Rethinking the Use of Feminist Theories in Sport Management Research and Teaching in the Age of Hillary

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Socio-Cultural - Other (Other)
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Feminist theory has many versions but its objectives overlap. In general any feminist theory is one that attempts to identify and explain social inequalities and suggest ways of eradicating those inequalities (Martin, 2003). Such theories focus for example, on the way dichotomies such as women/men and masculinity and femininity are constantly reified and challenged, how gendered interests are embedded in language and in so-called neutral practices and the influence these dynamics have on sustaining and challenging social inequalities (Acker, 1990; Martin, 2002). Vanden Brink (2015) argues that since most individuals are unaware of the ways daily practices, images, organizational structures, processes and ideologies are gendered and how they may have internalized this gendering as common sense, a primary purpose of scholarship in the area of gender has been to reveal gendered practices and enable critical reflexivity to enable work towards change. Benschop & Verloo (2016), in their survey of the use of feminist theories in management and organization research publications contend that such theories are primarily used when the central focus is on gender while feminist theories have applicability beyond explaining the relatively low number of women in managerial positions (see for example, Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014).

Similar and different dynamics as those described by Benschop & Verloo (2016) for the extant literature, occur in sport management research. A cursory Google scholar search of the phrase ‘feminist theory’ in sport management journals such as Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review and the European Sport Management Quarterly shows that it is rarely used explicitly (for exceptions, e.g. Aitchison, 2005; Fink, 2016; Shaw & Frisby, 2006), and when it is used, it is rarely employed outside of research on diversity/gender. Even in research on gender in sport management feminist theories are often not explicitly named either. In general the explicit use of feminist theories in sport management is limited and not part of mainstream theorizing and scholarship. Explicit use of feminist theories means a research project is explicitly grounded in a form or version of feminist theory. Implicit use means feminism may not be mentioned in the study but the research does seek to better the lives of girls and women in sport and decrease social inequality (to the extent that management of sport as well as studies about organizations can lead to results that influence that). In this round table session we would like to explore ways in which scholarship in sport management and organization could employ and benefit from explicit feminist theorizing. We do this in three ways.

Annelies Knoppers will give an overview of liberal feminist perspectives and how they have been implicitly and explicitly used in diversity research in both the extant and sport management literature and how a more frequent and explicit use of feminist social constructionist /post structural /queer perspectives such as proposed by Acker (1990); Bendel et al, (2008); Rumens, (2016) in the critical management literature could enrich this work.

Ellen Staurowsky will focus on socialist feminism (Booth, Creamer, Davis, Dobbin, Kaufman, & Klass, 1972; Gordon, 2013; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013): its focus and how it could be employed more frequently by sport management scholarship opening up new ways and avenues for diminishing exploitation and social inequalities, focusing on social class of employees and part time work, and synergies with critical race theory as well as potential conflicts with liberal feminist approaches to sport. The focus of this portion of the roundtable will be on sport labor examined through the lens of Gordon’s (2013) socialist feminist framework that uses autonomous structures of gender, race, and class to expose and challenge constructions of inequality and exploitation.

Brenda Riemer will focus on possible uses of critical feminist theorizing in sport management education. She argues that the classroom experience has to include teaching about gendered experiences in sport management, both at the
educational level and in the field, since many sport management programs are perceived as “male”. She will draw on research on critical feminist pedagogy and on theories such as critical race theory and discuss how they can be used in the education of future sport management practitioners (see also Fink, Burton & Bruening, 2008; Howard and Navarro, 2016). Additionally, she touches on the issue of how faculty can critically analyze institutionalized sport (and be heard!) when teaching students who are heavily involved and invested in sport programs as athletes and coaches.

We close with a reflection on the underutilization of explicit feminist theories in research in sport management (e.g. Van den Brink, 2015).