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Norwegian handball and gender Towards a cultural sociology of sport

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List of articles

Article #1

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Article #2

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Article #3

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Article #4

Broch, T. B. (under review). The Cultural Significance of a *Smile*: An ethnographic account of how sport media inspires youth sport. *Nordic Journal of Youth Research (Young)*.

1.0. BACKDROP	1
1.1. EMPIRICAL SENSIBILITIES	2
1.2. THEORETICAL SENSIBILITIES	3
1.3. WITH CULTURE AS PERSPECTIVE	4
2.0. CONTEXT	6
2.1. CONTEMPORARY NORWAY	6
2.2. NORWEGIAN TEAM HANDBALL	8
3.0. PRIOR RESEARCH	11
3.1. SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT	11
3.1.1. Sport sociological research on sport praxis and gender	12
3.1.2. Sport sociological research on sport media and gender	15
3.2. THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SPORT	17
3.3. CONCLUDING REMARKS	19
4.0 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES	20
4.1. THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER	20
4.1.1. West and Zimmerman: doing gender	22
4.1.2. Nancy Chodorow: the psychodynamics of gender	24
4.1.3. R.W. Connell: Gender, power and social structure	26
4.1.4. Concluding remarks	28
4.2. CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY	29
4.2.1. Reconceptualizing culture	30
4.2.2. Alexander and Smith: the strong program	33
4.2.3. Ann Swidler: repertoire theory	35
4.2.4. Concluding remarks	37
5.0. EPISTEMOLOGY	39
5.1. THICK DESCRIPTION	41
5.2. HERMENEUTICS	43
5.3. THICK MESO-LEVEL DESCRIPTION	44
6.0. SAMPLE AND METHODS	47
6.1. FOUR EMPIRICAL LENSES	47
6.2. COLLECTING, ORGANIZING AND ANALYZING MEDIA DATA	48
6.3. COLLECTING, ORGANIZING AND ANALYZING FIELD DATA	50
6.4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	53
6.5. JUDGMENT CRITERIA AND LIMITATIONS	54
7.0. ARTICLES	57
7.1. ARTICLE #1 AND #2	57
7.2. ARTICLE #3 AND #4	59
8.0. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION	62
8.1. SO WHAT?	64
9.0. REFERENCES	66
10.0. NOTES	92
11.0. APPENDIXES	98

1.0. Backdrop

This project highlights how we understand sports and how these understandings are shaped by and shape gender. The empirical focus is directed at televised elite handball and practiced youth handball in Norway. Grounded in these empirical specificities, I elucidate a set of underlying cultural processes that are unlikely to be unique to this sport and setting. Focusing culture in this manner reveals how conceptions of handball are structured by a code and how this code constrains and permits gendered innovation in sport and society.

The analytic torque is provided by the use of a cultural sociological perspective. Spillman (2007) defines culture as processes of meaning-making and advocates that:

Cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens, why meaning vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination and resistance (Spillman, 2002, p. 1).

This project concerns meaning-making, sport and gender. I treat each of these concepts in distinct ways, with particular analytic priorities that require some clarification. Meaning-making in and by way of sports is the primary focus. Secondly, the investigation sheds light on how gender is mobilized to shape particular salient interpretations of sport. Third, I pose the question of how conceptions of gender are reshaped in sport-related contexts. From the former to the latter, this is also how purchase to my distinct analytic interests is made. A preoccupation with meaning-making through sports has persuaded a principal use of *culture as perspective*. This involves a meticulously hermeneutic approach that highlights the meaningful dimensions of contemporary Norwegian sport. Nevertheless, gender research and theory remain significant resources for interpretations of how, why and what happens when sport as a cultural phenomenon intersects with the social force of gender.

For a long time, sociologists with diverse disciplinary interests have analyzed culture as a soft and dependent variable through which topical ideologies and macro-structural inequalities (such as neo-liberal capitalism, gender, class and race) can be manifested. Conversely, culture can also be used *as a perspective*. Culture then becomes an independent variable with its own internal logics and relations – a context in which competent actors strategically mobilize and reshape ideologies and inequalities. This perspective emerged 25 years ago and is now institutionalized in North American sociology (Spillman, 2008). In Norway, this perspective has recently been termed *the new cultural sociology* (Larsen, 2013).

In relation to sport studies, *culture as perspective* is irretrievable in most of the North American and international sociology of sport journals.¹

It is fair to say that ‘culture’ is not a new concept in sociology. Increased dialogues across the social sciences and humanities, a *cultural turn* (Hall, Grindstaff, & Lo, 2012), have prompted many social scientists to assert that their favorite theories concern both meaning and culture. Contemporary work in comparative-historical, political and gender sociology have adopted cultural perspectives (Jacobs & Spillman, 2005). For instance, gender is explored as the meaningful product of an individual-culture dialectic (Chodorow, 1995), as a societal structure that conditions cultural life and meaning (Messerschmidt, 2012), and as a cultural praxis that conditions social structures (West & Zimmerman, 1987; 2009). Gender, as a social structure and as meaning, is *embedded in culture* (Lorber, 1994; 2000). Given that this project concerns gendered meaning-making, why then push the use of a cultural perspective inspired by gendered sensibilities as opposed to a gender perspective inspired by cultural sensibilities? The answer to this question is twofold and concerns my empirical and theoretical sensibilities.

1.1. Empirical sensibilities

I have explored the sport of team handball. In Norway, handball on a national level foremost constitutes a women’s sport: 2/3 of active players are female and the national women’s team outranks the men’s team in popularity and international merit. The women’s team participates in international championships every year, and averages approximately one million viewers in a country of 5 million inhabitants. Women dominate the field of play, the definition of the game and its representations in the media. I therefore wanted to explore how Norwegian journalists portray men’s handball. Live game commentaries of men’s handball were thus recorded and transcribed. A ‘*gender as perspective*’ analysis revealed a discursive emphasis on an aggressive and violent form of masculinity. I argued that this representation resolved any conceptual tensions that might arise from men playing a women’s sport. It was emphasized as a temporal resolution, in the moment of mediation (Broch, 2012).

The project moved on to explore televised women’s handball. These commentaries were so similar to those accompanying men’s handball that the analytic status of the project had to be revised. It now seemed plausible to assume that analysis was exposing a set of discursive characteristics of handball. This insight refocused the project, leading to speculation on, as well as structuring and analysis of the small differences and many similarities of the two broadcasts. Sameness became as interesting as how it was that the

depictions might reflect societal inequalities. With *culture as perspective* similarities could be structured as revolving around a discursive culture-structure: the stakes of the game. Differences could be conceptualized as the commentators' creative accounts of how handball and gender interrelate. Representations of women's handball convey images of powerful female bodies that successfully manage the combative game and socio-cultural gender norms (Broch, 2014).

Throughout the remaining project, the cultural perspective was pursued. It was well suited to an inquiry that evolved into an implicit comparative study of handball as played by women and men, as well as boys and girls. In its second phase, the project was relocated to a Norwegian handball arena where I conducted participant observations of boys' and girls' handball praxis. Observations strengthened the analytic hunch that gender subtly matters and that its relevance in handball interlocks with a culture structure that cuts across the sex binary. A cultural account of youth handball praxis revealed that gender did not occur as a forced reproduction or challenge of socio-structural inequalities. Rather, gender was brought to bear through processes of structured meaning-making. Social actors thus forcefully embraced, humorously distanced, and objected in no uncertain terms to the gendered meanings put forth by coaches, parents and youth. Gender was an important resource for evaluation, amusement and inspiration at the arena. Cultural processes of meaning-making made for powerful mechanisms that put gender in play.

1.2. Theoretical sensibilities

This project involves an accumulative process of four discrete empirical resources, distinctively gathered via two different methods of enquiry, and with four separate stages of analysis. I have therefore progressed rather bumpily through the different stages of empirical and theoretical reasoning. Quite a few attempts to combine and reject theoretical frameworks have been made. Varied inspiration from a range of persons in a variety of academic milieus has been cherished, but not always easily balanced. The result has been a conceptual move from using gender as perspective to the use of culture as perspective. *Gender as perspective* signifies research agendas that in diverse ways primarily analyze empirical observations by employing and developing gender and feminist theory. Similarly, *culture as perspective* signifies research agendas that in diverse ways primarily analyze empirical observations by employing and developing cultural theory.²

Cultural sociologists challenge conceptualizations of culture as something to be “explained away” by something else entirely. Instead, they use hermeneutic techniques, more

common to the humanities, in order to focus on how culture is structured by meaning and how meaning influences action and social processes. By also advocating explorative combinations of anthropology and sociology, they have turned culture into an analytic perspective stressing why it is that culture is worthy of analysis on its own terms (Alexander, 2003; Spillman, 2002). In this project, meaning-making in relation to handball is not “explained away” by macro-structural inequalities such as gender. Journalists’ comments and youth handball praxis are treated as being worthy of analysis on their own terms. My focus is analytic, and not ameliorative. This effort reveals how and why journalists’ and handballers’ contextual meaning-making is shaped by and reshapes broadly available meaning. I follow Larsen (2013) and Spillman (2002), who argue that by using culture as perspective, topical investigations evolve into cultural sociology.

1.3. With culture as perspective

In this sociological investigation of sport, I analyze when, why and how gender as a social impetus intersects with the cultural praxis of handball. The cultural perspective has motivated observations of more than gender in the empirical strands. It has made me conscious of the means by which macro-models of gender mask empirical nuance. It has urged accounts of culture-structured environments where practices and interpretations can achieve gendered significances. I do not treat subjects as cultural dupes or negotiators of omnipresent and saturating macro-social inequalities. Rather, this project accentuates how competent social actors are inspired by, creatively mobilize, use, and reshape socio-cultural conceptions of sport and gender. For heuristic reasons, *culture comes first*, and *gender comes second*.

Two comparative streams flow through this study. Empirically: media representations of elite sports and practiced youth sports. Theoretically: culture as meaning-making and gender as a power relation. The first two articles, *Masculine men playing a women’s sport* and *Smiles and laughs all teeth intact*, concern Norwegian live commentaries on international men’s and women’s handball. The first analysis explores men’s handball and how it is that gender dynamics supposedly influence the cultural dynamics of handball. On the flipside, the second analysis explores women’s handball and how handball’s cultural dynamics supposedly influence gender dynamics. In combination, they offer understandings as to how gendered and cultural perspectives can afford contrasting analytic results. The last two articles of the project, *What can Al Pacino teach Norwegian youth?* and *The cultural significance of a smile*, respectively examine the experiences of the young Norwegian boys and girls who practice handball. The first article investigates how a Hollywood script is used

by the boys' coach to shape and build a particular team culture, and how ritual dynamics allow social actors to embrace and/or distance this culture's subtly-gendered ramifications. The last article reveals how the girls' coaches use idolized media representations of women handballers in order to shape idealized expressions of team culture. This article exposes how the media inspires contextual pragmatics, and how pragmatic intents shape and reshape notions of gender. Combined, these two articles reveal how sport media is used during youth sport practices. I emphasize how competent actors mobilize these representations in order to shape specific strategies of action.

In the lead up to the articles, I first familiarize relevant aspects of the field of inquiry: contemporary Norway and Norwegian handball. Following this, relevant research from the fields of sport sociology and sport anthropology is introduced. The outline of empirical research also delineates two theoretical lines of thought that have informed the project: culture as a dependent variable, and culture as an independent variable. This theoretical tension is further discussed by assessing current trends in theories of gender and cultural sociology. The theory chapter further discloses how it is that this project evolved from the primary use of gender theory to the ensuing application of a cultural sociological perspective. The chapter concludes with a series of research questions before I outline the epistemological inspirations and expose the methods applied in the project. To conclude this introduction, I attempt to apply some broad brush strokes, thus hopefully shedding a slightly different light on the four articles.

2.0. Context

Sport as a cultural phenomenon is both shaped by, and shapes, its surroundings. If we take this to be a commonsensical and analytic truth, then sports studies can reveal the how, when and whys of conservative and progressive ideas in society – in terms of their remodeling, and synthesizing of, or divergence in and through sport cultures. Journalist Sæther (2007) appeals to our sociological imagination:

The Norwegian handball girls are, along with Grete Waitz³, the most powerful symbolic representation of a new and gender equal Norwegian society.

First of all, Sæther situates sports in society. Despite the fact that handball and marathons are performed at arenas and on closed roads, their rules and cultural organization are not isolated from broad society. Sporting heroines are not only positioned within, but also invested with the power of representing a contemporary Norway. Second, the journalist alludes to the cultural power of symbols and rituals, namely, to these heroines' embodied capacity to shape something greater than their mere corporeal materiality – Norwegian gender relations. This dialectic between societies and embodied culture makes sport an interesting topic for social analysis.

2.1. Contemporary Norway

As a constitutive element of contemporary Norway, Gullestad (2001) highlights the binary code of *sameness*. The tacit oppositions of *sameness* include difference, hierarchy and diversity. Only the notion of diversity carries positive connotations in Norway.

Simultaneously, *sameness* is interlinked with independence, home, nation, safety, nature, peace and harmony. This binary logic structures dominant conceptions of Norwegian society and its various models of organization (Gullestad, 2001). In Norwegian sports, frictions between democratic inclusive ideals of sameness and the meritocratic exclusionary logic of competition create extensive paradoxes and dilemmas (Henningsen, 2001; Säfvenbom, Geldhof, & Haugen, 2013; Skille, 2011). Subsequently, a focus on sameness provides considerable analytic potential, as it exposes both the ambiguity as well as the paradoxes inherent in multiple Norwegian realms (Lien, Lidén, & Vike, 2001).

About forty years ago, Norway struck oil and began its contemporary “oil-adventure”. In 2009 Norway became the fifth largest exporter of oil in the world. Huge incomes from this

industry contributed to vast expansions in the public sector, to the construction of the welfare state, to high rates of employment and to an increase in wages (Schieffloe, 2012).⁴ Vike (2001) argues that the welfare state not only allowed for material sameness, but also a linguistic undermining of difference as ‘deviance’ and sameness as ‘normality’. In terms of gender, Norway, along with Iceland, Sweden and Finland, is regarded as being the best country in the world for women to live in.⁵ Norwegian women are rated as global leaders by virtue of the power and influence they wield in their own society (Birkelund & Petersen, 2012). The welfare state’s institutionalized notions of sameness, and of equal rights and opportunities, are important aspects of many cultural practices that occur in contemporary Norwegian life (Lien et al., 2001; Frønes & Kjølørød, 2010) and Norwegian sports culture (Henningsen, 2001; Breivik, 2013).

Parallel to the development of the welfare state, expenditure devoted to sport and leisure increased exponentially (Breivik, 2013). Norwegian sports as an ideological force, providing elite athlete exemplars and a “healthy organization” of children’s leisure time, have received considerable sums from the state treasury by virtue of their promoting sameness (Breivik, 2011; 2013; Loland, 2011; Henningsen, 2001).⁶ As a result of debates and changes in Norway, even organized sports have stressed and developed gendered sameness (Skirstad, 2009). These gender relations have contributed to the appearance of women in most arenas of physical activity (Breivik, 2013; Goksøyr, 2008). From 1951 to 2006, the percentage of female memberships in The Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) almost doubled and by 2012 amounted to 40 percent (Fasting & Sand, 2009).⁷

Nevertheless, this progression to sameness in sport and society also masks certain paradoxes and power relations (Gullestad, 2001). Norway has the greatest gender-segregated employment market among the OECD-countries (Birkelund & Petersen, 2012; Holst, 2009).⁸ Although Norwegian men no longer monopolize power positions in the public sector, and even though gender differences in higher education are low, many of the most demanding and least-rewarded jobs are still done by women (Vike, 2001).⁹ In sports, female memberships vary from 7,4 percent in the Hockey Federation, 28.8 percent in the Football [soccer] Federation, 40,5 percent in the Ski Federation, 69.2 in the Handball Federation and 87,7 percent in the Equestrian Federation (Fasting, Sand, Sisjord, Thoresen, & Broch, 2008). Women were long denied participation in ski jump and are absent from the sport Nordic Combined (Goksøyr, 2008). There is a scarcity of female leaders in Norwegian elite sports (Hovden, 2010), and social stigma has led to the ridicule and bullying of female soccer players and wrestlers (Fasting, 2000; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). The journalistic depiction

cited above – of Norwegian handball girls as powerful symbolic embodiments of a new and gender-equal Norwegian society – are, in other words, somewhat paradoxical.

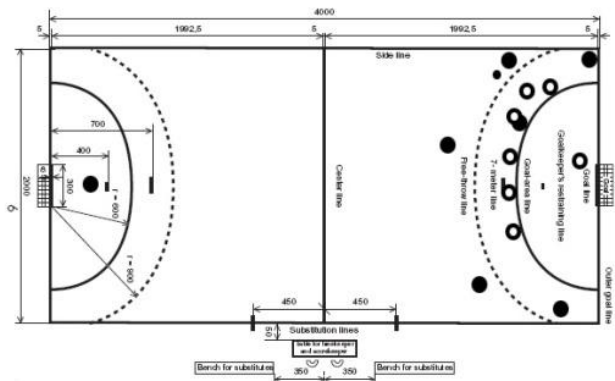
2.2. Norwegian team handball

Both Germans and Danes have made claims to the descent of handball. Lippe (1997) argues that while Germany led the international organization and standardization of the game, the modern seven-player version of handball originates from Denmark. The history of handball, as narrated by Lippe (1997), was typified by numerous attempts made by men to alter the rules, rendering the game more attractive to the male sex. From 1917, up until the 1920s, the sport was characterized by “an absence” of bodily contact. In Germany, around the 1920s, the men’s game was reconfigured to contain some of the combative elements of today’s game. Handball could thus become legitimized as a “masculine” game, keeping German soldiers fighting-fit. Rule changes, argues Lippe (1997), rendered German handball a man’s game, dominated by male participants.

In Norway, the game was foremost introduced under the influence of Danes and Swedes (Ronglan, 2008b). In 1937, the Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF) was founded and the game soon became popular, in particular for Norwegian women. Whilst men dominated in the roles of organizational managers, coaches and referees, women made up two thirds of the active participants (Lippe, 1997; 2001). As a game denuded of bodily contact, handball did not attract Norwegian men who, according to Lippe, preferred soccer. The first domestic handball game was played in 1946 by Norwegian women, in front of about ten thousand spectators (Lippe, 1997; Ronglan, 2008b). After 1948, when bodily contact was permitted, Norwegian men and women handballers were constantly compared to Swedish handballers; Norway’s “arch nemesis” in all sport competitions. The Norwegian men were outplayed, but Norwegian women competed fiercely with the Swedes. Lippe argues that this is the reason the women were favored by the Norwegian press. In 1939, a male journalist described handball as a delicious women’s sport; uniting grace, power, speed and team spirit – and its growth was thereby natural (Lippe, 2001, p. 68).

Today, handball remains a relatively little-known sport globally, and is primarily played in European and some Asian countries (Agergaard, 2008). Consequently, handball is sometimes mistaken for its North American namesake.¹⁰ According to the International Handball Federation (IHF), handball, or European handball, even called ‘team handball’, is a fast-paced game involving two teams of seven players. Participants pass, throw, catch and dribble a small ball with their hands while trying to score goals.¹¹ A handball game is

comprised of two halves, with a 10-minute half-time break. Youths aged 13-14 play 20-minute halves, youths aged 15-18 play 25-minute halves, and adults play 30-minute halves. The playing court is an approximately 131(40m) x 66 (20m) foot rectangle. The court consists of two goal areas, with a



playing area in between. Much like other invasion sports, such as hockey and soccer, there are defending, transitional and attacking phases of the game. Goalies are for the most part restricted to operating within the goal area, and to defending the net. On the other side of the goal-area line, the defence is organized and spread out in order to control the defensive half of the court (usually in close proximity to the goal-area line). Defenders are not allowed to tackle from behind, and consequently attempt to keep in front of attackers, in order to deny easily-delivered shots or any attempts to jump into the goal area. This is achieved by using the chest to tackle and the arms to lock down attempted shots. Currently, the game has developed into a power and performance sport (see Coakley, 2009), in which participants quickly learn that they are evaluated in terms of their ability to use violence, in combination with their physical skills.

While there are local examples in which handball is dominated by active boys and men (Ronglan, 2008b), the game is primarily and nationally dominated by - as well as understood to be - a women's sport in Norway (Goksøyr, 2008; 2010; Lippe, 1997; 2001; 2010). In 1986, the Norwegian women's team won a bronze medal at the World Championships, and made their decisive breakthrough in the Norwegian media. On October 13th of 1997, a Norwegian elite-level coach commenting on his Danish import player Anja Andersen said she "is not only the world's best female handballer; there is not a man in the world who shoots the ball better or with more versatility" (in Lippe, 2001). From the 1990's until today, boy handballers have idolized stars from the women's national team (Broch, 1995; Kristiansen & Broch, 2013). In a country of only 5 million inhabitants, between 1,3 and 1,5 million Norwegians watched the immensely successful women's team's international finals from 1997 through 2006 (Ronglan, 2008a).¹² In 2011, four televised international women's matches made it into the all-time top-ten viewer ratings on Norwegian television

channel TV2, irrespective of genre. The 2011 match between Norway and France had the highest viewer rating in the history of the channel.

In the next chapters, I will outline the primary assumption of sport sociology that deems sport to be a male preserve and sport sociologists' subsequent use of gender and feminist theory in order to highlight how patriarchy is omnipresent, challenged or reproduced in sport (Birrell, 2002). However, the above sketch makes it seem fairly reasonable to speculate on whether male domination is a straight-forward case in Norwegian handball. In 2014, active female athletes still make up two thirds of the NHF. It also appears sensible that contemporary Norwegian sports might be surrounded by, and equally constrained by, their paradoxes of sameness as by their patriarchal structure of difference. Even if this may not be the case, perhaps it is time to approach sport in society with a set of new research questions?

3.0. Prior research

This review, as any other, is far from exhaustive. I am first and foremost concerned with how researchers have documented sport praxis as gendered, in addition to being concerned with the manner in which researchers have analyzed the media's gendered representations of sports. Importantly, this outline also shows *how* both the sociologists' and anthropologists' disciplinary histories have impacted their analytic ambitions and results. In sociology, *culture* has often signified particular objects, symbols, meanings and values in particular locations and analysis has focused how these specificities "mirror" society. In anthropology, *culture* has often signified the "whole way of life" of a people, and analysis focuses on how part-whole elements meaningfully coexist within a culture (see Spillman, 2002; 2007). In my project, both strands of research have provided a great deal of inspiration. Combining and contrasting the two has provided the project with direction and analytical thrust. A brief outline of the sociology of sport opens this chapter.

3.1. Sociology of sport

In the *Handbook of Sports Studies*, Coakley and Dunning (2002, p. xxi) assert that whilst a wide range of social scientific studies on sport had proliferated at the end of the twentieth century, it is in fact the sociology of sport that is "the largest and best established of the subdisciplines in the area". Even though anthropologists, geographers, economists, philosophers and psychologists have made an impact in the field, it was the sociology of sport that first emerged in an institutionalized form. According to Coakley and Dunning, the process of institutionalization evolved through six stages. First, through the ongoing process and initial emergence of modern sports, that can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Second, during the mid-1960s, the need for socially scientific perspectives was recognized by teachers of physical education. Third, sport as a significant part of societies was recognized by prominent sociologists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Norbert Elias. Fourth, as part of the 1960s' university expansion, new publication outlets were needed, and *the International Review of Sport Sociology* was created. Fifth, a new momentum was gained through the 1960s and early 1970s, when left-oriented 'radical' forms of thinking and acting encouraged the spread of sociology. Sociology revealed and broke down social inequalities in science, law, arts, education, sports and beyond. Sixth, East-West struggles throughout the 1940s-1980s created a perceived need to understand global power relations, and what part sports played in these relations. Coakley and Dunning (2002, p. xxix) also note another significant change and impact in the sub-field of sport sociology:

during the late 1970s and early 1980s [...] neo-Marxist, feminist and Marxist-feminist scholars became increasingly vocal and powerful, if not hegemonic, figures within the sociology of sport. As they grew more influential there was an associated change in the dominant professional self-image among sociologists of sport. Rather than seeing themselves as technocratic servants of sports-forms which they uncritically accepted as ‘good’. Many began to see themselves as critics whose principle goal was to use research and action to ‘purify’ the ‘pathological’ sport-forms produced under capitalism. [...] Sociologists of sport today continue to have variants of both these self-images but, if we are right, the ‘critics’ have come to outnumber the ‘technocrats’.

Norwegian sport sociologist Ronglan (2011) elaborates this review, and argues that functionalism was “replaced” by a critical and an interactional tradition. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, perspectives in feminist and cultural studies became increasingly dominant, and stressed how sports are created through interaction and confrontation. Fasting and Sisjord (2002, p. 551) assert that these Anglo-American traditions have dominated Norwegian research perspectives and aims. In Norway and Europe, significant influences from Bourdieu, Giddens, Luhmann and Foucault have also offered inspiration (Fasting & Sisjord, 2002; Ronglan, 2011). Nevertheless, Anglo-American and Norwegian sport sociology have progressed in a similar fashion. The search for knowledge in the sociology of sport has been “hands-on” and aimed at “the *real* world of sports and games, and at increasing our ability to make practical interventions in that world” (Coakley & Dunning, 2002, p. xxxi).

3.1.1. Sport sociological research on sport praxis and gender

“The study of gender and sport is one of the most dynamic and important areas within the sociology of sport”, internationally (Theberge, 2002, p. 331) and in the Nordic countries (Fasting & Sisjord, 2002). Nevertheless, Coakley argues that gender relations in sport are impossible to understand without ‘critical’ analyses of how they interlock with macro gender-relations: gender equity in sports is integrally tied to ideological and cultural issues (Coakley, 2009). Consequently, Theberge argues that sport sociologists’ work on gender relations has:

focused heavily on the contribution of sport to gender relations and the construction of gender ideologies. The key issues discussed are the manner in

which sport reproduces or challenges hegemonic masculinity and the social conditions that underline and enable these processes (Theberge, 2002, p. 331).

Hegemonic masculinity, as the cultural reproduction and reflection of societal patriarchy (Connell, 1987; 2005), was embraced by sport researchers such as Messner and Sabo (1992). Also Bourdieu and Foucault, through notions of *doxa* and *discourse*, have inspired analyses that manifest how that which is culturally taken for granted interlocks with societal power relations. Norwegian gender and sport researchers have argued on a general basis that central values and norms in society correspond with central values and norms in sport. They conclude that sport mirrors society and normalizes the perception of “masculine” values and norms as being superior to “feminine” values and norms (Fasting, 1998; 2011; Hovden, 2010; 2011). In other words, they reveal how the social structure of gender corresponds to cultural and mental structures of sport and sporting agents. The social reproduction of gender can respectfully be manifested in Norwegian sports cultures through the Bourdieusian concept of *doxa* (Lippe, 1997; Sisjord, 2009) and the Connellist concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Lippe, 2010; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; 2009). For these researchers, doing sport is synonymous with doing gender; athletes challenge, or reproduce, gendered stereotypes (Fasting, Pfister, & Scraton, 2004). This is a symptomatic trend in both the Norwegian and international research on sport and gender.

Since the 1970s, there has been a massive increase of girls and women in a variety of sports. The sheer exclusion of women has thus been replaced by more complicated processes of structural, cultural, and interactional inequalities (Hovden, 2010; Messner, 2002). Research documents how male contact sports often culturally reproduce (Messner & Sabo, 1994; Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Theberge, 2002), but sometimes also challenge hegemonic masculinity (Coad, 2008; Light, 2007). Messner (2011) has mapped processes of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic gender ideologies in sport. He argues that a hard-essentialism has been replaced by a soft-essentialism that appropriates liberal, feminist language and naturalizes class-based gender inequalities (Messner, 2011). This emergent ideology, he argues, is bolstered by media and the increased popularity of men’s combat sports that:

in the face of women’s increasing emergence as athletes, glorified images of massively built and violent male bodies may help erase or at least mitigate the extent to which women’s increasing athleticism reveals a continuum of difference (Messner, 2013, p. 120).

In contrast to men's sports, female athletes entering the masculine sport field have often been analyzed as negotiating valorized sport masculinity and compulsory femininity (Bäckström, 2013; Thorpe, 2008; 2009; 2010; Cooky, 2006; Theberge, 2000). Daniels (2009) argues that the confines of heterosexual femininity have, in fact, increased in later years. Women who like sports, she argues, "are considered to be masculine, and their identifying physical attributes [are considered] as unattractive or negative" (Daniels, 2009, p. 85). Others reveal female athletes as infantilized, sexualized and ridiculed (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008; 2009), and in need to act out a 'female apologetic' that complies with heteronormativity (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009). In the eyes of these researchers, women entering sport create a double-bind gendered dynamic. This cyclic process is well explained by Theberge (2000, p. 158) in her ethnographic account of the women hockey team *Blades*:

The Blades constitute a meaningful and powerful challenge to the masculine preserve of sport and ideological construction of gender. In making place for women in hockey, however, the Blades accommodate those very interests they challenge on the ice.

Female bodies entering the world of sport challenge the domination of men bodies. However, women entering sport simply reproduce and valorize the cultural ideals that have been created by and for men – those of *hegemonic masculinity*. Under the title *Athletic intruders*, Bolin and Granskog (2003) edit an anthology of ethnographic research on unapologetic female negotiators of gender. Wachs (2003) explores co-ed softball as a microcosm shaped by ideologies of competition and gender, which create a myriad of negotiations that simultaneously reproduce and challenge socio-cultural gender relations. Markula (2003) presents a Foucauldian analysis of a discursive power (comprised of political, economic and gendered forces in society) embedded in aerobic praxis. This force, Markula explains, creates contradictory beliefs in women to simultaneously desire and resist degrading and sexualized body ideals. Dworkin (2003) reveals how heteronormativity and gender/power –relations keep women from lifting weights. Even though they know about the benefits of being strong, they refrain from weight-training by dint of hegemonic masculinity. Drawing on Lorber (2000) and Deutsch (2007), Sterk and Knoppers (2009) thus advocate that humanity, rather than femininity and masculinity, should serve as the organizing principle for sports, physical cultures and society. They claim that gender needs to be undone.

Others have called for perspectives that treat research subjects as competent actors, as opposed to negotiators of social macro-structure. They empirically argue that women and girl athletes' negotiation of gender is far less prominent today, as contemporary girlhood incorporates the "masculine" qualities of competitiveness and athleticism (Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010; Strandbu & Hegna, 2006; Strandbu, 2005a; 2005b). Funberg (2003) eloquently combines Connell (1987; 2005b) and Geertz's (1973e) notion of thick description, to argue that Swedish boy soccer exists within a culturally autonomous realm. He argues, in contrast to the above research trend, that soccer is practiced in a separate space that allows the creation of a hegemonic masculinity that is not hegemonic in Swedish society at large.

3.1.2. Sport sociological research on sport media and gender

Media sports and sport stars hold a highly visible and influential position in many societies (Whannel, 2002a). Andrews and Jackson (2001) note that sport celebrities are identifiable in three regards. They are the upshot of a fundamentally meritocratic culture that values and evaluates continuous performative excellence. Their praxis can at times gather "a whole nation" in a shared interest. Spectators often perceive sporting celebrities as "real" individuals participating in unpredictable contests. When mediated sports and sport celebrities - as embodiments of sport cultures - are put under a gendered analytic lens we find the general trend to be very similar to what has been mapped above. Representations of sports bolsters "a social practice [that] serves to demarcate gender distinctions" (Whannel, 2004, p. 298). Norwegian sport and media researchers (Dahlén, 2008a; Lippe, 2010), and scholars elsewhere (Bruce, 2013; Connell, 2000; Kimmel, 2007; 2008), have documented and argued that the sport media thus have pervasive gendered implications in contemporary western societies. Televised sport in the U.S.A. presents a *televised sports manhood formula*:

The sport/media/commercial complex appears to be predicated on boys accepting – indeed glorifying and celebrating – a set of bodily and relational practices that resist and oppose a view of women as fully human and place boys' and men's long-term health prospects in jeopardy (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000, p. 392).

Sport media showcase and privilege the hegemonic masculine male athlete and his symbolic image as the sacrificial warrior athlete (Gee, 2009; Messner, 2013; Trujillo, 1995; Whannel, 2002b). Anderson and Kian (2012) document an increased awareness in media of

sport injuries and concussions. They argue that this trend now allows prominent athletes to distance themselves from the televised ideal of self-sacrifice in sports. They claim that there has occurred a “softening of American masculinity”. Nevertheless, Messner (2013) wraps up prior research on men, masculinities and the media by highlighting sport as a “male preserve”. He holds Davis’s (2004) classic 1997 study of the *Sport Illustrated* “swimsuit issue”, Messner and Montez de Oca’s (2005) study of Superbowl ads, and Nylund’s (2007) study of sports talk radio shows to be contemporary documents of this patriarchal realm. Messner concurs with Sabo, Gray and Moore’s (2000) interview study of women who had been physically abused by their male partner shortly after the men watched televised sports:

This kind of study begins to give researchers and activists a handle on what the links might be between a man’s act of violence against a woman partner, with his acts of viewing violent sports, drinking alcohol, and gambling on sports (Messner, 2013, p. 118).

Although female participation in sport has exploded, women are vastly underrepresented in the media (Bernstein, 2002). The U.S. coverage of women’s sport today is at its lowest ever: 1.3% in televised news and in coverage by the ESPN *SportCenter* (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). When women athletes do appear in the media, Brookes (2002) argues that depictions are intertwined with traditionalist ideologies of a heterosexual family and motherhood. Media sports, seemingly, reproduce and spread patriarchal values throughout society. “Hundreds of studies” have shown that the sport media generally devote more coverage to male athletes because of the “hegemonic masculine cultural and organizational structure” that permeates sport organizations and media outlets (Bernstein & Kian, 2013, p. 319). Lippe (2010) defines Norwegian sport journalism as “a dominant masculine exposure industry” consisting of 92% men. In Scandinavia, between 2001 and 2002, 8% of newspaper sports covered women sports, 80 % men’s sport, and 12% concerned both genders (Lippe, 2010). Bruce (2013, p. 128) wraps up the research field on communication, sport, women and femininities as follows:

Despite being framed by diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, research on gender provides ample evidence that mediasport is an overwhelmingly male and hegemonically masculine domain that produces coverage *by* men, *for* men and *about* men. More particularly, mediasport

valorizes elite, able-bodied, heterosexual, and professional sportsmen, especially those who bring glory to the nation.

Both Messner (2013) and Bruce (2013) acknowledge recent studies that reveal a decline in the disrespectful trivialization and sexualization of women athletes – they both still choose to present reviews such as those cited above. MacKay and Dallaire (2009) reveal the campus newspaper coverage of male and female athletes as almost free of gender bias. Lippe (in press) documents gendered, ambivalent, contradictory and non-gendered representations of the Norwegian women’s handball team. Media representations of the Olympic Games have been analyzed as gender equal (Capranica & Aversa, 2002; King, 2007), most notably where national identity and gender intersects (Vincent & Crossman, 2012). Heywood & Dworkin (2003) argue that while second-wave feminists, reducible to a women/victim and men/oppressor binary model, have revealed subordinated images of women athletes (as exemplified above), third-wave inspired feminism has revealed powerful women who “love to kick butt”. These researchers argue that contradictory cultural forces objectify, valorize, destroy and empower female bodies (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Lippe, 2010; Dahlén, 2008b; Vincent & Crossman, 2012). Dahlén (2012b) documents how Swedish journalists depicted the men’s 2002 Olympic hockey team’s failure, even taunting them with reference to the success of the bronze-winning women’s team. Dahlén contextualizes this gender analysis as part of a “geopolitics” of failure whereby journalists imbue sporting fiascos with gendered, national and global meanings simultaneously. Jackson and colleagues have explored how masculinity, corporate nationalism and consumerism intertwine in (re)creating gendered identity formations (Jackson, 2013a; 2013b; Jackson, Gee, & Scherer, 2009).

3.2. The anthropology of sport

One could argue that the differences within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology are as diverse as the differences between the two, and that the need to distinguish between them is weak. Blanchard (2002) promotes *the anthropology of sport* as a perspective rather than a subdiscipline of anthropology. However, weakened disciplinary boundaries can at times produce false idioms. Some reduce anthropology to the practice of ethnographies, and in turn claim that sociological ethnographers are “almost” anthropologists. I am not schooled in anthropological theory and method; I am not an anthropologist. Interests in anthropology are related to their empirical insights, their epistemologies, and to the way in which I aim to practice research. The need to distinguish between the disciplines is therefore considerable.

Sociologists' studies of cultural hegemony and structural domination in sport are understood by some anthropologists as mirroring their preferred "universalizing assumptions and objectives" (Dyck, 2000, p. 17). Sport sociology is "a field of scholarship that has paid considerable attention to the ways in which sport has been applied instrumentally in order to advance or shore up [dominant] state, class and gender interests" (Dyck & Archetti, 2003, p. 13; see also Stoddart, 2012). Dyck (2000, p. 19) cites Sutton-Smith (1995, p. xii), for the purpose of elaborating on sport sociologists' concern with constructing categories, and how it is that categories are vital in order for *researchers* to grasp differences and privileges:

[They] wish to show you that the discussion of sports is important for understanding the modern world of women versus men, of corporations versus workers, of tradition versus modernism, of freedom versus compulsion. And all of their views are thoroughly grounded in the modern twentieth-century consciousness that thinks that children's play and adult sport are very different; that sports but not play have a great deal to do with power and violence...

Dyck (2002) also draws on MacAloon (1987) and argues that since the categories emerge historically and vary over time, we should focus how *research participants* contextually use categories and definitions. This is far more significant than how academics define sports, if our aim is to understand the life worlds of research participants, that is. Dyck (2002) therefore insists that reducing sport to manifestations of sociological categories – such as gender, race, ethnicity and class – risks our overlooking all the fascinating variation in cultural life. Anthropologists cannot "shore up" complexity to academic categories and theoretical explanations. They cannot use Gramsci or Foucault in a "purely instrumental or functionalist" manner that reduces culture "to mystifying values in service of structurally dominant or hegemonic interests" (MacAloon, 1992, p. 106-107). "The anthropological analysis of sport is not a reflection of society, but a means of reflecting on society" (Archetti, 2003, p. 217). Dyck (2002) accordingly highlights four aspects that speak to profoundly anthropological concerns about sports: games, bodies, celebrations and boundaries.¹³ I will simply note here that through these concepts, Dyck directs our attention to research participants *in situ*. Instead of solely manifesting how macro-structures dictate actors and cultures, Dyck dictates that our analytic attention should also focus on how actors' interpretations are influenced by sport cultures.

Anthropologists thus often observe more than what is confined by the sociological categories of race, class and gender. Their analyses can therefore reveal how particular sports, athletes and enthusiasts forcefully mobilize, and are both shaped by, as well as reshape, conceptions of race, class and gender. Anthropologists have analyzed sports as ritual and the ritualized magic of male athletes in a game of chance (Gmelch, 2004[1972]); how sports, dance and deep play provide a means by which to reflect on gendered -nationalities, -localities and -moralities (Geertz, 1973a; Archetti, 1999; 2003; Pink, 1997); how sports provide liminal spheres that enable, mostly male, Norwegian supporters to commit to English soccer identities (Hognestad, 2003); how youth sports provide arenas for boys and girls to learn hierarchy-management and the gendered dynamics of the “talent” (Broch, 2003; Lithman, 2000); how youth sports are shaped by the ambitions and arrangements of elite sports (Dyck, 2003) and how gender interlocks with these ambitions and arrangements (Weiss, 2000). In the anthropological literature on sports, *gender* becomes relevant in relation to - as well as part of - independent sport worlds, not as a variable that explains and exhausts these worlds, as in the case of the sociology of sport.

3.3. Concluding remarks

It is primarily in the field of sport sociology that my project exploring Norwegian handball cultures was conceived. As the above outline indicates, sociological research on sport, gender and the media has predominantly focused how gendered ideology is reproduced and challenged in sports and through the sport media. Using concepts such as Connell’s *hegemonic masculinity*, Bourdieu’s *doxa*, and Foucault’s *discourse*; we “deal with culture” as epiphenomenal to societal structures and as a wielding power for elites.¹⁴ This becomes surprisingly evident when turning to the anthropology of sport. From this perspective, sports become cultural realms worthy of analysis in their own right and on their own conditions. Sports become enclaves in which superstars, children, parents, leaders, spectators and journalists join in processes of creative gendered meaning-making.

Drawing inspiration from both streams of research, I practice a cultural sociology of sport that does not reduce sports and athletes praxis to material forces via *hegemony*, *doxa* or *discourse*. Through thick description of sport media and sport praxis, I account for Norwegian handball’s cultural autonomy and expression. With culture as perspective, sociological and anthropological impulses are synthesized for an investigation into the ways in which Norwegian handball is shaped by, shapes and intersects with broader social meaning.

4.0 Theoretical Perspectives

This study started out with a gendered perspective on sport and sports media. Inspired by the sociology of sport, I wanted to investigate how a binary and macro-social gender structure inspired comprehensions of Norwegian handball. Yet, once the empirical information was gathered, the project slowly evolved from a primary use of gender theory - sparked with topical insights about culture - to the primary use of cultural theory drizzled with topical insights about gender. As the project progressed, it became gradually clearer what the often politicizing gendered perspectives reveal and mask. With inspiration from anthropologists who strive for thick description, binaries other than that of masculinity and femininity steadily became more compelling. In the beginning, I had no idea where these “other” binaries would lead the investigation. In retrospect, they allowed me to fixate a culture structure and thus develop analyses of how “culture intervenes”, as interactants are shaped by, but also forcefully shape social realities. A comprehensive draft of cultural and gender theory lies beyond the scope of this project. The outline below highlights some main strands of influence in this project and explicates how and why these inspirations were applied.

4.1. The Sociology of Gender

The sociology of gender is the “study of socially constructed male and female roles, relations, and identities” (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1992, p. 319). Whereas the sociology of gender and feminist theory can take on two different connotations (gender as a sociological variable and a women-centered perspective respectively), the study of gender and feminist theory often interlock:

An explosion of research on gender issues now suggests that all social interactions, and the institutions in which the interactions occur, are gendered in some manner. Accounting for this gendering has reshaped the theoretical and empirical foundations of sociology. On the theoretical side, gender awareness has modified existing sociological theory and led to the creation of a new feminist paradigm (Lindsey, 2010: 1-2).

The Norwegians Lorentzen & Mühleisen (2006) also note the intertwining of gender and feminist theory. They assert that gender research has always been concerned with power relations and the unconscious reproduction of gendered comprehensions, marginalization and subordination. Giddens and Sutton (2013, p. 1057) argue that feminist theories “emphasize

the centrality of gender for any analysis of the social world” and desire to explain and overcome gender inequalities. According to Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (1992, p. 311), the feminist agenda has produced “a theory of social life universal in its applicability.” It finds its appropriate parallel, they argue, in Marx’s epistemological accomplishments; in the discovery that knowledge - what people assume to be absolute and universal realities - is in fact the realities of those who economically and politically rule the social world. In the feminist translation of Marx, men become the holders of power, rulers of the world and shapers of gendered knowledge (Connell, 1987; Hearn, 2004).

This project makes cautious use of gender theory. It is therefore important to note the close, often intertwined, relationship between gender and feminist theory. The above-outlined sociological research on gender in sport media and in sport praxis exemplifies the assertion that this theoretical synthesis is also evident in the sport sociology. Feminist concerns in sport studies have followed much of the same development as sport sociology in general. The topic of women’s sports was first addressed in relation to education (Markula, 2005). As a series of subdisciplinary sport studies developed (sociology, history, psychology), it became a multidisciplinary topic of inquiry (Hall, 2005). While Coakley and Dunning (2002) have argued that the majority of sport sociologists are ‘critical’ thinkers, sport feminist Birrell (2002, p. 62) asserts that feminists are not just committed to thinking critically, but to changing gender. According to Birrell, feminist theories developed outside the field of sport sociology were used to inform feminist sport studies. A sketch of this development includes unmasking the cultural meaning in biological understandings of women and men (Fausto-Sterling, 2004; Martin, 1997), emphasizing how women constitute a universal category that is oppressed by men (Firestone, 1997; Hartman, 1982; Rubin, 1975), and highlights the challenge to universalistic thoughts borne of the inclusion of conceptions as to how race, class, sexuality and gender interlock (Anzaldúa, 1990; Rich, 1983; Zinn & Dill, 2005).¹⁵ This development can also be traced within sociological sport feminism (Hall, 2005; Markula, 2005).¹⁶ Birrell (2002) reiterates this development and notes that by the end of the 1980’s:

a turn to critical theories that explicitly theorized relations of power, and more inclusive theories which explicitly theorized difference in terms of relations of class and race as well as gender, moved us towards a critical feminist cultural studies approach and changed the direction of the field (Birrell, 2002, p. 64).

A feminist cultural study of sport, Birrell argued, is informed by Gramscian hegemonic theory, and is based on the assumption that sport is a male preserve and that the female athlete constitutes contested ideological terrain. Birrell's (2002) summary is highly indicative of how I read contemporary sport sociological research on gender.¹⁷ These developments, and the close connection between gender and feminist theory, can also be traced in the development and refinement of the theories presented next. Below, I briefly present three gender theories that have informed this project's analyses.

4.1.1. West and Zimmerman: doing gender

In analyzing field observations of young boys and girls practicing handball, West and Zimmerman's 1987 concept of 'doing gender' helped me conceive of how handball acts can also entail gendered performances. The concept even guided my observations. Girls' and boys' handball, and various athletes' performances, were gendered in both subtle and blatant ways. "Oh, so you think they look alike? All have blond hair and ponytails?" The head coach smiled at me as I struggled to learn the names of her girl players. While all were doing handball, their doing gender also endowed teams and individuals with a vibrant variability. I was soon to learn that there was no straight line between shared acts of gender and consensus.

The ethnomethodologically-informed concept of *doing gender* focuses how gender and other seemingly objective and factual properties of social life are accomplishments of local processes, such as the ones I observed. West and Zimmerman argued that gender constitutes a routine recurrently accomplished and reconstituted through interaction:

the "doing" of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures." (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126)

Fundamental to their analysis is the distinction between sex, sex category and gender. *Sex* constitutes the socially agreed-upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females and males. Placement in a *sex category* requires the presentation of sex criteria in everyday life. This is accomplished through sustained identificatory displays that proclaim membership in the male or female category. *Gender*, then, becomes "the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex

category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). The doing of gender emerges from and corroborates claims to membership in a sex category. Goffman (1976) is therefore used to highlight how gender is a conventionalized portrayal of the cultural correlates of sex. Goffman (1977) is also cited for his account of organized sport as an institutionalized praxis of recurrent expressions of masculinity. Within this conceptualization, gender becomes a socially-scripted dramatization of ideal notions of femininity and masculinity. Recurrent enactment naturalizes the social gender binary. “The physical reconstruction of sex criteria pay ultimate tribute to the “essentialness” of our sexual natures – as women *or* as men.” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 145). The two authors finish by urging the reader to do gender differently. This will disturb the deceptive naturalness of the institutionalized arrangements between the sexes. They draw on Connell (1985) to focus on gender as a power relation:

An understanding of how gender is produced in social situations will afford clarification of the interactional scaffolding of social structure and the social control processes that sustain it (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 147).

As with the development of gender and feminist theory outlined above, the ‘doing gender’ approach was critiqued for its “white middle-class character”. For this reason, West and Fenstermaker (1995) reworked ‘doing gender’ as ‘doing difference’. Whilst gender, race and class “exhibit vastly difference descriptive characteristics and outcomes, they are, nonetheless, comparable as mechanisms for producing social inequality.” (p. 9). The interlocking mechanisms of gender, class and race should be analyzed as situational, as symbolically omnipresent, and as the accomplishment of differential ‘doings’. In 2009, a special issue of *Gender & Society* was granted the concept of ‘doing gender’.¹⁸ West and Zimmerman (2009) argue that the concept has become so commonplace it appears without acknowledgement of its source. Contributors argue that ‘doing gender’ reveals individuals’ accountability for gender in patriarchy (Connell, 2009), the complicated and contradictory ways by which situated interaction is linked to structural inequalities such as gender, race and class (Jones, 2009), in addition to the interlocking of bodies with masculinity and femininity, and how individuals do and undo gendered macro structure (Messerschmidt, 2009). Risman (2009) argues that ‘doing gender’ has lost its feminist strength. She draws on Deutsch (2007) and Lorber (2005) in order to argue that the ubiquitous use of ‘doing gender’ creates conceptual confusion in gender studies. They claim it misleads the political goal of a post-gendered society: namely that gender needs to be *undone*.

Notably, Risman (2009) also questions why we should label “new” behaviors adopted by boys or girls as alternative masculinities and femininities, by simple virtue of the fact that the groups are composed of biological males and females. Why should we categorize “innovative” behaviors as new genders, as opposed to noticing that old gender norms are losing their currency? In the study of Norwegian handball, I am inspired by the concept of doing gender, but I don’t use the concept of doing difference, or undoing gender. This is because I am primarily interested in how handball is understood, and how these understandings are inspired by, and inspire, different ways of doing gender. I aim to focus on my research participants’ interactions and simply note whether and in what ways the old gender norms are losing their currency. A cultural perspective reveals how and why.

4.1.2. Nancy Chodorow: the psychodynamics of gender

Analyzing Norwegian media presentations of women’s handball, I reached for a gender perspective that embraced ambiguity and personal creativity, and which allowed analytic results to transcend the binary of reproduction and challenge of patriarchy. Chodorow allowed me to do this. However, having focalized on culture as perspective, and coming to the conclusion that one does not have to use gender-as-perspective in order to study gender, my use of Chodorow’s theories might have been redundant. Swidler’s notion of a cultural ‘tool kit’ (outlined later) would have done much of the same trick. However, at that point in time, Chodorow’s psychoanalytic perspective allowed me to come closer to my empiric information and analytic goal: personal creativity.

Chodorow is a psychoanalytically influenced feminist who explains patriarchy by employing the theories of Freud. Whilst concerned with patriarchy and gendered power relations, her models of explanation primarily focus mechanisms of the unconscious (and preconscious), rather than the interactional or macro-superstructure dynamics that reproduce social inequality (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1992). In the words of Chodorow, men and women have different psychological motivations for sustaining heteronormativity, patriarchy and male dominance. While some feminists are content to argue that men’s motivation for sustaining patriarchy is deeply rooted in the rewards of being dominant or of supporting domination (Connell, 1987; 2005a; Hearn, 2004; 2010) – Chodorow argues that:

Because women are themselves mothered by women, they grow up with the relational capacities and needs, and psychological definition of self-in-relation, which commits them to mothering. Men, because they are

mothered by women, do not. Women mother daughters who, when they become women, mother (Chodorow, 1997, p. 196).

For this thesis, Chodorow has received her fair share of critique. She does not explain the struggle of women (and in particular their struggle for autonomy); women and men are more contradictory than her theory suggests, and she has a narrow conception of the family as a white middle-class family (see Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p. 345). Connell (1987, see chapter 9) does not discard the significance of a gendered psychology, but prefers conceptions of gender as a historicized and collective project in which men strategically pursue patriarchy. Connell critiques Chodorow for accepting gendered inequality through “a psychodynamic explanation of the acceptance of a social structure, in this case the sexual division of labor in child care” (Connell, 1987, p. 201). Still, Connell (2002, p. 88) recognizes the advancement of “less” dichotomous conceptions of gender in Chodorow’s later works. This person-centered approach, in fact, motivates analyses of how individuals mobilize, transform and reproduce gendered meaning through a personal-cultural dialectic (Chodorow, 1995; 1999):

Each person’s sense of gender is an individual creation, and there are thus many masculinities and femininities. Each person’s gender identity is also an inextricable intertwining, virtually a fusion, of personal and cultural meaning (Chodorow 1999: 69-70).

Chodorow distinguishes her approach from Foucauldian feminists that conceptualize gender as being unvaryingly constructed through a linguistic, cultural, or discursive omnipotent force. Chodorow argues that according to the Foucauldian view “cultural order takes precedence over more nuanced and variable individual personal meaning, and the psyche is entirely linguistic” (Chodorow, 1999, p. 70). She claims that feminism has eliminated the realm of personal emotional meaning, or has made it subordinate to and determined by language and power. Psychoanalytic understandings therefore run counter to feminists’ assumptions about the exclusive political and ideological construction of gender. Instead, these understandings insist that cultural discourse serves as a source of knowledge that can be mobilized, emotionally negotiated, invested in or rejected by persons. This represents my fascination with Chodorow’s conception of gender; her research participants become competent actors. Significantly, individuals’ meaning-making can counter, can mold and does indeed draw on cultural categories (Chodorow 1995, p. 516). With Chodorow,

gender is varied, ambiguous and dynamic, constituting an interlocking dialectic between cultural and psychic life. Gendered complexity does not have to be explained away by intersectionality. Chodorow allowed me to analyze individuals' capabilities.

4.1.3. R.W. Connell: Gender, power and social structure

Connell has become monumental within the social sciences in general and within feminist and gender research in particular (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). As stressed above, Connell's work is remarkably salient within sport sociology as well. Her theories have also influenced this project. For the media analysis, Connell was used to highlight the gendered power and conflict that plays out in discourse. In the analyses of praxis, her theories provided insights as to how power relations can be gendered and how gender relations can be hierarchical.

This account of Connell's work revolves around the concepts of *gender order*, *hegemonic masculinity* and *masculinities* and *femininities*. Importantly, these concepts center on an overriding definition that holds Western capitalist societies to be patriarchies, and the political ambition is to end this domination. Connell advocates that gender research must shift focus from (often psychological) gender differences and typologies to emphasize gender as a form of relational power. Accordingly, Connell's theoretical tools, irrespective of whether local micro-situations run counter to a patriarchal organization, refocus the analysis of macro- and global relationships: "women are subordinated to men in society as a whole" (Connell, 1987, p. 111). Connell holds that gender is a dynamic process that changes historically and varies culturally. However, it is through the lens of a fixed macro-structure of inequality that Connellist analyses scrutinize how complex cultural practices reproduce or challenge patriarchy. "An adequate theory of gender requires a theory of social structure" Connell asserts (1987, p. 91), later conceptualizing gender as:

the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (Connell, 2002, p. 10).

Indeed, according to Connell, gender is produced in and through everyday interactions. Connell draws on the concept of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) to build this argument. However, these interactions, as minute as they may seem, are always linked to collective arrangements of society. Small-scale arrangements are conceptualized as *gender regimes* of historically enduring gender relations. In schools and organized sports,

gender regimes are active - though not always articulate - politics of gender that construct various kinds of femininity and masculinity. Gender regimes are thus particular to specific institutions and organizations, but simultaneously form part of a wider pattern of gender relations which Connell labels the *gender order*. Connell argues that it is necessary to go beyond small scale gender regimes and to theorize a large-scale *gender order* – the interrelationship between gender regimes and their societal expressions of gendered inequalities (Connell, 1987).¹⁹ *The gender order* concerns how the macro-politics of gender play out in micro-environments. Its processes include the creation and contestation of hegemony, the articulation of interests and organization of political forces (Connell, 1987).

This leads us to one of Connell's most cited concepts: *hegemonic masculinity* (Messerschmidt, 2012). This concept has been revised since 1987 – mostly in line with the developments in feminism outlined above – to become more sensitive to cultural complexity and the interlocking forces of gender, race and class. Connell (1987; 2002; 2005b) argues that there are many different *masculinities* and *femininities*, which is to say that there are many ideal-typical ways of being boys and girls. Furthermore, “their interrelation is centered on a single structural fact, the global domination of men over women” (Connell, 1987, p. 183). The interrelations between masculinities and femininities are hierarchically structured by patriarchy. Or, as Connell puts it, *hegemonic masculinity* is situated at the apex of the *gender order*. This specific form of masculinity is culturally glorified and devaluates all other masculinities and femininities. Inspired by Gramsci's concept of hegemony – a social ascendancy through a play of social forces that saturates private and cultural life – gendered power relations become embedded in socio-cultural life (Connell, 1987; 2005b):

To say that a particular form of masculinity is hegemonic means that it is culturally exalted and that its exaltation stabilizes the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated heroes (Connell, 2000, p. 84).

Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued for having an exaggerated emphasis on societal structure, an exclusive focus on men, and a narrow representation of men's subjectivities (Ekenstam, 2006; Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Walle, 2010). Messerschmidt has assisted Connell in responding to this critique by lending the concept a stronger focus on the interrelations between hegemonic, subordinated, complicit and marginalized masculinities, and an understanding of masculinities and femininities as

revolving *gender projects* (Connell, 2005b). Hegemonic masculinity now accounts for local variations, embodiment and identities through revised notions of a straightforward domination of women by men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The 1987 concept was formulated to “conceptualize how patriarchal relations are legitimized throughout society” – it still does, and according to Messerschmidt (2012, p. 63), it should continue to do so. By focusing the analytic lens on reproduction and/or the challenge of patriarchy, the Connellist agenda masks how and why it is that reproduction and challenge coexist in meaningful ways. However, where Connellist theory is not adopted as a lead perspective, it provides insights into the extent to which gender is a power relations and how hierarchies are gendered.

4.1.4. Concluding remarks

We can now summarize from the above literature. Gender and patriarchal gender relations are accomplished in everyday encounters. Simultaneously, these encounters are regulated by normative gender relations that sanction encounters as correct, challenging or playful in relation to the interactants’ sex category (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender and patriarchy are reproduced through the psychodynamics of the family and its intimate members. Individual understanding of gender and its significances are as variable as are individuals and their psychic biographies and histories (Chodorow, 1995). Gender relations are power relations that sustain the dominance of women by men. This gender ordering of social life can be traced in everyday encounters, to the individual psyche, and is embedded in culture (Connell, 1987; 2005b). Within sociology and sport sociology, *gender studies* often intertwine with feminist agendas. Henceforth, analytic focus and results will often revolve around the question of how patriarchy is reproduced or challenged. This is not the aim of my project.

I have interpreted gender as achieved in cultural encounters (West & Zimmerman, 1987); as understood in conflicting and ambiguous ways by competent persons (Chodorow, 1995), and as a power relation (Connell, 1987; 2005b). Notably, we have to contemplate what we empirically take to be gendered power relations in our analyses, and what power relations we are gendering by use of theory. When my main interest evolved to center on meaning-making, the aforementioned gender theory could not form the lead definition. Cultural analysis demands a bracketing-out of non-symbolic systems of stratification, such as a macro gender-structure. Cultural analysis cannot afford to assume that societal power relations, such as patriarchy, are omnipresent and embedded in culture. Such a perspective directs attention away from, and even masks, cultural particularities by emphasizing how *societal power relations* constrain symbols, rituals and codes of meaning. On the contrary, I use cultural

sociology to reveal how *symbols, rituals, and codes* constrain and permit meaningful contestations of power relations. Only *after* we account for culture can theoretical conceptions of societal gender relations – how they are done and accomplished, how they vary and how they often interlock with power relations – inform the cultural analysis.

4.2. Cultural Sociology

The feminist gender perspectives outlined above derive their primary strength in manifesting how gender as a macro-structure is produced and sanctioned through interaction, through psychodynamics, and through cultural hegemony. They all, in varied forms, link different levels of analysis with societal patriarchy. How, then, can sociologists grasp something cultural if their interests are purely socio-structural? What remains to be provided is an outline of a perspective that embraces an ambition to create a meaning-centered analysis; one that systematically develops thick description of actors' meaningful mobilization and reshaping of norms and ideology. This is a perspective that shifts the primary focus from the micro and the macro to the meso level. Instead of making claims that the micro produces the macro or that the macro explains the micro; meso analysis highlights how culture structures constrain and permit innovation, as interactants shape and are shaped by societal forces. This is cultural sociology.

Cultural sociologists transcend the disciplinary differences of anthropology and sociology. Anthropological conceptions of culture as a whole way of life are interwoven with sociological conceptions of culture as specialized realms that organize and produce social life (Spillman, 2002). The result is an opportunity to pay close attention to detail, nuance, creativity and to approach culture through the generality and systematicity of social explanation (Alexander, Jacobs, & Smith, 2012). Culture as perspective provides evidence for large causal claims by pointing to the subjective “reasons” that actors themselves offer for their actions (Reed, 2012). This perspective allowed me to understand how the research participants' subjective reasoning was culture structured. It revealed how meaning-making in televised and practiced handball shared a generative grammar that constrained and permitted gendered innovation. Rather than stressing how journalists' representations of handball mirror patriarchy, and instead of focusing on how micropolitics at the handball arena produce the gender order, culture-as-perspective allowed me to map a meso-structure and to analyze how it funnels, molds and spins meaning off in diverse directions.

What has spurred this research program is the sociological inability to account for the meaningful dimensions of social life. Alexander and Smith (2003) call it a numbness toward

meaning, and Spillman (2008) terms it as a practice of thin rational choice and as simplistic structuralism. It is an inability to account for how culture is structured by meaning and thus how meaning-structures are a significant force in society. Manifold sociological agendas have aimed at developing conceptions of the relationship between culture and society. According to Alexander (1990; 2003; 2007), many have also failed. While Alexander's critique does not find consensus within cultural sociology, many agree that it has contributed extensively to the development of the perspective (Larsen, 2013; Spillman, 2005). Spillman (2005) is slightly more diplomatic, and argues that ideology critiques, such as the previously-cited critiques of sport sociological research and gender theory, are important to revealing systematic inequalities in society. However, ideology critiques do not systematically account for how inequalities are rendered tolerable or how cultures translate inequalities in meaningful dialogues. In relation to this project, Alexander's critique of Gramsci, Foucault, and Bourdieu is noted in order to facilitate understandings of how cultural sociology differs from and can contribute to sport sociology.

4.2.1. Reconceptualizing culture

Cultural studies and Gramscian analyses, although defined as emphasizing cultural meaning, simply focus the role played by *hegemony* in maintaining societal relations of domination in and through culture.²⁰ Hegemony theory therefore often ends up reducing the cultural to the social. Foucault argued that prior research on sexuality was insufficiently cultural. However, his insistence that power and knowledge are fused results in a reduction whereby *discourses* are homologous with social structure, institutions, flows of power, and technologies. Bourdieu has "thick description abilities", but culture assumes the role of reproducing inequality rather than permitting innovation. Bourdieu assumes that *dominant groups* imperatively strive to have their cultural codes embraced as legitimate. Shoring up hegemony, discourse and domination to social structure leaves scarce room for understanding how autonomous cultures enable and assist actors in judgment, in critique, or in transcendental goals that "texture social life" (Alexander, 1990; Alexander & Smith, 2003). More directly related to the outlined research on gender as a social structure of inequality, Alexander (2007, p. 23) has coined a critique in these terms:

When it comes to issues of equality and redistribution, sociologists are particularly prone to think in anti-cultural terms. External, objective, and material forces are

conceived as determining unequal distribution without reference to the wills of actors – via hegemony, domination, subordination.

With this backdrop of critique, I turn to sketch three responses and cultural sociological reconceptualizations of ‘culture’. Cultural sociologists define ‘culture’ as processes of meaning-making (Spillman, 2002). This lead definition has spurred three mid-range reconceptualizations of “culture” and three “sorts of work” that emerged in North America and that are now adopted elsewhere (Larsen, 2011; 2013). The three sorts of work can be identified as cultural production, cultural frameworks, and culture in practice. They respectively focus on the production of culture, meaning-making in the text, and meaning-making on the ground (Spillman, 2002), and propose that the best strategy for revealing how culture matters, is to focus on its generative dynamics. All these conceptualizations thus highlight cultural autonomy. They explore how culture is a powerful dimension in social life and elaborate on why culture should be a powerful dimension in sociological analysis. Culture is not to be explained away by something else entirely, such as patriarchy, for example. This project primarily draws inspiration from research on cultural frameworks and culture in practice.²¹ Meaning-making in the text and on the ground are thus presented next.

Meaning making in the text

Research on cultural frameworks draws on late Durkheimian (2001[1912]), insights about deep formal structures of discourse and concepts of textual analysis more common in the humanities to map ‘culture structures’. By rendering them analogous with languages, cultures are assumed to have their own internal structure or grammar that is consequential for the ways in which meanings are generated (Ricoeur, 1973; Spillman, 2002). A ‘culture-structure’ can consequently be understood as a semiotic configuration where signifiers derive meaning from their relations in a system of signs: a code (Spillman, 2007). The study of meaning-making *in the text* differs from discourse analyses that investigate textual features and (at times) how these intertwine with social forces. It allows instead for cultural discourses to be analyzed as internally structured, independent from and sometimes casually efficacious for both institutional and interactional dimensions of social life.

To accomplish such an analysis, one needs to bracket out macro-social relations and embrace *thick description* (Geertz, 1973e). Thereafter, when analytic and cultural autonomy is realized, analyses can turn to explore how culture intersects with micro and macro relations. This analytic strategy is referred to as ‘structural hermeneutics’ (see *the strong*

program Alexander & Smith, 2003). As an example, Alexander (2006) investigates the *Civil Sphere*. Instead of reducing civil society to reifications of macro structures, such as capitalism, gender or race, he analyses the civil sphere as an autonomous phenomenon with its own internal structure. This meso-structure is a binary code that signifies the relationship between sacred and profane dimensions of civil life. Smith (2005) applies this civil code to his investigation into how it confines nation states' engagement in wars and how politicians use narrative genres to catalyze sacred and profane strategies to legitimate war. These insights on cultural frameworks allowed me to locate a discursive culture structure of handball. It might seem logical that, for the most part, it is knowledge of handball itself that explains what is significant in the game. However, reconceptualizing culture as structured sets of meaning revealed how a discursive grammar generated meaning-making about handball, and induced interpretations of successful styles of play.

Meaning making on the ground

Inspiration for research on culture in practice alternates between pragmatism and practice theory. It focuses on the extent to which interaction and practices are in themselves processes of situated meaning-making. By virtue of studying meaning-making *on the ground*, these investigations challenged overly generalized models of culture-society dialectics, and relaxed notions of consensus and coherence in groups and individuals (Spillman, 2007). By conceptualizing culture as a repertoire Swidler (1986) provided analytic possibilities for diverse interpretations by competent subjects – analyzing how individuals and groups draw fluidly and diversely on symbolic repertoires or “toolkits” (Spillman, 2002; 2007; Swidler, 1986; 2003). Larsen (2013) argues that the advance of repertoire theory can be understood to be a reaction to a focus on socio-structural reproduction through actors' more or less unconscious behaviors. Importantly, even though repertoires are limited to the cultural resources available at a given time and in a given context, this perspective makes of culture a situated resource that allows and inspires action, rather than simply constraining it.

Researchers concerned with culture on the ground have revealed how persons and groups use, maneuver and filter broadly-available meaning through schemata (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2004) and idiocultural processes (Fine, 1987; 2012). Fine's perspective has allowed me to anchor my analysis in concrete actions. Fine (1987; 2012) conceptualizes culture as a local or an idiocultural achievement. Idioculture is comprised of shared knowledge, beliefs, customs and behaviors that are specific to the observed group. To build an idioculture, a small group uses cultural elements that are known, usable, functional,

appropriate and triggered on multiple occasions. Importantly, idioculture acts as a mediator between the (macro) environment and (micro) interaction, as a filtering mechanism that molds abstract meaning into concrete needs, comprehensions and group styles (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2004; Fine, 2012).

4.2.2. Alexander and Smith: the strong program

The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology was written by Alexander and Smith (2003). Trondman (2013) argues that the program is fundamental to the study of cultural frameworks. Larsen (2013) asserts that this work has positioned culture at the core of the sociological discipline. As in the case of repertoire theory and the production-of-culture approach, the strong program holds that the meaningful dimensions of culture carry considerable implications for social life. It is thus imperative that sociology motivates the study of culture in its own right and on its own terms. In keeping with the critique of Bourdieusian, Foucauldian, and Gramscian sociology, *the strong program* programmatically advocates ways of thinking about culture that allow for it to be perceived as something more than a mere power to wield for elites, or as the masked exercise of social domination. Cultures, they argue, have internal structures that sustain and transform social relations in meaningful ways.

Alexander and Smith (2003, p 13) present three characteristics that drive the strong program. First: cultural autonomy. To elaborate, they differentiate between a sociology of culture and cultural sociology, distinguishing between “a weak program” and “a strong program” inquiry on culture. The weak program does not separate culture from social structure. The strong program creates a precise analytical uncoupling of culture from social structure, and establishes cultural autonomy. The strong program makes culture a “strong variable” and can thus illuminate the role that culture plays in shaping social life. Conversely:

To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that culture is something to be explained, by something else entirely separated from the domain of meaning itself. To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that explanatory power lies in the study of the “hard” variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meaning become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more “real” and tangible social forces. In this approach, culture becomes defined as a “soft”, not really independent variable: it is more or less confined to participating in the reproduction of social relations (Alexander & Smith, 2003, p. 13).

Second, strong program research is committed to hermeneutic reconstructions. What is needed, Smith and Alexander (2003, p. 13) advocate, is a Geertzian “thick description” of “the codes, narratives, and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning”. A thick description is contrasted by a thin description that “typically characterizes studies inspired by the weak program, in which meaning is either simply read off from social structure or reduced to abstract descriptions of reified values, norms, ideology”. The very achievement of thick description requires the bracketing-out of wider, non-symbolic social relations that also defines the first characteristic of the program. Inspired by Ricoeur (1973) and his linking of hermeneutics with semiotics, thick description also involves the creation of, or a mapping out of, culture structures. *Culture-structures* are shared meso-structures or meaning-structures that organize meaning-making in specific socio-cultural spheres. For instance, through binary generative grammars of the sacred and profane (Durkheim, 2001), or of purity and danger (Douglas, 1966). After the analytical bracketing demanded by such hermeneutics, after the internal pattern of meaning has been mapped out and cultural autonomy is achieved - *only after this* - “does it become possible to discover in what ways culture intersects with other social forces, such as power and instrumental reason in the concrete social world” (p. 14).

Third, Alexander and Smith suggest that the strong program anchors causality in proximate actors and agencies, and meticulously specifies how culture interferes with and directs what really happens. The weak programs, they claim, provide illusions of concrete mechanisms and of solving dilemmas of freedom and determination. Alexander and Smith explore the causal mechanisms ingrained in the observed culture. The strong program’s thick description focuses concrete dynamics of who says what, why, and to what empirical effect. What is missing from a traditional Geertzian account, however, is a structural approach that does not elaborate particularities at the expense of the universal (p. 23). The Geertzian notion of culture as “just text” needs to be transcended. They argue that culture must be understood as “a text that is underpinned by signs and symbols that are in patterned relationships to each other” (p. 24). Alexander and Smith highlight the work of such researchers as Durkheim and Douglas, who understood culture as a classification system of binary oppositions, as well as Lévi-Strauss, via Saussure, who combined linguistic and sociological approaches in the development of structural anthropology. These streams allow notions of a structured cultural autonomy. Meaning is generated from *within* a sign system, and thus enjoys a certain autonomy from social determination. Culture “becomes a structure as objective as any more material social fact” (p. 24). In turn, we can start to understand how these codes effect the

observed meaning-making; how culture effect action, and what happens when social structures intersect with culture.

The strong program's very blunt style has, of course, provoked reactions. Some argue that Alexander elevates culture to a sacred-like object of analysis, and that he is too focused on binary-mechanisms of meaning-making (see Larsen, 2013). Spillman (2005) argues that the strong program provides an important articulation of the core and the contribution of cultural sociology to the social sciences. However, she is skeptical of the program's rigidity, of its lacking the potential to integrate other ways of looking at culture, and its minuscule focus on mundane and routinized meaning-making. Spillman argues that whilst the sociology of culture's ideology critique and cultural sociological readings of culture contrast, they "are both important and true" (p. 5). Both Spillman (2002; 2005; 2007) and Larsen (2011; 2013) promote a "broad" cultural sociology that incorporates insights into meaning-making in the text and on the ground, as well as providing for a production-of-culture approach. Such combined inspirations allowed me to elaborate structured sets of thick description that dealt with how journalists and practitioners understand handball. After this code was mapped out, I returned to the empirical information in order to interpret how it directed journalistic representations of elite handball as well as practiced youth handball. When gender became a significant component in the transcribed commentaries, or the observed praxis, I turned to the sociology of gender in order to interpret how the generative grammar of handball was both shaped by and shaped gender.

4.2.3. Ann Swidler: repertoire theory

Spillman (2005) argues that mundane meaning-making differs from meaning-making in ritually heightened and dramatic moments. In everyday life, codes and narratives are typically mixed in disordered and multi-vocal ways. Spillman argues that the strong program lacks the explanatory tools necessary to remedy this messy level of meaning-making. Whilst Alexander might consider perspectives regarding meaning-making on the ground as weak and as fitting poorly with his strong program (Alexander & Smith, 2003; Larsen, 2014), I follow Spillman and Larsen, who believe cultural researchers should integrate different levels of analysis. When the article on televised women's handball was written, I started looking for ways in which to understand journalistic creativity, and how it is enabled and constrained by semiotic binaries. Nancy Chodorow temporarily solved the problem, but it recurred during revisions of the manuscript, and when the analyses of youth handball praxis commenced. This time, however, I had started studying cultural sociology and Ann Swidler.

Alexander and Smith (2003, p. 24) present Swidler as being inspired by American pragmatism. Her purpose, they claim, “is to relate culture to action without recourse to the materialistic reductionism of Bourdieu’s praxis theory”. Studying meaning-making *on the ground*, Swidler (1986; 2003) challenged overly generalized notions of culture as consensual, coherent and as a unifying system. Rather, she studies how people navigate conflicting systems and how the polysemy of symbols shape the ways in which people bring culture to bear on experience. Swidler (2003, p. 28) argues that people have little need of a coherent rationale for day-to-day life - as long as life seems to be working. Instead, we possess a patchwork of cultural accounts on which we can draw to handle most of the questions we pose to ourselves and which others pose to us. This patchwork of cultural accounts is what Swidler (1986, p. 277) defines as a repertoire or a toolkit: a “culture is not a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction”. It is more like a “tool kit” (consisting of traditions, rituals and symbols) from which “actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action”.

To understand the diverse ways individuals use culture, we need to focus both on how people appropriate cultural meanings, making them their own, and on how they come to name their own experiences in cultural terms. These are of course two sides of the same process, the connection of culture to personal experience (Swidler, 2003, p 44).

Swidler advocates the need to explore what parts of a tool kit are used and what parts are not. This enables us to properly analyze “the active, sometimes skilled users of culture whom we actually observe” (Swidler, 1986, p. 277). In *Talk of Love*, Ann Swidler (2003) directs empirical focus towards cultural conceptions of love among middle-class Americans. However, Swidler’s book also constitutes a theoretical elaboration of *how culture matters*. Her aim is to illuminate cultural ambiguities in situated processes of meaning-making, and to explore the “variation in the way culture is used” (p.5). This conceptualization of culture and meaning-making stimulates analyses of *how* competent actors mobilize different repertoires of meaning to “frame and reframe experiences in an open-ended way” (p. 40). The use of culture and the culture’s effects on action, Swidler (2003, p. 89) argues, must be understood in terms of whether persons are situated in *settled* or *unsettled* lives and times. These analytic metaphors respectively contrast situations in which people operate within established strategies of action, and situations where new strategies of action are developed and tried out.

Crucial developments in cultures occur in unsettled times when actors need cultural resources to improve their strategies for success. Strategies of action refer to the “ways actors routinely go about attaining their goals” (Swidler 2003, p. 82).

In my analysis, particularly of the girls’ team, Swidler’s terminology comes together to reveal how the girls and coaches creatively use televised handball to inform and form their own strategies of action at the arena. While not explicitly pursued in my manuscripts, Swidler argues that a great deal of culture operates by attaching meaning to the self. Swidler (2003, p. 87) proposes an “*identity*” *model* to illustrate how certain cultural repertoires are used to form identities through *strategies of action*. People develop lines of action based on who they already think they are. Actors’ capacities to draw on repertoires shape the lines of action that they find possible and promising. Also, in my analyses the use of culture is implicitly coupled with notions of identity. The claim is made that journalists’ use of culture is shaped by the identities they observe at the arena and the identities believed to resonate and entertain the viewers. At the arena, culture more clearly guides strategies of action. These strategies, while pragmatic by intent, also serve to boost certain identities among the boys and girls.

4.2.4. Concluding remarks

Cultural sociological reconceptualizations of culture focus cultural production, cultural frameworks and culture in practice. This project draws inspiration from the last two perspectives. Using insight about meaning-making in the text, Alexander and Smith has emphasized that cultural analysis needs to bracket out non-symbolic structures to reveal cultural grammars. This process maps out of a culture-structure that shapes meaning-making within particular spheres. Representing perspectives on the ground, Swidler’s notion of “tool kits” allows analyses of how interactants creatively use culture to solve everyday problems. Both lines of thought are influenced by Geertzian notions of thick description. Swidler’s toolkit theory is not primarily concerned with meaning-structures, but with the limitations of symbolic repertoires inspiring certain choices when actors create strategies of action.

It must be noted that in Swidler’s later work with Tavory (2009), they theorize how strategies of action revolve around certain semiotic axes. These axes are culture structures that generate actors’ comprehensions and guide how they carry out strategies of action. Alexander has expressed that this work converges with his own by inverting Swidler’s instance that meaning is solely generated by the pragmatics of action (Larsen, 2014). On an organizational level, Spillman (2012) has examined trade associations. She reveals that what makes business praxis meaningful is the axis of solidarity/strategy. The essential interrelation

of solidarity in strategy generates symbolic repertoires allowing sustainable economic action. Semiotic axes are, in other words, possible to trace in broad culture (Alexander, 2006), on the ground (Tavory & Swidler, 2009) and in organization (Spillman, 2012).

Cultural analysis, as a meso-analysis, constitutes the crucial link between the psychological and the societal; the micro and the macro; the abstract and the concrete; the space between interacting persons and larger social structures (Alexander, 2006; Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2004; Smelser, 1997). This line of research has provided remedies to engage with my empirical information in manners that emphasize the particularities of the handball game and how competent actors understand this praxis. Some might argue that this perspective masks important power issues and the detrimental “effects” of macro-structural constraints. However, if we analytically believe that social life is more than what can be read off as ideology and domination, if we believe that culture influences social processes, if we hold that meaningfulness in social life is worthy of an academic analysis – then we do not lose track of societal power dimensions, we give analytic purchase to diversity (Spillman, 2002).

With culture as perspective, I consequently ask: Is it possible to practice a sociology of sport that analyzes sport cultures as meaningful and autonomous realms? Can we transcend categorical assumptions about sports being a male preserve that sustains a world of women versus men, of tradition versus modernism, of freedom versus compulsion? I analytically map a culture structure to reveal similarities between four empiric handball strands and ask:

- How do Norwegian televised game commentators and practicing youth athletes comprehend handball in gendered ways?
- What cultural mechanisms in handball make gender relevant and how is gendered meaning mobilized by journalists, coaches and youth athletes?
- Are there mechanisms that sustain inequalities in sport other than those revealed by the sociological category of gender?

5.0. Epistemology

The above discussion has accentuated some theoretical dimensions of cultural sociology that differ from other sociological perspectives. In what follows, I situate cultural sociology as a research program with specific intents and procedures.

Cultural sociology, indeed, stands against a model of sociological research wherein explanations are constructed only in the terms of something called “external” causes [...]. But it does not stand against the *goal* of social explanation, but rather the *means* currently hegemonic for getting there (Reed, 2012, p. 42).

According to Reed (2012), understanding cultural sociology is best achieved by considering the larger context of positivist and “post-positivist” social sciences.²² Reed begins by conceptualizing *minimal* and *maximal interpretations*. Minimal interpretations are “a rapport upon some social actions that happened” and “tend to string together various pieces of evidence to create a *case*” (p. 28). Maximal interpretations are “a synthesis of abstract theoretical terms, with one or more minimal interpretations” and a means by which to perceive “the social actions under study deeper, more general or generalizable, or more effective and useful for the execution of future social actions” (p. 29). He then elaborates on how the post-positivist positions of *Interpretive empiricism*, *Realism* and (*Epistemological*) *Postmodernism* develop and use minimal and maximal interpretation.²³ The problem for cultural sociology is that it does not “fit” any of these post-positivist epistemologies:

Its knowledge products are consistently theory-laden, and, thus, it is not a version of interpretive empiricism. It constantly relativizes, historicizes, or culturalizes claims about direct causal effects of “social structure”, which puts it at odds with the ontological program of realism and with general theories of society and social mechanisms. Finally, it is quite obviously engaged in making stable and strong knowledge claims, which belie any association between cultural sociology and postmodernism (Reed, 2012, p. 35-36). Nor does cultural sociology have an external, political, or movement-based purpose to give unity and thus allow a radical and productive epistemic pluralism – as do, for example, feminist studies or post-colonial studies (Reed, 2012, p. 42).

Cultural sociology does not insist on a single practical technique of gathering data. This pluralistic approach also impacts a knowledge production which is thought to require the adept mobilization of theory to understand social reality. Although theory can have normative components, this is subordinated to the hermeneutic imperative to understand the meanings that surround action. Theory and the realities it is employed to perceive are comprehended pluralistically. Cultural sociology thus “questions whether the formalisms of general theory can ever give enough of an account of social reality to produce compelling explanations of action”. Theory is used to bring out deep meanings that are not immediately obvious to the investigator or the research participants. “These meanings, recovered and reconstructed, provide the real intellectual torque to social analysis”. Theories “need only to provide case-centered insights to be useful in the production of sociological truth” (Reed, 2012, p. 37).

Cultural sociologists aim to interpret symbolic structures and to grasp the deep meanings that surround a certain set of social actions. According to Reed, this analysis presupposes three characteristics. First, reasons are cues: the meanings actors share in a certain time and space are what cause their action. The subjective origins of social actions are necessarily focused. Second, cultural sociology is nominalist: ontological status is not ascribed to the formal structures that its theories articulate. Culture structures simply prepare the ground for a deeper understanding of the workings of particular symbol sets, at particular times, for particular people. Third, cultural sociology is theoretically pluralist: the social world comes to its interpreters in constituted and reconstituted socio-historical patches of structured meaning. Cultural sociological theories only describe the efficacy of culture when “fitted out” by certain performed meanings, at certain times and in certain places:²⁴

The investigator’s knowledge of abstract theory allows her to merge empirical knowledge of a case with a recognition of “culture structures” and thus to grasp the deep meanings that give “structure to the conjuncture.” Concretely, then, cultural sociology participates in the classical sociological mode of “structural” explanation. But the way in which it does this is historically sensitive, and, for this reason, theoretically pluralistic. Cultural sociology, to help generate explanations, theorizes the synchronic structures of culture; but these never explain specific, diachronic meanings [...] to become the basis for explanatory knowledge claims. Culture structures *as such* exist primarily in the heads of the theorists who theorize them. But when these structures are recognized in empirical evidence, and it becomes clear how they are fitted out

by certain meanings at a certain place and time, the structures take on the power of the real, becoming part of the symbolic inputs into social action. This is the basis for a causal hermeneutics and a cultural sociology that is also a historical sociology. P. 41

Cultural sociologists produce knowledge by using theories of how meaning is structured; they analyze how such structures organize meaning-making at specific times and in specific places, and then explain how this meaning-making can influence social processes. To grasp the particularities that “fit out” culture structures, cultural sociologists create thick description.

5.1. Thick description

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur and Kenneth Burke, Clifford Geertz (1973d) has worked hard to show that culture is a rich and complex text: “The result is a compelling vision of culture as webs of significance that guide action” (Alexander & Smith, 2003, p. 22). In Geertz’s words:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Geertz, 1973e, p. 5).

Culture is grasped through *thick description* (Geertz, 1973e, p. 5). While the notion of thick description might be elusive – how thick is a thick description? – the concept has important and concrete implications for this project. First, thick description is to treasure complexity, variation and ambiguity. It contains the interpretation of complex meanings within socially-established codes. Second, to carry out a thick description is to explore a phenomenon by accounting for its internal relations and structures – its webs of significance. In other words, a thick description is an account that allows for analyses of how multiple interpretations are enabled and constrained by the observed phenomenon’s internal logics.

To recognize that cultures have internal logics is to recognize cultural autonomy. The idea of ‘cultural autonomy’, and what it *does* to your analytic end-results, is an underlying and recurrent theme in my manuscripts. Exploring cultural autonomy and hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in rich and persuasive ways are two of the most important qualities

of a cultural sociological epistemology (Geertz, 1973e; Alexander & Smith, 2003; Larsen, 2013). Since cultural analysts no longer believe in a straight-forward relation between values, ideology, norms and consensus (Peterson, 1979; Spillman, 2002; Swidler, 1986) ‘rich and persuasive ways’ refers here to accounts of how meanings vary, how meanings are mobilized to inspire, and how meanings are altered –within cultural constraints.

Geertz eloquently illustrates how culture is essentially public, how the co-presence of diverse cultural schemata may cause systematic misinterpretations of the same situation, and how a gesture is only revealed as meaningful in its relation to social codes (Geertz, 1973e). He reveals how the social and spatial composition of a ritual alters its dynamics and meanings (Geertz, 1973c) and how the building of contexts upon contexts not only elevates our comprehensions, but allows interpretations of the deep meanings of culture (Geertz, 1973a). Geertz advocates that we should avoid empirically ungrounded assumptions about ideologies’ saturation of culture and that we should focus rather on how observed expressive symbols and rituals contest power relations (Geertz, 1973b). My venture into thick description explores how autonomous cultures shape expressions of social life, and how shared meaning within these cultural enclaves is continuously negotiated and reaffirmed by individuals. Handball journalists’ and handball practitioners’ understandings are interpreted as being structured by the cultural grammar of the game. Therefore, handball culture cannot be conceptualized as existing in a micro-vacuum or as reducible to macro-structures alone. I take Geertz scrutiny of gestures seriously and juxtapose verbal, nonverbal, textual and symbolic practices as equally valid empiric information. I give purchase to variation within the constraints of structured meaning.

My observations did not exclusively focus on gender, but allowed multifaceted notes about a culture where gender was occasionally revealed as a relevant dimension of the actors’ shared meaning. To enable thick descriptions of Norwegian team handball culture(s), gender could not “force” my observations or analytic elaborations. If everything was “analytically perceived” as gendered power relations, culture could not gain analytic power, and attempts at thick description would fail. While Geertz provides a powerful springboard for the analysis of cultural complexity, he overemphasized cultural coherence and failed to specify any causal relations between culture and action. This is why cultural sociologists advocate a structural hermeneutics (Alexander and Smith, 2003) and repertoire theory (Swidler, 1986; 2003).

5.2. Hermeneutics

Collected information and subsequent analyses are regarded as understandings of the research subjects' manifest understandings (Alexander, 2008, p. 160). This is not particular to my project. The nature of sociological knowledge *is* hermeneutic. Cultural sociology does not stand out as an entirely different method, but as a particularly strong version of the project of sociological interpretation itself (Alexander et al., 2012; Reed, 2012).

Most social scientists argue for using theoretical perspectives producing more than just descriptive accounts of social life. Yet, exposing non-observable meta accounts of society, macro structures and systems, as well as subjects' "false consciousness" is not our only option for scrutiny (Fangen, 2010a; Hegna & Smette, 2005). Hermeneutics involves the general problem of comprehension and the techniques of interpretation (Ricoeur, [1989] 2001). The approach first and foremost concerns symbolic and hidden meaning. Crucially, hermeneutics applies the rules for the interpretation of written text, it holds that texts are polyvocal, and thereby account for complex notions of significance (Mohr & Rawlings, 2012; Ricoeur, 1973; [1989]2004). This form of research has been more common in the humanities, but is now applied in cultural sociology to challenge simplistic macro-structuralism (Alexander et al., 2012; Larsen, 2013; Spillman, 2008). *The strong program in cultural sociology* (Alexander & Smith, 2003) explicitly draws inspiration from Ricoeur (1973) and his notion of action as text – or, rather – analyzing meaningful action by the use of hermeneutics. Ricoeur was inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure, Luis Hjelmslev and Noam Chomsky, who theorized the relation between langue/parole, schema/usage and competence/performance; the duality between internal logics of a text and the communicative act. Similarly, Ricoeur argued, meaningful action can also be analyzed as structured by a meaning code:

My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, by virtue of a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing (Ricoeur, 1973, p. 98).

In the same way as the speech act is structured by its grammar, meaningful action is also structured by a semiotic grammar. Meaningful action can therefore be analytically "read" as an utterance or a message that is structured by an internal grammar: a code. Ricoeur is also inspired by Lévi-Strauss' (1967), who conceptualized the code as a structure

consisting of semiotic opposition. Exploring the internal logics of actions is done in a similar fashion as when we map the structure of the speech act. Mapping out this grammar of meaning is achieved through a hermeneutic analysis that in a circular fashion moves from surface understandings of the message/action, to explanations of its internal logics, and renewed understandings of the studied phenomenon: “Ultimately, the correlation between explanation and understanding, between understanding and explanation is the *hermeneutic circle*” (Ricoeur, 1973, p. 117). If we follow this logic, a cultural analysis is the hermeneutic act of structuring that leads from a “surface-semantics”, the expressed message, to a “depth-semantics”, which constitutes the code of the message (Ricoeur, 1973). In methodological terms, Ricoeur enables the analytic mapping of culture structures that form the *meso-dimension* of social life. Ricoeur, combined with Geertz (1973e) and the hermeneutic bracketing-out of non-symbolic relations, allows the reconstruction of a “pure cultural text” (Alexander & Smith, 2003): thick description of structured meaning-making.

Swidler (2003) argues that Alexander and Smith put too much emphasis on continuity and coherence. The real challenge “is to accept that cultures are multiplex, fluid and contradictory, and then rethink models of when and how culture constrains action and experience” (2003, p. 186). Toolkit theory addresses this problem by highlighting how individuals draw from repertoires of meaning to frame and reframe experiences in open-ended ways. Swidler also suggests that different forms of “looser logics” *do* organize how cultural tools are used to shape action. Binary oppositions, narratives, homologies, resemblances and resonances can pattern and give unity to institutional dilemmas. I combine Swidler, Alexander and Smith, in order to investigate how a set of binary oppositions organize the institutionalized dilemmas of handball. This synthesis allows for hermeneutic analyses of how this “loose logic” constrains and enables homologies, narratives and resonances to guide specific comprehensions of handball and gender, as well as generating strategies of action in the youth handball arena (see also Tavory & Swidler, 2009; Spillman, 2012).

5.3. Thick *meso-level* description

Geertz (1973e) defined culture as public meaning. Geertz thus turned cultural analysis away from attempts to study how an individual’s culture influences their actions, to interpretations of what it is that texts, rituals and practices mean to the persons who use, perform, or live them (Swidler, 2002[1995], p. 313). The nature and extent of shared culture and consensus thus becomes an empirical question. Culture can be embraced and distanced, but is a shared

reality to which actors must pay tribute (Fine, 1987, p. 40). Notably, Geertz (1973b) also criticized (post-Marxian) ideology critique as going “directly from source to consequence without ever seriously examining ideologies as systems of interacting symbols”. From a cultural sociologist’s point of view, ideology critics beg the questions they are meant to answer and make ungrounded assumptions about meaning. Their data reveal structures of stratification, the “effect they presumably mirror”, or “the social reality they presumably distort” (Geertz, 1973b, p. 207).

Peterson (1979) suggested, in *Revitalizing the culture concept*, that cultural analysis should not preconceive culture to mirror society at large or to be a wielding power in elites’ attempts of domination. Rather, he urges a more positive view of the research subject, to give their interpretations centrality in analysis. This is because culture is actively used by research subjects in the same way academics use paradigms - to organize and normalize activities. Following this line of thought, the study presented here highlights publicly-shared meaning concerning Norwegian handball, but without reducing this meaning-making to non-symbolic orders of organization (such as a social gender structure). I present neither a sociological analysis that solely accounts for inter-individual exchanges of culture (micro), nor an exclusive study of non-symbolic societal relations (macro). This implies a meso-analysis of how the micro and the macro levels of society converge.

What I mean by micro, meso and macro must therefore be explicated. Collins (1988, p. 2) argues that macro theories “are concerned with long sweeps of time and space and with large numbers of persons.” Micro theory is defined as “dealing with relatively small slices of space, time, and numbers of persons: with the individual and the interaction, with behavior and consciousness” (p. 3). Meso theories, he explains, “raise the question of the relationship between micro and macro as an issue in its own right” (p. 6). Smelser (1997, p. 1) argues:

the micro, involving the analysis of the person and personal interaction; the meso (or middle, or intermediate), connoting structural but subsocietal phenomena such as formal groups, organizations, social movements, and some aspects of institutions; the macro (or societal).

Smelser (1997, p. 28) explains that about 25 years ago, a group of American sociologists formed an informal group they called MESO; “endowing it with its literal meaning: middle.” They felt that the micro-macro distinction distorted their world of study – the middle – and that the middle constitutes a crucial link between the psychological and the

societal (Smelser, 1997, p. 28). He argues that the meso-level is vague and best defined by instances of use, such as Tocqueville's ([1983]1945) use of "associations" – Kornhauser's (1959) use of "intermediary" community life, voluntary associations, trade unions, and political parties – and what some have labelled "civil society" where complex groups and institutions mediate between the citizenry (micro) and the polity (macro) (Putnam, 1993).

Jacobs and Spillman (2005) synthesize this chapter on epistemology by providing an account of what defines mesosociology and how it interlinks with cultural sociology:

We suggest that cultural sociology makes a distinctive contribution by providing conceptual tools for handling the intersection of macro-level social dynamics and micro-level subjectivity in meso-level processes. Perhaps surprisingly to some, the result is a distinctively empirical—though not empiricist—sort of argument: building on the examination of cultural processes in concrete contexts, the [perspective identifies] limits and complications to otherwise persuasive macro- or micro-level generalizations [...]. This empirical sensibility is complemented with an underlying concern to improve our theoretical understanding of the relation between structure and agency by understanding cultural processes as the site of their intersection, the switch point between them (Jacobs & Spillman, 2005, p. 3).

Conceptualizations of the micro, the meso and the macro levels are dependent on the aim of the researcher and their substantive theory. The researchers cited above all suggest that micro, meso and macro should not be taken as absolute categories. At best they are "the poles of a continuum. Various levels of analysis can be more micro or more macro, depending on whether we look 'up' or 'down' from them" (Collins, 1988, p. 386).²⁵

I investigate the middle ground between the psychological and the societal, the micro and the macro; the space between interacting persons and larger social structures. Rather than solely letting macro models shine down upon my research subjects, or claim that their interaction buds society at large, I structure shared meanings and analyze how these meanings are shaped by, and shape, the interactional setting and its surroundings. This project aims to analyze both agents' creative processes of meaning-making and the cultural forces that constrain and permit innovative meaning-making. This is a mesosociological effort to understand the relation between structure and agency in which 'culture' encompasses both sides of this process.

6.0. Sample and Methods

This project has approached Norwegian handball culture in numerous ways. What binds these various research strategies and techniques together is the epistemology presented above. Data and analyses of Norwegian televised men's handball were collected first, followed by televised presentations of women's handball. Finally, participant field work was carried out in two youth teams. Analyses also progressed in this specific order. In the following, I outline how the four empirical focuses were chosen, approached and carried out. This section concludes with some ethical considerations and a judgment critique of the project.

When cultural sociology advocates a synthesis of sociological and anthropological perspectives, this should necessarily have methodological implications.²⁶ A notorious chase to account for diversity and variation in meanings might to “non-cultural” sociologists be an anthropological peculiarity. Van Maanen (1988) argues compellingly that sociologists' and anthropologists' *pursuit of culture is same but different*. To some degree, these differences have lessened, yet to some degree they still hold true. This stereotype implies differences in writing styles and topical interests. Van Maanen argues, perhaps in slightly biased fashion, that anthropologists' writing style is evocative and graceful, while sociologists retain a “naturalistic zing, zest, and zeal”. He explains that it is probably easier to write poetically when concerned with the sacred, emotional, expressive rituals and myths, than when documenting the secular, economic, and political instrumentalities of daily life. However,

Sociologists are not always so tight and timid, nor are anthropologists always so loose and bold. The same sorts of contrast can [of course] be made equally well within each field (Maanen, 1988, p. 23).

In an attempt to be loose and bold, I draw on both sociological and anthropological theory and insights. The practiced methods therefore needed to allow for accounts of deep formal structures of discourse and the multivocality of symbols and gestures.

6.1. Four empirical lenses

Why handball? There are two primary reasons for this choice of empirical interest. First, throughout my childhood, and until the age of 30, I practiced and watched handball with great enthusiasm, as well as despair. Handball in the media has provided annual entertainment highlights and many disappointing performances by the national men's team. Handball praxis in the arena has entailed the joy of teamwork and personal achievement, as

well as the agony of absent solidarity amongst players and coaches in competitive milieus. Second, Norwegian handball is an interesting field of enquiry, given that its gender dynamics are somewhat contrasting to the mainstream gender dynamics documented in much other research on sport, the media and gender – that of male domination. Understating whether and in what way this particularity can be empirically traced in Norwegian handball praxis, whether and in what way handball is conflict-ridden with definitional tensions of best-gendered praxis, whether and to what extent processes of meaning-making resolve gendered problems within and beyond the handball arena; this project highlights the phenomenon of Norwegian handball through four empirical lenses:

- Men's handball in Norwegian media
- Women's handball in Norwegian media
- Practiced boys handball in Norway
- Practiced girls handball in Norway

These four strands provided a complex set of data and numerous possibilities for comparative analyses. It could be argued, and I would not completely object to it, that much of this potential was lost in the article-based PhD format. Yet, inspired by anthropological methodology, I argue that comparison is fundamental to the epistemology and the analytic-methodic technique applied in this project (Vike, Lidén, & Lien, 2001). While it is not extensively elaborated in the four articles, this comparative potential has fueled continuously revolving understandings of the differences and similarities between and among elite women and men, as well as female and male youth handball players. This comparison made it difficult to conclude that macro-social gender differences force all symbolic and pragmatic differences in handball. It made it hard to conclude that televised elite handball and practiced youth handball in the arena is altogether different. Rather, the project's comparative potential forced the discovery and use of cultural sociology with which to assemble the four strands.

6.2. Collecting, organizing and analyzing media data

Empirical information from Norwegian media was foremost collected by recording and transcribing two of the TV2's male commentators' verbal portrayal of international championships. However, a combination of keen interest in the game and easy access to printed and digital news regarding the national teams allowed a continuous observation of other media platforms than just television. Numerous newspaper-clippings, digital newspaper clippings and printed advertisements were thus collected throughout. The televised

broadcasts' visual and audiovisual depictions were also noted, and promotional advertisements for championships were recorded. Observations from pre- and post-game studio commentaries complemented live-game commentaries. The first information on televised men's handball was collected in 2007 and 2008, and the first data on televised women's handball was collected in 2009. Nevertheless, I kept recording games and taking notes to see if my initial observations would be supported and/or challenged.

Five games from the 2007 and five games from the 2008 men's championships, in addition to 8 games from the 2009 women's championships, have provided the "foundation" for analysis: an approximate 180 000 word document. This fundament was approached in two slightly different ways. The data on men's handball was loaded into the Maxqda qualitative analysis software. This software allowed for the possibility of manually and digitally-coding data, from which it was then easy to retrieve segments of text. Grounded theorists elaborates this process in their quest to develop empirically-grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This was neither my intention, nor the outcome of my coding. However, taking inspiration from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the coded texts were both data-driven (recurring themes in the texts and the journalists' use of "intertextuality" and "metaphors") and concept-driven (themes previously located in other sport discourses, such as "sport as war" and "show some guts"). After breaking the texts into fragments, these parts were then hermeneutically related to the entirety of the broadcasts and the "additional" sources of data.

The experience gained from this process was that the lengthy labor involved in developing codes and then coding the commentators' often incomplete sentences and rather haphazard arguments was not ideal. The codes did provide easy access, but in a very fragmented way. Moving forward, I wanted a technique that retained the narrative and journalistic processes of meaning-making without "chopping it up". Each women's handball game was thus managed through meaning condensations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) by writing summaries of the commentaries. As with the process of coding described above, notes on game specifics, tactics and bodily kinetics, were thereby radically condensed to better focus the processes by which journalists interpret and proscribe broad cultural meaning to game specifics. As in the case of working with elite men's handball, the individual summaries of female handball were related to the eight games in their entirety. The summaries were a good means by which to "work with" the texts. During hermeneutic analyses and writing, I often returned to the raw transcription.

It should be noted that once the manuscript on men's handball was written, I moved on to work on women's elite handball in the media. However, the lengthy process of

manuscript revisions allowed me to compare the analytic results from the men's games with that of women's handball. In relation to making a *strong program* argument - conducting structural hermeneutics - the process of analysis revolved around the mapping of a culture structure. Outlining such generative structures requires that considerable amounts of discourse be reduced to a binary culture-structure (Larsen, 2014). *Minimal interpretations* of what the journalists described as important for successful handball performances, and how they evaluated the performances of men and women athletes, directed this mapping. In turn, this structure allowed *maximal interpretations* of how the journalists understand and present handball, and of how and why journalists creatively and meaningfully use cultural repertoires with which to highlight and minimize particular characteristics of the sport. Lastly, it enabled an analytic understanding of how the televised specificities of sports are shaped by, but can also reshape, social meaning such as that pertaining to gender.

6.3. Collecting, organizing and analyzing field data

The aim of the field study was to carry out an extended exploration of meaning-making in Norwegian handball cultures. From the outset, attempts were made to gain access to two teams, one girls' team and one boys' team, and thus provide the field project with a potential comparison (Fine, 1987). This is a common ethnographic strategy: the undertaking of prolonged observations out of which contrasts and paradoxes challenge and support prior and ongoing assumptions and inferences (Fangen, 2010a; 2010b; Maanen, 1988; Pink, 2009).

To establish contact, I simply checked out the ever more professional-looking internet sites of a couple of handball clubs. In May, after the 2010-2011 season was over, I first decided to call the head coach of a boys' team. On the first call, I was dismissed as a possible threat and disruption to the team's practice ambitions. According to the coach, they were currently practicing fiercely for competition in "national championships" for 16 year-old boys. I therefore made the decision to call the coach of a 15 year-old team at another club. They eagerly accepted my presence and wondered how soon I could help out with training the boys. Next, I called a girls' team in the same age group and at the same club. The thought was that it might be interesting if the girls and boys knew each other. However, the same reason for rejection was given once more; I might disrupt the team's ambitions. In the meantime, since I had received a positive answer from the boy's team, a call was made to the club president. The president thought my project was great, and encouraged me to call more teams right away. A call was thus placed to the coach of a 14 year-old girls' team. A peculiar situation arose, as the words the coach used were positive, but the intonation was negative.

For some reason, this coach could not manage a negative response, and instead chose to “wait me out”. Finally, I contacted the coach of group of 13 year-old girls. I was instantly provided a spot on the sidelines; after a while, a place on the bench as a more active asset of their team.

The role as a participant observer is highly dynamic and evolves throughout the project (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Every day, I would get a different welcome, different assignments and therefore also different viewpoints. This could range from the sense of not being welcome to being welcome only in a few situations; from being positioned as a sidelined observer, to being included as part of the coaching staff. Most field studies consist of the four elements of observing communication and activities, as well as participation in communication and activities (Wadel, 1991). Overhearing a conversation from the bleachers is quite different from taking part in conversations. Being present on - as opposed to merely looking at - the players’ bench, or partaking in, rather than just listening to, exchanges from the bench, provides considerably different insights and information. As a distanced observer, it was possible to get overviews of situations, their social composition, and how persons maneuvered space. As an observer in proximity, I could overhear exchanges in the locker-rooms, parents’ discussions in the stands, and coaches directing the team. As a participant, it was possible to get “a feel” for the implications of verbal and non-verbal communication and, quite simply, to get to know more easily the research participant by producing shared memories: “to ‘know’ as others do, we need to engage in practices with them” (Pink, 2009, p. 34). In general, the field work progressed from occupying the position of an observer to that of becoming a participant – with numerous setbacks and complications.

In addition, the researchers’ gender and age affect the access and the available roles during field work (Berliner & Falen, 2008). Being a 30 year-old male and an active handball player, I could join the other male coach (in his early twenties) in practice drills conducted in the boys’ team. This provided a chance to interact with the boys during “play”. Such chances were seldom accorded in the girls’ team, where the coaches were all in their late 40s and early 50s, as they rarely participated in play. In the boys’ team, the other coach and I often hung out together in the locker room for long periods of time, in order to listen to and engage with the adolescent boys as they shared their interests. In the girls’ team, routinized pre-game locker room praxis followed a more strict procedure. A coach commanded the girls to find an available room, get dressed and send out a representative waving a ‘ready’ sign, to tell the coaches that they were all dressed. The coaches could then enter the locker room and commence the pregame pep talk. Following the game, all coaches and girls would enter the locker room, debrief, and then the coaches would immediately leave. This provided quite

different contextual possibilities for both the coaches and the researcher to understand and engage in the shared information produced in youth sports locker rooms.

The empirical information produced during participant observations consists of field notes. One key principle concerning note taking is that the researcher should document their own activities as well as contemplate emotional responses such as fear and joy, and should record sensory information concerning smells and sounds, as well as take note of contextual specificities such as time, place and the social composition of the group. These are all aspects of the observations that affect the information gathered and that allow experience-near interpretations of meaningful social life (Emerson et al., 1995; Fangen, 2010a; Overå, 2013; Pink, 2009; Geertz, 1973c). With a notepad in my back pocket, cues and clues were recorded in-field. For the most part, note-taking was not made visible to the research participants.

Headnotes (Fangen, 2010a, p. 93) - memorization by repetition - was therefore considered a practical and efficient method when moving along *with* the practice. Participation in practices and games on weekday evenings allowed for the jotting down of notes during late evenings, which I elaborated on in “full notes” the following day (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Altogether, observations lasted about eight months, with an average of four practice sessions a week, and one or more games per weekend. Being in and out of the arena, attending more than one session a day, I soon developed a reputation as being among the “more enthusiastic” members of the club. Observations throughout the 2011-2012 season resulted in about 150 “field visits” during which I accumulated approximately 300 000 noted words of information.

I did not change the content of information during analysis, but did, at times, edit the presented texts to make them more reader-friendly. On very few occasions, field notes from different observation days have been combined. Where this is the case, the relevant date indicates where one note ends and another begins. In addition, I added parentheses with explanatory information, to help the reader’s comprehension without losing “touch” with the utterances and occurrences at the arena. However, translations from Norwegian to English somewhat obscure the evocative and graceful conveyance of atmospheres in the arena.

During the analysis, field notes were coded by thematic relevance (Fangen, 2010a; Gentikow, 2005). This practice signifies how relevant field notes were marked in the qualitative coding software Maxqda, and were extracted and explored in their relation to the lived participant observations. Meaning: the hermeneutic pendulum between thematic fragments, such as *the speech* and *the smile*, and the whole body of field notes. Furthermore, and as noted above, to make a *strong program* argument, one needs considerable quantities of discourse (Larsen, 2014). Since participant observations do not “produce” the same amount

of discourse as televised commentaries, I imported the culture structure that was previously manifested in the analysis of televised handball. This requires an attentive consideration of whether the two empirical strands can and should be synthesized. I resolved this question not by focusing on the difference between elite and youth handball. Rather, by scrutinizing whether and in what manner the culture structure continued to reveal insights into the subtly varied manner in which the observed boys and girls went about and resolved problems in their institutionalized praxis.²⁷ *Minimal interpretations* of the social facts concerning successful youth handball were found to revolve around the same culture-structured performance traits as in televised elite handball. However, other binaries of relevance were also revealed. In turn, this structure allowed for *maximal interpretations* of how the observed praxis was loosely patterned, and how cultural elements were generated and imported to shape strategies of action at the youth sports arena. A structural hermeneutic analysis also exposed the causal forces behind innovative strategies of action, and how broad social meaning was used to shape praxis but was also reshaped through praxis.

6.4. Ethical considerations

The project as a whole has been cleared by the Norwegian social science data service (see appendixes). Participants in the field observations have been anonymized and the names used in the analyses are pseudonyms. Information that was considered sensitive has been removed. This is not information of significance to the project's analytic argument. The project's extended observations and comprehensive information allowed patterns and general processes to remain viable (Ronglan, 2000). However, the question of and need to leave out empirical information is a manifold dilemma, as it also reduces the presented diversity in the collected information (Overå, 2013). The article-based dissertation is detrimental in this regard, as individual manuscripts demand a recurrence of arguments, methods and summaries and thus leave less room for empirical information. I hope that the cultural perspective applied can do some justice to the observed praxis and the diverse actors I encountered.

Publicly-available media content has not always been anonymized. Rather, it has at times been quite important to highlight editorial origins, since different media syndicate and the various outlets use different styles of representation (Allern, 2001; Dahlén, 2008a; Lippe, 2010). For example, my primary focus has been directed at the Norwegian TV2's journalistic representations of handball. In contrast with NRK, that is a national public service broadcaster, TV2 is a commercial television channel dependent on the commercial market.

Critical ethnographers such as Beal (2002) have sought to educate their informants. I have sought their education. Bourdieu (1998; 2000) and the likes of Beal (2002) protect informants by directing “critical” attention towards the structuring macro-structures that symbolically subordinate informants that are uninformed of the macro inequalities of their subordination. Strandbu (2006) argues that this practice can induce states of powerlessness and thus questions whether this really is an ethical act at all. Taking these researchers meditations into account, I became concerned with observing and analyzing subjects as competent. This approach highlights the informants’ own experiences and comprehensions. Instead of pinpointing their “false consciousness” that maintains societal inequalities, this approach can nevertheless lead to individualizing responsibilities (Hegna & Smette, 2005). Following Ronglan (2000) I recognize that individuals can and should be presented in a respectful manner. Another methodological choice has been to use empirical notes where I actively take part in the interaction – as an associate and as a friend. Participation over an extended period can cause such shared sympathies (Overå, 2013). Being asked to continue my contribution, either as a “real coach”, or by extending my research by a couple of years, represented to me an accomplishment of high value. I am truly privileged to have spent time with such a diverse group of devoted adults and youth – through times of joy as well as hardship. My contribution was small, but my gratitude is heartfelt.

6.5. Judgment criteria and limitations

I follow Alexander and Smith (2003), who are inspired by Bloor (1976), Rorty (1979) and Latour and Woolgar (1986) by arguing that scientific ideas are cultural and linguistic conventions as much as they are results of “objective” actions and procedures. Rather than being a mirror of nature, science is understood as collective representations. Alexander and Smith (2003, p. 13) therefore suggest “a radical uncoupling of cognitive content from natural determination”. In a Geertzian fashion, Alexander and Smith argue that cultural analysts should be dedicated to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in rich and persuasive ways. They explain that the philosophical principles for this hermeneutic position were conceptualized by Dilthey (1962), who advocated a methodological injunction to look at the inner meaning of social structures. In Alexander and Smith’s eyes, Geertz and the notion of thick description are seen as providing the most powerful contemporary application of Dilthey’s ideas. Therefore, it is “only by resolving issues of detail – who says what, why, and to what effect – that cultural analysis can become plausible” (Alexander and Smith, 2003, p. 14).

Larsen (2013) is inspired by Giddens' (1984) notion of a 'double hermeneutic'. We have to be aware not only of what we study but also how we study it. Hermeneutics is a two-way process whereby researchers use scientific concepts to make meaningful a world that has already been made meaningful by the research participants. In turn, scientific concepts and considerations can be picked up to reshape commonsensical assumptions. To stimulate reflexive research, Sparks and Smith (2014, p. 179-205) have developed judgment criteria in sport and exercise research. They promote the development of a list-like engagement with the research process; in accordance with the research purpose. The list presented below is inspired by these researchers, as well as by Geertz (1973d), Pink (2009; 2012), Alexander (2012), Larsen (2013), Gentikow (2005), Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Tracy (2010):

- Is the study *rich*; have I presented empirical information in rich and persuasive ways? That is; have I accounted for complexities and alternative interpretations in an open interpretive style of writing?
- Is the study *credible*; what empirical information have I disregarded throughout the analyses and what data was not even accounted for in my observations and transcription?
- Is the study *sincere*; characterized by a self-reflexivity and transparency in use of method, theory and in accounting for challenges?
- Does the study *resonate*; have I presented competent actors in a manner that allows them to recognize the particular troubles and the general affects of the mechanisms in focus? Have I provided evocative representations that make readers believe in the places and persons depicted? Have I balanced these two acts while also providing the scientific rigor my research colleagues demand?
- Is the research *ethical*; have formal and procedural ethics been handled in a professional and emphatic manner?
- Does the research make a significant *contribution* to the research participants, to the specific sport sociological field of research, and to sociological debates?

The limitations of my project can be dealt with in relation to these questions. The *richness* of the study includes 18 televised handball games and eight months of observing youth handballers. Considerations were steadily made in order to highlight and ignore different aspects of the empirical information whilst remaining *credible*. The media analyses attempted to convey a slightly different research narrative than what is often found in

sociological sport studies on media and gender. To do so, analyses of the game commentaries strategically excluded depictions of bodily techniques and instead highlighted discursive evaluations. During and after the prolonged ethnographic work, I was able to develop rich understandings of processual patterns and complexities. During field work it is, however, impossible to observe everything that goes on. The girls' and boys' parents, the club organization and the athletes' non-sporting worlds were not made the prime focus. No formal interviews were made. Emphasis was placed on how the coaches and athletes conducted verbal and non-verbal evaluations of their practiced game. A major consequence of this approach is that I have little to say about the role handball played in the youths' lives outside the arena. Furthermore, being a participant observer with an extensive history as a handball player was and is considered a beneficial problem. Prior knowledge allowed me to contribute to the teams and therefore to take on the role of a participant observer. Preconceptions might also have blurred particular nuances and complexities of the praxis. Discussions with international scholars have been beneficial in this regard.

My *sincerity* is closely linked with attempts to make the research writing *resonate*. Theoretically, to achieve resonance, to stay close to and use my empirical information, the analytic approach progressed from the primary use of a gendered perspective to the primary use of culture as perspective. Empirically, the article-based PhD challenges the presentation of rich empirical information and hermeneutic analyses. Many reviewers and editors demand extensive literature reviews and painstaking accounts of theory, methodology and method. To some, this project lacks both a naturalistic zest, zing and zeal, and is to be found lacking in clear-cut questions and clear-cut answers. Since I made the *ethical* decision to account for and *contribute* to the research participants on their own terms, these terms and understandings also directed the observations and analyses. Gender researchers Messner (2013), Bruce (2013) and Kimmel (2007) all ask for research on how actors use and understand media. However, I suspect that they are foremost interested in how both this "use" and "understanding" can reproduce or challenge a masculine hegemony. Conversely, my focus is analytic and not ameliorative. This project does not pinpoint what the media and youth handballers are doing wrong, or aim to show how mediated stereotypes saturate handball cultures; I emphasize how moral actors create meaningful realities – realities that are as true and as important as academic moralities and realities. I argue with Spillman (2002) that attempts at social change need to account for and recognize what makes social life meaningful for social actors.

7.0. Articles

In this project, I have moved from relying primarily on gender theory and preconceptions of sports as male preserves to applying cultural sociology and preconceptions of a Norwegian culture which promotes notions of sameness as essential. During the course of the project, preconceptions have not been completely discarded, but I have made attempts to steadily progress towards holistic understandings of the empirical phenomenon. Understanding meaning-making in televised and practiced team handball, in order to map the culture structure of this institutionalized sport, has therefore gradually evolved throughout the project. A culture structure signifies how meaning-making *within*, as well as knowledgeable meaning-making *about*, a specific social phenomenon is organized. Whilst culture structures can take many forms, I have stressed how meaning is created through a set of binaries. The code of handball can best be summarized in the manner of the following table:

Culture-structure	
<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind

Working with the four articles, more semiotic axes were hermeneutically revealed and used to develop interpretations of how journalists and practicing youth athletes comprehend Norwegian handball. For example, in the analysis of boys' handball, the semiotic axis of seriousness/play provided insight into the way in which success and failure were ascribed different meaning among teammates, and how this meaning generated hierarchical distinctions within the team. I shall now proceed to present summaries of the four articles and highlight their possible relevance.

7.1. Article #1 and #2

Most sport sociological research on gender deems sports to be a male preserve in which women are categorically subordinated. Their analytic end-results generally manifest men's contact sports as reproducing a masculine hegemony in sport and society. Women in such sports are seen as challenging possible male domination, but as also reproducing the masculine sport-values. By valorizing these values, women symbolically reproduce hegemonic masculinity, which in turn reproduces male hegemony. This is the cyclic power of the *hegemonic masculinity* model.

Team handball is primarily understood to be a woman's sport in Norway. The first two articles therefore deal with how the Norwegian media depict men playing a women's sport and how the media present the celebrated national women's team. Since prior research indicates that sports are male preserves, Norwegian handball was explored as possibly embodying a form of *gender tension* through which dominant ideas about sport and gender are reversed. How do Norwegian journalists make sense of men playing a women's sport? How do Norwegian journalists present the combative and celebrated national women's team?

In article #1 *Masculine men playing a women's sport* I discuss how Norwegian live game commentators comprehend men's handball in gendered ways. In keeping with a lot of previous research, gender was presumed to be a relevant dimension of the commentators' discourse. Analysis thus revealed how the journalists' emphasis on the masculine features of the game, along with gendered analogies and stereotypes, produced a depiction of masculine men playing a women's sport. This analytic result was supported by a Connellist framework that highlights dynamics of gender tension. Connell argues that socio-cultural solutions to *gender tension* is analytically manifested through the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 2005); a symbolic form of masculinity that reproduces patriarchy. This theory further allowed an analysis of how Norwegian journalists, by producing contextually ideal masculinity, challenge common Norwegian conceptions of handball as a women's game and resolve possible gendered tensions. The argument was empirically supported by a twofold argument. First, by analytically emphasizing how sets of semantic oppositions, such as aggressive/passive, large/small, masculine/feminine, pattern comprehensions of the game. Second, how these comprehensions are catalyzed through the use of specific cultural repertoires that emphasize the combative elements of the game. Article #1 concludes that when televised by Norway's TV2; men's handball becomes a masculine and a manly sport.

Article #2, *Smiles and laughs all teeth intact*, concerns the discursive presentation of women's handball. This representation, conveyed by the same two male journalists, was remarkably similar to the presentation of the men's game. The empirical-analytic insights into how certain semantic oppositions guided comprehensions of handball were to resolve this issue of sameness. In manuscript #2, these binaries were explicated and demanded a structural-hermeneutic attempt at emphasizing how the journalists' comprehensions of handball were culture-structured. The code of the game now included: aggressive/passive, strong/weak, large/small, fast/slow, hostile/receptive and forward/backward. Ultimately, I empirically aligned these binaries with the gendered oppositions of masculine/feminine and the meritocratic sport binary of successful/unsuccessful. This patterning produces a loose

logic where the consequence of success in a masculine setting is the narrative projection of masculine characteristics onto the successful, and feminine features onto the unsuccessful, regardless of sex category. What has been empirically revealed is a staging of Norwegian women's handball that is constrained by the same cultural framework that shapes processes of meaning-making when the commentators represent men's handball. It also highlights how culture structures permit innovation. First of all, it enables and brings forth depictions of successful and powerful female bodies as capable athletes. Secondly, it generates the use of gendered (and national) cultural repertoires to symbolically normalize the coexistence of masculine and feminine features when Norwegian women succeed in handball. Article #2 concludes that Norwegian women handballers wage war with a smile on their face.

With gender as perspective, sport sociologists have used televised sports for the purposes of developing a politics of the present, or in the service of an overarching vision of sport as a male preserve which upholds the difference between men and women. Many sports sociologists have pinpointed aggression, sacrifice and hostility as being significant features of *hegemonic masculinity* in sport. In the case of televised Norwegian handball, some might argue that both men and women's handball valorize and reproduce hegemonic masculinity, albeit in slightly different ways. Other might say that the men are presented as doing gender in stereotypical ways, while the women are depicted as both doing and undoing stereotypes.

With perspectives on meaning-making *in the text*, televised handball is not primarily used to develop a case for the ongoing reproduction and/or challenge of hegemonic, doxic or discursive masculinity. Instead, the case is used to develop case-centered insights into the processes of meaning-making that occur during handball broadcasts. This approach reveals *how* and *why* conceptions of women and men might change historically and vary nationally. The discursive culture-structure of handball constrains and permits the classifying of successful men and women as aggressive combatants. This analysis reveals how journalists in the Norwegian culture of sameness mix and mold gendered national repertoires in meaningful and subtly different ways. Paradoxically, women's handball is most effective when on-court aggression and sacrifice are conducted with a smile on the athletes' faces.²⁸

7.2. Article #3 and # 4

As in the case of sociological research on sport and gender in the media, the perspectives applied to sport praxis and gender are in congruence with definitions of sport as a male preserve. However, since much ethnographic work often forces complex information upon

the researcher, sport sociological analyses of sport praxis and gender thus make use of more complex information to build a case for *a micropolitics* of patriarchy.

The two last manuscripts of this thesis examine the experiences of young Norwegian boys and girls who practice handball. In the course of observations, the research participants' concerns guided my observations. During analysis, non-symbolic relations were bracketed out to emphasize their ongoing meaning-making. The discursive culture structure outlined during the analysis of televised men's and women's handball was also used to interpret meaning-making in practiced youth handball. Through interpretations of what coaches and athletes emphasized as being important aspects of their praxis, I could justify this analytic procedure and continue to develop interpretations of meaning-making in the arena. It also allowed me to further elaborate the ways in which this generative and cultural framework of handball was influential for individual and institutional actions *on the ground*.

Article # 3, *What can Al Pacino teach Norwegian youth*, highlights how the praxis of a team of 15 year-old boys is guided by their coach's use of a Hollywood script. Through the prism of the team's ritualized use of Hollywood media, I explored how the discursive grammar of Norwegian handball resembles and is therefore compatible with the grammar presented in the Hollywood script. Article #3 thus also develops the project by accounting for how it is that *ritual dynamics* allow social actors to embrace and/or distance various cultural significations. We should not assume that a straight-forward relation exists between shared meanings and praxis. Following Swidler (2003), cultural frameworks present us with "loose logics" that are maneuverable. A ritual analysis of the team's use of media allowed a highly focused emphasis. It disclosed how ritual dynamics allow competent actors to pay tribute to and embrace - but also to reject and rewrite - dominant conceptions of team culture. While the culture structure of handball also generates meaning-making in the arena, its potential is highly contestable. Article #3 shows how the ritual maintained a stratification of the squad that was rendered tolerable and meaningful, albeit in different ways by different boys.

Article #4 *The cultural significance of a smile* explores significances of televised representations of elite handball in practiced youth handball. The smile that was discovered to be an important cultural tool in the repertoire of Norwegian journalists when presenting women's handball, was also a cultural remedy in the discursive and bodily praxis of a team of 13 year-old girls. During the season, the four coaches were observed as they evaluated and employed media depictions of elite women's handball with which to convey strategic relevancies of the game. Of particular empirical interest was how the coaches conveyed the pragmatic logics of the smile to their young players. Empirical analysis revealed that *the*

smile takes on situated meanings to encourage what the coaches perceive as appropriate and pertinent strategies for attaining success. Theoretically, I argue that significances of *the smile* must be understood as both generated by as well as rendered meaningful by the handball code's semiotic oppositions. The cultural significance of *the smile* resides within its manifold capacities to resolve problems at the handball arena. This bodily symbol also entails a generative promise to encourage gender-appropriate displays of aggression. Through the shared acts of a harmonious smile, the symbol can resolve, mask and sooth the players' discontent with a sport meritocracy. Article #4 concludes that the smile has a persuasive influence on the team's and spectators' experience of sameness and equality.

While sport sociological research on praxis does highlight ambiguity, this ambiguity is often typified by analytic discoveries of coexisting reproductions of and challenges to patriarchy. Accordingly, the micropolitics of sport and gender in handball and elsewhere can be understood as simultaneously doing and undoing societal and global gender norms. The two last articles of this project show how such ideology critiques only offer one perspective. Important as this ideology critique may be, the ethnographic information assembled here, and the following analyses reveal that social structure and broad meaning, even culturally specific structures and shared idioculture, do not necessarily correspond with individual conceptions and group praxis. Persons reach for meaningful ways to address problems and attempt to make working strategies work even better. Inspiration from broad society can in this way be used with pragmatic intent, but does not simply fixate and saturate all meaning-making. Polyvocal symbols in interaction provide opportunities for continuous reformulations. In settled times, cultures are subtly shaped by, filtrate, and reshape social norms and ideologies in powerful ways. I argue that these cultural mechanisms put gender in play.

Article #3 and #4 interpret youths' interaction in the handball arena and show how handball pragmatics are inspired by broadly available norms and meaning. The manuscripts reveal how individual handballers and teams draw on symbolic repertoires and how a variety of meanings are embraced differently in different situations. A culture structuring of this empirical complexity allowed scrutiny of the reasons why and the manner in which the analytic ambiguity of reproduction, and challenges to gender norms, meaningfully coexist. Further, it revealed how it is and why it is that the segregation of individuals was rendered meaningful. Notions of *sameness* and harmonious meritocracies softened differences among team mates, downplayed the significances of hierarchies, and allowed boys and girls to legitimately and preferably aim for victory, albeit some with smiles on their faces, some in a playful manner, and others in serious meritocratic fashion.

8.0. By way of conclusion

Three questions were stated above in order to guide the reader through the last chapters. First:

- How do Norwegian televised game commentators and practicing youth athletes comprehend handball in gendered ways?

Comprehensions of handball by Norwegian journalists and youth handballers can be analyzed as organized by a generative meaning-structure. This grammar limits conceptions of televised and practiced handball. It also allows, even gives thrust to, both the journalists' and practitioners' creative use of cultural repertoires, symbols and metaphors for the purposes of enriching handball's meaningfulness (Rappaport, 1999). The toolkits applied also consist of cultural elements and scripts with highly-gendered connotations. Such gendered meaning bolsters specific outcomes of the generative culture-structure, whilst downplaying others. When journalists and coaches pattern the successful dimension of the culture structure by using narratives and metaphors that emphasize masculine and male connotations, success in handball emphasizes masculinity and becomes inextricably linked with notions of manhood. When symbols that underpin femininity and female connotations are deployed, success in handball emphasizes femininity and becomes inextricably linked with notions of womanhood. Regardless of this cultural entrepreneurship, the generative force of the culture-structure still inspires conceptions of the game that can be understood as being gendered in their own right. Conceptions of masculine success and feminine failure are available and legitimately used to downplay and bolster gendered connotations that interlocks with women's and men's, girls' and boys' embodied identities. The second question sounds:

- What cultural mechanisms in handball make gender relevant, and how is gendered meaning mobilized by journalists, coaches and youth athletes?

By using culture as perspective (Alexander, 2003; Larsen, 2013; Spillman, 2002) analyses of sport in society must first bracket out the surrounding social contexts and notions of sport as being a male preserve that has previously spurred sport sociological analysis (Birrell, 2002; Whannel, 2002b). Preconceptions are thus turned into empirical questions. This allows for the theoretical disclosing of a set of internal mechanisms that are equally significant in shaping notions of sport, media and gender. For example, the social organization of meritocracy is central to understanding gendered differences in sports. When elite athletes succeed, they are glorified and invested with the masculine connotations readily available in the praxis they conduct. When elite athletes fail, their unsuccessful performances

can be explained through reference to counter-masculine associations: femininity and immaturity. In the arena, similar, but more complex mechanisms of this process can be observed. In the boys' team, members were segregated into a first-string and a second-string team based on the coach's evaluation of their respective skills. This segregation was infused with gendered connotations that deemed first-stringers to be serious contenders in a meritocracy headed by the male senior elite athlete. In the girls' team, the same segregation was carried out, but with a strong emphasis placed on the democratic rotation of players among the first and second-string teams. This praxis was informed by the successful national women's team and their emphasis on democracy and harmony. This did not imply that the girls were advised against combative competition, but that aggression, hierarchy and discontent were to be masked with a gender-appropriate smile.

- Are there mechanisms that sustain inequalities in sport other than those revealed by the sociological category of gender?

The move from a primary use of a gender perspective to the primary use of culture as perspective has several ramifications. Power relations are no longer held to be exclusive to gender relations, and gendered meaning is no longer exclusively linked with patriarchy. Importantly, this reconceptualization of gender occurs when analytic focus is no longer constrained by how macro relations of gender-saturated interaction or how interaction upholds this very macrostructure. Instead, I have made an analytic departure from a meso-structure, from an account of how meaning is organized, to show how gender is mobilized to shape and itself be reshaped by codes of meaning. Power has not disappeared from the analysis, but it has taken on a different form; that of culture. Analysis is no longer constrained by a model that preconceives ontological reality, but searches for ontological realities through hermeneutic analyses of empirical data. Even though handball is primarily perceived of as a women's sport in Norway, journalists and athletes devotedly reshape it into a masculine game when played by men. When the national women's team takes to the court, a repertoire of femininity shapes and is reshaped by understandings of the game. During practice, coaches, boys and girls continuously evaluate and reevaluate gendered notions of a good performance. By creatively applying culture in interaction they meaningfully position both self and others within the practice of meritocracy.

Moving from the macro to the meso, from a gendered to a cultural perspective, we can account for how inequalities are rendered tolerable and meaningful, and thereby persist - that is to say those inequalities that are rendered observable in our empirical accounts.

8.1. So what?

Feminist-charged gender researchers manifest the reproduction of and challenges to patriarchy. They can thus provide political interventions to counteract cultural and societal inequalities. What can my research project contribute? I have mapped a set of underlying structures that render the invasion sport of handball meaningful to journalists, enthusiasts and practitioners. The way I see it, this knowledge should make three significant contributions.

First, as argued throughout, this perspective nuances hegemonic gender research in the sociology of sport by highlighting the meaningful dimension of sport and gender. In addition, previous research has investigated the meaning of gender in sport, but this meaning has most often been explained in terms of the reproduction of and challenges to patriarchy. Ambiguity is revealed when mechanisms of reproduction and challenge occur concurrently. A cultural sociological analysis can examine why gendered ambiguity is unmistakably meaningful. The culture structure of handball generates interpretations of the game that are actively gendered by the use of gendered stereotypes, in order to produce meaningful accounts of men and women's as well as boys' and girls' embodied sport practices. While some researchers are concerned with the harmful effects of consuming televised stereotypes (Messner, 2013), this project reveals that such "effects" are filtrated by culture-structured environments that often reshape the stereotypes before they are received and digested. Social actors are not cultural dupes that simply submit to patriarchy through stereotype dynamics.

The second possible contribution of this project has to do with the field of sport practice. This project taps into the influence of sport media and elite sports for youth. Both elite and practiced invasion sports are competitively structured by a code that reckons that successful strategies should involve aggression, sacrifice and cunning performances. This structure is used to evaluate and segregate performances in both youth and elite sports. Journalists actively draw on and bolster this social fact by using specific cultural repertoires with which to produce entertainment. Coaches use cultural repertoires to inform both girls' and boys' strategies for success, and to resolve problems during the season. How journalists and coaches choose from cultural tool kits - with what intents, and with what possible implications - can soften and/or boost meritocratic reasoning. If coaches want to downplay a competitive and sacrificial milieu, then it seems reasonable to argue that cultural resources that bolster significations of meritocracy should be downplayed. However, organized sports are competitive, and it is quite reasonable for many athletes to enjoy and thrive for this aspect of sport practice. Nevertheless, my data show how two handball teams are made up of diverse

actors with diverse intents and ambitions. The composition of individuals, and how it ebbs and flows in subtly varied ways, are far from specific to handball teams. Therefore, I propose a sport sociology that focuses *complexities* in meaning. I urge practitioners to think through what loyalties are produced and at what possible cost (Broch & Kristiansen, 2013).

The third contribution involves the theoretical implications of reading specific sports through the generality of cultural frameworks. To understand meaning-making in Norwegian handball, the analysis “fitted out” the concept of binary oppositions with the discursive depictions of the game. The result of this empirical study was the elucidation of a set of underlying cultural processes that are unlikely to be unique to this sport and setting. Norwegian handball as a socio-historical concept has given this analysis of sport, media and gender a specific and local texture. Furthermore, the project highlights the structured similarities in Norwegian televised conceptions of handball, in Hollywood representations of American football and in practiced Norwegian youth handball. In various regards, this culture structure resembles what researchers elsewhere have analyzed as the patterning of masculine characteristics and patriarchy in the U.S.A. (Messner et al., 2000). Moreover, the culture structure of handball could very well direct meaning-making in non-sporting realms as well. I believe that this notion strengthens the claim of generality and directs attention to why it is that sports are influential in many contemporary societies. It might seem intuitive to say that sport-specific meaning organizes sport-specific meaning making, and this would also be true. However, if we accept the premise stated above, and the analyses presented in the four manuscripts, it seems plausible that sports are equally enjoyable and upsetting due to their intensified focus on specific dimensions of social life. Being a persistent and appropriately aggressive team player, willing to sacrifice one’s personal interests in the name of organizational interests whilst not being too kind to your opponents holds true and remains morally sacred in many a social realm. Invasion sports such as handball can thus become polyvocal symbols in themselves. However, although sports do not merely reflect society, their symbolic and generative grammar nevertheless renders them a powerful means by which to reflect on what is morally good and bad in society.

I hold that complex cultural life deserves complex cultural analyses. Sport researchers need to account for both ideology critiques and investigations into the ways in which cultures make equalities and inequalities meaningful. Sports uphold differences, fair enough, but they also permit sameness and innovation. To properly fathom the complexities of difference, we need to understand the paradoxes of sameness. This binary logic is a generative premise of meaning-making; it should also take center stage and be a premise of our analyses.

9.0. References

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10.0. Notes

¹ A search for ‘cultural sociology’ returned 15 hits, dated post-1990. The search incorporated the following journals: The Sociology of Sport Journal, The International Review for the Sociology of Sport, The Journal of Sport and Social Issues, The Journal of Sport Behavior, Soccer and Society, Sport Education and Society, Leisure Studies, Society and Leisure, Sport in Society. The 15 hits that were accounted for all provided links to a ‘cultural studies’ tradition, and most recently to the 2011 Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) special issue in The sociology of sport journal.

² These typologies are far from exhaustive. There exist as many varieties and similarities within as between the two typological perspectives. Distinguishing between a gendered and a cultural perspective should therefore be understood as constituting an analytic and reductive move, serving to highlight certain differences in their respective analytic ambitions. For instance, whereas the gendered perspectives that dominate sport sociology are primarily ameliorative, the cultural perspective that I use here is primarily analytic.

³ Grete Waitz is a Norwegian marathon runner who has won Olympic and World championship medals as well as nine NYC marathons and two London marathons.

⁴ The Norwegian welfare state can be defined as a ‘social democratic welfare state’ similar to that of its neighboring Scandinavian countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990). It is fair to say that the foundations of such a welfare state were well-established before the oil adventure began. Nevertheless, throughout the 1970’s the Norwegian welfare state expanded greatly. This process was also accompanied by a growth in the number of kindergartens, schools, social security and retirement homes that demanded expansions in the workforce as well. These new jobs were typically occupied by women (Birkelund & Petersen, 2012). The amplification of a social democracy (1950-1980) and strong beliefs in the welfare state’s integrative force further improved gender equality and women’s influence in Norwegian society. During the 1980s and until 2009, women’s employment in Norway rose from 50 to 78 percent, and the proportion of women in higher education rose from 48 until 63 percent. In 2000, Norway had a higher percentage of female political leaders (38,4%) than any other nation (Holst, 2009). Also, images of Norwegians as worldwide negotiators of peace and their place among the worlds’ most generous donators to development aid, even through the *Sports for All* aid (Hasselgård & Straume, 2011), contribute significantly to sustainable images of an inclusive and equality-minded state. Gullestad (2001) argues that this Norwegian regime and its moral community is realized through the institutionalization of the welfare state.

⁵ See The Global Gender Gap report 2013 (World Economic Forum, 2013).

⁶ In 2012 NIF was comprised of 11 867 sport clubs and 2 186 000 memberships in a country of about 5 million inhabitants. Their activities are grounded in values such as “sports joy” [idrettsglede], health, voluntarism, equality, communion and democracy – and aim to provide *sport for all* (Lesjø, 2008; Säfvenbom et al., 2013). Clearly, there is no better legitimization for state funding in Norway than for Norwegian sport to really be for all. That said, the gender relations noted in the contextual chapter, the hierarchical structure of the NIF, as well as the sports clubs’ competitive praxis logics, makes the realizations of sameness through sports a highly problematic issue (Enjolras, Seippel, & Waldahl, 2012; Skille, 2011). Nevertheless, prevailing ideological notions of Norwegian sport define it as a safe haven for child and youth development (Breivik, 2011; Strandbu, 2006). NIF is today, by far, the largest organizer of leisure activities for youth in the country. While many

teenagers drop out of sports, about 70 percent of the population's youth have participated in organized sports (Strandbu, 2006).

⁷ See *The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports* (NIF, 2012) annual report for numbers and statistics: <http://www.idrett.no/omnif/Documents/aarsrapport%20NIF%202012.pdf>

⁸ The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Their mission is to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

⁹ These are, for example, women in "frontline services", such as nurses at day-care centers and retirement homes, performing emotionally demanding work for a low wage and little prestige (Vike, 2001).

¹⁰ North American handball is a game similar in scoring to volleyball. It is played by two or more players, hitting a ball against a wall with their hands, usually whilst wearing a specially designed glove.

¹¹ The ball has a circumference of 22.8-23.6 inches, and weighs 0.94-1.05lbs for men and male youth over the age of 16; a circumference of 21-22 inches and weighing 0.7-0.8 lb. for women over the age of 16.

¹² From 2000-2013, the Norwegian women's team has won one silver and four gold medals in the European Championships, a bronze, two silvers and a gold in the World Championships, and a bronze and two gold medals in the Olympics. The national men's team has never won a medal.

¹³ *Games* concern categorization in ways of organizing and constructing the purposes and structural complexity of sports. Nevertheless, rather than highlighting differences, it centers attention on overlapping cultural understandings and praxis that empirically link various sport forms for their participants and enthusiasts. *Bodies* stress how sports provide a venue for displaying the body in public. Since sport performances are primarily non-verbal, cultural analysts should not ignore the complexity and diversity of bodily communication in and through sports. *Celebrations* emphasize how athletes, spectators and enthusiasts celebrate various sports as performances (with the varying degrees of seriousness this involves). Sports are a valorization of an alternative to everyday life. While some claim that sports are meaninglessly saturated by commercial interests, Dyck (2002) argues that sports allow competent actors to agree, object, and reshape commodities through a shared celebration of memories, moralities, nationalities and celebrities. *Boundaries* highlight how sports provide a means by which to observe, reinforce, redefine, invent and transgress all manner of 'boundaries' (Dyck, 2000). Anthropologists do not interlink boundary work with notions of 'false consciousness' or 'sub-cultures' in *worlds without meaning*. They insist on the multivocal capacities of sports, on athletes' ability to disregard boundaries and the need for researchers to uncover nuanced and flexible hierarchies and purposes in sport.

¹⁴ Hegemony, doxa and discourse are analytic concepts (discussed in more detail later in this thesis) that reveal power relations that are produced in and through culture. In turn, these power relations are often thought to saturate culture and become masked as truths that are taken for granted, even conceived of as *natural*. While these concepts are cultural by definition and therefore presumably deal with meaning, when sport sociologists reference hegemony, doxa and discourse, it often signifies their analytic manifestation of social structures (not culture or meaning -structures) in culture.

¹⁵ Emily Martin (1997) directed our attention to relations between nature, biology and gender. She revealed how explanatory models that emphasized *biological facts* in the natural sciences were saturated by *socio-cultural facts* regarding gender and how this process had important social and stereotypical effects on how we regard men's and women's bodies and reproductive capacities. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2004, p. 349), in accounting for *the five sexes*, claimed that a such processes of stereotyped dynamics should be understood as *a cultural need to*

maintain clear distinctions between the sexes. Her specific focus was directed at intersexual bodies, how they blur and bridge the male/female divide, and how cultural processes reinstate binary distinctions.

Universalists such as Gayle Rubin, Heidi Hartman and Shulamith Firestone emphasized the similarities of women's oppression. Rubin (1975) applied Marx's thoughts on capitalism and his overall *explanatory power* to outline a *sex/gender system* in which capitalism exploits unpaid women's labor. Whereas Rubin abstains from the conceptual use of 'patriarchy' Hartman (1982) critiques the Marxist theorists' attribution of job segregation solely to capitalism. Hartman conceptualizes a *dual systems theory* of patriarchy and capitalism's interlocking implications for female subordination. While Hartman argues that women (and men) must fight this dual system of oppression, Firestone (1997) argues with Marx that women must seize the means of sexual (re)production, thereby abolishing the oppressive gender superstructure that refers back to the sex binary. Through artificial reproduction, women are to be freed from the lengthy process of sexual reproduction, pregnancy and breast-feeding, in turn terminating the sexual relation of reproduction.

Post-structuralists and queer-theorists emphasized women's different experiences of oppression. Zinn and Dill (2005) objected to the false universalism embedded in the concept of 'women' and called for a multiracial feminism that also would account for other social divisions than merely that of men and women. Such theorists acknowledged that women are also affected by racial and class orders. They therefore sought to explore the processes of inequality through which gender interlocks with, for example race and class. Accordingly, Anzaldúa (1990) argued for stimulating a mestiza consciousness that develops tolerance for ambiguity and contradictions across social groups: a *massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness* (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 379). In this wave of embracing complexities Rich (1983) coined the term 'compulsory heterosexuality'. She wanted to encourage heterosexual feminists to critically examine heterosexuality as a political institution. Her notion of a lesbian continuum addressed the 'range' of female-identified experiences and bonding against male tyranny.

¹⁶ Both Markula (2005) and Hall (2005) highlight the move away from psychology as a significant change in developing theories about gender and conducting feminist sport studies. Markula (2005, p. 3) argues that feminist research on women's sport *came to full existence in the 1980s when it moved from psychological considerations of sex differences and sex roles in sport to gender differences and gender roles, to the sex/gender system and to patriarchy and gender relations.* This move has been labeled as a turn to feminist cultural studies in which gender structure is analyzed through notions of hegemony (see also Birrell, 2002).

¹⁷ (See for example: Bolin & Granskog, 2003; Bruce, 2013; Hall, 2005; Fasting, 2005; Hovden, 2010; Markula, 2005; Messner, 2013; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Sterk & Knoppers, 2009; Whannel, 2002b).

¹⁸ In this special issue Connell (2009), draws our attention to the doing of transgendered politics and to the political possibility for changing the conditions for individual accountability of gender thus changing the processes that legitimate patriarchy. Jones (2009) argues that researchers should illuminate the complicated and contradictory ways in which situated interaction is linked to the structural circumstances of inequality. It is time to shift the investigative focus from actors as accountable for doing gender norms, to actors that *strategically choose from a variety of gender, race and class displays depending on situation* (Jones, 2009, p. 92).

Messerschmidt (2009) argues that West and Zimmerman's concept of 'sex category' should be used more forcefully in analyses of gender, because perceptions of male, female and material bodies are highly significant in cultural interpretations of behaviors as masculine or feminine. In a Connellist fashion, Messerschmidt argues

that doing gender is inescapably coupled with an oppressive social structure that needs to be undone. We therefore need to account for how individuals do and undo gender.

¹⁹ The interrelationship between gender regimes and their societal expression of gendered inequalities, through the gender order, can be observed in conceptualizations of *labor*, *power* and *cathexis*. Connell (1987, p. 96-97) argues that these are the three structures that *are empirically the major structures of the field of gender relations*. Labor has to do with the organization of housework and childcare, as well as the segregation of labor markets by gender (Connell, 2005b, p. 74). *Power* has to do with control, ideology and hierarchy in and through institutions such as the state, business, the military, as well as authority and regulation in domestic life (Connell, 2005b, p. 74). *Cathexis* is the patterning of object-choice, desire, desirability and the production of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Connell, 2005b, p. 74). *Labor*, *power* and *cathexis* are 'structural models' that are interlinked, but that enable local and historic comparisons (Connell, 1987, p. 98). Connell goes on to show how these four structural models can be read off in culture: *To sum up: it is possible to see how each of the major structures impinge on the way femininity and masculinity are formed in particular milieus. Conversely, these structures must be seen as the vehicles for the constitution of femininity and masculinity as collective patterns on a scale far beyond that of an individual setting* (Connell, 1987, p. 182).

²⁰ In this text, I do not go into detail about the cultural studies tradition, but present a co-existing critique of the Birmingham School tradition as I discuss Alexander and Smith's critique of Gramscian analysis. According to Alexander and Smith (2003, p. 17), one of the masterstrokes of the Birmingham School was to meld ideas about cultural texts onto the neo-Marxist conceptualizations that Gramsci established. This conceptualization concerned the role played by cultural hegemony in maintaining social relations. Hegemony as an analytic concept stimulated ideas as to how *culture worked* in a variety of settings all the while, *without letting go of comforting old ideas about class domination. The result was a "sociology of culture" analysis, which tied cultural forms to social structure as manifestations of "hegemony" (if the analyst did not like what they saw) or "resistance" (if they did)* (p. 17). The perspective thus fails in relation to what is discussed later as cultural autonomy. Culture often becomes reduced to instrumental reason (elites articulating discourse for hegemonic purposes) or some kind of ambiguous structural causation (discourses being anchored in relations of power).

²¹ The 'production of culture' perspective draws on the sociology of organizations and the sociology of knowledge to push for an intensified focus on contexts of cultural production. These researchers aimed to scrutinize "the ways particular meanings, values and artifacts are generated in particular organizations, institutions, and networks" (Spillman, 2007, p. 924). Importantly, and in turn, to understand how those social contexts influence emergent meaning. This *production of culture* perspective challenged earlier approaches that made over-generalized assumptions about how cultures reflect societies as wholes (Spillman, 2002; 2007). Instead, these studies are historically positioned to highlight how certain production contexts influence particular cultural outcomes. As a representative of this approach, Larsen (2013, p. 54) notes Griswold's (2013, p. 15) *cultural diamond* that accounts for the interrelation between a cultural object, a historically contingent social world, the creator of the object, and its active recipients. Spillman (2002) also highlights Peterson who attributes the emergence of rock (Peterson, 2002[1990]) and country music (Peterson, 1997) to changes within the music industry and its applied technologies, and to the creativity of producers and audiences, rather than to large-scale demographic changes. The *production of culture* has not explicitly influenced my project, but would

have been a powerful means by which to understand the mechanisms behind the production and the reception of sport media.

²² Positivism, Reed argues, was and is an attempt to ground minimal interpretations in observable and measurable evidence. Positivism attempts to ground a certain sort of maximal interpretations in inductive generalizations borne of many minimal interpretations. *Covering laws are maximal interpretations in positivism, and they can be used to “subsume” any number of minimal interpretations* (Reed, 2012, p. 31)

²³ ‘Interpretive empiricism’ emphasizes *the way minimal interpretations need to be constructed with actors’ categories, and the way in which interaction must be attended to closely so as to grasp the construction of various social realities*. The very terms that empiricists wanted to eliminate or “reduce” to observation statements were emphasized by ‘Realism’. Realists argued for a significant role for theoretical concepts in identifying mechanisms, organizing empirical investigations and explaining minimal interpretations. Minimal interpretations can serve to “test” different theories with different ontological commitments to produce the truest maximal interpretation. (Epistemological) Postmodernism places emphasis on the idea that maximal interpretations are exercises in social power and domination. These researchers use the case to develop a politics of the present, or employ it in the service of an overarching vision of history, culture and society. Minimal interpretations are interlocked with the maximal interpretations or politics they supposedly support (Reed, 2012, p. 32-35).

²⁴ Reed (2012, p. 38-40) explains. First, reasons are cues: for the cultural sociologist, it is *absolutely necessary* for the researcher to classify and analyze the subjective origin of social actions and to develop deeper understandings of certain historically-located actors. Second, cultural sociology is nominalist: the cultural-sociological agenda aims to *understand* the subjects under study. Cultural sociology does not ascribe ontological status to the formal structures that its theories articulate. The theoretical identification of “structures” never has direct, concrete grasp of the social actions under analysis. Rather, elucidating these structures prepares the ground for a deeper understanding of the workings of particular symbol sets, at particular times, for particular people. The shared meanings that actually drive action thus combine structural “form” and historical “content”, and only when the investigator has elucidated both can they claim to have arrived at a cultural explanation of social action. Third, cultural sociology is theoretically pluralist: the social world is pluralistic, as opposed to conforming to one ontological scheme. Cultural sociological theories are abstract and only describe the efficacy of culture when “fitted out” by certain concretely efficacious meanings.

²⁵ I will not discuss diverse micro-macro disputes in detail. Some macrosociologists argue that the micro level does not contain the causal laws that the macro level has – or even that the micro level has any valid laws at all. However, Collins (1988) proclaims that *[t]he real energy of the micro –macro dispute has come from the more radical micro positions* (p. 389).

²⁶ The two disciplines also share similarities. Both social anthropologists and cultural sociologists that are concerned with culture and symbol analysis are inspired by the humanities (Gullestad, 1989; Spillman, 2007). Cultural sociologists draw explicit inspiration from anthropologists: for example: Clifford Geertz’s (1973d) and his elaboration of *thick description*, Mary Douglas (1966) and her focus on the *purity and danger* -binary, and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1967) conceptualization of *structural anthropology*. These streams come together to encourage understandings of the social role of culture and meaning, by describing its deep logics and multivocal gestures in a meticulous fashion (Alexander et al., 2012).

²⁷ Following the principle of cultural autonomy; the commentators' meaning-making, and their production of culture, can also be seen as not so much relating to 'handball' as to the 'entertainment genre' and to the 'production relations' of sport media. Many handball practitioners would *not* view the commentators as competent knowers-of-handball, but as entertainers. This remark, if pursued analytically, would perhaps tilt the investigation of handball in Norwegian media to favor the *production of culture* perspective in cultural sociology. What has been pursued, and what became relevant during the analysis of the journalists' commentaries was the cultural sociological notion of *cultural frameworks*. The commentators cited in this thesis can thus be perceived as competent sport journalists who are constrained by the discursive code of handball, but creatively make sense of the game by using diverse cultural repertoires. Nevertheless, the commentators operate within an entertainment genre that is prone to producing dramatic representations, turning losses into hell-like fiascoes and success into sublime glory (Dahlén, 2008a; 2012a) – at times forgetting everything in between.

²⁸ This paradox is multilayered. First, the gendered perspective that dominates the sociology of sport would traditionally understand *the smile* as a means for the women to act apologetically for their participation in a sport that has been rendered masculine. The following conclusion might have noted that *the smile* signifies an emphasized femininity that reproduces female subordination and male domination (Broch, In press). A cultural analysis reveals that the smile is actively used and becomes a perceived means by which to perform effective and successful handball. The possibly feminine significances of the smile, combined with a wide range of other connotations that a smile carries, become a weapon in the handball women's "masculine" endeavors. Second, the polyvocal smile contains several possible significances on the handball court; it can convey the joy of the game, a pleasing feminine appeal, authority, ridicule of an opponent and absolute control of the game. Third, boys and girls, men and women are taught to "strategically" display joy and anger on and off the handball court. In the Norwegian culture of sameness, the smile nevertheless becomes a key symbol for understanding the aggressive behavior of successful female handballers. This subtly varied difference is not easily uncovered, but reveals itself in an analysis of how the smile as one specific form of symbolic behavior takes on many different meanings. Such an analysis elucidates how a smile can create gendered paradoxes whilst understanding the same game, played by different bodies.

11.0. Appendixes

Norwegian Social Science Data Services – certificate of approval

Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste AS
NORWEGIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA SERVICES



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Trygve Beyer Broch
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Norges idrettshøgskole
Postboks 4014 Ullevål stadion
0806 OSLO

Vår dato: 25.07.2011

Vår ref: 27182 / 3 / JSL

Deres dato:

Deres ref:

KVITTERING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 06.05.2011. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

27182	<i>Et komparativt studie av mediert og praktisert håndball</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	<i>Norges idrettshøgskole, ved institusjonens overste leder</i>
Daglig ansvarlig	<i>Trygve Beyer Broch</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstillende kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i melde skjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, eventuelle kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven/-helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk_stud/skjema.html. Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.


Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/prosjektoversikt.jsp>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 01.08.2014, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

Bjørn Henriksen


Juni Skjold Lexau


Kontaktperson: Juni Skjold Lexau tlf: 55 58 36 01
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Denne meldingen gjelder observasjons- og dokumentanalysedelen (inkludert TV-opptaksanalyse) av prosjektet. For at Personvernombudet skal kunne vurdere intervjudelen av prosjektet, må utkast til intervjuguide(r) ettersendes for vurdering i god tid før denne delen av prosjektet skal igangsettes. Disse kan sendes til personvernombudet@nsd.uib.no.

Vi gjør oppmerksom på at eventuelle nye forskningsprosjekter som skal bruke datamaterialet som blir samlet inn i forbindelse med dette prosjektet, må meldes til Personvernombudet på vanlig måte.

FORMÅL

Formålet med prosjektet er å gjennomføre en komparativ undersøkelse av likheter og forskjeller i medias fremstilling av dame- og herrelandslagshåndball, og utforske relasjonen mellom mediehåndball og håndballaktiviteter i to aldersbestemte håndballag.

UTVALG

Utvalget består av et håndballag for gutter og et for jenter, i tillegg til trenerteamene rundt lagene. Ungdommene er i alderen 13-16 år. Totalt antall personer vil være ca 50. I tillegg vil utvalget bestå av et ukjent antall ulike mediekommentatorers fremstilling av dame- og herrelandslagshåndball på TV2 og i VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Dagsavisen, Oppland Arbeiderblad og Fiskaren.

METODE

Opplysningene samles inn gjennom personlig intervju, gruppeintervju, observasjon, bruk av Internettkilder som youtube og klubbens hjemmesider, i tillegg til klubbenes og lagenes årsrapporter og kamprapporter. Videre vil det bli gjennomført dokumentanalyser og videoanalyser av de ulike mediehusenes framstilling av dame- og herrelandslagshåndball. Ombudet legger til grunn at det ikke registreres personidentifiserende opplysninger om trenere, foreldre eller ungdommer som det ikke har blitt innhentet informert samtykke fra.

PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Det registreres direkte personidentifiserende opplysninger gjennom navn, fødselsdato og adresse. Det registreres indirekte personidentifiserende opplysninger gjennom bakgrunnsopplysninger. Direkte personidentifiserende opplysninger lagres separat fra det øvrige datamaterialet, men kan kobles mot det øvrige datamaterialet ved hjelp av en referansekode som kun daglig ansvarlig for prosjektet, Trygve Beyer Broch, har tilgang til. Det vil videre bli tatt videoopptak og fotografi av håndballaktiviteten som foregår i laget. Det tas høyde for at det registreres personidentifiserende opplysninger om foreldrene, men disse blir informert og samtykker aktivt til ungdommens og egen deltakelse i prosjektet.

INFORMASJON OM SAMTYKKE

Utvalget tilknyttet håndballagene for gutter og jenter informeres muntlig og/eller skriftlig om prosjektet. Foreldre informeres skriftlig om prosjektet og samtykker skriftlig til ungdommens deltakelse i prosjektet (jf. informasjonsskriv og samtykkeerklæring mottatt 22.07.2011).

Utvalget av sportskommentatorer informeres om prosjektet ved at det sendes en e-post om prosjektet til de ulike redaksjonene (jf. informasjonsskriv mottatt per e-post 22.07.2011). De

informeres der om muligheten til å trekke seg. Det vurderes som tilstrekkelig at det informeres og innhentes passivt samtykke til deltakelse, siden opplysningene forsker skal analysere er gjort offentlig tilgjengelig.

DATASIKKERHET

Ombudet legger til grunn at bruk av privat pc tilknyttet Internett er i tråd med Norges idrettshøgskole sine rutiner for datasikkerhet. Vi anbefaler at forsker krypterer ekstern harddisk og dokumenter på bærbar pc som inneholder personopplysninger om deltakerne.

PROSJEKTLUTT OG ANONYMISERING

Utvalget vil være gjenkjennbare i rapporteringer fra studien gjennom bruk av fotografier som illustrasjoner. Det innhentes samtykke til denne bruken.

Datamaterialet anonymiseres senest ved prosjektslutt, 01.08.2014, ved at fotografier, eventuelle lydopptak, eventuelle videoopptak og navnelister slettes, mens eventuelle indirekte personidentifiserende opplysninger slettes eller endres på en slik måte at opplysningene ikke kan tilbakeføres til en enkeltperson.

Informed consent

Mediert og praktisert håndball

Forespørsel om deltakelse i forskningsprosjektet

Et komparativt studie av mediert og praktisert håndball

Bakgrunn og hensikt

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i en forskningsstudie om kommunikasjon og samhandling i norsk håndballkultur. I første del av prosjektet tar jeg for meg medias framstilling av norsk landslagshåndball. I andre del tar jeg for meg gutter og jenters håndballpraksis. Oppsal Håndballklubb er et spennende idrettsmiljø der utøvere i midten av tenårene er nært et norsk elitenivå. Jeg ønsker derfor å delta i deres håndballaktivitet. Norges idrettshøgskole er ansvarlig for doktorgradsprosjektet, som skal resultere i internasjonale vitenskapelige publikasjoner.

Hva innebærer studien?

Jeg skal foreta deltagende observasjon av et jentehåndballag og et guttehåndballag i Oppsal Håndballklubb. Det vil si at forskeren deltar i aktivitetene knyttet til treningsopplegg og lignende.

Min deltagelse ønskes foretatt, i samsvar med trenerteamets ønsker, på 2-3 treninger i uken samt tilstedeværelse på kamper/cuper i løpet av sesongen 2011/2012. Hovedfokus vil være på kommunikasjon i treningssituasjoner (utøvere i mellom, mellom utøver og trener) og i kampsituasjoner (mellom utøvere på samme lag, mellom de konkurrerende utøverne, mellom utøvere og dommere, og mellom trenere og disse aktørene).

Frivillig deltakelse

Det er frivillig å delta i studien. Du kan når som helst og uten å oppgi noen grunn trekke ditt samtykke til å delta i studien. Dersom du ønsker å delta, undertegnes samtykkeerklæringen på siste side. Om du sier ja til å delta, kan du også senere trekke tilbake sitt samtykke. Om du har spørsmål i forhold til samtykke, eller lurer på noe om håndballprosjektet mitt, kan du, eller foreldrene dine kontakte meg, Trygve Beyer Broch, på telefon 23 26 24 39 / 40 86 60 07

Hvis du ikke ønsker å delta, vil jeg ikke samle inn opplysninger om deg som enkeltperson under observasjonene mine.

Siden de fleste deltakerne er under 16 år, må også forelder(e) din(e) lese dette skrevet og samtykke til at du deltar i prosjektet.

Mulige fordeler ved deltagelse

Utøvere, trenere, foreldre og klubb vil få tilgang til forskningsresultatene. Om det skulle være noe trenerteamet synes det kan være interessant å rette fokus mot, vil jeg prøve å integrere dette i prosjektet.

Hva skjer med datamaterialet?

Observasjonene skal kun brukes slik som beskrevet i hensikten med studien. Alle opplysninger skal anonymiseres ved prosjektslutt, senest 01.08.2014. Det betyr at eventuelle personidentifiserende opplysninger slettes eller endres.

Opplysningene behandles konfidensielt og det er kun forskeren og veiledere knyttet til prosjektet som har adgang til datamaterialet.

Samtykke til deltakelse i studien

Jeg har mottatt skriftlig og muntlig informasjon og er villig til å delta i studien. Jeg forstår at dette innebærer at opplysninger om meg, slik som beskrevet over, vil inngå i håndballprosjektet.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Foreldres samtykke (for ungdommer under 16 år):

(Signert av foreldre, dato)

(Signert av foreldre, dato)

Trygve B. Broch
Masculine men playing a women's sport?

Abstract

Common Norwegian conceptions of team handball define it as a woman's sport. What happens when Norwegian media portray men playing a women's sport? This article investigates the definitional paradox of Norwegian handball by investigating TV2's representations of men's handball. To develop an understanding of contemporary gender dynamics, Norwegian handball is explored and analyzed as embodying a form of *gender tension*. The socio-cultural solution to such tensions is analytically manifested when the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell 2005), as an ideal symbolic form of masculinity, is combined with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *symbolic power*. Norwegian journalists are analyzed as producing contextually ideal masculinity, challenging common Norwegian conceptions of the sport as a women's game, and resolving possible gendered tension in Norwegian handball through symbolic power. The article concerns the psychosocial and socio-cultural mechanism of gendered meaning-making through symbolic representations. When televised by Norwegian TV2; men's handball becomes a masculine and manly sport.

Keywords:

Sport, gender tension, media, discourse, symbolism

Masculine men playing a women's sport?

Norwegian media representations of male handballers

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Prologue

When the celebrated Kristian Kjelling was supposed to show why he was dubbed, by handball experts, the wild card of the European championship, there was no magic. Just a pointless backhand pass, a turnover, and an unnecessarily spoiled Norwegian scoring opportunity. [...] he became a bit-too-fancy ball-handler [...]. That is when you realize that Johnny Jensen is the better role model and representative for a sport which has still not achieved any results to make one [male players/clubs/organizations egos] grow large. It is him [Jensen] that little boys will make pretend in front of the handball goals in the schoolyard. It is Johnny's ruff play and arched chest which is cool, and at best make a little guy test if the sport [of team handball] is manly enough before football snatches him. BECAUSE there is nothing halfway about Johnny. Did you see what it cost him to maintain the defensive wall [formation] at the end of the game? In the second last attack made by the Croatians, Johnny got kneed in the crotch; NO, right in the nuts. That's the language of Johnny Jensen when he plays defense for Norway; there [in the crotch] centers the pain in which all grown boys have a close relation to, but which Johnny denies because he wears the national jersey and the game can still be won (Sæther 2008, my translation).

Late January 2008 sport journalist Sæther (2008) depicted the Norwegian men's team's exit from the 2008 European championship. The technically brilliant attacker Kristian Kjelling (with timely hair dues, a proposed clothing line and bare-chested displays on tanning salon ads throughout Oslo city), resembles the commodified image of David Beckham; sexy, elegant and somewhat vain. Whannel (2002) argues that such 'modern' men and sport stars sometimes become scapegoats, emasculated, and taunted when they 'fail' to contribute to their respective nation's quest for sport success. In the above citation Sæther blames and feminizes Kjelling as he, according to the journalist, is the cause of Norway's loss and hereby presents a sportsman, clearly more concerned with his fancy

looks and ball-handling skills than winning. Contrary, the rugged, down-to-basics play of defensive specialist Jensen's body is inscribed with masculine meaning and stamina. Accordingly, in Sæther's eyes, Jensen becomes a better role model of manhood, a celebrated hero in a sport where Norwegian men have no merits to make ones ego grow large. The close connection between national identity and the masculine is not the main focus of this article, but is quite explicit and should be kept in the back of our analytic minds. According to the journalist's explicit remarks, Johnny provides a monumental role model for Norway's upcoming male generations. Implicitly, he is so because of his refusal of symbolic castration in a fight against feminine and unmanly behavior on a January evening.

In December 2007, Sæther had this to say about the Norwegian women's handball team who had just won the silver medal in the World Championship: 'The Norwegian handball girls are, alongside Grete Waitz,¹ the most powerful symbolic representation of a new and gender equal Norwegian society' (Sæther 2007). If Sæther's articles (of both women's and men's handball) are critically compared, they appear somewhat oxymoronic. While the national women's team symbolically represents progression in a gender equal Norwegian society, the male handballers are paradoxically and symbolically represented through traditionalist gender stereotypes analytically perceived to reinstate gendered differences among men and between men and women.

Introduction

In a time when many traditional gender binaries are transgressed it is important to explore trends that go against and trends that support transgression (Connell 2008, 134), as well as to investigate gendered meanings produced when transgression and resistance occur. Norwegian handball makes an interesting case for such exploration. No matter how rough and physically demanding, despite common European comprehensions of team handball as a prototypical masculine and male sport, widespread Norwegian conceptions of the game define it as a woman's sport (Goksøyr 2008, Lippe 2001, 2002). The notion of handball as a women's sport in Norway suggests that it is female appropriate, but not necessarily comprehended as typified by traditional feminine characteristics. In Norway, handball is a hard-nosed game mostly played by women and for many, a game where the female body is the norm which defines the game (Lippe 2010) and its esthetic expression. The composition of the Norwegian Handball Federation (69 percent female members), the national women's team international success, along with the resulting extensive and positive media coverage, has arguably shaped Norwegian conceptualizations of the game. Conversely, a minority population within the Handball Federation, many years of poor results and absence from international championships has provided scarce media and popular attention to the men's team. Recently, however, the Norwegian men's team's

participation in international playoffs has sparked an interest in the Norwegian population and sport media. On the 23rd of January 2008 this interest was demonstrated when a Norwegian web paper remarked that the women were being 'challenged by the men' and asked if the Norwegian men's squad was 'About to outshine the handball girls?' (Kvamme 2008).

Regardless of whether the Norwegian men's team might outshine the women's team or not, the web paper article highlights the dominant position of women in Norwegian handball. It also raises questions about socio-cultural dynamics of gendered legitimacy in contemporary Norwegian handball. In this article focus is directed at the television commentary of men's handball to explore this dynamic of gendered legitimacy. The socio-historical definition of Norwegian handball as a women's sport is a ubiquitous contextual feature. The Norwegian handball scene becomes an arena of definitional tension when Norwegian handball is constituted as a women's sport, raising questions such as how the portrayal of Norwegian male handballers should be handled by the media? An investigation of how Norwegian television commentary conveys gendered meanings about male handballers' bodily practices becomes timely.

Journalist Sæther's writings on men's and women's handball set the stage for the article. His commentaries also inspired the theoretical framework that is used to analyze the televised communication of men's handball. The tension that Norwegian handball depicts is analyzed as embodying gender tension (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The socio-cultural solution to such tension is analytically conceived by combining the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005), as a symbolic and ideal masculine construction, with the concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991). Then, a brief backdrop of gendered media studies is charted and the data sample and method are outlined. The analysis is presented in a descriptive narrative style and divided into four interconnected sections: Section I through III discuss the handball context portrayed by media and highlight the symbolic connotations ascribed to Norwegian men's handball. Section IV concisely relates this context to televised representations of Norwegian women's handball and Norwegian handball as an arena of gender tension is discussed.

Theoretical Perspective

Journalists' verbal communication is analytically perceived to retain the power to produce and inspire knowledge and meaning. This is conceived as a symbolic dynamic where particular knowledge inspires its recipients, even without the producer's or the recipient's intent or knowing (Bourdieu 1991). Communication and its potential power dynamic are referred to as discourse in what follows. To capture a specific dynamic of gendered knowledge production through discourse, Connell's (1987, 2002, 2005, 2008) theoretical perspectives are applied:

Gender is the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (Connell 2002, 10).

Bodies, as well as gender, are here analytically perceived as socially constructed. However, the tightly knit connection between reproductive sex distinctions and gender (as well as rigid cultural constructions of a gender binary (Bourdieu 2000)), implies that gender analyses should include discursive, symbolic and bodily dimensions (Connell 1987, 2002, 2005). Within the sports sphere the bodily dimensions of male and female athletes explicitly communicate gender and serve as the basis for participation, the embodiment of ideology, and as vehicles for and production of entertainment (Messner 2002). Connell (interviewed by Mellström 2006, 116) recognizes Bourdieu's emphasis on bodies, but defines 'his stuff on gender' as 'archaic'. Despite Connell's discontent, the two theorists are combined when the interconnected elements of bodily practice (the material), communicative patterns (the discursive and symbolic) and its gendered power implications are analyzed below.

Inspired by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) televised Norwegian men's handball is explored through the concept of arenas of gender tension: 'Gender relations are always arenas of tension' (2005, 853), where dominant notions of gender, femininity and masculinity, and male and female appropriate conduct are continuously challenged and/or reinstated. This implies that symbolic formations of masculinity and femininity are dynamic and in constant battle to achieve legitimacy. How do Norwegian television commentators present men's handball as a legitimate men's sport? Do the commentators evaluate the men in relation to a Norwegian female standard? The chosen theoretical framework allows a scrutiny of this symbolic struggle for discursive legitimacy.

Hegemonic masculinity is a symbolic construct situated at the apex of the gender order, a gender hierarchy valuing this specific form of masculinity and devaluing other masculinities and femininities. Connell (1987, 2005) argues that very few men perform and/or embody prototypical hegemonic masculinity in most everyday encounters. However, through fictional male characters (like action movie heroes) and exceptional men who succeed in displaying contextually ideal forms of masculinity (like sports heroes); some male bodies come to symbolically represent a hegemonic masculinity. Thus the power implications of hegemonic masculinity do not reside in its truth value, but in the symbolic power of representation. Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued for an exaggerated emphasis on structure, an exclusive focus on men, and narrow representation of men's subjectivities (Ekenstam 2006). In this article hegemonic masculinity is used as equivalent to ideal masculinity. This framework reveals an ideal masculinity discourse within the commentators' representation of men's handball, accompanied by a symbolic meaning potential that may resolve possible gender tensions.

Symbolic power, as mechanisms of cultural and symbolic production of meaning (Bourdieu 1991) refers in the following text to the position of journalists who define and produce discursive comprehensions, and the potential in which this discourse's utilized symbols are invested. Through discourse gender constructions become part of the information flow that inspires our psychosocial perceptions of gender. This symbolic dynamic is possible because of the symbols' masked power dimensions, latent even without the producer's or the recipient's intent or knowing (Bourdieu 1991). Through symbolic power, communicated hegemonic masculinity can achieve legitimacy and induce common comprehensions of a phenomenon.

The analysis that follows is contextually and historically situated in relation to Norwegian conceptions of handball as a women's sport. Hegemonic masculinity is explored as a symbolic and metaphorical construct projecting a specific form of manhood devalued by contrasted comprehensions of the unmanly (Ekenstam 2006). The theoretical perspective does not imply that all male Norwegian handball players are reduced to a hegemonic form of masculinity, or that they need the exact same skills to excel and all share or are prescribed one identical masculine identity. Rather, hegemonic masculinity is understood as a televised symbolic and masculine ideal presented and negotiated by the commentators to make sense of Norwegian men's handball.

Gendered Media Depictions of Sport

Through handball practice players learn the ability to use violence in combination with physical skills. Such sports have often been analyzed as offering boys and young men (Messner and Sabo 1994), as well as girls and young women (Sisjord and Kristiansen 2008) an arena for learning, by doing, masculine values. Interviewing Norwegian male handballers, Lilleaas (2007) argues that these characteristics represent a particular form of masculinity. Through verbal and bodily communication gendered discourse color the context of sports (Lilleaas 2007, Messner and Sabo 1994), as well as the portrayal of these sports through media (Dahlén 2008). In general, media images and texts of men's sports regularly produce theatrical and warlike dramas where the contestants battle to prove and perform a hegemonic masculinity often characterized by muscular strength, courage, fighting spirit, bodily invulnerability and the will to combat. This charade has often been analyzed as symbolically reproducing hegemonic masculinity in sports and society (Dahlén 2008, Messner 1990, 2002, Sisjord and Kristiansen 2008, Trujillo 1995). Conversely, Langeland (2009) has documented that also vulnerable masculinities can have similar symbolic power implications. Research has also explored how conflicting masculine identities challenge the notion of sport as simply and smoothly reproducing a hegemonic masculinity (Kinnunen and Wickman 2006).

Norwegian handball makes an interesting case of possible gender transgression and resistance. No matter how rough, physically demanding and defined by masculine characteristics (Lilleaas 2007), even commonly comprehended as a prototypical male sport in much of Europe – widespread Norwegian conceptions of the game define it as a woman's sport (Goksøyr 2008, Lippe 2001, 2002). The image of women's handball has received extensive positive media coverage in Norway. Lippe (2010) concludes that the media representations of women's handball is dominated by the conveyance of physical and mental toughness, democratic relations (both in leadership and among players), and feminine charm. Next we shall examine the characteristics that define the Norwegian male handballer.

Sample and Method

To explore Norwegian media depictions of men's handball, data was collected by recording, the commercial station, TV2's televised representations of five games from the men's World championship in 2007 and five games from the men's European Championship in 2008. With few exceptions, TV2 has been the sole producer of televised Norwegian team handball during the last couple of decades. Almost every game televised by TV2 (both women's and men's team handball) has received commentary from the same two male journalists, including my sample (coded A and B in the following analysis). Although marginal, the analysis also explores newspaper commentary to highlight and add insight to the televised commentary. Since newspaper reports are 'cold' media where there is only the written word that conveys meaning, a different journalistic explicitness is demanded. The two different journalistic approaches are here considered to be analytically complementary. The outlined qualitative inquiry's main interest was gendered meaning-making. The empirical material was collected to focus detailed descriptions, cultural nuances and facets more so than the socially generalizable.

Inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) the commentators' verbal presentation was transcribed and loaded into the qualitative analysis program Maxqda. The texts were then manually coded both data-driven (repetitive themes manifesting in the texts, such as: use of 'intertextuality' and 'metaphors') and concept-driven (themes previously located in other sport discourses, such as 'sport as war' and 'show some guts'). After breaking the texts into segments, the derived concepts were once more related to the texts as whole. Additionally, pre- and postgame analysis (also TV2, coded numerically in the following analysis) and some web and news paper stories were collected during the seasons of investigation to get a broader grasp of the media narratives. Thorough reading was employed, going back and forth between retrieved segments and the whole text, repetitive themes and communicative patterns were pinpointed and scrutinized contextually.

Televised Men's Handball

The stage is set from the very start. The games are conveyed by Norwegian media as highly dramatic, entertaining and exciting. The game of team handball, like most other sports, provides the raw material for such depictions (Broch and Fasting 2009) and is here analyzed as presented by media through a gendered optic. After introducing its viewers to the dramatic and warlike games, the commentators narrate the games as masculine passages for the team, the players, and the nations involved:

I: 10 200 spectators have come to see the game between Norway and Denmark: The teams are playing for a spot in Manheim [Division A playoffs], amongst the great and large, or a trip to Lemgo [Division B playoffs], amongst the much, much smaller.

A: ... we are only seconds away from the titanic clash, the battle of Scandinavia, here in Ostseehalle in Kiel. It's be or not to be, for one of the two Scandinavian countries [Norway vs. Denmark].

A: This is going to be a game for grown men.

B: That's correct.

When games/battles are won, the national team becomes part of the prestigious elite classified as the great and large. In contrast, the loser is pictured as much smaller, rather unimportant. The quotes above, along with media depictions of other male athletes in other countries (Dahlén 2008, Messner 2002, Trujillo 1995), become semantically meaningful when discourses reveal that men's contact sports are games for grown men, implicitly, neither for boys nor women. The metaphors of size, in a highly gendered sport context, are analyzed as twofold. Firstly, elite sports represent an interesting sphere where the (usually) largest, tallest, and still highly motorically cultivated and skilled bodies of our society are celebrated and glorified. Such exceptional bodies may ideologically serve as visual markers of the sex/gender binary (Broch 2011). Secondly, size/growth henceforth comes to signify the symbolic separation from the effeminate boy and the becoming of a grown, large, respectable masculine man. Bourdieu (2000) argues that the phallus is omnipresent metaphorically and symbolically, even though rarely mentioned explicitly, in representations of power and gender. Growth and size are important discursive factors in the Norwegian presentation of men's handball. Through a Bourdieusian analytic perspective, the large male handball bodies are by the commentators symbolically offered and staged as visual and discursive proofs of an arbitrary and socially constructed gender

order. The large male body fascinates the commentators. At a pregame show, earlier games and play sequences were analyzed:

2: For France, Didier Dinar, who here lifts [and throws] Johnny Jensen out-of-the-way. Johnny is no small boy. Dinar only plays defense for the French team: 197 [cm] tall, 104 kilos, and maybe the best defensive player in the world. [Dinar] Picks up Johnny Jensen, as if he was a small boy, and just tosses him aside.

1: It wasn't Jenny Jansen we just saw, it was Johnny.

The televised message is clear: Johnny is no small boy and surely no woman (Jenny), he is an aggressive and manly man fighting for (a dominant) position (on the floor) – and so is his rival. The male body becomes an important contextual, visual and discursive feature. Within this Norwegian media context, both Jensen and Dinar embody hegemonic notions of masculinity. This discursive and symbolic embodiment fuses the masculine and the male within large male bodies. The discursive and social (re)production of gender should not be detached from this highly visual actuality of televised and photographic presentations and production of embodied identities. Connell (2005, 45) argues that 'true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body'. The empirical quotes reaffirm this claim but also show how the masculine/male body becomes a symbolic entity that discursively transcends the athletes' bodies. The commentators' discourse links body dimensions, age and size with success and domination. Victory is enlarged and a large body becomes synonymous with degrees of supremacy and manhood:

B: Løke [Norwegian player] is remarkably strong. Rastvortsev [Russian] stands there and tries to pin him down. He [Rastvortsev] is no little boy [but he cannot hold Løke]

A: Using Løke on defence now. That would not have been possible a couple of years ago. He was like a practice cone [easy to pass]. Now he has grown.

Whether Løke has grown mentally, physically, or aged, is not elaborated upon. However, his new symbolic body size makes it possible to fight off large manly Russians and hold his ground defensively. If players do not conform to this mature, grown, aggressive and hegemonic form of masculinity; they are devalued through feminization, subordinated within a masculine hierarchy and presented as unmanly. By symbolic presence, no actual female presence or comparison is needed to produce a distinct gender order. Defeated by

an opponent, the Norwegian men's team is symbolically portrayed as small, passive, feminine, boyish, vulnerable, even stripped naked. These characteristics signify that to behave manly and sustain a masculine appearance is far from always an easy task:

B: It's just too naïve, standing there, waiting [on the opposition]. Really, we know that there will be fired shots from a distance; we need to step up and out. Løke backs down, no one is interested in making the tackle. It's just silly.

B: We cannot become passive. Buchmann [Norwegian] needs to dare, dare to attack. [He] stops and just drops the ball. We need to make body contact and move the ball cleanly.

B: Why can't we make the substitutions as fast as we should? They [the opposition] strike like lightning [and score]. [...]

A: Yes, well, we are shorthanded and still have to make the substitutions. So we are in an incredibly vulnerable situation. We are standing buck-naked, without a thread, in the middle of the city centre! It's not easy!

Becoming men

Being an elite athlete puts you at the centre of attention. This is a vulnerable position where the opposition can and will try to take advantage of your mistakes – for the audience to cheer. Media narratives enhance this actuality. The metaphor of being stripped naked by the opposition is highly visual and positions the naked as an object of the gaze, judgement, humiliation and shame (Berger 1972). Stripped of clothes, being taken advantage of and losing one's power/masculinity (Connell 1987), nakedness expresses the tension between pride and shame (Giddens 1991, 66). Paradoxically, there might be nothing more masculine than the naked male body and it may therefore be displayed with much pride. Public nakedness and exposition to the gaze is, however, a highly judgmental and vulnerable position as well. In the context of many sports, the opposite of power, pride and masculinity is shame, humiliation, femininity (Wachs 2006) and the unmanly. Lilleaas (2008) argues that this is indicative of practiced team handball in Norway as well. In the Norwegian media context, the male athletes are discursively under the constant threat of feminization and infantilization – a threat of devaluation. Consequently, the symbolic and discursive media depictions of men's team handball hold the symbolic power to construct an arena where the participants also can discursively achieve the pride and status of manhood:

A: Nicely defended on the Russian fast break. Yes, Thomas [Norwegian player] doesn't stand around with his hat in hand debuting in the European Championships.

B: Why should he. Fast as a lightning and stands tall in the duel. [...]

A: [...] He's brilliant on the fast break. Welcome to the team Thomas!

A: Andre Jørgensen [Norwegian player] is set up [to score]; on ground, at sea, and in air as well! Just like Espen Askeladd.

Thomas, the rookie, is no longer a shy and respectful boy who stands timidly with his hat in hand, waiting for the adults (the hierarchically superior) to respond and command. 'No, no, boy. This must come to an end. Do not scurry into the living room, before you have taken off your hat. Did you forget? That's not nice' – goes the old but commonly known Norwegian edification song by Margrethe Munthe ([1907] 2002). The song implicitly communicates how young men and boys symbolically should perform reverence (quietly taking off their hat) and respect their parents and the symbolic hierarchy of age and gender. Thomas, the young rookie, now takes charge, is fast and powerful like lightning and through his performance on the handball court; he is praised by the commentators and welcomed to the team of grown men. Thus, symbolically positioned higher in the age-gender hierarchy: Amongst grown authoritarian men. Andre Jørgensen, another youngster is compared with the mythical fairytale figure Espen Askeladd, also commonly known by Norwegians. The fairytales about Espen Askeladd are narratives of a boy on his way to becoming a man. On his quest for merits, away from the family's safety and open fireplace (hence the name Askeladden – Aske=Ash) he encounters many obstacles and battles huge, aggressive trolls (much like Jensen and Dinar). Askeladden's kind and clever attitude usually earns him the ultimate prize: His Manhood, that is; the princess, and half the kingdom. In accordance with Bettelheim (1975) fairytales (and edification songs) are here analyzed as bearers of psychosocial and cultural knowledge. The commentator's use of imagery from well known cultural repertoires becomes a symbolic means to make sense of and interweave male handball practice with other gendered narratives. Within the narratives of televised sport and fairytales; Thomas, Andre and Espen Askeladd are all striving to become adult and respected Norwegian males.

A: The only one who can relax is his majesty King Harald, who is witnessing this fantastic show in Drammen Arena. For King and Fatherland, literally speaking, the last twelve and a half minutes [remaining of the game].

Sport as war

To achieve manhood, to become worthy men within this media discourse, Norwegian handball men need to hustle hard, be courageously willing to duel with their enemies of the day, show no fear of injuries or pain, dominate others by use of physical power and advanced bodily skills, and be physically tough and strong. They need to master the context of televised sport war (see Trujillo 1995):

A: We are not going to present a game analysis during half time; we are going to do a movie critique – of a Western.

A: Metlecic [Croatian], looks like he's been to war. He has got bandages and patches all over his face.

B: Well done by Johnny Jensen [Norwegian], moves his feet nicely, steps up and fights and battles Nagy [Hungarian].

The use of a particular discursive sign or symbolic representation often results in the emergence of other specific signs and symbols which are contextually appropriate (Berkaak and Frønes 2005). The quotes above do not only show empirical examples of the discursive construction of sport as war in Norway, it also illuminates the commentators' discursive positioning of men's handball in close proximity to other hyper masculine discourses. Within the realm of televised men's handball, intertextual and symbolic references are drawn to brutal warfare and action movies, rather than to romantic Hollywood features. The highlighted attributes stressed above are considered by the commentators to fit well with other traditional and dominant masculine themes and domains. For example: war and the military, action and western movies, cartoon heroes, and so on:

A: It's quite like what we read in the [cartoon series of the] Phantom: It's an old jungle saying that the Phantom has a thousand ears and eyes. In the World cup, words are spoken of Fritz [German goalie]: He has a thousand hands. Not too unlike the Phantom then.

A: Jepp, Festus is right around the corner with his coffee mug. Because it does not only smell like, it looks like Gunsmoke right now.

B: Yes, this is, this is like a Western [television series Gunsmoke].

Discursive gender constructions, as well as signs and symbols, are patterned and chained. In the specific case of Norwegian televised men's handball: Masculinity is not necessarily inherent in the male body, it must be achieved and continuously preformed. If performed adequately, the male handballers will be discursively presented by the commentators as manly men and forceful handball warriors. By discursive sport rhetoric: The winner dominates, the loser is dominated:

A: They are making mistakes [Angola loses possession of the ball], and gets a taste of the Norwegian whip. Here [swing] by Skjærvold [who scores].

B: We are back in a better offensive rhythm – doing collective things all the way. Where we fled, almost as frightened hens, yesterday against Slovenia, we are now [being] collective.

The loser is being dominated, whipped, and by the commentator presented as resembling frightened and chaotic hens (female chick). Words highlight certain aspects and obscure others. Implicitly: The winner and dominator is (symbolically) whipping and subordinating his opponent. Through the media narrative, domination may cause the opposition to flee, regardless of the game's masculine ethos. The handball men have to repeatedly perform well to be inscribed with masculine meaning and manhood. Success becomes part of a continuous masculine passage for the team, the players, the nation at interest, even the reputation of Norwegian men's handball as a whole:

A: It's all about whether Norwegian men's team handball is going to ignite, or if it's going to sink back into the ditch it has been in for all too many years.

A: This match is all about the survival of Norwegian men's handball! It is so for the Danes as well! But we are red, white and blue today! It's that blue stripe in the flag that separates us now!

An arena of tension

The analysis above manifests the commentators' symbolic discourse. I will argue that within the discourse resides the power (Bourdieu 1991) to solve possible gender tension through the symbolic construction of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 853). When Norwegian media portray male handballers and produce men's handball as sport entertainment, the notion of Norwegian handball as a women's sport seems to influence implicit as well as explicit symbolic meaning-production. Rather than explicitly portraying male handball players as performing a women's sport, compare

their achievements to a female standard, the depiction is similar to what earlier researchers have documented in other male dominated contact sports (Dahlén 2008, Messner 2002, Trujillo 1995). The implicit solution to gender tension, manifest analytically in the commentators' use of intertextuality, metaphors and gendered symbolism. The fantastic and fictive representations of men's handball inspire psychosocial perceptions of men's handball and mask certain power dimensions of the communication that are here analytically revealed.

When intertextual and symbolic references are used to construct discourses in new and creative ways, it signifies a discursive drive for socio-cultural change. On the contrary, when intertextual and metaphorical references are intertwined in conventional ways, it signifies a drive for the reproduction of dominant ideologies (Berkaak and Frønes 2005). Media texts with high degrees of stereotypical references and symbolism are regarded in the same way. Quite convincingly, the commentators' symbolically (re)produce a distinct traditionalist masculine ideal continuously threatened by the unmanly. This pattern of masculinity dominates the discourse of televised men's handball and constructs intertextual linkages between various other hyper masculine pop cultural discourses. Nevertheless, the journalists feel a need to overcompensate:

A: I understand now why they call men's handball the fight sport with a ball. There are tackles all over.

A: That it [the game] was going to be tough, that we knew. So are the women's games between Norway and Hungary, and so it is, to an extreme degree, when the men are playing.

The need to overcompensate becomes analytically clearer when the commentators' presentations of men's handball are compared to that of women's handball (Broch forthcoming). The two productions are commented by the same two male journalists and are remarkably similar. The contextual features of being a contact sport saturate both broadcasts. Also women's handball is at times presented as sport war, but this is not elaborated to the same metaphoric, symbolic, and intertextual extent which is the case when televising men's handball (see also Broch 2011). The context of handball discursively avails the transition from boy to man, a transition where femininity and the unmanly is a direct threat to symbolic manhood. Even presentations of women's handball is influenced by elements of discursive femininity as prohibiting game efficiency, but also as part of a feminine appeal (Broch, forthcoming). In the commentators' narrative of men's handball the large male body is brought to the center the spectator's attention. Here it is staged as the symbolic male power potential of hegemonic masculinity and as visual proof of an ideal masculinity embodied. The handball game is the same for both male and female players.

However, the way this context is understood and presented by the commentators and the symbolic meaning ascribed differs (Broch, forthcoming). These symbolic comprehensions retain the symbolic power to induce specific understandings of male and female Norwegian handball.

TV2 symbolically reconstitutes handball, when played by men, in a new condition: As something different than when played by women. According to the journalists both Norwegian women and men fight on the handball court, but men appear to fight a bit rougher. Men's handball is more similar to typically male dominated and masculine fight sports, like mixed martial arts, the commentators conclude. Consequently, the implicit intertextual, metaphoric and symbolic pattern is by the commentators explicitly underlined. Stereotypical boundaries between men's and women's handball, between the masculine and feminine, the manly and unmanly, what is male and female appropriate conduct are reinstated. In this manner possible gender tension in Norwegian handball is symbolically and temporarily resolved. Notably, the media is 'selling' the product of sport entertainment and exaggerations are to be expected. There might be a journalistic need to differentiate the male from the female television product for both spectators and sponsors.

Conclusion

Both Norwegian men and women play the sport of handball, a game that in Norway is constituted as a women's sport. Analysis has shown that the Norwegian commentators resolve the gender tension in team handball by emphasizing the games masculine characteristics and by both implicitly and explicitly communicating: It's just that male handball players are tougher, bigger and stronger. A combination of Bourdieu's (1991) and Connell's (2005) theoretical contributions manifests the interlocking dynamics of symbolic and bodily dimensions in the discursive production of gendered knowledge. By challenging the greatest handball players of the world, young men may discursively become grown men. The body of a grown man is discursively staged as a symbolic contrast to what is commonly perceived as feminine, female, boyish and unmanly. Intertextual references to the military and other traditionally masculine domains furthermore enhance this gendered contrast. Defining men's handball as such, the televised depictions of men's handball link masculine symbolism and metaphors to the bodily performances on the field. The dialectic connection between such symbolism and definitions of the masculine furthermore reinforce gendered stereotypes as embodied identities and cultural ideals. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that this televised discourse provides a temporary solution to gender tensions in Norwegian Handball.

The specific case of Norwegian team handball, as a distinct arena of gender tension, might bring insight to more general societal processes of discursive definitional tension. In

a time when many traditional gender binaries are transgressed we should consider trends 'that go against equality as well as those that support equality' (Connell 2008, 134). The stereotypical media presentation of men's handball paradoxically contradicts, even over-compensates for, common Norwegian comprehensions of handball as a women's sport. The contradiction creates antagonist discourses of knowledge, gender tension, resolved by symbolic references to traditional gender binaries represented by the ideal of hegemonic masculinity within this context. At the moment of mediation, the game of men's handball is constituted as a male sport, it's contestants as masculine, and there is no need for further legitimizing of men's participation in what Norwegians have and still commonly perceive as a woman's sport. These contestants are surely masculine men playing a man's game.

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Note

- 1 Norwegian born marathon runner; won Olympic medals as well as nine NYC marathons.

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Trygve B. Broch is currently engaged with PhD research concerning the mediation and practice of Norwegian team handball. Also working on a research project exploring the cultural significance, with special interest in leisure activities, of Oslo's bordering woodlands. Other areas of interest include symbolic constructions in lived and mediated practice of sports, and manifestations of gender and power relations through communication.

Article #2

Borch, T. B. (2014). "Smiles and laughs - all teeth intact": A cultural perspective on mediated women's handball in Norway. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 7(1), 56-73.

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Article #3

Borch, T. B. (accepted with revisions). What can Al Pacino teach Norwegian athletes: A Norwegian coach's ritual use of Hollywood media to produce team culture. *Sociology of Sport Journal*.

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The Cultural Significance of a *Smile*
An ethnographic account of how sport media inspires youth sport

Abstract

This article explores the cultural significance of smiles in Norwegian women's team-handball. Throughout the 2011-2012 season I observed how four coaches evaluated and used media depictions of women's handball as they educated 13 year old girl handballers. Media representations of smiling female athletes inspired the coaches' instructions. Accordingly, they attempted to convey the pragmatic logic of the smile to their players. A cultural sociological perspective allows investigations of how competent subjects mobilize, mold, transform and reproduce meaning. I aim to develop an ethnographic account of why and how symbolic smiles inspired the girls' praxis and to examine how this smiling conduct is shaped by and shape broad conceptions of sport and gender. Analysis reveals that *the smile* takes on situated meanings to encourage what the coaches perceive as appropriate strategies towards success – and that the cultural significance of the smile resides within its manifold capacities to induce comprehensions and resolve problems.

Keywords: | Ethnography | Cultural Sociology | Culture-structure | Structural Hermeneutics | Performativity | Sport | Media-use | Harmonious meritocracy |

Geertz's (1973) argues that behavior + culture = meaningful gesture. Without ethnographically situating behaviors in culture, or what Geertz defines as *thick description*, their meanings remain hidden. Below I develop a thick description of an upward curving of the corners of the mouth: a smile. A smile can suggest pleasure and amusement, but it can also express control, ridicule, even contempt. While what we often perceive as an authentic smile is closely interlinked with spontaneity, the above definition explicates the manifold cultural meanings that can be inscribed and derived from a smile.

I show how *the smile* became important in a Norwegian youth handball team – how it was taught and learned, why its meanings varied, and how it influenced action. I had previously documented journalists' emphasis on *the smile* as a trademark of the Norwegian women's national handball team (Author). During fieldwork I was therefore struck by the reappearance of *the smile*. As a participant observer I closely watched how coaches communicated with each other and their team of 13 years old girls. More specifically, how the coaches evaluated media presentations of smiling women handballers and taught its semiotics to the girls. Smiling media heroines inspired coaching practices and strategies of play at the youth sport arena: I witnessed the socialization of *the smile*. I therefore explore how meanings were inscribed and derived from recurrent use of *the smile* in the girls' team.

I first introduce team handball to inspire understandings of how the game is played and the possible meaning-making this encourages. Then the fundamental research methodology and method are outlined. For example, observations did not exclusively focus gender, but allowed multifaceted notes about a culture where gender was occasionally revealed as a relevant dimension. The theoretical perspective accordingly motivates thick description of how meaning-making in the girls' team and significances of *the smile* were organized by a culture-structure. A 'culture-structure' can be understood as a semiotic configuration where signifiers derive meaning from their relations in a system of signs: a

code (Spillman, 2007). Importantly, a culture-structure is a meso-structure. It must not be mistaken as a macro- (societal) or a micro (personal interaction) structure (see Smelser, 1997). I investigate how the meso-structure of institutionalized handball direct situated thoughts, actions and interactions at the arena. Analysis establishes an account of the semiotic code that constrains the observed practice – then hermeneutically scrutinizes how the coaches and the girls creatively applied *the smile* to shape comprehensions and actions within this culture-structured potential.

Norwegian handball and gender

Handball or team handball is a fast-paced game involving two teams of seven players. Participants pass, throw, catch and dribble a small ball with their hands while trying to score goals. Two 30-minute halves, separated by a 10-minute half-time break, is played on a rectangular playing court (131 feet (40m) long and 66 feet (20m) wide). The court consists of two goal-areas separated by a playing-area. Each team has a goalie minding the net and two teams of six on-court players. Handball is a contact sport where participants combine physical violence with tactical and technical ball handling skills. Defenders are not allowed to tackle from behind and consequently attempt to stay in front of attackers to deny easily delivered shots or any attempts to jump into the goal area. This is done by using the chest to tackle and arms to lock down attempted shots.

In Norway handball is primarily constituted as a women's sport (Author, 2012; Lippe, 2010). Handball as a women's sport in Norway suggests that it is female appropriate, that women are in majority within the Norwegian Handball Federation, huge international success by the national women's team and subsequent media attention, but not that the game is typified by traditional femininity. Conversely, Norwegian male handballers remain marginal to their celebrated female colleagues (Author, 2012).

Methodology: Field observations and thick description

Believing that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (Geertz, 1973: 5) and cultural analysis to be the hermeneutic pendulum between the whole and part-whole elements that is culture (Geertz, 1974; Fangen, 2010). Below I investigate how *the smile* was made a significant cultural resource in a handball team and what it came to connote within this culture. The account is a venture into thick description of shared meaning that is continuously negotiated, contested and reaffirmed (Alexander, 2003; Spillman, 2002b; Swidler, 2001). Thick description refers here to the notion of ethnographic accounts as interpretations of agents’ situated meaning-making – non-reducible to researchers’ manifestation of micro- or macro- structures alone. I juxtapose verbal, nonverbal, textual and symbolic practices as equally valid data and give purchase to variation within meso-constraints.

Prolonged observations, where contrasts and paradoxes challenge and support the researcher’s prior and ongoing assumptions (Fangen, 2010), were carried out in Norwegian girl handball. Two teams refrained from hosting an observer, but the on third phone call a group of coaches enthusiastically agreed to demonstrate their communicative practices. The girl athletes and their parents were orally informed about the project and without exception they all consented. The team consisted of 25 athletes 13-14 years of age, one male and one female head-coach who had previously played handball on an elite level, and two assistant coaches. They were all in their late 40s and early 50s. The youth athletes were segregated by skills and separated in two season-series. However, all *level 1* players played one or more games in the *level 2* series. The team practiced three to four times a week, participated in two season-series and a couple of cup-tournaments.

My role as a researcher included participation in the coaching staff and assisting the coaches during practices and games. This role was to me, and after a while to most research participants, preferable as it enabled close interactions and allowed me to contribute instead of hamper their practice. Throughout the 2011-2012 season I attended two practices a week and several games: about 75 field days resulting in an approximate 150 000 word note. Analyses of the girl team is informed by a similar stay in a 15 years old boy team in the same club (Author, 2013) and therefore frequent and prolonged presences at the club arena. Also work on televised men's and women's handball (Author, 2012; 2014) inform the investigation. I argue that these various empirical contexts reveal comprehensions and representations of handball as structured by a semiotic code: a meso-structure. Working on this particular article field notes were thematically coded (see Fangen, 2010) with special interest in 'media-use' and 'the smile'. These part-whole elements were then hermeneutically scrutinized in relation to the substantial notes from the girls' team, an outlined culture-structure and topical research on sport, gender and media.

Theoretical perspective: Culture as meaning-making

I combine two mid-range conceptualizations of culture. First, building on Durkheimian insights about deep structures of discourse I drawn attention to and map a 'culture-structure'. This allows a study of culture as analytically independent and sometimes casually efficacious for both institutional and interactional dimensions of meaning-making (Alexander, 2003; Larsen, 2013; Spillman, 2002b; 2007; 2012; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). Hermeneutically mapping a meso-structure is achieved by bracketing out micro and macro social relations to enable a *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) of situated meaning-making. This strategy is 'structural hermeneutics' (see *the strong program* in Alexander, 2003). Accordingly, I map the discursive code of Norwegian handball. This hermeneutically

developed meso-structure concentrates the institutionalized handball game, its specific set of rules, accompanying norms and dominant conceptions of successful strategies of play.

Second, interaction and practices are themselves analyzed as processes of situated meaning-making. This allows studies how competent subjects and groups draw fluidly on symbolic repertoires (Larsen, 2013; Spillman, 2002b; 2007) or what Swidler (2001) define as “toolkits”. Swidler (2001: 89) also provides the analytic metaphor of settled and unsettled lives contrasting situations where people operate within established strategies of action and situations where new strategies of action are developed and tried out. Alterations in culture often occur in unsettled times when actors use “toolkits” to improve their strategies of action. Strategies of action refer to the “ways actors routinely go about attaining their goals” (Swidler 2001: 82). I explore how *the smile*, as a symbolic resource, is mobilized to guide the team’s expressive strategies of action – actions that are constrained by a culture-structure.

The smile is a highly visual and performed symbol. Developments on performativity therefore sift through the analysis: recognizing that only through (inter)actions are ideologies’ and moralities’ meaningfulness realized (Goffman, 1992; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010; Alexander, 2004). Inspired by Hochschild (2012) I explore how performed smiles in the girls’ team induce their performed feeling. Researching flight attendants Hochschild exposed the emotional skills needed of service workers who interact with costumers. She defined these skills as emotion management: “Acts of emotion management are not simply private acts; they are used in exchanges under the guidance of feeling rules” (Hochschild, 2012: 18). Feeling rules are the standards used to determine the worth of feelings. Through these rules we pay tribute to each other in the currency of the emotion management: “we pay, overpay, underpay, play with paying, acknowledge our dues, pretend to pay,” as we make our try at sincere civility (Hochschild, 2012: 18). I argue that the discursive code of handball also structures the feeling rules of the girls practice. The coaches

prefer their young athletes' to manage feelings in a manner that is consistent with particular strategies of action. *The smile* becomes an important currency in the teams' exchange of feelings.

Analysis

Culture-structuring the processes of meaning-making

Jason stops the girl's play sequence by shouting: "What's most important ALWAYS keep your eyes on the goal! Look here." Jason picks up the ball and with his 220 lbs heavy, 6 foot 8 inches tall body, thunders toward 13 years old Lisa on defense. Lisa covers her eyes and bends her neck and shoulders in apparent fear. "If the defender does not engage, it will bang! Trine Haltvik probably scored 10.000 goals by banging the ball passed defenders. Like this – in a determined stride towards the goal – and after the shot – comes the follow-through and the arm." Jason illustrates by throwing his arm at Lisa's neck and shoulders, stopping an inch from her body. Lisa theatrically hides her face in her arms while Jason portrays Haltvik's fearless and fearful shooting technique. [As a defender, when the follow-through comes] "You cannot stand with your hands on your hips" Jason finishes [1/12]. The practice is over, but some of the girls are still playing around. Erika picks up the ball and gives herself a live game commentary: "*Nora Mørk and Heidi Løke!*" She starts her own imaginary attack sequence passing the ball on to Jessica who shoots into the open goal "*Ye(eeee)ah!*" they collectively holler [12/1].

Everyday media-use within groups play a crucial part in how young people understand selves and others (Kvalem & Strandbu, 2013). The observed girls make active use of available female handball idols as they understand selves, others and the game they practice. During the fieldwork Nora Mørk and Heidi Løke were two of the brightest stars on Norway's national team. Both players are renowned for their fearlessness. The 22 years old Mørk returned to the court on the 30th of April 2013 after a career of six knee surgeries and 717 days on the disabled list. In the observed girl team the coaches try to stimulate mindful fearlessness. It's considered a positive presentation of self and team (Goffman, 1992). In the eyes of the coach, no one better exemplifies this performance than the national heroin Trine Haltvik.

Handball is best played by the young girls when they are aggressive both on offense and on defense. Keeping their arms raised and eyes on the goal offensive players are a constant shooting-threat. With arms raised defenders perform readiness to engage attackers. The binary opposition is the passive player, with a passive posture and arms along the sides. The young girls learn that being active, aggressive and combative is a success formula. They are also instructed not to be kind, but mean:

The two head coaches gather the girls and explain to them that when playing handball, one has to be a little rough and tough. Coach Katherine complains that "*You cannot be so[ooo] kind!*" and puts weight on all the right syllables. While Jason continues she tightens Stefanie's ponytail, gently shakes Susan's necklace and friendly picks at Mary's earrings. Mary smiles back and quickly removes her jewelry. Jason is still talking: "We have to practice a lot. And it's like Katherine has said; you have to be a little boyish up here." Jason looks thoughtful while he holds his right hand besides his head and slowly rotates

his wrist, making it look like he is adjusting or tightening sophisticated clockwork. “You have to be a little gangsta.” He continues. “This is not school where there is someone who is making you behave. This is handball. *Girls are made of porcelain.*” Jason quickly ends his speech and puts his hand behind his ear, wanting and waiting for the girls’ furious response. It never comes. An eternity of 4 seconds pass and I’m about to scream “no!”, then suddenly some of the girls awaken and reply “*NO!*” Jason has received his answer and moves on “How do you think Katherine played the game? *SHE was THOUGH!*” Head coach Katherine’s eyes ignite, she nods her head and smiles “Yup, I dished out a lot of punishment, and I received my fair share”. She laughs kindly, but her eyes are still burning as if she has been reminded of something she’s proud of, something that has defined her, and made her who she is today [15/3].

Traditional gender markers of a young girl’s heterosexual femininity, such as earrings and necklaces, are to be removed because they can cause injuries during play. The last remaining and game appropriate gender signifier, the ponytail (Daniels, 2009), is tightened to withstand the action. In the words of Jason, game exertion is signified by an adjustable boyish mindset and the metaphoric expression of “being a little gangsta”. The semiotic opposition of being girlish, frail and made of porcelain is neither game efficient nor an appropriate reputation for these girls. Handball is a game that requires a different gender performance than the girls might be urged to practice elsewhere. The coaches therefore attempt to clarify and fuse pragmatic meaning with cultural expectations (Alexander, 2004; Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010). At the arena being a girl is no more threatened by – the cunning, combative and aggressive boy – or the frail and passive girl of porcelain – but the

stereotypes are actively used to guide particular strategies of action. The doing of handball is playfully informed by stereotyped ways of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Handball players are schooled to aggressively sacrifice their bodies and to disregard own and others pain and the risk of injuries. Some of the young research participants admitted that “It hurts a little to wrestle like this”, while others attempted to convince selves and bystanders that “Pain is over-rated!” (Field notes 19/1). Similar use of contact-sport argot has been observed in numerous other studies on contact sports (Theberge, 2000; Messner & Sabo, 1992), in the Norwegian televised presentation of men’s and women’s handball (Author, 2012; 2014) and in practiced boy’s handball (Author, 2013). Based on these prior and present observations I have mapped a culture-structure of handball. I suggest that this code constrains how the observed team understand their own practice – how and why they develop particular strategies of action. Table 1 illustrates the code that conceptualizes successful handball strategies as aggressive *not* passive, sacrificial of body and mind *not* (too) selfish, and being a ‘little mean’ *not* kind towards opponents. Table 1: The culture-structure patterns successful and unsuccessful strategies in the institutionalized game of handball.

Culture-structure	
<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind

This binary culture-structure interestingly resembles a traditionalist macro-gender-structure: Connell’s *gender order* (Connell, 1987; 2005; Messner & Sabo, 1992). Previous researchers have therefore documented male contact sports as (re)producing hyper

masculinity, manhood formulas, and resolving contemporary ‘masculinity crisis’ (Messner, 2002). Contrastingly, female sports have been analyzed as conflict ridden negotiations of performed masculinity in endless challenges and reproductions of patriarchy (Bäckström, 2013). Part of this dynamic has arguably changed and girlhood now often legitimately incorporates the “masculine” qualities of competitiveness and athleticism (Strandbu & Hegna, 2006; Author, 2014; Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010). The observed girls’ handball performances are therefore analyzed here as *inside-gender*; within the limits of what is today culturally defined as gender appropriate (Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010). This does not imply that we should disregard the abstract resemblances between the meso-structure and a macro(gender)-structure. Far from, it was even commonsensically acknowledged by Mary:

I turn to assistant coach Mary and ask her if her daughter participates in other activities than handball. “Yes, she takes dancing lessons on Mondays – first handball practice and then two hours of dancing. That’s why we always rush out of the arena on Mondays. So, that’s when she dances, it’s a little bit more feminine [activity than handball]. [Field notes 17/10].

In line with dominant trends in prior gender research practiced handball, even though defined as a women’s sport in Norway, Mary does not perceive handball as typified by stereotypical femininity. However, rather than analyzing the oppositions of boyish/girlish and masculine/feminine as mere reflections of a structured and structuring (macro)gender structure (like Bäckström, 2013; Connell, 1987; 2005; Messner, 2002; Messner & Sabo, 1992), I analyze Mary’s discursive expression as a culture-structured potential that constrains, allows and catalyze actors’ *use of gender* in multiple ways. Revealed is how Mary and the team powerfully wielded stereotypes, not to reduce players to their representations,

but to make sense of their praxis and to stimulate specific strategies of action. Table 2 shows how a toolkit of gendered stereotypes is used to ascribe certain meanings to successful and unsuccessful handball strategies. Table 2: Stereotypes are used to aid comprehensions of the positive dimension of the handball code: namely acting a little boyish and “gangsta”.

Structural hermeneutics	
<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind
<i>Boyish</i>	<i>Girlish</i>
Being Gangsta	Made of Porcelain

The smile in Norwegian media

The national women’s handball team is renowned for the players’ charismatic smile – a symbol that signifies gender appropriate expressions of aggressive and successful handball practices (Author, 2014). *This smile’s* meaning potentials were also manifested in a newspaper article during my period of observation. In *Aftenposten* the national women’s handball team was cheered as the most popular sport team in the country – regardless of sport and gender (Bugge, 2011). Under a photograph of two smiling representatives, dressed in sports apparel, one interviewee explains: “We are affable and enthusiastic. I have always admired the handball-women, long before I made the team myself.” The other player proclaims that “I think the athletes are good at showing off sports-joy [idrettsglede] and commitment. It’s contagious. Everything goes easier when in a good mood. This is something

we are conscious of. We work on it all the time, and it has an effect on opposing players as well.” The two female athletes admit that success is an important factor that makes the presentation of joy a lot easier. However, a lot of effort goes into communicating the joy of the game: “There should be no visual doubt that these players think handball is fun.” concludes the journalist. “The strategy is that the opponent never knows if [our] players are worried or disappointed. We know that body language has an enormous effect.” adds the current Norwegian male head coach. The journalist writes that the head coach was astounded to see happy girls already in 1986 when he witnessed the national team win a World Championship bronze medal. “Since that time it has been part of our [handball] culture. Throughout the years all players have had a sparkle [glimt] in the eye, a smile, and padded each other on the shoulders” he explains.

The smile is here analytically understood as a symbol with multiple meaning-making capacities. However, the power of *the smile* should be analyzed within the constraints of the culture-structure outlined above and its respective logic. *The smile* is perceived to improve the national team’s own performance and decrease the moral of opponents. Ronglan (2007) has previously documented and analyzed how strategic on-court cheering is a means to demonstrate and in turn produce collective efficacy in handball. While many sport heroines can be seen smiling after competition, the handball girls’ even use the smile as weapon during competition. *The smile* is also perceived as a powerful means to sustain nationwide popularity. It can be analyzed as the simultaneous doing of charismatic girlishness and disciplined physicality (Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010; Author, 2014) – a performative alignment of contextual pragmatics with broad cultural and gendered semiotics. In other words, patterning the culture-structure of handball using *the smile* shapes specific understandings of the game that also constrains women athletes’ possible roads to goal attainment (Swidler, 2001; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). *The smile* has given Norwegian

women’s handball a specific “charismatic look”. Table 3 demonstrates how *the smile* is aligned with the successful dimension of handball’s culture-structure and thusly inspires a smiling strategy of action. Table 3: the *smile* is aligned with the preferred strategies of action while the semiotic opposition of the frown aligns the non-preferred strategies.

Structural Hermeneutics	
Success	Failure
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind
<i>Smiles</i>	<i>Frowns</i>

Revealed is how a meso-structured level intersects with macro forces such as gender and the media. *The smile* induces appropriate ways for media to represent and for female athletes to perform aggressive contact sports: It’s both game efficient and gender appropriate. Explored next is how this meaning-making plays out on the ground; investigating the cultural significances and the socialization of a smile.

Using media images of *the smile* to understand practice

The observed team of 13-14 years old girls and their coaches rarely shared negotiations or debated gendered troubles during my observations. Swidler (2001) argues that in settled lives and times the integration of culture and experience does not cause the need for explicit examination. However, in states of unsettledness “people use culture to organize new strategies of action and to model new ways of thinking and feeling” (Swidler, 2001: 94). It is reasonable to believe that the observed handball practice is performed within settled times

and *inside-gender* (Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010). However, extended observations allowed important insight as crucial moments of unsettledness occurred.

Both coaches and players, as shown above, made use of direct references to elite women's handball to guide comprehensions of their sport practice. However, this was not only done to maneuver game specific demands, rules and regulations or to provide role models for technical and physical skills. It was also an active means to shape appropriate expressions of the young girls' sport performances:

“It’s really important to express joy.” Jason talks about other teams he has coached. “When you score a goal, or make a great tackle, then raise your arms!” Jason raises his arms high in the air and smilingly flexes his biceps “It’s a really important message to convey!” Mary agrees “It’s contagious you know.” – “The handball girls [the nick name of the national team] too, they are up here, smiling.” Jason responds, raises his arms again and takes his big body tip-toing on a small victory lap. As he returns Mary announces that: “Yes, that’s why they are so popular. There was a poll in *Aftenposten* [Norwegian newspaper] showing that the handball-girls are the most popular national team in Norway. And that’s because they are so affable [blide] and enthusiastic. It’s contagious you know.” – “*Off course!*” replies Jason. “That’s also the difference between the handball and the soccer -girls. While the handball girls are up here, they are, excuse me, down here you know. That’s no fun.” Jason theatrically shows us the difference, one joyful celebration with hands up, and one celebration with shoulders hanging and in complete lack of ‘charisma’. Mary thinks Jason is a bit out of line, but we all agree: a smile is contagious [Field note 20/10].

The powerful symbol of *the smile* is known by the coaching staff as a visible symbol in the media presentation of elite women's handball in Norway. However, for *the smile* to gain cultural significance in a shared system of beliefs and behaviors it has to correspond with the social meanings in the team and be in congruence with goals and needs of significant members (Fine, 1987). First of all, the broadly available narrative of *the smile* has already been proven valuable by the head coaches of the national Norwegian women's team and their long successful tradition. By applying the success formula of the national team it is reasonable for my research participants to believe that also they can experience success, at least improve their performance. Secondly, the winning formula of *the smile* is not only in congruence with meritocratic sport cultures like handball, but also the front stage (Goffman, 1992) performance of a democratic, harmonious and happy sport activity for young Norwegian women.

Shaping actions and hierarchies with a smile

For *the smile* to fuse concrete practice with conceptions of harmony in successful handball strategies it had to be recurrently staged and performed (Fine, 1987; Goffman, 1992; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Since a smile is a highly visual symbol, potentially performed and embodied, the coaches could use both verbal and non-verbal communication to *show the smile's* possible effect and to demonstrate its semiotic opposition – a smile turned upside down. By recurrent motivation and bodily performed meaning-making the coaches attempted to inspire and shape their athletes' performed feelings:

The first half is over and the girls huddle together. Head coach Katherine starts the halftime-debrief and warns the girls "I'm gonna be a little cruel now. You

walk around out there with your heads hanging, as if you have already lost the game, before it even started. *Yes*, they are [physically] stronger than you *and* they might beat us by a couple of goals, but not because of you standing out there *moping*". Katherine theatrically impersonates her athletes: "*Oooh* I can't do it, I can't do *anything*, I can't". Katherine shakes her head "Your chin [frown is so long that it] sweeps the floor – you have lost the game before the first whistle blew". Head coach Jason takes Katherine's cue "When you're on defense, you cannot hold your ground like a bowling cone". Jason models his body like bowling cone, heels touching, and makes it look like he has just barely avoided a strike as he sways from left to right. Suddenly he jumps up, spreads his legs, and lands on the court in a squat-stand, slamming his feet on the plastic turf: "You need to bend your knees, stretch your arms out, step up and engage, back, forth, back, and forth". Jason thunders back and forth between the goal area line and the girls. "You are not a good defender because of your size, it's because of your effort, *all the time* – it's starts here" ends Jason by pointing to his head. Katherine takes the lead once more and tries to pep the girls: "And where's the smile?" With her fingers she draws a big smile on her own face, pulling the corners of her mouth, so the smile stays up. She smiles to the girls and some smile back "Let's have some fun and show some guts!" [14/11].

The above note illustrates how *the smile* was used and preferably staged during games. The semiotic opposition of a frown is empirically expressed as the coaches profess their strategies of success by laying down the *feeling rules*; the management of preferred emotional displays (Hochschild, 2012). In the competitive setting of handball, where players

struggle to make the team, play through fear of pain and injuries – *the smile* not only has a contagious effect that “spreads happiness”, it also masks disappointments in a players’ own performance or lack of playing time, and her possible fear of mental and physical pain. *The smile* provides the tool to redefine “feelings”, turning frowns upside down, and reeducating skills and habits of contextually appropriate interaction (Swidler, 2001). Consequently, *the smile* not only organizes the culture-structure of handball to guide sacred strategies of action it also sets the feeling rules of the team’s social encounters. These observations reveal the power of codes in shaping the ways we read the behavior of others, how we are thought that others read our behavior and how this affects embodied strategies of action (Strandbu, 2005; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). It does not imply that the feeling rules equal the girls actual feelings. It exposes how symbolic communication confines young girls’ bodily expressions through dramaturgic loyalty to specific strategies of action (Fine, 1987; Swidler, 2001). The feeling rules control legitimate appearances as the coaches and girls consciously and unconsciously observe and sanction selves and others (Goffman, 1992; Hochschild, 2012; Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010).

Furthermore, for symbols to become significant they cannot undermine group structure and its power relations (Fine, 1987). *The smile* also reinforces a social hierarchy in the team that is based on meritocratic comparisons of individuals: players are evaluated and awarded based on their present-day achievement. The girls’ coaches made continuous evaluations and the decisions of: whether a girl plays first or second string games, whether she is in the starting lineup or is benched most of the game. In such environments coaches often equal competition among individuals to performance enhancement possibilities for the team (Author, 2013): it stimulates a competitive milieu where individuals attempt to out-perform each other. The stressful culture of meritocracy can and should be masked by *the smile*. This was explicitly illustrated as one of the girls silently disagreed with team

management, moped during practices and games, and refused to participate in regular activities:

Jason ends his weekend wrap-up and turns to me: “*Now*, I’m gonna have a chat with Kari, she’ll be given a crash course in smiling!” He takes Kari for a walk to the stance – where most coach-athlete confessions and communication occur – highly visible from the playing court where the girls practice. When they return, Kari looks unfazed [uaffisert]. Jason takes a stand beside me, and I assume he wants me to ask: «How did it go?» Jason replies in an indiscrete volume “She seems happy, content, no response. I asked if she reacted because she had to play a level 2 game. And off course, that was the case. So I told her, I used Jennifer as an example. When we rotate [players between the two levels], you have to use the level 2 games to showcase both your skills and attitude. Look at Jennifer she plays a great game, terrific hustle and shows sports-joy [spillerglede] – right. One should also use the opportunity to practice playing at multiple positions; that will make you a far more versatile player.” [28/11].

The smile became a means to reassert the hierarchy of the team by shaping the appropriate emotional reactions and comportment of the girls. Even though an ambitious and disappointed girl does not experience “real joy”, or attempts to showcase her own agenda by displaying the counter cultural and semiotic opposition of *the smile* – she is immediately sanctioned by all coaches who actively condemn the performance of a frown. To function well as a team; players need to take the team’s perspective and set aside selfish interests (Ronglan, 2000). *The smile* has the power potential to mask player’s disappointment, stress,

and uneasiness with coaches' authority and the meritocratic logic of competitive sports. In the girls' team; *the smile* allowed moments when meritocracy took on a harmonious appearance and allowed team performances of a harmonious meritocracy.

I here define a *harmonious meritocracy* as the act of dramaturgic loyalty to a specific set of feeling rules. Consistent with meritocratic strategies of action these feeling rules guide front stage performances of harmony in elitist competition. Table 4 illustrates how *the smile* is used to provide meritocratic success formulas a harmonious appearance. Table 4: the performance *a smile* can inscribe meritocracy with specific expressions of harmony.

Structural Hermeneutics	
Successful action	Unsuccessful action
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind
Meritocracy	Democracy
<i>Smiles</i>	<i>Frowns</i>

The gendered significance of *the smile*

Organized Norwegian handball practice is segregated by age and sex. Except from me and one male coach, the all-girl team was coached by three adult women. We all joked about stereotypical masculinity and femininity, dominant and dumb coaches yelling at their players, school dances, tournament discos, and first kisses:

The team is closely spread out on the bleachers waiting for the court to clear. "Jason, have you gotten a hair-cut?" someone asks. "No, I just combed my hair today." the

coach laughs while coach Katherine sneaks behind his back and starts doing her own hair, massaging air into her new hair-style. “Have you done something with your hair?” one of the girls correctly wonders while Katherine smilingly laughs and nods. Another girl rats out “Cecilia’s birthday is today” and we all burst out singing while Cecilia gives the rat a demonstrative look. “13 years and never kissed?” assistant coach Mary teasingly asks. “MOM! You have to stop saying that, it’s no fun, it’s embarrassing!” her daughter quickly replies. The adults kindly laugh. Katherine tells the tale of her other daughters’ teenage handball tournaments and how the coaches spied as the young women exited the evening disco: “We just sat there and counted. When everybody had left giggling (Katherine puts her hands in front of her mouth and giggles like a teenage girls), we left as well. That night, when we were going to sleep [on the classroom floor], everybody were dead silent – but – as soon as the lights went off all the girls started giggling and talking in their sleeping bags. It was *impossible* to sleep, everybody giggled: “did you kiss him? Who did you kiss? I kissed him!” They kept at it until midnight [Filed notes, 20/10].

The adults stand corrected by the coach’s daughter, but kindly laugh back at the girls and what they understand as gender appropriate and age-right responses. Missing from the so far minute account is another crucial aspect of resonance; namely normative conceptions of gender. I argue that a doxic part of *the smile*’s appropriate resonance resides in its gendered meaning-potentials. Researchers have demonstrated the significance of a societal gender-structure that brings binary reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (like Bäckström, 2013; Connell, 1987; 2005; Messner, 2002; Messner & Sabo, 1992). These scientists have revealed crucial insight to how a gendered macro-structure can saturate social life and privilege and force subjects’ negotiations of the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

Others have argued that being boyish and aggressively competitive does not always force contemporary girls' conflict ridden negotiations (Gamson & Grindstaff, 2010; Strandbu & Hegna, 2006). To show how gender norms also provide a valuable toolkit, that can be used to shape strategies of action (whether conflict ridden or not), we need to explore how this societal abstraction gains pragmatic significances in cultures Spillman, (2002a).

Reproductive distinctions between bodies do provide binaries for meaning-making at the handball arena. The segregation of competition by sex and the above discussion of being boyish/girlish exemplify this claim. What some researchers define as contemporary conceptions of a charismatic and disciplined girliness is in the observed culture condensed by *the smile*. The antagonistic frown is neither game efficient conduct nor a gender appropriate expression of aggression. Not within this girls' team, nor in the national women's team as portrayed by media:

We are more than half way through the season and almost half way through the coach-player-chats. Kari, who earlier had her disagreement with the coaching staff, has not been "acting up" lately. She takes a seat, next to us on the bleachers, and Jason explains: "I want you to be happy-Kari, not angry and moping, but take initiative and work hard – like you have done lately. You might know the girl on the national team, you know, the one that runs around like a big smile?" – "Camilla Herrem!" replies Kari quickly and with confidence. "I don't believe that she is happy and smiling *all the time* – nobody are." finishes Jason. [6/2]. The day's practice ends and Katherine gathers the girls as Jason vividly explains: "In a game of handball there are approximately 60 attacks for each team, approximately 30 goals are averaged, meaning, half of all attempts to score – fail. Just run back on defense and think

‘another chance [will come]!’ We cannot start crying and hang with our heads just because we miss! *When we succeed* all the girls are like the national team. Then we are up here, right!” Jason makes his signature celebration and stretches his arms high in the air and smiles. Assistant coach Mary happily contributes by shouting: “CAMILLA HERREM!” [19/12].

This quote exemplifies that processes of socialization through *the smile* is multifaceted. First, Camilla Herrem is inscribed with *the smile*’s symbolic significances and made its corporeal expression – by the media, coaches, players and Norwegian handball enthusiasts. Herrem is simply one of many players on the national team that occasionally smile. Nevertheless, she is becomes a significant representation of perceived positive aspects of Norwegian women’s handball. Second, on the basis of Camilla Herrem’s on-court smiling she is made into a symbol that gains significances beyond her combative face-to-face and face-to-media interaction. Representing more than her corporeality the smiling Herrem is utilized to educate young handballers how to play handball successfully. Third, the positive and contagious effects of a smile have also been strategically taught to flight attendants as a friendly, charismatic and feminine appeal (Hochschild, 2012). As a successful female athlete, a role model with a ponytail, and publically known for having a boyfriend, she also bares the potential to achieve gender appropriate significance (Daniels, 2009; Messner, 2002). From Norwegian handball’s provided toolkit; Camilla Herrem is used and given symbolic significance as a woman exemplar of how competitive aggression can be expressed in a game efficient and gender appropriate manner. This is a processes of meaning-making where subjects negotiate macro-social gender norms (like: Bäckström, 2013; Connell, 1987; 2005; Messner & Sabo, 1992) as well as competently use these norms in culture-structured contexts (in line with: Alexander, 2003; Tavory & Swidler, 2009; Spillman, 2002a; Swidler, 2001).

The observed team contain actors that competently maneuver, shape and reshape the meaning of, even experience spontaneous and heartfelt smiles in the handball team:

“How did the games go this weekend?” I meet assistant coach Mary and the two girls Lynette and Nina. “GOOOD, well, you two can answer” replies Mary with a smile. The two girls, played two different games, both won. Nina tells the story of the level 2 game: “we won the game 22-5”. Mary explains that “It was delightful, all the girls contributed, every girl scored one or more goals on level 1 and everybody, except three girls scored on level 2. It was nothing less than magnificent. And scoring all those goals, I almost got a bad conscience” - “Yes, it’s no fun to lose by those numbers” I reply and Mary agrees. “Well, fun for us” says Nina in a cheerful tone and we all agree! Mary explains that our teams’ parents felt so bad about it that they started applauding the opposition “and [our player] Jessica just stood there and smiled. She played both games and was just, shining, like a sun. There were a lot of girls that blossomed and sparkled this weekend, I tell you that” ends Mary [17/10].

It is easier to smile when experiencing success and when in a good mood. Even though the above analysis has revealed the manifold capacities of the smile, this note exemplifies the process that makes the symbol contextually unambiguously positive: a sign. The smile represents, encourages, guides and is effectual for exercised harmony in strategies for success. However, *the smile* as a powerful sign should be handled with care and it is considered inappropriate to smirk at your opponent. The girls’ parents therefore respectfully balance *the smile* as a signifier of success and applaud the opposing team as well.

If this analysis is accepted it should entail some theoretical implications. Symbolic significance occur and reoccur because of its polysemy. The use of a symbolic tool, sharing and shaping culture over time, even changes the tool itself (Swidler, 2001; Tavory & Swidler, 2009). Analytic use of a culture-structure embraces this potentially more dangerous recognition of ambiguity as a significant mechanism of reproduction – and allows analyses of how this ambiguity is constrained and therefore meaningful (Spillman, 2012). After all, total ambiguity would leave to total obscurity. In the culture-structured context of handball the coaches used *the smile* to educate the young girls in specific strategies of action. This cultural dynamic was conceivable as it conflated notions of why Norwegian women’s handball provide appropriate role models for the girls – with concrete strategies of success on the handball court. Table 5 illustrates the argument: these girls were taught to achieve success by aggressive, sacrificial, cunning, and boyish handball performances done in a gender appropriate manner – with a smile on their face. Table 5: *The smile* makes the young girls’ aggressive handball performance a gender appropriate performance.

Structural Hermeneutics	
Success	Failure
Aggressive	Passive
Sacrifice	Selfishness
Cunning	Kind
Boyish masculinity	Girlish femininity
Smiles	Frowns
<i>Female appropriate</i>	<i>Female inappropriate</i>

Conclusion: The cultural significance of a smile

Diversity in meaning allows diversity in action – in ways a cultural analyst cannot disregard. In this article I have explored how media-use and broad conceptions of sport and gender inspired the coaching practices and strategies of play in a girl handball team. Participant field observations throughout the season allowed thick description of the team culture. A thick description does not undermine critical analyses of powerful macro-relations, but recognizes the power of cultural codes and competent subjects – and respective theoretical possibilities to highlight ambiguity, stability and diversity in lived experiences.

Through hermeneutic analysis I began by outlining the discursive culture-structure of institutionalized handball. This analytic move allowed the practice of structural hermeneutics (Alexander, 2003): exploring how symbolic ambiguities and subjects' creativity are constrained by meso-levels of organization. To play the game efficiently the girls had to be aggressive not passive, sacrifice their bodies for the team and not play the game (too) selfishly, and act a 'little mean' towards opponents. To inspire such performances gendered stereotypes and representations of the national women's team were regularly used by the girls and their coaches. Not only did the celebrated women handballers provide elite models for technical and tactical practice, they also informed other aspects of the sport performance. The national women's team is renowned for their charismatic smile. *The smile* is a symbol that not only signifies a friendly, charismatic and feminine appeal, but it is also a symbolic asset that demoralizes the opposition and keeps teammates cheerfully invigorated. In the observed team *the smile* provided front stage presentations of a *harmonious meritocracy*. This performance was taught to the girls as an act of dramaturgic loyalty to their hierarchical strategies of action. *The smile* masks disappointments in a players' performance or lack of playing time, possible fears, and provides the tool to redefine "feelings": turning frowns upside down. Consistent with particular strategies of action these 'feeling rules' align with the culture-structure to induce particular expressions of roads to success. The smiling

handball heroines, personified by among others Camilla Herrem, seemed highly resonant within the team. As a female athlete, a role model with a ponytail and a boyfriend, she also achieved gender appropriate significance. These were some of the symbolic capacities of *the smile* allowing shared culture to achieve personal meaningfulness – if only through dramaturgic loyalty.

If *the smile* was not meaningful in context, entailed possibilities to be shaped and reshaped, it would never achieve cultural significance.

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