Protect, Control, Objectify: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Hegemonic Masculinity and Professional Cheerleading

Lauren C. Hindman, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Nefertiti Walker (Advisor), University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Sport, and the organizations that comprise it, are gendered spaces, ones that position men as dominant to women (Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). Women hold fewer positions, are relegated to roles with less power, and are typecast into jobs in congruence with stereotypical gender norms (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, Grpppendorf, & Henderson, 2011; Shaw & Hoeber, 2003). They are excluded from informal networking opportunities and subjected to sexism in nearly all aspects of the industry (Fink, 2016; Lovett & Lowry, 1994). Such power dynamics are created, maintained, and reinforced through discourse, forms of knowledge that are socially constructed yet taken for granted as natural (Lazar, 2005; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Analyzing the domination of men and the subordination of women in sport organizations, therefore, requires an examination of the discourses which produce them (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003).

The National Football League (NFL), with its professional cheerleading squads, offers perhaps one of the most compelling sites to study this gender inequality. The visual juxtaposition of football player and cheerleader is stark, particularly at the professional level, where cheerleaders have been increasingly sexualized as entertainment designed to appeal to heterosexual, male fans since the 1970s (Hanson, 1995; Messner, 1990). Both football player and cheerleader embody, in many ways, the masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995) stereotypically associated with the ideal man and woman. Further, media reports and lawsuits in recent years have brought to light issues cheerleaders face as employees of NFL teams, ranging from underpayment to gender discriminatory policies (Cardona, 20018; Belson, 2018a). It is the context of this ongoing power struggle that we situate this analysis.

This study examines how gender ideology underlies discourses surrounding NFL cheerleaders as sport organization employees, contributing to the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity in sport (e.g., Fink, 2008; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Data will include U.S. newspaper articles, team website and social media marketing, and available recent NFL team cheerleading employee manuals. By exploring external and internal-facing texts, we will demonstrate how discourse reinforces gender ideology both inside and outside organizations. Using an open coding methodology, themes of gendered discourse will be identified from these documents (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Particular attention will be paid not only to the overt meanings of text, but also to the more “implicit meanings for the subtle and complex renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations” (Lazar, 2005, p. 13). In addition, sources of discourse will be considered, as power can be signaled through control of a particular social occasion (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Taking a feminist perspective, this critical discourse analysis considers discursive production and resistance of power and dominance (Lazar, 2005). Accordingly, in addition to analyzing the prevailing hegemonic gendered discourse, we explore resistances to it and consider whether and why such challenges are or are not successful.

We expect results will provide insights into the role of gender in establishing and maintaining power within sport organizations. Additionally, we will offer recommendations for scholars and practitioners on working toward great gender equity within the industry.