The Power of Discourse: Managing Elite Youth Sport

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Various discourses in which coaches play a central role and are held responsible for the wellbeing of their athletes (Taylor & Garratt, 2010), circulate in and about youth sport. Youth sport is often assumed to be a site for pleasure and participation and positive development (discourses of pleasure and of positive development). However, in the last decade the issue of abuse of athletes by coaches has received a great deal of attention (e.g. Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Pinheiro et al., 2014; UNICEF, 2010). This has led to a discourse of child protection and safeguarding (e.g. Fasting & Brackenridge 2009). Taylor et al., (2014) argued that the implementation of the discourse of protection can detract from discursive practices of pleasure and positive development. Similarly, an emphasis on discursive practices of performance (discourse of performance), may not only undermine pleasure but also produce resistance to the discourse of protection and normalize abuse in order to produce winning athletes (Owusu-Sekyere & Gervis, 2014).

The power of these discourses and their conflation and circulation may however, be dependent on context. Youth sport takes place in institutional contexts such as sport clubs. Boards of directors of sport clubs tend to be held responsible for the wellbeing of the club. Inglis (1997) found that the relationship between boards of directors in amateur sport organizations and the professional staff was in part defined by a continual struggle for power or influence. Little scholarly attention has been paid however, to the ways in which professional coaches and directors position themselves in relationship to these discourses and each other. Coaches may be hired to produce winners in elite youth sport clubs while directors may also expect them to engage in discursive practices of pleasure, protection and positive development. The question that guided this exploratory study was: how do coaches and directors in elite gymnastics currently engage with these discourses and what, if any, tensions do these discourses produce?

Theoretical Framework

We drew on poststructural perspectives to explore how coaches and directors use these discourses to legitimate their practices and ways of thinking about elite gymnastics in order to create ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1977). A poststructural perspective assumes individuals position themselves with respect to discourses and may accept, resist or compromise in their use of these discourses. Post-structuralist perspectives also take power into account assuming it is always present, is relational, works in complex ways and is always productive in that it gives meaning to everyday practices (Foucault, 1980). We used Foucault’s notions of disciplinary power and governmentality (Munro, 2011) to examine how directors and the coaches they appointed position themselves with respect to these dominant discourses.

Methodology

We used semi-structured interviews to explore the discourses used by coaches and members of boards of directors of five sport clubs that produce elite female gymnasts and of the Dutch Gymnastic Association. Data saturation occurred for the two groups resulting in 10 interviews (5 per group). We used iterative methods to analyze the resulting data.

Results

Overall, those interviewed used the various discourses that circulate in elite youth sport to construct hybrid discourses that enabled compromise, adaptation and resistance. An additional discourse, the discourse of expert knowledge or expertise, emerged from the interviews. Directors combined discourses of protection, expert knowledge and pleasure. They emphasized the expertise of the coaches they had appointed, including those fired by other elite clubs, and used that to legitimate their trust in the coaches’ ways of conducting practices. Coaches used the discourse of expertise in combination with the discourse of performance as rationalization for their practices, including those that involved emotional abuse. They redefined abuse as a way of developing mental toughness and
constructed that as a regime of truth embedded in the discourses of performance, pleasure, protection and development needed by gymnasts who want to excel at the global level. We situate the results in the scholarly literature about disciplinary power and governmentality and abuse in elite sport, reflect on the ways in which those involved in the study redefined and limited the discourse of development with use of the discourses of performance, pleasure and protection and explore the meanings of these results for everyday practice.

References


UNICEF (2010). Protecting children from violence in sport: A review with a focus on industrialized countries. Florence, Italy: Innocenti Research Center