Constructions of gender equality in Swedish sport: Discourses and subject positions in conversations about gender equality with male sport coaches and leaders

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As a result of a historically anchored relationship between the Swedish state and the sports movement, gender equality has been a prioritized area of interest in Swedish sports since the 1970s. Despite long-term work in this field, research indicates a notable gap between what is said and done at the central level and locally. Research also indicates attitude problems; gender equality is often seen as an insignificant or unnecessary issue.

This thesis seeks to relate to and analyze this development. Answers are sought via male sport coaches and leaders. This approach is motivated by the fact that gender equality-related sport research in Sweden seldom focuses on men and masculinities. At the same time men have been overrepresented as power holders and decision makers, and gender equality has consequently been constructed as a women’s issue. By means of a post-structural discourse analysis, the aim is to investigate constructions of gender equality in interviews with 47 leaders selected from seven sports. How is gender equality constructed in terms of meanings and standpoints in relation to the concept, and which discourses set the frames for these constructions? Which subject positions are articulated?

Results show that gender equality is given many different meanings in the interviews and that these meanings are produced in line with three discourses: a women’s rights discourse (semi-essentialism, structural feminism, a quantitative and qualitative support for women’s sport), a gender critical discourse (constructionism, structural feminism, “women can”, deconstructions of femininities) and a liberal discourse (“sport for all”, individualism, gender neutrality). Furthermore, four subject positions are distinguished: the skeptic, the cynic, the women rightist and the norm critic position. When the results are related to the production of gender equality policies four aspects are discussed, 1) relations between discourses (the discourses generate contradictory interpretations of sport, subjectivity, gender and equality), 2) men and gender equality, 3) the relatively substantial lack of interest in gender equality in the interviews and 4) sport and pluralism.

One conclusion in the thesis is that the women’s rights discourse dominates and that the liberal discourse is marginalized in the interviews. Further, it is suggested that an elaboration and a more frequent practice of the gender critical discourse could be useful in the development of the gender equality project in Swedish sport.

Keywords: sport, gender, gender equality, men, masculinities, sport leaders and coaches, post-structuralism, discourse analysis, subject positions.
Summary

Background

As a result of a historically anchored and politically and economically intimate relationship between the sports movement and the Swedish state, gender equality has been a prioritized area of interest within Swedish sports since the 1970s, at least at a central level. The Swedish Sports Confederation, RF, has routinely produced and communicated gender equity policies for more than three decades. Despite long-term work in this field, research suggests that there is a gap between what is said and what is done at the central level and locally, “on the ground”. Policies that are formulated centrally are seldom realized locally. Furthermore, research also indicates problems related to attitudes; gender equality is often seen as an irrelevant or insignificant issue.

This thesis seeks to relate to and analyze this development. Why is the equation of gender equality and sport so difficult to solve? Potential answers are sought via interviews with some of the key actors in sport when it comes to gender equality policy production and work, male sport leaders; decision makers, administrators, and coaches. The (47) informants have been selected from seven sports, athletics, badminton, ice hockey, soccer, table tennis, tennis, and volleyball and have different functions in these respective sports. High elected leaders and representatives (13) and elite sport coaches and youth sport leaders and coaches (34) are interviewed. The interviews are semi-structured; the informants get to answer and relate to a certain amount of open-ended questions related to the subject in question. The focus on male sport coaches and leaders is two-sided. Firstly and generally, sport leaders are interesting because of their power, influence, and responsibility over the production and implementation of gender equality policies. Secondly, the men-oriented approach is motivated by the fact that men are overrepresented in sport leadership positions. At the same time gender equality has consequently been conceptualized as a women’s issue, and Swedish research about sport and gender equality has seldom had men and masculinities as a focus area. Furthermore, the growing body of Swedish research about men and gender equality, research which is closely related to the more and more extensive international body of research which is called critical studies of men and masculinities, has never explicitly been related to sport. In addition and finally, research about responses to the gender equality project in the Swedish sports movement is also uncommon. How has the project been received and translated? In this case by male leaders – men, sport leadership and gender equality is also a relatively unexplored area of research, in the Swedish context as well as internationally.

In practice, new knowledge about how male sport coaches and leaders construct gender equality could contribute to an elaboration, modernization, and a more effective implementation of a seemingly ambitious – but in line with previous research too ineffective and partly out of date – gender equality apparatus in Swedish sport.

Purpose

By means of a post-structural discourse analytical approach, the aim of the thesis is to investigate constructions of gender equality in semi-structured interviews with 50 male sport
coaches and leaders in Swedish sports. How is gender equality constructed in terms of meanings of and standpoints in relation to the concept, and which discourses set the frames for these constructions? Which subject positions are articulated?

**Previous research**

**Research about sport, gender, and equality**

In contemporary gender equality related research, most feminist oriented – Swedish as well as international – questions about sport, gender, and equality have been outlined, defined, and investigated via the following parameters (in short and in line with my reviews): 1) masculinized sport history and practice and its content and implications, 2) girls and women’s sport and pre-suppositions for girls and women’s sports, 3) women and sport leadership, 4) gender equality in sports media, 5) gender equality and essentialism contra social constructionism, and 6) boys and men’s sport and pre-suppositions for boys and men’s sport.

**Research about men, sport leadership, and gender equality**

The content in previous research about men, sport leadership and gender equality, more specifically research about how male sport coaches and leaders interpret and relate to gender equality, can be summarized as follows. 1) Generally, gender equality is given a relatively large number of different meanings in different studies. One pattern, however, is that questions about sport, gender, and equality almost always is connected to girls and women. Gender equality in sports is interpreted as a women’s issue, concerning for example: equal rights and opportunities for girls and women in different sport contexts (both quantitatively and qualitatively), gender equal representation (for example, representation among athletes, decision makers, policymakers, leaders, and coaches) and gender equal distribution of resources (distribution concerning for example economy, materials, human resources, training times, and facilities). 2) The picture of how male sport coaches and leaders relate to questions about sport and gender equality in the body of research at hand show a couple of central themes: gender equality is seen as something unnecessary or as a non-question; gender equality is seen as something good and important; the closer you get, the fewer problems (“we don’t have any problems in our organization”); a frequent tension between essentialism, semi-essentialism and constructionism; disbelief or general skepticism (“gender equality is unrealistic”); critical structuralist and system oriented approaches to gender equality are rare.

The potential contribution in this thesis to this previous research about men, sport leadership, and gender equality can be formulated as follows. 1) There is a need for new research focused on men and masculinities. 2) Poststructuralist and discourse analytical approaches have been rare which, among other things, a) had an effect on how the relationships between different interpretations and approaches/standpoints have been imaged, and b) the ways the category “men” have been understood and operationalized (structuralist constructions have dominated over poststructuralist). 3) A relatively large part of the examined studies have started in and been structured in line with feminist theory; few have
started in and been structured in line with more multifaceted theoretical frameworks (for example, what is “gender equality” in the context at hand, for the researcher and/or for the informants?). 4) There is a need for new research about sport coaches and leaders located on different levels and with different functions in different sport contexts. 5) Studies built and centered on qualitative interview materials are relatively rare.

**Theory and method**

**Post-structuralism**

The thesis is framed by and given its specific ontological and epistemological meaning with post-structuralism as an important reference point and inspiration. In short, post-structuralism can be characterized via aspects and themes as a move from modernism to postmodernism, a move from structuralism to post-structuralism, a move from subject to subjectivity, the linguistic (and material) turn and deconstruction. One important dimension of post-structural research is the adaption and the operationalization of the linguistic turn. The linguistic turn can be said to be a view and practice of the relation between language and reality: a modernist and rational conceptualization of language as “a natural mechanism of naming, based on the existence of intrinsic and immutable links between words and material” (Andrews, 2000: 111) is rejected in favor of a social constructionist, holistic, contextual and performative practice. Simply put, the world and the meaning-making of the world are in some respects always changing and an ever ongoing process. Among other things, this practice has an impact on how the human subject and subjectivity is conceptualized. If structuralists understand the human subject as relatively consistent, coherent, and in many respects universal, the same subject is, in line with poststructuralist thought, seen as socially and culturally imbedded – as “dynamic and multi-accentual entity constituted within, not outside, discourse” (Andrews, 2000: 115). “Rather than being fixed or constituted in specific embodied individuals, selves are taken to be constructs” (Macdonald et al, 2006: 378).

One strength with post-structural research, as well as with discourse analysis (post-structuralism and discourse analysis are closely interrelated in this thesis), are their potential to question established truths, orders and relations, and their openness to new ones. Seemingly self-evident and natural orders and relations are not as natural as we think. New orders and structures – new interpretations and practices, and new knowledge, perspectives, and policies – are possible, in this case in the world of sport. A second strength with poststructuralist research is the potential to handle and bridge divergences between modernist/structuralist and liberal/individualist perspectives and research strategies; post-structural research “recognizes both the constitutive force of discourse […] and at the same time recognizes that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices” (Davies & Harré, 1990: 46).
Discourse analysis

Discourse and subject positions

Discourse and subject position are two important, closely related, and co-existing concepts in the thesis. Discourses are defined as systems of beliefs and values which produce particular practices and relations, and further, as material, and active and relational (rather than fixed or static): “discourses are […] ways of being and acting in the world” – “like mental scripts that you take for granted as you […] acting in different situations, being a member of different groups and communities, and participating in different activities” (Hall & Chambers, 2012: 297). A subject position, on the other hand, is a personal practice of and way of understanding and relating to certain discourses in a specific context. A subject position is always contextual; made possible and articulated in a discursive context, in relation to certain (competing) discourses. Davies & Harré (1990: 62) says that a subject position is “a possibility in known forms of talk” – “position is what is created in and through talk as speakers […] take themselves up as persons”. In short, it is individual and structural: discourse “constitute the speakers […] in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers […] can negotiate new positions” (Davies & Harré, 1990). Or in other words, the male coaches and leaders statements in the interviews are both their own and products of discourses.

The analysis

The form of discourse analysis that is used in the thesis can, in short, be characterized via the following concepts or themes: post-structuralism, constructionism, relationism, materialism, the relation between discourse-subjectivity-subject positions, and (analyses of) statements and situations bounded by meaning-making processes.

The results and analyses are generated, structured, and elaborated in line with these research questions:

- Which situated meanings is gender equality given in the interviews? Which systems of values and beliefs – discourses – are practiced when these meanings are formulated? Are some discourses more dominating than others?
- How do the coaches and leaders relate to gender equality in terms of emotions, attitudes, and values? In which ways, and in relation to what, are different standpoints expressed? Are some standpoints more dominating than others?
- Which discourses are relevant (and irrelevant) when different standpoints are expressed? Which discourses do the informants express emotions, attitudes and values in relation to? How can the meeting between different discourses and standpoints be characterized? Is some patterns produced more frequently than others?
Results, discussion and conclusions

Results

The results, which are both in line with and differ from previous research, show, firstly, that gender equality is given eight meanings in the interviews. 1) A strictly women oriented qualitative meaning (gender equality is related to equal opportunities and pre-suppositions for girls and women as for boys and men and practical initiatives addressed exclusively towards girls and women). 2) A strictly women oriented quantitative meaning (gender equality is related to a gender balanced distribution of economy, resources, and practice times and to gender balanced representation numbers among actives, policymakers, decision makers, and coaches). 3) An equal rights oriented meaning (gender equality means equal rights and pre-suppositions for both women and men in different sport contexts). 4) A gender neutral and individualistic meaning (gender equality is understood in terms of individualism and plurality rather than in terms of gender and gender relation). 5) A strictly girls and women oriented gender constructionist meaning (gender equality is understood in terms of norm criticism, deconstructions of femininities, and cultural and social empowerment of girls and women). 6) A men’s rights oriented meaning (gender equality is related to problems associated to boys and men, for example low rates of athletes and social problems). 7) A competition and performance oriented meaning (gender equality means that girls and women should be given the opportunity to do more and better sport). 8) A gender mixed meaning (gender equality means that women and men sometimes can and should train and compete together).

Secondly, three standpoints in relation to gender equality are formulated in the interviews. Standpoints that can be characterized in terms of: 1) skepticism, resistance, dissatisfaction, determinism, and unrealism (gender equality is seen as something unrealistic). 2) Sympathy, approval, engagement, positive involvement, and passion. 3) Uncertainty and ambivalence in relation to, and lack of interest in and knowledge about, the subject. The first two standpoints dominate and are expressed with approximately the same frequency. In sum, these results are both in line with and differ from previous research.

Thirdly, three discourses set the frames for and are practiced when the different meanings and standpoints are expressed, discourses that is partly recognized and acknowledged in previous research, both Swedish and international: 1) a women’s rights discourse (semi-essentialism, traditional women centered structural feminist analyses, a quantitative and qualitative support for girls and women’s sport), 2) a gender critical discourse (binary social constructionism, women centered structural feminist analyses, “women can”, focus on deconstructions of women’s sport and femininities) and 3) a liberal discourse (equal rights, individualism, gender neutrality, “sport for all”). The women’s rights discourse is more dominant and present in the interviews than the other two. Recognitions of practices of the gender critical discourse, in sport contexts, seem to be relatively uncommon in previous research.

Fourthly, when the relations between the meanings, discourses, and standpoints are analyzed, four subject positions are distinguished. When the informants construct gender equality, various and sometimes contradictory meanings are generated, these meanings are in turn valued differently. When different meanings of and standpoints in relation to gender
equality are expressed in parallel, different patterns become visible. In this process, the women’s rights discourse is more apparent and dominating than the other two when positive as well as negative approaches to gender equality are expressed. However, the other two discourses are also present, the gender critical one more than the liberal one. Some informants use the liberal discourse when they relate to and value the other discourses, especially when they express criticism towards them. But, in contrast to the practices of the women’s rights and the gender critical discourse, few informants practice gender equality in exclusively liberal fashions. When negative approaches to gender equality are expressed, it is sometimes done in relation to the gender critical discourse. Among other things, the informants relate a gender critical practice of gender equality with an unnatural and too far-reaching strive towards gender similarity. The negative approaches are mostly expressed with the women’s rights discourse as a reference point. The skepticism or resistance towards the women’s rights discourse holds, among other things, ideas that traditional structural feminist analyses of sport is one sided in relation to gender and too structural in nature (for example, “what about problems which can be related to boys and men?”, and “are not gender equality initiatives exclusively directed towards girls and women unfair and discriminative?”). This form of criticism also holds the idea that gender equality in sport is unrealistic (“it will never happen”). When the women’s rights discourse is constructed as something good and positive and worth fighting for, this is, on the other hand, often done in line with a general – structural feminist related, qualitative and quantitative – support for women’s sport. A support which, for example, is constructed and outlined in terms of: 1) a support for more female athletes and more girls and women in leadership positions in different sport contexts, 2) a support for more female sport and developed and strengthened rights and opportunities for girls and women in sport in general, and 3) a support for exclusive and practice-oriented girls and women projects. Furthermore, many of the positive approaches to gender equality are constructed and elaborated in line with the gender critical discourse. In short, these approaches are expressed in line with a support for different kinds of norm critical analysis of sport and sport history and, for example, constructed via statements such as: “women can”, “comparisons between men and women in sport should and could be possible – we don’t know how women would perform in the future if given the same opportunities as men”, and “gender relations in sport are constructs; gender differences vary in different context over time and do not exist in a vacuum”. In summary, four subject positions are distinguished and described in the material. These positions are elaborated and characterized in detail via the names the skeptic, the cynic, the women rightist and the norm critic.

Discussion and conclusions

When the results are put in relation to broader questions about gender equality, legitimacy and implementation, and the – according to previous research – partly insufficient and ineffective production of gender equality polices in Swedish sports, five themes are outlined and discussed. 1) The content of and sometimes complex and contradictory relationships between the three discourses in question; the discourses generate gender equality practices which partly contradict each other in terms of interpretations of subjectivity, sex/gender, feminism, and equality, but they also generate practices which in
some respects hold internal tensions and paradoxes. 2) The multi-dimensional construction of meanings of gender equality in the material and its implications for the production of gender equality policies. Eight meanings and three discourses are articulated in the interviews, which constructions are “right” and should be legitimate and practiced in different contexts? 3) The (both homogenous and multifaceted) relation between men, gender equality, and sport. There are clear patterns and logics in the conversations, but plurality and contradictions are also obvious; gender equality is often constructed and valued differently by the informants in different interview situations. In line with previous research it is suggested that, in comparison with some of the previous work in this specific area of interest, more multifaceted, contextual, and individual interpretations of “boys”, “men” and “masculinities” could potentially be useful, both in practice and in research. 4) Lack of knowledge about, and positive interest and involvement in, gender equality in the material and its implication for the gender equality project in Swedish sports. If some of the persons which are responsible for the formulation, organization and implementation of the gender equality project in Swedish sport are uninterested in, lack knowledge about, or are highly skeptical against gender equality and gender equality work, must not this be seen as a (big) problem? 5) Variations between different sports in the interviews: sometimes gender equality is practiced and valued differently in and in relation to different sport contexts. There are, for example, differences between soccer and badminton. While the women’s rights discourse dominates in the soccer context (both when positive and negative standpoints are expressed), badminton is at first hand connected to the gender critical discourse.

One conclusion in the thesis is that the women’s rights discourse dominates and that the liberal discourse is marginalized in the material (liberalism, gender equality, and sport is a difficult equation). Another conclusion is that the gender critical discourse is practiced relatively frequently, and this implies that a more widespread practice of the gender critical discourse in Swedish sport would meet a certain amount of engagement and legitimacy “on the ground”.

Research related conclusions are, among other things, that there is a need for more research about 1) sport coaches and leaders, gender equality, and sport pluralism. How do sport coaches and leaders, male coaches and leaders and/or coaches and leaders in general, construct gender equality in sports that are not focal points in this thesis, for example in aesthetical sports, motor sports, or martial arts? And 2), more research about men, masculinities, gender equality, and sport. How are relations between gender equality and masculinities constructed in different sports and sport settings, and what are the consequences of these constructions (in sport practice as well as in a broader societal meaning)? How can research about men, masculinities, gender equality, and sport be related to and situated in broader societal contexts, in relation to questions about, for example, politics, education, family and violence? 3) It is suggested that there is a need for more research about feminist premises in sport research about gender equality and its implications – implications for researchers as well as for athletes, leaders, and policymakers and the production of gender equality policies. For example, some studies start in seemingly pre-determined interpretations of what gender equality is. Few studies
are designed and carried out in line with more open approaches to the concept. Sometimes the meaning of gender equality is taken for granted.

In the final section of the thesis, some proposals related to gender equality work and gender equality policy production are formulated (target groups are for example sport organizations and sport associations, sport clubs, and sport media). The proposals are products of the results and analyses in the thesis and formulated as questions about: 1) initial framing of gender equality and gender equality policies in the context at hand, 2) how this process can be structured, formed, evaluated, and gradually reshaped, 3) implementation and legitimacy, and 4) questions about problems that can occur during the process. Suggested questions are for example: what should gender equality be and mean in the context at hand? How are different distinguished problems related to different discourses in the context at hand? What is the effect and consequence when different discourses are practiced? Can different discourses be practiced simultaneously? Are there new or partly alternative ways of practicing gender equality that could be useful in the context at hand, for example gender critical, boys- and men-oriented or different kinds of intersectional advances? How can potential resistance or skepticism in relation to the formulated gender equality policies be understood and evaluated, in relation to which discourses is it articulated?