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The sceptic, the cynic, the women’s rights advocate and the constructionist: male leaders and coaches on gender equity in sport

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ABSTRACT

Research about sport and gender equity has taken various forms in different historical and scientific contexts but a general conclusion is that sport still is male-dominated terrain. Why is this, despite decades of gender equity work and initiatives? Here, answers were sought through interviews with 47 male power holders – leaders and coaches – in Swedish sport. Men from seven sports were interviewed. The aim was to, by means of a Foucauldian discourse analysis, explore how ‘gender equity’ was interpreted and valued: how do the leaders and coaches position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to gender equity? The findings show that four subject positions are articulated: the sceptic, the cynic, the women’s rights advocate and the constructionist. The sceptic raises doubts about the reasonableness and fairness of gender equity, the cynic constructs gender equity as something unrealistic or impossible, the women’s rights advocate articulates a semi-essential and quantitatively oriented support for gender equity, and the constructionist voice a norm-critical approach. We conclude that the constructionist probably is more aligned with the gender equity objectives of both Swedish and international sport organising bodies than the women’s rights advocate, but that more distinct and detailed norm-critical approaches to gender equity are required ahead. A more successful implementation of gender equity initiatives is related to changed interpretations of and attitudes towards the fundamentals of gender equity work among those who are to realise it, but also to clarifications of what ‘gender equity’ means and why it is important.

Introduction and aim

Gender equity in sport is a vastly researched area (e.g. Scraton and Flintoff 2002, Hargreaves and Anderson 2014, Mansfield et al. 2018) and can be considered highly contested terrain, to borrow a description from research on gender and organisation (Kelän 2018). Opinions differ, e.g. regarding the relevance and timeliness of gender equity work (Hoebé 2007, Hardin and Whiteside 2009, Soler et al. 2017) and the area is flooded by various perspectives of both gender and gender equity (Hall 1988, see also, e.g. Cahn 2015 on women’s rights in sport, Skewes et al. 2018 on biological determinism, Toffoletti et al. 2018 on postfeminism). However, despite diversity and difference, a general conclusion from this body of research is that sport is a male-dominated and ‘distinctly gendered’ activity (Hargreaves and Anderson 2014, p. 3, Mansfield et al. 2018). Skewed gender patterns are rooted in a wide range of sport practices,
not least in competitive sport (Smith and Wrynn 2014, Cooky and Messner 2018). Further, and this is an important premise in this study, although there are increased participation opportunities for girls and women in a large number of sports and sport settings, men are over-represented in leadership positions at all levels (Pﬁster 2011, Burton 2015, Elling et al. 2019). This means that men, on a structural level, are accountable for and control the production and implementation of gender equity polices and initiatives. Men can promote – and have promoted – change in the field of gender equity and sport, but it can be seen as a paradox that the key actors expected to engineer change are male, since gender equity and sport is primarily looked upon as a question concerning girls and women (Connell 2003, Hargreaves and Anderson 2014).

In this study, we focus on male leaders and coaches in Sweden and their relationship to gender equity. It should be noted that sport leaders and coaches in Sweden are working in a mainly non-professionalised culture. At the grass-root level, the majority of leaders and coaches are volunteers and active in non-proﬁt and non-governmental sport clubs (Fahlén and Stenling 2016, Norberg 2011), meaning that they are expected to realise gender equity goals without much formal education or any other requirements regarding their assignments. A total of 47 men from seven sports were interviewed. The overall purpose is to explore why gender equity in sport often becomes problematic. The speciﬁc aim is to analyse how ‘gender equity’ is interpreted and valued by the research participants. Central questions are: how do male leaders and coaches position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to gender equity?

Background

In Sweden, as a result of a historically anchored and politically and economically intimate relationship between the sports movement and the state, gender equity has been a prioritised area of interest since the 1970s, at least at a central level. The Swedish Sports Confederation (RF), a national umbrella organisation for Swedish sport, has routinely produced gender equity policies for more than three decades (Larsson 2014). The ﬁrst policy was mutually agreed on by all sport federations in 1989 and the latest one dates 2017. In the latest version, the goals that should be reached by 2025 include the following: (a) there should be equal opportunities for men and women to participate in and coach or govern sport; (b) women’s and men’s sport should have the same value and should be prioritised in the same way, which means that (c) women and men should have the same resources and the same attention should be given to them in research, education and communication; and (d) a gender equity perspective should be incorporated into daily activities and permeate all areas of sport. Although these goals must be said to be quite self-evident, they are almost the same today as 30 years ago (RF 1989, 2005, 2013, 2017).

One issue that is often addressed in research about sport and gender equity in Sweden is skewed gender patterns in organisational settings: 76% of the chairmen and 72% of the high ofﬁcials in the national sport associations are men, and men make up over 80% of the leaders and coaches in elite sport (Grahn 2017). In addition, organised sport in Sweden has been described as a gendered practice. Boys and men are more physically active than girls and women, and different sports attract different genders. In 10 sports, among them ice hockey, skateboard and motorcycle, men make up more than 80% of the members. Women make up more than 80% of the afﬁliated participants in two sports: equestrian sport and ﬁgure skating. Finally, research about sport and gender equity in Sweden has also been related to economy and resources: traditional norms and systems favour men over women, on different levels and in various age ranges (Centrum för idrottsforskning 2018). Research about sport and gender equity in Sweden conﬁrms, together, that there is a gap between what is formulated as goals to be accomplished at the central level and what is said and realised in club sports (Grahn 2017, Larsson 2018). Consequently, a recent government report concluded that gender equity is still a highly relevant issue in most areas of Swedish sport (Centrum för idrottsforskning 2018).
The difficulty to change unequal conditions is certainly not a Swedish phenomenon, international research on gender equity policy implementation in sport state the same (Hoeber 2007, Norman 2016, Soler et al. 2017).

**Previous research**

In this section, we will present an account of previous research about male sport leaders’ and coaches’ relationship to gender issues. We will also depict different perspectives of gender and gender equity that can be identified in the research literature.

**Male sport leaders’ and coaches’ relationship to gender issues**

While there is a growing field of critical studies into sport, men and masculinities, the area that concerns men, gender equity and sport leadership is still, to a large extent, unexplored internationally (Kempe-Bergman 2014). Although there are studies of relevance for this study, we have not found any that draw explicitly on men’s perspectives. In one study about the maintenance of masculinity among stakeholders of sport, the conclusion is that orthodox notions of masculinity are institutionally codified within sport, and therefore it will take more than affirmative action programmes to accomplish gender equity (Anderson 2009). In another study, focused on a Canadian university athletic department in ‘which gender equity was an espoused organizational value, but in which gender inequities were still evident’, the author’s explanations for the gap between what was espoused and what was enacted circled around two dominant, but contradictory, themes (Hoeber 2007). The first one was a denial of gender inequities (‘they don’t exist’) and the second one was a rationalisation of gender inequities (‘they are expected, natural, or normal’). Such arguments of resistance were also found in a study by Soler et al. (2017). They talk about the five nos: ‘not my problem, no need, not possible, no time, not fair on men’ (p. 286). In yet another study, the emphasis was on narratives about sport and gender in relation to equity among young adults (Hardin and Whiteside 2009). The main findings here suggested that emancipatory goals for girls and women were not supported because equity was looked upon as a right that women had not earned. The authors state that misconceptions about gender and equity in sport must be addressed in order to ultimately challenge dominating gender ideologies and patterns.

**Different perspectives of gender and gender equity**

As we stated in the introduction, gender equity in sport is a well-researched topic. In her seminal paper on ‘the discourse of gender and sport’ M. Ann Hall (1988) portrayed the research at that time as a development

> from its origins in social psychological research that focused on the supposed conflict between femininity and athleticism, to the more sophisticated yet functionalist notion of ‘sex roles’ and its application to sport, and finally to the emerging feminist paradigm that is informed by a growing body of feminist social theory. (p. 330)

In her paper, Hall (1988) embraced the problematisation of the category of gender as a social rather than a biological construct but emphasised the inadequacy of role theory and functionalism in the attempts to understand gender relations in sport in the support of gender equity. Instead, she highlighted a need for feminist perspectives where power dimensions are explicitly foregrounded. Putting ‘feminist perspectives’ in plural arguably indicates that gender and gender equity in sport is a vital and dynamic research field, but as we will show in this paper, the existence of a plethora of different – feminist and non-feminist – perspectives of gender and gender equity also constitutes possibilities for confusion.

In their overview of feminist traditions, Lewis et al. (2018) note that the emergence of a multitude of different academic ‘strands’ of feminism is related to several ‘waves’ of feminism occurring in
Western societies since the early 1900s. They point out that ‘[t]he wave metaphor suggests a temporality with one distinct wave after the other, but it is more helpful to see the feminist waves as particular approaches than to pin them to distinct periods in time’ (p. 4). In contemporary societies, the waves exist simultaneously, which, according to Evans and Chamberlain (2015, p. 399) ‘exacerbates arguments [...] and creates confusion surrounding what constitutes each wave’. Conversations about sex/gender may also invoke any of the perspectives of gender that Messner (2011) outlines in his influential paper Gender Ideologies, Youth Sports, and the Production of Soft Essentialism (p. 154 f). These are (1) hard essentialism, a categorical and essentialist view of women and men that was the foundation of the hegemonic gender ideology of the post-World War II era; (2) binary constructionism, emerging in the 1970s out of feminism and a view that challenged naturalised beliefs of gender difference and hierarchy; (3) multiple constructionism, with its roots in late 1970s socialist feminism and 1980s feminist women of colours’ critique of the white, middle-class basis of feminist binary constructionism, and orientated towards anticategorical and antiessentialist ideas and de-gendering theory; and finally (4) soft essentialism, a currently ascendant hegemonic ideology of the professional class that valorises the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for girls and women, while retaining a largely naturalised view of boys and men. These perspectives of sex/gender seem in Messner’s account to relate to different views of gender equity, for instance, in the sense that certain gendered practices are understood as either natural and fair, or inherently unfair. However, while Messner’s soft essentialism primarily relates to liberal feminism, we believe that soft essentialism also can be related to neoliberal and postfeminist ideas and ideals. As Lewis et al. (2018, p. 7) argue

… one significant feature of postfeminism is its lack of social critique and thus its lack of a political agenda. Whereas its predecessor liberal feminism used the liberal ideals of individual freedom, choice, opportunity and equality to critique gender inequalities in wages and positions of authority, the feminism attached to postfeminism does nothing to critique the neoliberal capitalist system.

The research questions of this paper, how male leaders and coaches position themselves, and how they are positioned, in relation to gender equity will be related to, and answered within, the above outlined framework. We will come back to this in our analysis. Next, we turn to our theoretical approach.

**Theoretical approach**

We have found Foucault’s (1998) concepts discourse and subjectivity to be relevant in order to understand the power-related dynamics that characterise gender equity work as it unfolds in interviews with male leaders and coaches. Overall, the use of Foucault’s theoretical framework to understand the relationship between power, knowledge and subjectivity within the area of gender and sport is vast (see, e.g. Larsson 2015, Markula 2003, Markula and Pringle 2006, Rail and Harvey 1995, Scraton and Flintoff 2013, Sawicki 1991, Svender et al. 2012). This research has offered knowledge about the necessity to critically scrutinise what is typically considered to be ‘natural’ about women and men in sport, as well as how sport participation can be highly regulated in the name of gender equity. However, we have not found any Foucault-oriented studies about male sport leaders and coaches and their relationship to gender issues and gender equity work.

Our theoretical approach to the overall question why gender equity in sport is problematic is based on the notion that gender equity is not something uniform and clear, but rather something ambiguous and contentious. With the help of the concepts discourse and subjectivity, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of why something that, at least superficially, might seem quite straightforward, i.e. the need to improve the situation of girls and women in sport, sometimes end up in confusion, resistance, indignation and defiance. In everyday speech, ‘discourse’ means a ‘verbal interchange of ideas’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2019), but this is not primarily what Foucault had in mind when he chose discourse as one of his key analytical concepts. In his early work, he
stipulated that discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, p. 49). Later, he offered a more elaborated definition of discourse as:

the ensemble of more or less regulated, more or less deliberate, more or less finalized ways of doing things, through which can be seen both what was constituted as real for those who sought to think it and manage it [objects; our note] and the way in which the latter constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality. (Foucault 1998, p. 463, our italics)

Following Foucault, in relation to the dictionary definition of discourse, the primary focus should not be on ‘ideas’ but on the doing, or more specifically, on the practice of interchange. This kind of interchange, whether verbal or of any other kind, has ‘reality effects’ in the sense that both subjects and objects are positioned in and through discursive practice.

By choosing the concept subject, Foucault was playing with the parallel meaning of the word, simultaneously being ‘the mind, ego, or agent of whatever sort that sustains or assumes the form of thought or consciousness’ as well as ‘one that is placed under authority or control’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2019). This tension between agency and subjection mirrors how Foucault saw the becoming of subjects – and subjectivity – as the reality effects of engaging in discursive practice; as at the same time enabled and restricted by the power of discourses. In The History of Sexuality (Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986), he eloquently showed how human beings become sexual subjects as a result of the subjectification to certain discourses of sexuality.

In this study, the focus is on gender equity and the different ways in which discursive practice contributes to produce different versions of both gender equity (object), including implicitly stipulated versions of gender, and approaches to gender equity (subject). This approach is based on a notion that gender equity, what it ‘is’, if it is necessary, or how it is to be realised in society or any particular sector of society, is always contested and negotiable. Additionally, when people say or do things that are related to gender equity, they become something, a ‘feminist’, a ‘libertarian’, a ‘sexist’, etc. Our analysis is focused on what ‘gender equity’ comes to signify – what it ‘means’ – in the interviews, as well as what ‘gender’ implicitly comes to signify, and how the interview persons position themselves in relation to the issue gender equity. As we will show, different meanings of gender equity (and gender) together with different approaches to gender equity are engendered. In the next section, we outline how we endeavoured to gain insights into the doings of gender equity in sport.

Methods

The study is based on empirical material from a larger research evaluation of a government-funded sport-for-all initiative. Consequently, the selection of sports and participants was to some extent effected by the evaluation; The Swedish Sports Confederation steered which sports that were included, and the national associations of the sports in question took part in the initial framing of the project. A total of 47 leaders and coaches were interviewed, representing a variety of men; 13 elected leaders and representatives in national sport associations (chairmen, secretary-generals, national board members and high officials), 5 administrative officials in regional sport associations and 29 local officials, leaders and coaches (chairmen and board members, club managers and administrators, and coaches for senior, elite and child and youth sport in local clubs). The local participants’ club contexts varied – participants from large, medium and small clubs were included in the study – and some of them were active as both leaders and coaches. Most of the coaches were active on voluntary basis in their spare time and had no professional coaching background, but at least four of them were employed and worked full-time in their clubs. A majority of the participants were selected from four sports: football (15), badminton (10), volleyball and beach volleyball (11), and table tennis (8). In addition, one coach from each of athletics, ice hockey and tennis were interviewed.

An interview guide was developed, and the participants were encouraged to relate to certain themes and issues through open-ended questions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Our
operationalisation of the semi-structured interview was grounded in established social scientific models for qualitative interview research (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The basic ambition was, in line with Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), to enable open, safe and in-depth conversations about gender equity and sport. The conversations were structured around four main questions: (1) What does gender equity and sport mean in a broad sense? (2) What does gender equity mean in the participants’ own sport? (3) Is the participants’ own sport fair and equal from a gender perspective? How? If not, why? and (4), in general, is sport fair and equal from a gender perspective? How? If not, why? All interviews lasted for 45–100 minutes. The participants were between 25 and 70 years of age, the vast majority 35–55. As previous research has shown (Fundberg 2009), Swedish sport leaders and coaches are an ethnically homogenous group. Almost all of the participants were born in or had close cultural ties to Sweden. None of the participants were disabled. The interviews were carried out in line with recommendations and ethical guidelines established by The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2017).

Analysis
All the 47 interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed. The transcription process generated some 500 pages of raw interview data. Based on the earlier outlined Foucauldian framework, we conducted a discourse analysis of the 47 interviews. This analysis was performed in several steps.

The first step included several read-throughs in order to get a general grasp of the material and potential patterns in it. All the relevant sections were marked, and some initial classifications were made. The second step included a more systematic coding process where different conceptions of gender equity was identified. The analytical question in this step was: what ‘is’ gender equity here (in this section of an interview)? The two first steps were performed by the first author.

In the third step, all three authors gathered to interpret the different versions of and approaches to gender equity. The analytical questions here were as follows: What meanings of gender does this conceptualisation of gender equity accommodate, and how does the participant position himself in relation to the meaning of gender equity in question in terms of feelings, values and attitudes? Is he positive or negative, dedicated or sceptical? Here, we endeavoured to acknowledge Foucault’s (1998) suggestion to study ‘the concrete practices by which the subject is constituted in the immanence of a domain of knowledge’ (p. 462). This meant that we sought to understand the research participants’ approach to gender equity not as a result of any elaborated interpretation of a formal definition of gender equity but as engendered by encounters with an endeavour that comes in many forms and shapes (e.g. gender equity as an ambiguous and contentious concept). In short, the Foucauldian analysis was conducted as a search for how male sport leaders and coaches (subject) position themselves in relation to a particular understanding of gender equity and gender (object), where both subject and object were seen as produced, moulded and modified in a simultaneous process. Finally, we also analysed whether there is a hierarchy among the positions, e.g. in the sense that some positions are more frequently articulated than others and can be depicted in more nuanced ways. The third step meant to some extent that the initial classifications were revised, which also meant that the participation of author two and three served as a member check to increase credibility.

Findings
The analysis generated four ways in which the participants positioned themselves, and were positioned, in relation to the issue of gender equity. We have designated these positions: ‘the sceptic’, ‘the cynic’, ‘the women’s rights advocate’ and ‘the constructionist’. In line with Foucault’s notions, it should be pointed out that these positions are not equivalent to actual persons. One person may articulate multiple positions during one interview, simply because the conversation is informed by several discourses. Further, each position seems to be related to various
conceptualisations of gender equity, which in turn imply various understandings of gender. In the following sections, we will distinguish, describe and discuss the four positions and their related interpretations of gender equity and gender.

The sceptic

Scepticism is a regular feature among the coaches and leaders in our material. ‘A sceptic’ is someone who raises doubts about the reasonableness and fairness of certain gender equity efforts. Oftentimes, this scepticism is founded in a perception that the basis of the efforts is flawed. For instance, many of the participants articulated a strong scepticism about gender equity initiatives in club sports because there is actually no gender inequity. Hence, the initiatives become illegitimate, or, as in the interview excerpt below, something quite obsolete:

I think that [gender equity] feels a little old-fashioned. Because nearly all kids do sport nowadays, boys and girls. [...] Maybe girls choose sports that aren’t highly visible in society, like dancing and equestrianism … while boys choose sports that are exposed in media. (Table tennis coach)

Presumably, this position is based on the notion that individual girls and boys ‘choose’ sports unconditionally, and that it is merely coincidental that the sports that boys choose happen to be the ones that are highly visible in media. On the contrary, several of the participants, much like the athletics coach below, stated that too much talk about gender and gender equity may in fact create (gender) equity problems:

I try to relate to people and not think too much about gender. […] It’s about finding the key to how every human being works, rather than if it is a girl or a boy. Actually, you paint yourself into a corner if you think too much about gender. (Athletics coach)

Some of the participants even held that gender equity initiatives were unjust. Here, a comment is made about the building of a new, large sport and training centre in a major Swedish city. The centre is built exclusively for girls and women, partly in the name of gender equity.

Everything that we do, we men, it should be shared … our doors are to be open to them [girls and women]. They should have access to everything that we do, but they are allowed to keep their things for themselves … (Football coach)

Another football coach said,

No efforts are ever put into boys between 10 and 15, the ones who are at real risk of becoming thugs downtown [rather than the girls].

In the above interview excerpts, gender equity initiatives are not taken to be about levelling the gendered playing field, but rather as a way of – illegitimately and unnecessarily – favouring girls and women in their sporting endeavours, because there are actually no gender inequities. Instead, the participants seem to understand skew gender patterns as the result of girls and boys choosing sports unconditionally. This is why gender equity efforts mean that ‘one forges something that there really is no need for’, as a volleyball coach puts it. It seems almost as if merely asking questions about the proportion of male and female sports participants is interpreted as an attempt to force girls and boys into certain sports. One coach, for example, picks up the discussion on why so few girls participate in ice hockey. To him, this discussion is similar to saying that more girls should be playing:

Well, why should they? Why can’t they play what they want to play? Why do boys have to do figure skating? I don’t really see the problem.

Participation in ice hockey is here taken to be unconstrained, and therefore gender equity efforts become a way of forcing girls and boys into something that they do not ‘really’ want to do. In some interviews, it seems unconceivable that girls do not participate in certain sports because they are not expected to participate, or that they may even be prohibited from participating. In short, the position
of a sceptic relates to a disinclination to see any points in doing gender equity work, because there is no gender inequity problem. Since gender patterns are the result of (unconditioned) individual choice, existing gender equity work is wrong. Our interpretation is that this scepticism towards gender equity work can be related to postfeminist perspectives, where individual freedom and choice is highlighted and social critique muted (Lewis et al. 2018, Toffoletti et al. 2018). This is particularly so if gender equity is dealt with unprofessionally by municipality officials, which was highlighted in one of the interviews:

Researcher: What is gender equity to you? [...] 

Table tennis coach: I don’t know? [...] I was in an umbrella organisation for the whole municipality, and they said that all clubs need a gender equity plan in order to get subsidised. I was the only one who said that this is stupid. [...] I wrote that damn plan and when I checked with the municipality official what he did once he got it, he said: ‘When I get them, I perforate them … and then I put them in a binder.’ [...] Yeah, that’s what he said. What a bloody nonsense.

The above table tennis coach initially indicates that he is basically ignorant about gender equity. He follows up on this response with one example of gender equity work that he sees as ‘stupid’ and ‘nonsense’. It is not our intention to lament or stigmatise this coach’s relationship to gender equity work, just to highlight that if a sport coach or leader is ignorant of what this work may pertain to, and for what purposes it may be relevant to take part in, it is important that any initiatives taken is clearly related to specific problems.

Another dimension of scepticism towards gender equity initiatives seems to be when girls and boys are constructed as essentially different: ‘Boys will be boys’ while ‘girls will be girls’, as is the case in the following interview excerpt:

There are differences between girls and boys … [...] how you should treat them and so on … [...] what characteristics they have. [...] At least, that’s what the coaches here say [...] Other things are important to the girls compared to the boys … It’s more important to the boys to win the game than to the girls. And there is more gossiping among girls. (Football coach)

It is quite common that gender characteristics like the ones that the above quoted coach articulates are taken to reside within girls and boys, as a sort of essence. It is unclear, however, whether ‘hard’ or ‘soft essentialism’ (Messner 2011) would be the correct designation of this perspective. In fact, there are few, if any, references to genetic inheritance in the leaders’ and coaches’ accounts. In any case, an essentialist perspective may explain why girls and boys, and women and men are typically taken to bring innate gender-specific characteristics into new situations:

Football coach: I think it would be sounder to have girls taking care of boys (as coaches) … I think that boys need softer values than the typical laddish ones.

Researcher: And you think that female coaches can accommodate those softer values?

Football coach: Yeah, I think that they have other interests. I actually believe that there’s a difference between girls and boys, also mentally. [...] So far we aren’t entirely equal … but maybe we shouldn’t be entirely equal either, honestly? Imagine if everyone was the same (laughter).

With the notion that men and women are in essence different, as was indicated above, seems to follow that gender equity is in fact taken to mean ‘equalisation of sex differences’. Or put simple, equal terms are translated as ‘the same’. This may well support scepticism towards gender equity initiatives, because if gender equity is taken to be about equalisation of sex difference, then the whole business is viewed as an impracticability. The matter of impracticability takes us over to the second category in our analysis.

The cynic

Just as the sceptic, ‘the cynic’ articulates scepticism and critique towards gender equity work, but when the articulation of the first position is about the illegitimacy of gender equity initiatives, the
The sceptic seems to relate to reasonable yet unrealistic endeavours. Gender equity may well be good and desirable, but ‘it will never happen’ – ‘it’s a man’s world, rebut me?’, as one football coach says. The initiatives are seen as unrealistic, hence an impossible mission. Below is a statement from the same football coach:

It’ll never be the same money in women’s sport as in men’s sport. [...] I’m just honest. [...] I’ve been challenged many times, but … prove me wrong? [...] Men control everything, the spectators in sport are men … [...] You have Premier league, you have La Liga, you have Serie A. People don’t have the time to watch a women’s game. It’s just the way it is. [...] And there’s no magical cure, like ‘tomorrow, we’ll shut down the TV–net, you’ll have to go and see women play’. Half of the Swedish population would shoot themselves (laughter).

The above coach relates to sport history and market logics: ‘men control everything’. And ‘people don’t want to watch women’s football’. This constitutes a fairly omnipotent view, where what ‘people’ (i.e. probably men as taken for granted spectators) becomes self-evident. Hence, becoming cynical may include the right to pronounce what is allegedly taken to be obvious: ‘how things are’. The arguments are based on generalisations, and the underlying assumption is that men are better than women and that men are not interested in women’s sport, no matter what. The fact that the football arenas were sold out during the Women’s European Cup in Sweden 2013, for instance, is ignored when speaking from this position. Instead, the ‘evidence’ brought forward points in the opposite direction. Things are the way they are, and the situation will not change. Overall, such a perspective can be described as deterministic. However, as was the case with the difficulty to distinguish between hard and soft essentialism earlier, there are no explicit indications that these accounts are based on biological determinist notions. Nevertheless, the participants that articulate this position do seem to reason in the fashion that ‘men are from Mars, women are from Venus’ (Skewes et al. 2018), a way of reasoning that explains and justifies male dominance and economic differences in sport as well as ‘people’s’ supposedly negative attitudes towards women’s football. A similar perspective is articulated in the below excerpt from an interview with another football agent:

Maybe I’m pessimistic, but I can’t see that the best female football player in the world earns 15 million dollars, that kind of mass media power doesn’t exist … And that’s where the money is, and the possibilities to finance players. Men’s football have existed for at least 100 years, women’s football for 40. Even if we would wish for it, I don’t think we’ll get there.

The static view of football’s virtually innate patriarchal logics, at least the way they are articulated above, seems to relate at first hand to money (in this case income). However, a mass media context and its male domination is also highlighted. Money and media forge an almost insoluble alliance, which underpins the deterministic view: ‘Gender equity? We’ll never get there’.

Both the sceptic and the cynic articulate quite negative views of gender equity initiatives in sport: the sceptic because they are unnecessary or unfair (because there are no inequities and the genders are essentially different), the cynic because they are unrealistic and will never happen (because men are actually [in essence] better than women at sport). But such negativism does not constitute all interviews.

**The women’s rights advocate**

We call the third subject position in our material ‘the women’s rights advocate’. A women’s rights advocate constructs gender equity as something good and worth striving for; gender equity is linked to a broad support for women’s sport participation, both quantitatively (‘more women’) and qualitatively (support of ‘female values’). Below is an excerpt from an interview with a leader with a central function in The Swedish Football Association that indicates this broad support of gender equity initiatives:

Gender equity and football [...] is about … in a club, there are men and women in the board, and the women there have responsibilities for both girls’ and boys’ activities. It should also be more female leaders and coaches. [...] And boys and girls should have the same conditions when it comes to practice hours. And, nothing separates boys and girls economically.
This close link between gender equity and work aimed at including and supporting girls and women is present in many interviews. A badminton leader is asked about with which problems he associates gender equity. He answers: ‘I think it’s about resources […] That you spend just as much resources on a girls’ team as on a boys’ team, or on a female player as on a male one’. Below is an excerpt from an interview with a table tennis leader about the same issue:

Gender equity in table tennis is that boys and girls should participate on equal terms. […] It should be just as easy for girls to play as for boys. That’s the basics. […] And sometimes you have to start in a compulsory direction. […] Affirmative action is an example of that, to allocate money is an example of that. […] It’ll take 100 years for the feminists to … so we’re trying to speed up through administrative arrangements. […] We have to increase the number of women in our board. Girls aged 12–13–14, and older players, get just as much resources as the boys, despite that there are more boys.

In these excerpts, the general support for girls and women and the will to include more female athletes and leaders seems to be comprehensive. The leaders talk about both equal participation (it should be just as easy for girls to play) and equal resources (affirmative action, allocation of money, and more female leaders), and in this sense their way of reasoning echoes a liberal feminist perspective (Birrell 2000), as well as what Messner (2011) called ‘binary constructionism’.

The women’s rights advocate position is typically also a difference-oriented position: women and men are essentially different. Hence, the support for gender equity initiatives that the women’s rights advocate is expressing is sometimes related to a preservation of traditional gender norms, and affirmation of conventional ideas about gender difference. For example, women are ‘wiser’ and more ‘socially competent’ than men, which, according to a women’s rights advocate, should be appreciated and used. In one interview, a leader from The Swedish Badminton Association offers a narrative about a gender equity initiative that the organisation launched some years ago. One of the most important things with this initiative, he says, was to complement men with women, especially in leadership positions. Gender equity is about combining what is taken to be essentially feminine with what is taken to be essentially masculine; ‘We need each other’, the leader says, and give an example of the ‘great’ benefits with gender equity that were exposed when a female leader was recruited to a national team he was a part of. A ‘totally different atmosphere’ emerged, he states,

We had a male coach who travelled with us, to competitions and so forth, but he stopped, and they said ‘you have to get a woman’. And it was so incredibly concrete, the whole group grew when she got in. […] I really got to learn, and see concrete, how important it is that we have both. […] So my philosophy is, ‘make sure that you have a double leadership, one of each kind’, ‘always try’. The group will grow, I’ve seen it.

Here, the earlier mentioned notions about innate gender properties are neatly expressed, as was the case in binary constructionism (Messner 2011). Women are assumed to hold a certain, inherent essence, although none of the research participants refer to biology or environment as the ultimate source of such an essence. In fact, the exaltation of female traits can also be linked to radical feminism (Birrell 2000), for example, according to the above quoted badminton leader, the group ‘grew’ because the new female coach introduced particular traits that he ascribes to womanhood. In effect, the women’s rights advocate in this sense contributes to romanticise traditional femininity. While scepticism and cynicism related negatively to gender equity initiatives, a women’s rights advocate express positive views about gender equity. However, all three positions seem to relate to the reproduction of traditional gender norms.

One final aspect about the women’s rights advocate is highlighted in the below excerpt from an interview with a football leader in a central function nationally:

If gender equity is that girls should have the same conditions as boys in relation to participation, competition, and practice opportunities … that has never been controversial for us … 25 years ago, there were no [tournaments] for girls … today, it’s just as common with girls’ and boys’ teams.

This leader gets ‘incredibly happy’ when he sees ‘the magnitude’ of the development. He emphasises the importance of more girls and women in football. Perhaps the issue of gender equity was ‘never
controversial’ because the argument is based on taken for granted notions about (essential) differences between the genders and that gender equity is about ‘more’ (participants and resources), rather than about challenging the gender binary and a redistribution of resources. More women and more resources, combined with a disinclination to address a possible need to redistribute resources, forge a non-critical perspective, i.e. that gender equity in sport is not controversial. It is not controversial because it, quite simply, does not challenge the gender binary and the need to redistribute resources. This is, however, what may happen with the fourth, and last, category.

The constructionist

The articulation of ‘the constructionist’ is uncommon in our material. Apparently, scepticism, cynicism and women’s rights advocacy are easier to articulate. Where a women’s rights advocate typically expresses a consensus perspective where gender equity is uncontroversial, perhaps because it does not challenge the gender binary, a constructionist articulates a somewhat more critical approach. However, although different from the binary constructionism that was related to the women’s rights advocate position, we are not certain that the articulation of the constructionist is tantamount to what Messner (2011) termed ‘multiple constructionism’, because here, the coaches and leaders relate to a binary gender model too. Nevertheless, in this case, the model is dynamic and relates to cultures and norms rather than to how or what the genders ‘are’. Gender becomes something non-essential.

One dimension of the constructionist is linked to critical ideas about (male) sport history and tradition. How can females become a natural part of a context that, to a large extent, has been, and is, anti-female? A football coach says that it is a ‘dream scenario’ to attract more girls to the sport, but that the girls start too late, and quit too early, because of constraining norms. ‘The boys start to play at five’ – ‘few girls do the same’. Few girls get in later, he adds. ‘Why?’, asks the interviewer:

Good question. But basically, isn’t it obvious? […] Football is such an old sport, and so rooted in Sweden … and the fact that it has been a male sport … ? […] It’s easier for younger sports to attract both girls and boys. The problem is the tradition, I think.

A table tennis coach also highlights ‘tradition’, but in a slightly different fashion. He contends that girls need more and better opportunities to train, compete and perform. Girls need to learn how to be ‘strong’, ‘confident’ and ‘to win and lose’. This coach also argues that few girls get challenged in this area; for boys, ‘competition is much more accepted’, at the same time girls learn to ‘play’ and do sport ‘just because it’s fun’. Further, girls should get the chance to ‘aim high’ and ‘set and reach goals’. If society develops like it does today, he argues, sporting skills will help girls advance and succeed, because ‘competition is an important part of the working life – you have to perform’.

A football coach that trains girls aged 11–12, and who lets his team play against same-aged boys, which is uncommon in Sweden, articulates similar statements as his table tennis colleague:

It’s about the society. […] Football mirrors what the society looks like, even if we have our own culture and norms. And it bottoms in history […]. Women’s football wasn’t accepted until the 1990s. Some people don’t accept it yet. […] And you don’t have the same role models […], you don’t have engaged people in the club.

In another part of the interview, he says

Girl’s aren’t allowed to be good. […] That’s the difference between boys and girls. But I feel, there is no difference. […] Why shouldn’t a girl be able to play football well? When I grew up [in the 70s], the girl’s skipped rope and played games, they never played football. […] You shouldn’t compare men’s football with women’s. Men’s football have existed for 150 years. […] If you give them good practice, without too much pressure, and intensify it every year, then … a girls’ team shouldn’t be worse than a boys’ team.
The same coach, who says that he treats his players ‘as boys’ (‘I don’t cuddle with them’, ‘they are very strong mentally’ and ‘can handle press’), articulates yet another comprehensive statement, here in relation to practice opportunities:

Equal conditions for girls and boys start with good coaches and practice arrangements. […] Practice opportunities is number one. It shouldn’t be any differences there. The boy’s shouldn’t practice ten times at the best facility and the girl’s one … You have to burn for both boys and girls.

Taken together, becoming a constructionist means articulating certain core principles: society, sport and gender are interrelated (‘football mirrors society’), gender relations are contextual and cultural (‘girls are not allowed to be good’) and conditions related to training and development are important (‘practice opportunities are number one’).

Further, a constructionist also typically conveys positive attitudes towards gender-mixed sport cultures. A chairman in a badminton club describes badminton as gender equal due to its mixed-gender settings: from an early age, girls and boys ‘learn’ to train and compete together, and use the same training models and exercises. ‘Everyone takes part on equal terms’, he says. This leader also talks about mixed settings and respect. He poses the following rhetorical question: ‘will not [boys and girls] look at each other with a little more respect [if they play mixed] than if they play separately?’

To summarise, the position of constructionist means seeing culture and learning as central aspects of gender equity. Something that must be said to resemble a social constructionist, or ‘doing gender’, perspective within a research context (see, e.g. Larsson 2014). To a large extent, you learn what sport and gender is and should be – and that it can change. The narrative could be spelled out as follows: ‘sport is tradition, and new traditions could and should be made. Sport used to be organised in ways that favoured men, now we need to organise sport in ways that favour women too. For example, skewed gender relations in football are historically and culturally ingrained. Women have not had access to football to the same extent as men; they have not had the same conditions and opportunities, and they have not had the same formal support’. However, viewing gender equity favourably and adopting constructionist perspectives of gender are not necessarily linked to an inclination of taking action more broadly for gender equity initiatives. The interviews indicate that the perspective is useful for sport leaders and coaches under certain conditions (e.g. if a coach work with girls who are skilled at sports), but there are few indications that the perspective is used more systematically in gender equity work.

Above, we have distinguished, described and discussed the articulation of four subject positions in relation to gender equity in sport. Now we will summarise our analysis and discuss it in relation to previous research.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The overall purpose of this paper was to explore why gender equity in sport often becomes problematic. More specifically, the purpose was, by means of a Foucauldian discourse analysis, to explore how ‘gender equity’ is interpreted and valued by male leaders and coaches: how do they position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to the concept? On the level of sport politics, and arguably as an indication of what Norberg (2011) calls an ‘implicit contract’ between the non-governmental umbrella organisation The Swedish Sports Confederation and the Swedish state, it might seem as if gender equity would be a straightforward question since the confederation regularly has issued gender equity policies. Thirty years of systematic attempts to implement gender equity suggests that the issue is indeed a legitimate endeavour at the central level. However, above, we have theorised that gender equity is not something uniform and clear, but rather something ambiguous and contentious (Lewis et al. 2018). This ambiguity is obvious in research, but its consequences are seldom discussed. A benefit with a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault 1998) is that it illuminates how different versions of and attitudes to gender equity are tied to
different perspectives of gender, be they essentialist, constructionist or postfeminist. However, the ambiguity and the multitude of perspectives are not something that people typically pay attention to. Rather, our analysis indicates that the leaders and coaches often approach gender in spontaneous and immediate ways. The sceptic, the cynic, the women’s rights advocate and the constructionist may be well aware of the different interpretations of gender and gender equity that exist, but it is unusual that they express this, or reflect on it.

Clearly, our results mirror many of the results that have been presented in previous research. This includes the dominance of orthodox notions of masculinity (Anderson 2009), and a rationalisation – sometimes even denial – of gender inequities, which may instead be understood as expected, natural or normal (Hoebber 2007, Soler et al. 2017). The view that gender equity initiatives are ‘not fair on men’ (Soler et al. 2017, p. 286) is also expressed. Further, as in Hardin and Whiteside (2009) study, emancipatory goals were not always supported because equity was looked upon as a right that women had not earned, for example since women’s sport was not seen to be as competitive and spectator attractive as men’s sport. However, based on the results of our analysis, we believe that the picture can be both deepened and nuanced.

Our results indicate a confusion surrounding what gender equity actually is about, a confusion that to some extent seems to be constituted in the multitude of waves and strands of feminism (Evans and Chamberlain 2015). This is not to say that what can be seen as a vital research field, which includes a plethora of different perspectives and standpoints, is to blame for poor output when it comes to gender equity work. We merely suggest that if the issue is not considered to be legitimate and of special concern, the diversity among gender equity perspectives risks turning into simplicity and a reason to ignore the mission, with the consequence that little is done to improve the situation.

Many of the interviewed male leaders and coaches, specifically those who articulated scepticism and cynicism, raised negative concerns about gender equity initiatives in sport. While the sceptic was sceptical because there is actually no gender inequities, thus echoing a postfeminist viewpoint (Lewis et al. 2018, Toffoletti et al. 2018), the cynic was cynical because women are actually inferior to men in sport, and this fact cannot be changed, since the difference is categorical and essential (Messner 2011, on hard essentialism). Thus, the equation between gender equity work and sport becomes problematic partly because several of those who are meant to realise the gender equity ambitions do not support the same ambitions. Despite gender equity policies and efforts, many of the leaders and coaches in our interviews are in a position to say that gender equity is not worthwhile or something they will strive for. It is not on their agenda.

Even when positive approaches to gender equity were articulated, fairly traditional views about gender were often reproduced, e.g. that female athletes are in need of particular care or that female coaches have a different leadership style. This was especially a way of reasoning when the women’s rights advocate was articulated, a position that to some extent relates to what Messner (2011) calls ‘binary constructionism’, and to some extent also relates to liberal feminist ideals, such as the emphasis of equal resource allocation and women’s rights to participate on their own terms (Birrell 2000). As we indicated earlier, we interpret the reproduction of traditional views about gender as a sign of the dominance of a non-critical perspective of gender. Already 30 years ago, Hall (1988) concluded that such a perspective could become an obstacle to gender equity. Drawing on Hall’s insights, we anticipate that although a women’s rights advocate is positive to gender equity work, the articulation of the position might undermine gender equity ambitions due to the absence of a critical perspective of gender.

The position of a constructionist may fit the intentions of The Swedish Sports Confederation’s overarching gender equity ambitions better than the other three positions. This assessment is based on the notion that gender inequity in sport is founded in stereotypical gender norms, much like the ones that are articulated by the sceptic, the cynic and the women’s rights advocates alike. However, the position of the constructionist seems to be subordinate to the other positions since it is not articulated as frequently. Moreover, it is not entirely clear that the articulation of the constructionist includes a critical perspective of gender. This is evident, for example, in statements
such as ‘football mirrors society’ and ‘girls are not allowed to be good’. Here, it is not obvious if football, or society for that matter, must change, or if the problem with girls not being allowed to be good is related to stereotypical perceptions of gender. Further, it is not entirely clear if the constructionist position embraces ‘multiple constructionism’ (Messner 2011) or if it is limited to binary constructionism.

We conclude that becoming a constructionist is probably more aligned with the gender equity objectives of both Swedish and international sport organising bodies (see, e.g. the European Commission 2014) than the other here outlined positions. However, there is still room for an anticategorical and antiessentialist impulse (Messner 2011, p. 154) within gender equity work in sport. That is, future gender equity initiatives must include a critical perspective of gender in more distinct and detailed ways. Further, we conclude that simply adopting gender equity goals at a central level in a large sport organisation is not enough if these goals are to affect leaders and coaches in their daily work. Gender equity goals seem to be quite easy to disregard or even do away with within a minimally regulated non-profit and voluntary leisure-time context.

Disclosure statement

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