Sport and Social Cohesion in South Africa: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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The concept of social cohesion has been widely mentioned and investigated in academia as well as in policy domains (Jensen, 2010; Khanyile, 2010). The discussion initially started with international organizations (e.g., The European Union, The United Nations, etc.), framing social cohesion in relation to the developmental challenges from communities, with the underpinning belief that "the deepening of social fissures can harm all" (Rodrik, 1997; p.1). Sport, in particular, has often been uncritically positioned as a tool to promote social cohesion (Black, 2010; Coatler, 2010).

In South Africa, sport has been a contested site of racial boundaries, closely interwoven with the broader fabric of social changes (Cornelissen, 2011; Nauright, 1997). In the divided past of apartheid (1948-1994), sport was coded with segregationist thinking (Hansen, 2012). The end of apartheid spurred sport to be seen as a facilitator to represent South Africa as a non-racialist, multiculturalist ‘rainbow’ nation (Grobelaar, 2009; Lazarus, 2004). One widely popular scene was Nelson Mandela's infamous speech at the 1995 Rugby World Cup - “the Springboks are my boys, our boys”- which actively transformed the representations of South Africa from its atrocious and unequal past.

However, the social fabric of post-apartheid South Africa is threatened by many problems at large: deepened economic disparities due to a neo-liberalist agenda, problems of corruption, flawed approaches to HIV/AIDS, as well as the lofty rhetoric of African renaissance losing appeal as a united moral and political front (Southhall, 2007). Situated within this background, this study has conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis of the parliament speeches from the Minister of Sport and Recreation South Africa. The purpose is to critically pinpoint the normalized premises and taken-for-granted assumptions characterizing the notion of social cohesion, illuminating wider ideological struggles in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The data chosen for analysis is composed of annual budget speeches (2008-2013) given by the Minister of Sport and Recreation South Africa (retrieved from the official SRSA website: http://www.srsa.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=2152). The budget speech is held every year in June at the South Africa Parliament in Cape Town, with the direct purpose of passing the annual budget vote for the Department of Sport and Recreation South Africa as a part of the governmental process.

Much has been discussed about the appropriateness of using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze political speeches (Schaffner, 1996). CDA is a methodological approach to illuminate the “dialectical relationship between the discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairelough & Wodak, 1997; p. 258). In this study, CDA is performed by focusing on the concept of social cohesion, seen as socio-politically constructed and located in the Minister’s speeches. Specifically, it is done by following two approaches: first, by examining the micro-level of discourse formation, the rhetoric and linguistic features as well as organization of concrete instances associated with the usages of social cohesion (van Dijk, 1993). Second, by dwelling on the macro level, the analysis seeks to contextualize and situate sport for social cohesion in a broader structural relationships of power and knowledge configurations in South Africa.

Analysis

Throughout the speeches (2008-2013), the phrase of social cohesion is frequently employed in the formation of discourse, with a total appearance of 41 times. Specifically, the appearance is primarily associated with two contexts:
sport in building the South African nation-state, and sport in creating social interactions through community and mass participation.

In the first context, an example can be located that in 2009, in an effort to recount South Africa’s fluctuating soccer performance at recent international competitions, the Minister spoke emotionally: “What can denote the fragility and fickleness of our sport-loving nation more than this? … Indeed an effective catalyst for social cohesion!” As such, it connects social cohesion to South Africa’s sport performance as a global spectacle, capturing the emotive and symbolic nature of sport. In the meantime, the idea of community and mass participation through sport constitutes another dimension, which can be frequently grasped from examples such as: “…two weeks ago, I was privileged to receive 672 soccer balls from the Japanese ambassador. I promised that the majority will be delivered in our identified poverty nodes…to promote active lifestyles and social cohesion” (2008).

Both approaches in advocating sport for social cohesion carry inherent problematic assumptions. On one hand, the reliance on a matter of transient symbolism of sport does little to generate transformation of social structures (Höglund & Sundberg, 2008). On the other hand, the effect of emancipation and tolerance through sport is considered rather as a given, as long as the condition such as distributing soccer balls is met. Much is rested on the functionalist belief of sport with the ability to transcend economic and racial barriers (Giulianotti, 2004), ignoring the complexities situated within sporting sceneries. Meanwhile, if the perception of social cohesion was built upon the removal of racism when the post-apartheid regime first came into power, then the lack of sport facilities as well as unequal accesses to sport revealed from the speeches only serves to manifest how equalities have not been materialized in social realities. In this sense, sport reveals the fractured social fabric, which is also paradoxically used as a political tool to obscure struggles over structural changes and redistribution.

Conclusions and Implications
According to Prins (2002), political speeches have the abilities to set agendas for policy making as well as practices through performative power of language. The findings allow us to develop a comprehensive understanding of sport – its contradictions and structural deficiencies - in relation to the social realities of South Africa. That is, as Johannes Fabian (1978) reminds us: “Sport in South Africa is not merely as a response to questions and conditions; it asks questions and creates conditions.” (p. 316). Furthermore, the analysis also carries implications outside of the context of South Africa, by approaching the paradigm of sport for development from a critical perspective. Considering the relevance of social cohesion at various levels in the global environment, the engagement of sport and its representations in public agendas needs to be further examined.