourses as would a Foucauldian approach but on how female leaders in a male dominated organization feel/experience their leadership and how that influences their behavior and thinking.

The foregoing suggests that a focus on bodies and embodiment might help explain why diversity has thus far not been realized at the managerial level in sport. This description of possible approaches and avenues for research is not meant to be exhaustive nor is it meant to be confined to the issue of diversity but will be used to argue for the need for management scholars to pay attention to bodies and embodiment in sport organizations regardless of the topic.

References

