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## Discursive resistance to gender diversity in sport governance: sport as a unique field?

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### ABSTRACT

Although diversity is an often cited organisational value, its support is often muted when it pertains to boards of governance. The aim of this study is to identify discursive practices that may prevent or limit the implementation of measures to increase gender balance in sport governance at the national and international levels. Drawing on a total of 60 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with board members, we explore both the content of and reasons for discursive opposition to implementing gender balance in the governing boards of international and national sport organisations that purport to value diversity. The results demonstrate that board members justify their resistance to gender balance by drawing on discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism, silence/passivity, and diversity. Resistance to gender balance in sport governance may in part have roots in the sport capital and habitus of board members, and their ability to utilise that in normalising judgment that may keep women out.

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## Introduction

Diversity has become a desired value in many organisations (Embrick 2011), and sport clubs and organisations are no exception (Knoppers and Anthonissen 2008, IOC 2018, Spaaij et al 2020). Most policies that purport to encourage diversity in organisations stimulate self-regulation and are based on a body count that places people into categories, usually based on gender, race/ethnicity and sometimes, age, and sexuality. Puwar (2004) argues that the presence of differently categorised bodies is imagined to amount to, and be evidence of, equality and diversity.

The rhetoric about the need for different bodies or categorical diversity is largely muted or even contested when it pertains to leadership of organisations, especially in the boardroom (Hovden 2010, Kirsch 2018, Roos and Zanoni 2018, Knoppers et al. 2019). For example, only 25% of the board seats of the largest publicly listed companies in the European Union were held by women in 2017 (European Commission 2018). This lack or slowness in implementation of measures to increase diversity in the boardroom exists across organisations in various strengths and forms (Terjesen et al. 2009, Kirsch 2018, Elling et al. 2019). For example, sport is a sector that notably lags behind in the level of gender balance of the boards of directors of national and international sport organisations (United Nations 2007, IOC Gender Equality Project 2018). Using data collected for the Sydney Scoreboard, Adriaanse (2016) reported that women comprised an average (global mean) of 19.7% of board members of national sport organisations. This lack of gender balance in sport governance is

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especially noteworthy since in the 2016 Olympic Games women comprised just under 50% of the participants (IOC 2019). This suggests there is a pool of candidates with many years of experience in sport from which directors could be drawn.<sup>1</sup>

The lack of significant change in the percentage of women board members has been attributed to various factors: a skewed work-life balance required of many board members, the shortage of mentors and role models for women, the preference of males for people who are like themselves (male homosociality), the perception that a token woman board member is sufficient, the negative stereotypes of strong women leaders, and the dominance of male networks that largely exclude women (Terjesen *et al.* 2009, Gregorič *et al.* 2017, Kirsch 2018). Although the previously cited literature describes various factors that may be addressed in policy efforts to increase gender balance on boards of directors, relatively few scholars have looked specifically at why these attempts to create change may fail and how insiders of organisations that purport to value diversity, such as members of the board of governance, may discursively resist measures that might increase gender equity. In one of the few existing studies, Roos and colleagues (Roos and Zanoni 2018, Roos *et al.* 2020) found that directors drew on discursive resources to legitimate the status quo and to resist the institutionalisation of measures that could increase the number of women on boards of governance. Roos *et al.* (2020) have called the use of a combination of discourses by powerful organisational actors to resist change in the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership, 'defensive institutional work'.

Relatively few scholars have examined sport governance as a site for valuing diversity and for simultaneously resisting a significant increase in women directors by engaging in defensive institutional work. Yet, sport governance is a significant activity where strategies are developed and decisions are made regarding policy and rules that inform how a sport is to be played. These decisions impact the participation of athletes, club members, licence holders, and external stakeholders such as fans, families, and sponsors (Hoeber and Shaw 2019). In general, a move to gender balance on boards of governance has been very slow.

In this paper we explore the discursive resistance by members of national and international sport boards to gender balance in sport organisations that value diversity. Furthermore, we analyse why, in part, this resistance to more women board members may have roots that are embedded in sport as a field. We conceptualise resistance to gender balance by board members as a discursive practice in which members of boards of sport governance discursively engage in defensive institutional work to oppose policies that would/could increase gender balance in their board. Although much of the existing research has focused on resistance to the implementation of *quotas* for women (e.g. Krook 2016, Adriaanse 2017, Hovden *et al.* 2019), we focus on discursive opposition to the implementation of measures that could contribute to the realisation of diversity as an organisational value. The purpose of the paper, therefore, is to develop insight into discursive practices of resistance used by those in governance positions to the implementation of gender balance on boards and, specifically, boards of sport governance.

We focus on discursive resistance by members of national and international sport boards. These boards develop and implement policies that shape the participation of athletes at grassroots and elite levels (Hoeber and Shaw 2019). Verloo (2018) has argued that increased understandings of resistance to gender balance could enable analyses that contribute to theorising about reducing gender inequality. Sport organisations are situated in a field dominated by males. Institutional sport competitions, of which boards are a part, are formally structured as a gender binary based on assumed inherent differences between men and women (Joseph and Anderson 2016, Betzer-Tayar *et al.* 2017). Sport participation continues to be a place where participants learn to appreciate and incorporate desirable practices of celebrated masculinity (Messner 1988, Joseph and Anderson 2016). According to Fitzsimmons and Callan (2019), the degree of resistance to changing relations of power in male dominated fields is often underestimated. These power relations have been perpetuated by self-fulfilling structures that prefer and were created for those who embody norms that have dominated a field for many years (Bourdieu 1990), and therefore need attention. The need

to identify discursive practices of resistance goes beyond analytical and theoretical concerns, however. Mergaert and Lombardo (2014, p. 4), who investigated resistance to gender mainstreaming in the European Union, suggest that making the dynamics of resistance visible can 'help identify who the resisting actors are and through what mechanisms they operate, ultimately making this opposition to change visible, diagnosing the problem, and devising solutions'.

The research questions that guided this paper were twofold. First, which discourses did members of boards of directors of national and international sport organisations draw upon and which discursive practices did they use to resist the implementation of measures to increase gender balance? Second, why did they engage in this resistance and how might these ways of thinking and doing be specific to the field of sport? We use empirical data to answer the first question. To answer the second question, we draw on both empirical data and the scholarly literature about (non) sport organisations, gender and resistance to diversity.

## Theoretical framework

We draw on Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse and techniques of power, and Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus, and field. Foucault's concepts of discourses and regimes of truth suggest how some ways of thinking and talking about gender in sport and governance become dominant and common sense. Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus capture the structuring mechanisms that shape this process. Together these notions explain how the social and material positioning of individuals shape reality as being self evident or common sense. Discourse is what can and cannot be said about a specific topic (Foucault 1972). What is proclaimed to be true becomes common sense and a regime of truth. We assume that the discourses and discursive practices used by board members to resist diversity play a role in how the underrepresentation of women board members is understood and may become common sense. For example, Hovden (2010) found that discourses about leadership in sport organisations were gendered and normalised in such a way that they primarily produced men as being best suited for positions of leadership.

Although discourses may be practiced through the use of verbal or visual texts, we also assume that the practice of inaction, passivity or silence is a discourse as well. Foucault (1976, p. 27) argues that 'silence itself ... is less the absolute limit of discourse ... than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them with over-all strategies'. Silence can have discursive power when it is part of an effort by directors to disengage from concrete efforts to implement an organisational value such as gender balance (Priola *et al.* 2014).

There may be different ways of being silent or passive about implementing diversity. These discursive practices can include criticism of policies, excuses for non-implementation, and silence or marginal involvement in implementation (Thomas and Plaut 2008, Roos and Zanoni 2018). An analysis of the discourses and related discursive practices including those of silence or passivity by directors may explain how they, while valuing diversity at the organisational level, resist the entry of (more) women in sport governance. We situate this resistance within Foucault's (1972) notion of normalising judgment that he considered to be a technique of power. We explored this resistance to gender balance by conducting a secondary analysis of data collected in studies that examined measures that national and international sport organisations have undertaken to increase the number of women on their boards.

A Bourdieusian perspective suggests that variations in acceptance or rejection of initiatives are largely specific to a sector such as education, government, and sport. These variations may be understood if each sector is seen as a field with its own rules, ways of interacting and regulating, including the acquisition of capital (Bourdieu 1984, Kitchin and Howe 2013, Verloo 2018, Piggott and Pike 2020). This uniqueness of a field means the forms of capital that are generated within it are field specific and related to its habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Habitus consists of 'the relatively durable principles of judgment and practice generated by an actor's early life experiences and modified (to a greater or a lesser degree) later in life' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, p. 4). These

principles can generate symbolic capital that can be used to wield power specific to a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Symbolic capital consists of social, cultural, and economic capitals that have been discursively constructed as legitimate in a specific field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Habitus operates not only on the micro-level, but also on the meso-level of organisations. Organisational habitus constitutes 'the informal, unconscious practices which interact to guide the dispositions of the organisation as a whole' (Kitchin and Howe 2013, p. 129). Since it is based on the power of habitual practice, which is performed without thinking and questioning, organisational habitus 'is most of the time perceived as natural or pre-given' (Tatli 2010, p. 11) due to its historical embeddedness.

Organisational habitus is field-specific (Kitchin and Howe 2013). In a field such as sport, where in general, male versions of the sport are valued more than female versions, a sport history may create an organisational habitus that generates more symbolic capital for male athletes who move on to leadership positions than for female athletes. This gendered hierarchy in capital is constructed as a regime of truth. Piggott and Pike (2020), for example, found gendered organisational practices of two national sport organisations were shaped by the habitus and capital of individual members that assumed a gender hierarchy as a regime of truth. Throughout this paper we show how the entry of more women into sport governance at the national and international levels may be discursively resisted because their habitus and possession of capital in the field are seen as inadequate for the task of governing a sport.

## Methods

The empirical data were gathered through interviews held in conjunction with two projects that focused on the underrepresentation of women in sport governance at national and international levels. In the first project, which was conducted in 2017, boards of governance at national and international levels were selected for the study specifically because they collectively had endorsed the value of gender balance in leadership positions in either their position statements or in newly passed policy measures. Women comprised 41% of these boards. This project (total  $n = 34$ , consisting of 12 women and 22 men) was based on data collected from board members of two national Olympic committees (NOC) ( $n = 9$ ), two national sport federations (NSF) in two countries ( $n = 13$ ), and two international sport federations (ISF) ( $n = 12$ ) (Sotiriadou *et al.* 2017). The second project, conducted in 2018, investigated the efforts of NSFs in one country, the Netherlands, to increase the gender ratio in sport governance at the national level (Claringbould and Van Liere 2019). This project (total  $n = 26$ ) included interviews with board members or directors (11 women and 15 men) from all but two (taekwondo and bobsled) national Olympic sport associations. The researchers conducted telephone interviews with board members and directors of 26 NSFs about the role of gender balance in their board and how they wished to change the gender ratio, if at all. Women comprised 19% of these NSF boards.

The data for both projects were originally generated through face-to-face and telephone interviews with members of these boards. Interviews were topic-based, giving interviewers the possibility to tailor questions to the respondent. Interviewees were asked to describe their experiences with recruitment, selection, the need for diversity on the board in question, and efforts (if any) to attain a gender balance on the board. Elsewhere the authors analysed and reported on ways board members advocated and worked for gender balanced boards (Sotiriadou *et al.* 2017, Claringbould and Van Liere 2019).<sup>2</sup> In the current paper, we conduct a secondary analysis of the combined data from these projects to discover the discursive strategies respondents used to resist implementation of gender balance, especially pertaining to recruitment and selection. Resistance was operationally defined as explanations or reasons given by respondents for not implementing gender balance. Although discursive practices of resistance are complex, contradictory and ambiguous (Mills *et al.* 2004), we present them separately for heuristic and analytical purposes. We acknowledge that discursive practices of resistance overlap, are not fixed and are interrelated and address this issue

in the discussion of the results. We did not engage in a comparative analysis across countries or sport since our aim was to identify discursive practices that may prevent or limit the implementation of measures to increase gender balance in boards of sport governance at the national and international levels. Since our focus was on discursive resources and not on the identities of those involved in the studies, we purposively do not identify the gender of those quoted in the results.

We began the data analysis by listing all the quotes in the data set that signified resistance as defined earlier. We subsequently used axial coding to discern commonalities (labels) in acts of resistance and grouped the data accordingly. We then drew on scholarly literature in sport and outside of sport on gender and governance to further identify discourses that were utilised and labelled them as such. This step focused on publications that added to our understanding of *top-level* discursive resistance to gender balance in sport and non-sport organisations. We integrated these results from the literature into our analysis, especially for answering research question 2. The board members involved in these two studies drew on discourses of: neoliberalism, meritocracy, silence/passivity and diversity. Subsequently, we explored the data analysis and the literature to gain insight into why current board members might resist gender balance and/or measures that may be used to implement that and how these may reflect the uniqueness of sport as a field.

## Results

The discursive resources that the board members used to resist gender balance in sport governance overlapped with those presented by Roos and Zanoni (2018), and therefore were not totally unique to the study. Below we discuss each discourse and the associated discursive practices in turn.

### *Discourse of meritocracy: selective focus on qualifications*

Discursive resistance to the use of gender quotas based on meritocratic discourses has been well documented in the scholarly sport and non-sport literature (Hovden *et al.* 2019). This discursive practice of resistance tends to assume that well-defined and objective qualifications comprise the predominant criterion in the selection of board members and that current board members have been selected primarily on that basis, that is, on the symbolic capital they embody and are assumed to enact. Current board members, primarily male, determine what those qualifications are; these qualifications have become a regime of truth (Foucault 1972) for those engaging in defensive institutional work (Benschop and Van Den Brink 2014, Roos and Zanoni 2018).

Respondents seemed to assume that women who entered a board as part of a quota or under affirmative action practices were unqualified or not as qualified as the men were. The interviewees used rhetoric that suggested that decisions about board members are based on 'gender blind' procedures. For example, an NSF board member contended that 'selection is based on commitment and quality; what you look like and your ethnic background are less relevant'. Similarly, another NSF board member resisted the notion of affirmative action because 'we should never begin [our search for a board member] with the idea it must be a woman; the search should focus on quality and we select someone according to that'. A selection based on having the best qualifications was assumed to be most fair. A board member of a National Olympic Committee (NOC) argued that the use of quotas has a negative influence on motivation: 'We should never have a quota system; no one can feel they are doing their best work if they feel they are being overlooked for someone who is not as good'. The qualifications are not clearly defined however; that is, the board members do not describe which forms of capital are needed and considered legitimate. This lack of clarity about merit can serve as a tool for exclusion. In their investigation of corporate statements on diversity, Ben-Amar *et al.* (2020) found that when these disclosures referred to merit, they tended to be vague and obscure, and thus legitimated the status quo. The discourse of qualifications was not the only



discursive resource, however, that these interviewees drew on to resist an increase in gender balance.

### ***Discourse of neoliberalism: freedom of individuals and organisations***

The interviewees constructed initiatives, including quotas, that were suggested by governing bodies to increase the gender ratio, as curtailing the freedom of individuals and sport organisations to act. Those who resisted gender balance felt no responsibility for the underrepresentation of women board members since all are free to become board members. A board member argued that 'no one is prevented from applying for a position on the board'. This argument is part of the notion of choice and personal responsibility that underpins a neoliberalist discourse (Krook 2016). We note that board membership at the national and international levels of sport is based on selection/appointment and/or election. The resisters contended that policies to increase diversity in leadership positions should emerge organically and not be established in a top-down manner. For example, a board member of an NSF said that any 'changes should develop or emerge from within the organisation'.

Those interviewed argued that sport, including its governance, is a voluntary activity. A volunteer organisation has autonomy in a civil society and cannot or should not be regulated by an outside organisation. Two board members from different sports contended: 'We want to develop our own policies and not let the NOC set targets for us', and 'We already have demands from [our] NOC about good governance that we have to meet; they go too far if they would also give us guidelines for diversity'. It is striking that these board members do not consider the implementation of diversity measures to be part of good governance.

Non-interference by the government or governing bodies in sport organisations has been an issue of contention in voluntary sport organisations that are seen as part of civil society, and in which sport is seen as a field with its own regulations (Dortants *et al.* 2016). Respondents' use of a discourse of autonomy is an example of unconscious practice that guides the disposition of the organisation as a whole (i.e. organisational habitus), and governs the allocation of power positions to men within the organisational context (Tatli 2010). Sport organisations contend that they are free to (not) act and cannot be forced to comply with directives by the national government or NOC about their practices, including diversity measures. International sport federations, moreover, are relatively independent and not directly governed by or accountable to policies of a nation-state or of NOCs. However, they must, often indirectly, contend with external stakeholders such as (but not limited to) corporate sponsors, the media, NSFs, the IOC, and fans (Croci and Forster 2003). Little is known about how those stakeholders construct symbolic capital in ways that may influence compliance with or resistance to the implementation of measures of diversity in sport boards of governance.

Similar to our findings, Roos and Zanoni (2018) found that corporate directors drew on a discourse of freedom or autonomy to justify their inaction. They argued that they were not responsible for gender inequality and that the state did not have the legitimacy to interfere. Ryan and Dickson (2018) contend that such discursive practices are an outcome of neoliberal ideologies. They argue that reliance on such ideologies results in 'a lenient and voluntarist approach to fairness and equity' (Ryan and Dickson 2018, p. 332). This neoliberal approach appears to have shaped attitudes and behaviour regarding the underrepresentation of women in sport governance, often resulting in the use of a discourse of silence/passivity with regard to taking measures to implement diversity.

### ***Discourse of silence/passivity: Structures are responsible***

A Foucauldian analysis means not only uncovering the accepted, common sense discourses but also discursive practices of inaction, of silence. Our respondents constructed various reasons to legitimise their inaction or passive resistance. Although the interviewees positioned themselves as active agents who valued diversity and who looked only at qualifications and being gender blind when

selecting board members, they also constructed themselves as passive victims of societal and sport structures that keep women out and that they as board members were powerless to bring about structural change.

'Family structure' or work-life balance is a common discourse used to explain the underrepresentation of women in administration and management (e.g. Runté and Mills 2004, Hancock and Hums 2016, Kane and LaVoi 2018). Several board members engaged in this discursive practice and explained that societal family structures and cultures mean women care for children and that prevents/hinders women in becoming board members. For example, an international board member argued that women are underrepresented in board membership because they 'carry a lot more of the child caring and household responsibilities. That continues to be the cultural norm in [country]'. A board member of an international sport association told a woman with a young child she would be eligible to be a board member after the child had turned 18. These board members were generally silent about the social privileges they themselves may enjoy because in their personal lives they may have assigned caring and household responsibilities to others. They assign little or no symbolic capital to these caring responsibilities that could contribute to board membership.

The use of this discourse as a way to resist women entering boards has also been used to keep them from gaining high positions and has become a regime of truth (Runté and Mills 2004). Research by Soler *et al.* (2019) has challenged this regime of truth at the local level, however. Women in Catalonia were constructed as ideal chairs of local sport boards because of their perceived ability to care for board members and for those who wished to participate in sport. Board members participating in the current study were passive, however, and did not challenge this work-life balance discourse.

The discursive silence or passivity extended to unwillingness to undertake initiatives to change the structure of sport governance including procedures for appointing/electing board members. A NOC member explained that the current nomination procedure meant women were unable to self-nominate for board membership. A selection procedure was in place that could not be bypassed to appoint women board members. Another board member of an NSF expressed an inability to influence who becomes a board member: 'Candidates for boards of directors are nominated by their regions; more men are active in the various regions than women and therefore, automatically more men become board members'.

Gender balance as an objective tends not to be discussed in recruitment and selection processes in sport boards because these procedures are assumed to be about quality and to be gender neutral (Claringbould and Knoppers 2007, Sotiriadou and De Haan 2019). Subsequently, current male board members tended to select and elect more men to boards using their social capital, as illustrated by the following comments: 'They search in their own networks and those networks consist of primarily men', and 'Men do their best to get more women involved in governing but they [the men] are part of an old boys' network and therefore the board consists mostly of men'. Hovden's (2000) study of board member selection also found that male members searched for potential members in their networks that consisted of colleagues and friends. These findings reflect Bourdieu's (1984) assertion that network membership can generate social capital. Such social capital is necessary if an individual is to achieve board membership at the highest levels in sport (Karaçam and Koca 2019). These networks, however, tend to be overwhelmingly male as the data in the current study and in other studies suggest (e.g. Claringbould and Knoppers 2007, 2008, Welty Peachey *et al.* 2015). These findings not only reflect Bourdieu's (1984) assertion that network membership can generate and reproduce social capital, but also that these ways of doing board membership reproduce organisational habitus in the field of sport governance. Those who are not part of (male) board members' networks and do not have a competitive history in men's sport may have relatively little symbolic capital and therefore few possibilities of being chosen/elected. We note also that the respondents in the current study, all board members, did not seem to recognise their own complicity in maintaining the status quo in these procedures. This



is because, as noted earlier, habitus operates largely at an unconscious level, unless individuals and organisations engage in conversations that critically examine the status quo, which can build reflexivity.

### ***Discourse of diversity: selective valuing of diversity***

Since diversity is a popular organisational value, unsurprisingly the interviewees said they valued it. They sometimes redefined it to include more than gender, suggesting that the inclusion of members from other categories was just as, if not more, important as the inclusion of women, as the following four quotes suggest:

'You want a good board, not just women and men but people from other backgrounds as well.'

'I also would like to have younger board members.'

'We have policies about preferring diversity but not about gender.'

'Other topics are more important.'

These quotes suggest women as a category are not a priority for board membership. Women become a priority only when board members discuss and value diversity in club/sport participants. Board members may construct membership or sport participation, rather than leadership, as a priority when taking on a discourse of diversity. The comments of an NSF board member illustrate this concern or priority: 'Yes, diversity is a current topic, but society is changing, and we must respond to those changes to keep our membership totals high; getting more people to play [our sport] is our priority'. Similarly, a board member concluded that since no one has asked about diversity in sport governance, there is no interest in the matter: 'I've never heard anyone ask about this [more women] at the membership meetings'. This board member seemingly has not internalised the value of diversity as a board value or the role of board members to demonstrate leadership on this issue. Here again, the presence of women on the board of an organisation is not constructed as adding symbolic capital to the board itself. In contrast, the addition of more women participants in a sport, rather than on the board, is seen as a source of economic and human capital.

### ***Justifying resistance to gender balance***

The previous sections provide insight into *how* board members may resist gender balance in sport governance. By evoking the aforementioned discourses and discursive practices, board members may feel they have done enough to increase gender balance or to negate the value of doing so. However, this does not explain *why* some engage in defensive institutional work using normalising judgment (Foucault 1972) and how this may be related to the field of sport and the capitals associated with it. Our data suggest that increased competition for prestigious positions and selection dynamics are at play. We posit that some of the explanations may be common to all boards, but others may be unique to sport as a field especially when it involves board positions at the national and international level.

The number of positions on a board is limited. More women might mean fewer men. Members of international sport boards linked the resistance to women board members to this limitation and the prestige assigned to be a member of an international board: 'Some people are just there because they like the position and feel threatened if you challenge them in any way'. Another said: 'We see more men with ambition in sport governance'. This idea of board membership conveying status on men has been echoed in other research in sport. Hedenborg and Norberg (2019) found that men desired to be members of national and international boards because they wanted the status or symbolic capital they assumed was part of such membership. Although token women may be welcome, the appointment of more women may be constructed as decreasing the number of

opportunities for men and possibly reducing the status of being a board member. There may however, be some exceptions. Another respondent suggested that not only women may be seen as a competitive threat: 'I think the previous president was so dominant that he didn't surround himself with alpha males. . . he surrounded himself with good quality people that weren't after his position. Three of those happened to be women'.

Some of the interviewees noted that there are benefits for men to be a member of a board. Board positions in sport, especially at the national and international levels, were seen as a symbol of desired status or power. An ISF board member explained: 'To be a member of the board of [a NOC], is a coveted position. It looks good on your CV. Men think it gives status . . . they want to prove themselves'. Similarly, an NSF board member observed that 'you see more male board members because of their high aspirations; that is a fact, a matter of self-selection'.

The principle of selection based on discursive meritocracy used to challenge the use of quotas to increase the number of women did not seem to apply here. Some men may become board members because they want a valued position, not necessarily because of their qualification or because of what they could do for their sport: 'They [board members] may not be terribly effective but they value the position they hold. They are not benefiting the sport really. They are trying to benefit their own ego you could say'.

Male board members may not only want to use a position to prove themselves but also use it as a stepping stone to other functions in sport. An ISF board member explained that some men 'use sport [governance] to gain experience as a member before moving on'. A board member of an NSF echoed this as he described how the chair of the board is using the position to move to the international level: 'The chair is putting more time into it [being a board member] because he has international ambitions. He's applying to be a member of the European board'. As the foregoing has suggested, the resistance to more women on a board is complex and may be grounded in discourses of neoliberalism, meritocracy, and passivity, as well being shaped by self-interest/privilege.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The gap between an affirmation of diversity as a desired organisational value and the lack of implementation of measures that result in gender balance in sport governance has multiple explanations, some of which may be unique to or more pronounced in sport. As we indicated previously, we created a taxonomy for heuristic and analytical purposes for our presentation of results. The results reveal that discursive practices of resistance overlap and are interrelated. We therefore discuss the results in ways that emphasise this overlap.

### ***Discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism and silence: selective focus on qualifications***

Although the discourse of meritocracy has been deconstructed in the sport and non-sport scholarly literature, these board members drew on it (e.g. Castilla and Benard 2010, Hovden *et al.* 2019). Incumbents, usually male board members, engaged in normalising judgment (Foucault 1972) to define the qualifications board members must have to be selected and they draw on members of their network to find them (Hovden *et al.* 2019). By emphasising their definitions of qualifications and drawing on their social capital generated by the old boys' network, those who recruit board members select those who have similar qualifications as they do. Roos and Zaroni (2018) argued that this perceived similarity can add to the assumed trustworthiness of incoming board members and thus may contribute to their symbolic capital.

### ***Discourse of neoliberalism and silence: freedom to appoint new members***

Sport organisations and other non-profit organisations are part of civil society and as such, participation in them is assumed to be voluntary. Board membership is also a voluntary activity. The board

members involved in this study therefore, were able to draw on this notion of 'freedom' to resist implementing suggested measures to increase gender balance such as quotas and to blame women for choosing to care for children instead of spending time being a board member. These board members claim they are, or want to remain, free to set their own priorities with respect to diversity. These results are similar to those found by Roos and Zanoni (2018) in their study of resistance of corporate directors to gender balance, as well as to what others have found for sport (Hovden 2010, Claringbould and Knoppers 2012). Obviously, moving towards gender balance at the board level may not be a priority for current members, and instead they may see it as oppositional to their self-interest.

### ***Discourse of diversity: reframing and maintaining male privilege***

Scholars have argued that resistance to gender balance can be triggered by perceptions of diminished privilege or in the status of the job (Benschop and Van Den Brink 2014, Mergaert and Lombardo 2014, Krook 2016). Our findings suggest that, although board members resisted implementing measures to increase gender balance, their talk or speech acts and even their silence/passivity about diversity can still be understood as performing diversity because they underwrite it as an organisational value while they do little to change the status quo. These discursive practices of intent or promise become authoritative because they are repeatedly used. Such speech acts are, however, nonperformative (Ahmed 2012). Ahmed (2012, p. 119) defines nonperformative acts about diversity as acts that 'do not bring into effect that which they name'. By defining diversity in a generic way and/or applying it primarily to sport membership, the board members involved in these studies ostensibly (but selectively) endorsed it.

### ***Defensive institutional work in sport governance***

The erroneously assumed meritocracy and gender blindness in recruitment and selection processes are part of the discursive resistance to the entry of women to all boards (e.g. Roos and Zanoni 2018, Hovden *et al.* 2019), but this resistance may be especially salient to sport as a field. The regime of truth (Foucault 1972) constructed in sport about gender may make resistance to the entry of women board members in the form of defensive institutional work more acceptable in sport governance than in other fields. Although the assumed binary that prevails in sport participation does not formally apply to positions of leadership, women may still be constructed as contributing less symbolic capital than men. We explain and illustrate this argument in the following paragraphs.

The normalisation of a gender hierarchy, in addition to nonperformative speech acts of board members, may be reinforced or strengthened by the athletic history of members of sport boards. The formation of a sport habitus often dates back to an individual's own beginning in sport, often at age five or six, to their history as fan/supporter, coach, administrator, and to their identification with a desired and celebrated sport masculinity (e.g. Matthews 2016, Ryan and Dickson 2018). Specifically, athletes are disciplined into an institutionalised gender discourse that normalises the absence of women from positions of leadership (Messner 1988, Joseph and Anderson 2016). Their habitus and the embodied capital associated with that may dispose both men and women to assume that men are 'naturally' more qualified and better ('stronger') leaders than women. This normative judgment that is used to devalue women in sport may, in part, be embedded in resistance to having more women members on sport boards.

This resistance may also be linked to challenges to organisational habitus. Gregorič *et al.* (2017) suggest resistance occurs or is strengthened among elites when pressure from outside an organisation requires a deinstitutionalisation of practices that were previously seen as a regime of truth. This deinstitutionalisation of male dominance of sport leadership such as recommended by the IOC, may be seen to challenge or threaten the identity of members of the dominant group, specifically, men whose masculine identity is closely aligned with sport. This may mean they are more apt to engage in

defensive institutional work in the field of sport than other fields. Harding *et al.* (2017, p. 1226) have argued that resistance emerges in contexts where self-identity is challenged: 'it may be that some insults to identity are felt so profoundly that they inspire a collective response'. This perceived collective sense of identity, or organisational habitus, may therefore produce a form of resistance that is (unconsciously) collectively produced rather than primarily being an act by individual board members (see also Matthews 2016). This finding is in line with previous research which suggests that 'mismatches between organizational habitus can result in conflict or lead to the marginalization of dominated agents at the behest of the dominant' (Kitchin and Howe 2013, p. 129).

Although the literature cited in this paper suggests that a boardroom is a male enclave in most fields, the assemblage that configures this preserve in sport governance may be specific to the field of sport. Strategies to decrease this resistance may therefore be in part specific to the field where a board is located. This study suggests that policy efforts that attempt to increase gender balance on boards need to pay more attention to why these policies fail or are only partially successful, and especially the ways that insiders of organisations that purport to value diversity may discursively resist measures that might increase gender equity. Further research is needed that explores the discourses surrounding resistance to gender balance and the role that the habitus of members plays in that.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that the concept of diversity often includes many other forms of power relations in addition to gender, such as sexuality, able-ness, race/ethnicity, social class, etc. The findings presented here are based on a secondary analysis of data from two projects that focused specifically on gender diversity and sport governance. The focus of those projects was specifically on gender, in part because sport is formally structured across gender, creating women's and men's sports competitions. Some countries have instituted policy measures such as quotas for women for sport boards. These quotas are often legitimated and based on the percentage of women participating in a sport (Hovden *et al.* 2019). We do not have information about the (intersectional) demographic diversity of each of the boards represented in the two studies and how that reflects definitions of categorical diversity in a specific country.

<sup>2</sup> One of the current authors was involved in project 1 and another in project 2.

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