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**“Smiles and laughs – all teeth intact”
A cultural perspective on mediated women’s handball in Norway**

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Abstract

This article explores gendered sport communication in Norway. The data highlights Norwegian TV2’s live game commentaries of the 2009 women’s handball World Championships, as well as live and studio commentary and journalistic reports concerning the Norwegian national women’s handball team from 2009 until 2013. The narrative analytic approach is structural hermeneutic and concerned with processes of meaning-making. Instead of reading off gender/macro-structure in data, this project maps the semiotic culture-structure of mediated women’s handball and shows how gendered meaning is creatively used to inform understandings of female handballers’ situated practices. The analysis first outlines the cultural binaries that constrain the media presentations of Norwegian women’s handball – then scrutinize how gendered conceptions of sport and female athletes are used to understand this binary culture-structure. Analytically revealed is a staging of Norwegian women’s handball that portrays successful and powerful female bodies’ contextual conduct. Norwegian women handballers are performing the aggressive and physically violent game in what is analyzed as a gender appropriate manner.

Keywords: media | women’s handball | structural hermeneutics | cultural sociology | gender |

Introduction

This article concerns Norwegian media presentations of women's handball and empirically analyzes the gendered meanings communicated through televised and print media. The investigation of meaning-making is neither a macro- nor a micro-structural reduction of culture, persons or groups. Instead of reading off macro or micro-structure in data, this project is intermediary situated at the *meso*-level. Meso-level analysis enables scrutiny of shared meaning, an analysis of *culture*. Revealed is how broadly available conceptions are used and become affectionate, real and immediate in persons' and groups' everyday communication (Alexander, 2003; Smelser, 1997; Spillman, 2002; Swidler, 2001). Demonstrated below is a *cultural analysis* that first outlines the cultural binaries that constrain the presentation of handball practice – then scrutinizes how journalists creatively use gendered conceptions of sport and female athletes to infuse this binary culture-structure. Revealed is that Norwegian media's staging of women's handball portrays powerful female bodies that (1) successfully maneuver the contact sport context (2) where femininity and positive-masculinity co-exist as embodied identities, and (3) reshape and challenge traditionalist gender relations and rigid macrostructures.

Given sport communication and mass media's influential societal position (see Pedersen, 2013) several students of gender-structure have explored how gender can be read off in media presentations of female athletes. Some show that female athletes are infantilized, sexualized and ridiculed (Messner, 2002; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008) when participating in masculine sports and therefore act apologetic (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009) when forced to negotiate a masculine/feminine dichotomy (Thorpe, 2008). Others demonstrate that media also empowers female athletes (Dahlén, 2008b; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Vincent & Crossman, 2012) and that a new and gender neutral sport media is emerging (Capranica & Aversa, 2002; King, 2007; MacKay & Dallaire, 2009). In the global sports world mapped by these researchers, a sports world traditionally dominated by men and marginalizing women – Norwegian women's handball makes an interesting case of national female domination. Like soccer is a women's sport in the United States and a men's sport in much of Europe (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003) the popular European sport of handball is in countries such as France, Spain, Germany and Sweden foremost considered typically masculine and a typical men's sport. In Norway it is constituted as a women's sport (Broch, 2012; Goksøyr, 2008; Lippe, 2001; 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, but not that the game is typified by traditional femininity. Norwegian handball therefore demonstrates gender as a dynamic *cultural* construction – and calls for a *meso-analysis* of how processes of meaning-making interconnect broadly available conceptions of masculinity and femininity to concrete and practiced embodied identities.

This article starts with a brief overview of team handball to introduce the rules and structure of the game and to contextualize its socio-historical position as a female dominated sport in Norway. The next section contextualizes the article within a research field concerning media representations of female and male athletes. Next, a gender perspective informed by a combination of Chodorow (1999) and cultural sociological perspectives (Alexander, 2003; Spillman, 2002; Swidler, 2001) is presented and situated within a narrative methodology that focuses processes of meaning-making. The subsequent discussion is divided into three empirical subchapters: (1) exploring the gendered context that the media portrays and mapping its culture-structure, (2) and (3) investigating how contextual representations make use of and is induced by broadly available conceptions of sport and

gender. This threefold division exposes three analytic dimensions intertwined in the narrative whole; a Norwegian media narrative of women's handball.

Norwegian team handball

The Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF) was established in 1937. Lippe (2001) explains that at that time, the game appeared in two versions: one eleven player version prohibiting physical contact for women, and one seven player version forbidding physical contact for both women and men. Lippe argues that Norwegian women welcomed the seven player version while many Norwegian men found the game uninteresting. In 1937 the NHF members list consisted of 75 percent women. In 1939, a male journalist commented that women's handball was "a delicious women's sport – it unites grace and power, speed and team spirit – and its growth is thereby natural" (Lippe, 2001, p. 68). It was this seven player version that developed to be the handball norm nationally and internationally. In 1986, when physical contact no longer was prohibited, the Norwegian women's team won a bronze at the World Championships and made their decisive breakthrough in the Norwegian media. From '97 until 2012, in a country of approximately five million inhabitants, Norwegian TV2's televised international women's games have attracted between 1.3 and 1.6 million viewers.

Contemporary team handball is a fast-paced game that consists of two 30-minute halves with a 10-minute half-time break. The rectangular playing court is approximately 131 feet (40m) long and 66 feet (20m) wide. The court consists of two goal areas each with a goalie minding the net and a playing area in between with two teams of six on-court players. The contemporary game is a power and performance sport characterized by the capacity to use violence in combination with physical and mental endurance, controlled aggression and ball handling skills. Attackers pass, throw, catch and dribble a small ball (circumference of 21-22 inches and weighing 0.7-0.8 lb.) with their hands while trying to score goals. 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 many European countries team handball is mostly considered a sport for men. In Norway this is different. Even though handball has developed into a contact sport the NHF still consists of about 67 percent girls and women. This composition of members, along with international success and extensive media coverage, has arguably formed and contributed to an understanding of the game as a typical women's sport in Norway. Lippe (2010) argues that the national team is now characterized as mentally and physically tough, devoted to democratic relations and a feminine charm. Conversely, many years of poor results and absence from international championships has resulted in scarce media coverage and significantly less popularity for the Norwegian men's team (Broch, 2012).

Sport, gender and the media

Power and performance sports, when practiced by male athletes, have been analyzed as produced by men to shape men in a particular image (Coakley, 2007). Through the TV screen, the often hyper-masculine warrior narratives of male sports are glorified and broadcasted to wide audiences (Broch, 2011; Gee, 2009; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Trujillo, 1995; Vincent & Crossman, 2012). Jordan and Cowan (1995, p. 729) accordingly argue that "[t]he mantle of the warrior is inherited by the sportsman". Coad (2008) nuances such perspectives and claims that hyper-masculine sports also enable and catalyze alternative masculinities, such as David Beckham. According to Coad (2008) Beckham defies masculine sport norms by expressing openness to nonnormative sexualities through sartorial flamboyance, conspicuous consumption, and appearances in fashion and gay magazines.

In Norway, female participation in sports typified as masculine/male has historically been met with distrust, conservative gender ideology and exclusion (Goksøyr, 2008; Lippe, 2001). With massive contemporary female involvement in sports, more complicated processes of structural, cultural and interactional differentiation have replaced simple exclusion (Messner, 2002). Scholars now argue that media portrayals of sports marginalize (Crolley & Teso, 2007; Ólafsson, 2006), infantilize, ridicule and sexualize the female athlete and contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy (Messner, 2002; Eliopoulos & Johnson, 2012; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Sisjord and Kristiansen (2008) who explore Norwegian female wrestlers, and Thorpe (2008) who explores female snowboarders, assert that female athletes negotiate and confront contradictory and binary discourses of femininity and valorized masculinity. This research reveals a masculine/male sports world where female athletes *apologize* for their participation by overcompensating conventional femininity (Davis-Delano et al., 2009).

An emerging change in the media image of the female athlete has recently been documented. MacKay and Dallaire (2009) found that Canadian campus newspaper coverage depicted male and female athletes almost free of gender bias, as mere athletes. Media coverage of the Olympic Games have been analyzed as gender equal (Capranica & Aversa, 2002; King, 2007), notably as national identity and gender intersects (Vincent & Crossman, 2012), but its relevance questioned as a four-yearly spectacle (Bernstein, 2002). New female ideals, whether empowering, oppressive, or both, are emerging in sport media. The mentally and physically tough, active and attractive female ideal is now a significant part of the commodified sports/media complex (Dahlén, 2008a; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Lippe, 2010). Such ambiguous gender dynamics within sport communication demand analytic approaches that make sense of how complex gendered meaning-making takes place (Kristiansen & Broch, 2013).

Theoretical perspective: A cultural approach

When people hear, read, or watch television, transmitted meanings contribute to both unconscious and conscious fantasies about gender. Persons negotiate, transform and reproduce gendered meaning of self and others through a personal-cultural dialectic. Chodorow (1999) proclaims that every person's sense of gender identity is "an inextricable intertwining, virtually a fusion, of personal and cultural meaning." (Chodorow, 1999, p. 70). Chodorow (1999) distinguishes her approach from Foucauldian discourse analysis. She extrapolates that gender is not unvaryingly constructed through linguistic or discursive omnipotent macro-force, but that culture serves as a source of knowledge emotionally negotiated, invested in or rejected by persons. Contextual meaning-making can consciously and unconsciously counter, can mold and do indeed draw on cultural conceptions to create gendered meaning (Chodorow, 1995). Chodorow helps highlight that Norwegian journalists' creatively use broadly available conceptions of gender and sport to communicate handball. This process of meaning-making is analytically grasped by a mesosociological mapping of a culture-structure (Alexander, 2003; Smelser, 1997).

Cultural analysis, as a meso-analysis, constitutes the crucial link between the psychological and the societal, the micro and the macro (Smelser, 1997; Spillman, 2002); the space between interacting journalists and a gender structure. Thus it is possible to interpret social situations and processes without appealing to micro or macro orders of organization (Alexander, 2003; Smelser, 1997). I therefore outline a binary meso-/culture-structure based on the institutionalized handball game, its specific set of rules and accompanying norms, and dominant conceptions of successful handball strategies of play. This analytic move reveals

how journalists' representations are constrained by the cultural practice they convey and how broadly available conceptions of sport and gender color this commentary.

A narrative approach is applied to investigate how the journalists' communication creates a meaningful representation of women's handball. By stitching together temporal meaning fragments, live game commenting contextually organize and orchestrate narrative realities. In general, narrative analysis is about meaningful stories and story structure; even so, narratives are not always orderly accounts (Bruner, 1990; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2003). Narratives do, however, demand a meaningful sequencing of what would otherwise be fragmented and arbitrary (Riessman, 2008). Importantly, through narrative past and part-whole elements, as well as *tradition and exceptionality* (Bruner, 1990), are made to co-exist.

In this article I deconstruct the journalists' texts into three thematic subchapters. This analytic fragmentation focuses the narrative fragments that are made to co-exist in the narrative whole: Norwegian media representations of women's handball. As part of a meso-analysis I also highlight context, morality, symbols and metaphors that through narrative are patterned in relationship to a binary culture-structure (Bruner, 1990; Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2003). This analysis reveals journalists, not as macro/gender-structural dupes, but as *creative users* of cultural repertoires of gender (Alexander, 2003; Swilder, 2001). Macro-reductionism is avoided by going into deeper hermeneutic interpretations (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

Sample and method

Television is the most popular media channel for the presentation of handball in Norway and receives the main focus here. A significant part of the data consists of Norwegian TV2's televised women's games covering the 2009 World Championships in China. Eight games were recorded and the running commentaries by the commercial network's two male commentators (marked A and B in the analysis) were transcribed verbatim. Each game was then managed through meaning condensations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009): summaries of the games. Commentaries on game specifics, such as tactics and bodily kinetics, were hereby radically condensed to better focus the processes where journalists interpret game specifics. While the 2009 Championship represents the beginning of the data collection, the project has applied these preliminary findings as a guideline to observe Norwegian media depictions of the subject: live game commentary, studio commentary, as well as journalistic paper and internet reports from 2009-2013 were filed as parts of this data collection. Newspaper and internet reports as "cold" media require a different journalistic explicitness and complement the live and studio commentary (Broch, 2011).

Throughout the data analysis the condensed summaries covering the 2009 World Championships in China was used to map the culture-structure of represented Norwegian women's handball. This process focused how the commentators represented the game and formulated moral judgments of the women's successful and unsuccessful strategies of play. Thereafter, I sought repetitive and spontaneous, symbolic and metaphoric meaning fragments to be hermeneutically interlinked with (1) the meso-structure (2) the narrative whole of the televised and written representations 2009-2013, (3) socio-historical conceptions of handball in Norway, and (4) to research on sport as gendered entertainment and practice. This mesosociological exercise composes a structural hermeneutic analysis of how journalists use broadly available symbols and metaphors and how the symbols and metaphors used become meaningful when patterned by the semiotic meso-binay (Alexander, 2003). Norwegian media narrations creatively use cultural notions of femininity and of sport-as-entertainment to shape understandings of the game.

Data analysis is foremost concerned with textual narratives, but also addresses visual (Riessman, 2008), performative (Jordan & Cowan, 1995) and bodily aspects (Shilling, 2003) of narrative meaning-making. The hermeneutic potential of this approach focuses how these textual and visual representations occur and what they connote. Significant connotations are expected to be found in the symbols and metaphoric expressions applied.

A media narrative about Norwegian women's handball

Stepping onto the court, the handball player becomes physically situated within the context of a power and performance sport. The rules of team handball, allowing and advocating the fusion of violence with physical skills, cultivate a distinct use of the athletes' bodies. To be successful in handball, as in hockey and rugby, players need to use their bodies as tools, even weapons (Messner et al., 2000), to restrict the opponents' movements and allow their own. On defense, the athletes are readily placed in a narrative context by the media, where they must hustle hard, be courageously willing to duel, show no fear of injuries or pain, dominate opponents by use of physical power, and be physically and mentally tough and strong:

A: We'll see if Spain gets into that pace, that aggressiveness we feel and know they are capable of (Spain, 20.12.09).

B: I'm hoping we'll get to see a defense that moves sideways and that we are even rougher, even better in the dueling game [player vs. player] (Spain, 20.12.09).

B: Tonje Larsen gets body contact. That's what's important, that we manage to make those stoppages [in play] (Spain, 20.12.09).

B: She is a good shooter; [her body is] built large. We need to be awake.

A: Ah, Neagu [Romanian player], that's brilliant.

B: Edin is way too passive [on the defense; she should tackle Neagu before she shoots] (Romania, 10.12.09)

A: Tine Stange stops Mangué.

B: Good [job] by Stange there. [She] Is aggressive, takes the step forward, *hits* the Spanish player eight and half meters out [from the goal area line]. That's what we witnessed in the semifinal between Spain and France yesterday – they [Spain] got trampled so badly from start that they really did not want to step inside the 9 meter [line]. And every time they did, they got banged into.

A: It has to [bang] (Spain, 20.12.09).

The *bang* verbally symbolizes the sound of powerful bodies colliding and is an omnipresent reminder of the brutal physical and mental aspects of men's (Broch, 2011) and women's handball alike. According to the commentators' narrative, to play handball efficiently, the Norwegian women need to be aggressive and apply brutal body contact in order to wear out their opponents both mentally and physically. A large and heavy body is a good requisite, but can and *should* be handled with the right amount of aggression. The semiotic opposition of being aggressive is a display of passivity, and that is not a winning formula. It is common-sense in handball that when an opposing player steps inside the 9 meter line, she enters the defense's territory, in which attackers are to be "punished"

physically. When mounting an efficiently aggressive and violent defense, this notion of physical punishment is described by commentators as discouraging attackers to set screens and interrupt defensive formations. The quote above is illustrative, where the French team is applauded for discouraging the Spanish team. On the offensive side, the same characteristics define a good attacker:

B: There is something halfway about Dyhre Breivang, moving sideways. We have to be rougher, we must gather more speed, and we must dare to go in [approach the defense] and take [the hits and], get banged into.

A: Lunde-Borgersen searches for a passing lane. Gets tackled by Vetkova (Russia, 18.12.09).

A: Run, run, run, run! Linka tries to slip between [the two defenders]. She manages to push the ball into the goal. That's a great accomplishment; takes quite a beating there. This is a powerful hustle, threading the ball past (the goalie).

B: Gets banged into to by club mate Turey [Russian player]. [On replay, We] See Turey steps in there, gives Linka a real blow (Russia 18.12.09).

A: We are closing in on halftime, and are five goals behind.

B: It's all about being, gathering even more speed, be even more brutal in those movements towards the defenders, and dare to challenge. We pass the ball a little too early and we are too far away from the [defensive] wall when we really are supposed to dare to press on (Russia, 18.12.09).

The game specific rules and regulations performed by players are inscribed with social, moral and symbolic content (Broch, 2011; 2012). If we also accept that narratives involve moral judgments (Smith, 2003) it makes sense to analyze the above presented material accordingly. To demonstrate positive moral character on defense and on offense; the female handball player should keep her composure while facing the risk of physical injury and pain. She must show capacity and courage to play the game efficiently in spite of any temptation to avoid physical contact. These moral characteristics are vital to the team handball interaction and the moral evaluation in the televised narrative. Besides the physical attributes of strength, endurance and technique, the commentators evaluated the players in terms of character and/or lack of character; of being aggressive or passive. This interpretation is an analytic generalization demonstrating the commentators' narrative binary simplification of the game. Informed spectators know that handball, as well as other team sports, requires a constant negotiation and response to both teammates and opposing players. However, the televised game of team handball is presented by systematic application of explicit and implicit cultural binaries: Aggressive/passive, strength/weakness, large/small, fast/slow, hostile/receptive and forward/backward:

A: Postova breaks throu(u)gh! Gets the goal...

B: We are way, way, way too kind. We have the opportunity to initiate [body contact]. Riegelhuth has to be a lot rougher. We saw the French girls earlier; they dove in whenever someone tried to break through [their defense]. [They] were moving forward. We cannot stand passively and wait. We do everything perfectly on defense there, until we get a little halfway and lazy towards the end (Russia, 18.12.09).

The binary culture-structure mapped above is not ostensibly about the gender of the participants, but signifies the context of handball as a contact sport. The binaries semantically define and demarcate successful/positive and unsuccessful/negative handball practices. Importantly, the binaries also resemble representations of a traditional gender dichotomy; the opposition between masculinity/femininity. This has led several critical sociologists to equate contact sports' binary oppositions with mere macro-reflections of a gender dichotomy. Accordingly, they have demonstrated how media depictions of male athletes reproduce stereotypical notions of men and masculinity – and how media depictions of female athletes can challenge patriarchy and stereotypical notions of women and femininity (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Gee, 2009; MacKay & Dallaire, 2009; Messner et al., 2000; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Thorpe, 2008; Trujillo, 1995). The meso-analysis presented here *refocuses* the analytic momentum of these researchers, nuances their macro-reduction, and crystalizes the *cultural particularities* of power and performance sports.

Notably, narrative elements that are not about gender at all may help socio-psychological understandings and articulations of gendered experiences (Chodorow, 1999). The culture-structure – Aggressive/passive, strength/weakness, fast/slow – is ultimately aligned with masculine/feminine. Accordingly, this produces a cultural logic where the consequence of success in a traditionally masculine setting is the narrative projection of masculine characteristics onto the successful/winner, and feminine characteristics onto the unsuccessful/defeated, regardless of sex category. Success aligns the cultural binaries in a specific pattern: masculine conduct displayed through aggressive and resolute use of physical strength leads to success. This is also the observable case in practiced boy's handball (Broch, 2013) and televised men's handball (Broch, 2011; 2012) in Norway. The analysis above demonstrates that Norwegian TV2's commentators do not mask this cultural logic. Rather, the commentators' moral narrative evaluation illustrates *how* and *why* traditional masculine characteristics become valued prerequisites of the female handballers. Empirically, the commentators portray female athletes that successfully maneuver the contact sport context of handball. Theoretically, a cultural perspective reveals (1) the *culture-structure* that shapes gendered comprehensions of contextual conduct, (2) the moral *narrative power* that patterns this conduct in gendered ways, and (3) ultimately the narrative legitimation and glorification of female handballers' successful masculine conduct.

Gendered processes of meaning-making are noticeable in more ways than the alignment of successful and unsuccessful performances. Shown next is how broad cultural conceptions of stereotypical masculinity and femininity are used to understand the culture-structure mapped above and to shape narrative representations of women's handball.

Girls aloud: Cultural conceptions of femininity

The media, athletes and spectators make sense of the world and their lives in it through a conceptual dynamic of constructing narratives forming and formed by broadly available cultural meaning. Culture serves as a toolkit for meaning-making (Swidler, 2001). As the Norwegian women's handball squad enters the court the commentator's resume commentary and reveal psycho-social linkage to cultural heritage:

A: They are tip-toeing carefully in the yard, the girls in Suzhou. Doing warm-ups before the second [half]. The score is 15-9 after the first half. The Norwegian team stormed into an opening 4-0 lead [...] overall a pleasing game so far (Japan, 15.12.09).

The quote above is invested with rich semantic connotations buried in Norwegian cultural tradition. The powerful female athletes, who are almost exclusively referred to by their full name, family name or sometimes just by nickname, are as a collective group represented as girls. The powerful female athletes, partaking in a power and performance sport, are depicted as girls carefully tip-toeing on the field, yet smashing their opposition. Chodorow (1999) holds that narratives, as well as gender constructions, are based on “facts”, fantasies, wishes and hopes. Such constructions, even when based on imaginary associations become “real” without the loss of their narrative power to shape meaning (Bruner, 1990). Associations define the reality *of a moment*. Important, but lost in the English translation of the above quote, is the commentator’s sudden shift in pronunciation. The commentator switches to an old-fashioned Norwegian dialect (paradoxically defined as ‘new-Norwegian’) in portraying the girls’ tip-toeing. An analogy conveys insights of relevance to the quote: Arne Garborg, a Norwegian author and poet, wrote in 1895 (republished 2001), the children’s song “Småsporven gjeng i tunet”, in English: Tiny sparrows wander the yard.

Tiny sparrows wander the yard, nibble grains and pluck straws
in a pleasant mood and laughing at the gray cat.
Pip, pip, that’s how days pass by
The cat-man Mons chases me, but can never fetch me
(My translation of Garborg, 2001).

The analogy used by the commentators, a narrative interface of handball girls and sparrows, manifests gendered meaning applied to comprehend the female athletes. The female athletes and the sparrows are analogized as light-footed, light-minded, and playfully avoiding the opposition’s attack. The new-Norwegian word ‘tippar’, meaning nibble, is replaced with ‘trippar’, meaning tip-toeing, both connoting gentle and careful movements. Portrayed is a playful, pleasant and youthful tease with the danger represented to the sparrows by the ‘cat-man’ (Mons) and to the handballers by the opposing team and the contextual practice of contact sports. The psychoanalyst Hermundstad (1995) analyzes meaning-making within Norwegian fairy tales and myths. He argues that the bird is associative and linked to the air and femininity. Hermundstad analysis discloses an interpretation of the contextual constraints of feminine failure and masculine success and the feminine outsmarting the masculine. Most interestingly, this cultural notion of femininity has previously been used in other Norwegian contexts, and is arguably still inspiring gendered meaning-making. The interpretation reveals linkages between a Norwegian cultural heritage and contemporary cultural understandings of gender. In the eyes of the commentators, Norwegian girls and young women excel at managing both the aggressive game of handball and cultural expectations of femininity:

A: Stange stays down. *Only* a yellow card is given to line player Sha [Chinese player].
B: Couldn’t argue if she got more than a yellow card [for that infraction]. Stange is tough; initiating our offense on arrival and during our transition game.
A: Stange smiles and laughs – all teeth intact (China, 13.12.09).

B: Almost everyone who has played for Norway has contributed. [They] stand solid on the defense, smiling and laughing much more (China, 13.12.09).

A: Yes, Katrine Lunde-*Haraldsen* makes the save and here comes the pass downfield to Lin Kristin Riegelhuth – Brilliant! Brilliant! That’s our girls the way we know them! (Hungary, 09.12.09)

By using broadly available cultural conceptions of appropriate sport femininity as active, attractive (Dahlén, 2008b; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003) and heterosexually appealing (Messner, 2002; Lippe, 2010) the commentators re-fuse the contextual performance with salient gendered meaning. The commentators emphasize that Tine Stange gets punched in the mouth, but smiles and laughs. *The smile* is interpreted as a narrative staging of Stange’s toughness. It shows the opposition, her teammates, and the spectators that she can take the pain. Simultaneously, she performs and displays what previous research has documented as a friendly, charismatic and feminine appeal (Hochschild, 2012; Lippe, 2010). This specific visual, performed and bodily displayed *smile* is also stimulated by the present head coach of the national women’s team (the Icelander). Empirically, *the smile* is a symbolic conception that is used in both the verbal and non-verbal communication of women’s handball. Theoretically, the commentators’ use of the multivocal *smile* reveals how cultural repertoires can be used (Swidler, 2001) to gender context specific practice. Female handballers can appropriately perform successful contact-sport masculinity with a feminine smile. Complex understandings of gender should therefore include textual, visual and bodily elements of communication:

B: There’s Malm Frafjord!

A: We are back! A very strong move by Marit Malm Frafjord – busts a hairpin too, but it’s back in place now.

B: Gets a replacement [pin]. What I think is great, is that we have made some fine attacks. We’ve have improved our tempo [...] we have thrust in our legs, brilliant (Russia, 18.12.09).

Earrings, hairpins, and any pointed or sharp item that can harm another player are disallowed on the court, but female handball players use athletic tape to cover up and render the use of such items as safe. During the 2009 and 2010 international championships, the Norwegian female athletes sported various half-length and long haircuts, but few or none had short haircuts. Several players wore nail polish and mascara during the matches. This culturally conforms to a visual presentation of selves, and the team as embodying a distinct narrative and gendered identity. Empirically, the Norwegian women’s team and the commentators’ portrayals and performances display references to conventional heterosexual femininity and charm through smiles, ponytails, mascara and nail polish (Hochschild, 2012; Lippe, 2010).

Theoretically, similar empiric evidence has elsewhere been reduced to mere negotiations of a binary gender/macro-structure (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Thorpe, 2008) and performed “apologetic” behavior (Davis-Delano et al., 2009). A cultural perspective demonstrates that this is only one side of the story. When we “analytically freeze” a meso-structure instead of a macro/gender-structure we reveal that meaning-making occurs as persons make sense of the concrete by use of the abstract (Smelser, 1997; Spillman, 2002; Swidler, 2001). Stereotypical femininity is *used* by the commentators to make gendered sense of women’s handball and actively adds a traditionalist gender dimension to their successful/masculine performance. Combined, the women’s smile and athletic success are presented by TV2’s commentators as melting cold Norwegian hearts throughout the winter:

B: [I] want more tempo [...] we need to push the tempo [...] we must up our defensive intensity.

A: Yes, the Icelander [Norwegian coach], with lots of experience from Norwegian handball, wanted back the *smile* too. They have melted many handball hearts [spectators] through the month of December with their smiles, the handball girls. It is important to increase the happiness too, the joyfulness of the game. [It] Better the performance (Hungary, 09.12.09).

Also male handballers smile, but *the smile* as a symbolic representation does not define the national men's team (Broch, 2012). The moral potential of the commentators' narrative about women's handball, however, is not only capable of aligning the culture-structure of handball. The narrative also normalizes the co-existence of masculine and feminine characteristics as legitimate embodied female identities. Norwegian female handballers are portrayed as successfully performing masculine conduct (displayed through aggressive and resolute use of physical strength) yet at the same time being conventionally feminine. In 2011 journalist Bugge revealed that the Norwegian women's national team was the most popular national team in the country – regardless of sport and gender. Under a photograph of two smiling representatives the two interviewees announce that “We are affable and enthusiastic”. The head coach adds that all players have “a sparkle in the eye [and] a smile” readily available. Theoretically, a cultural perspective demonstrates (1) persons' cultural creativity through processes of gendered meaning-making, (2) how broadly available meaning shapes comprehensions of concrete gender appropriate conduct, (3) and in turn how culture conflates traditionalist and contemporary conceptions of gender. With the semifinal of the 2010 European Championship on the line, the commentators call for female positive-aggression:

A: We cannot [risk] playing on such small margins. As long as we are ahead by five goals: We need to take care of the ball as if it was a new born child.

War at last: Cultural conceptions of sport as war

The handball narrative is dominated by game specific references, directions and gendered evaluations of positive-aggressive and negative-passive involvement. Additionally, when bodies are drawn into processes of meaning-making they culturally form and are formed by gendered meaning (Chodorow, 1995). For example, the metaphor of the new born child, protected by its mother at all costs, connotes the importance of the game and illustrates the commentators' use of a cultural conception of inherent female positive-aggression. Empirically, this cultural conception of womanhood and the feminine appeal investigated above clearly separates the female handballer from the male (Broch, 2012). These findings also separate the Norwegian presentation of women's handball from research demonstrating gender neutral media where female athletes are presented as mere athletes free of gender bias (Capranica & Aversa, 2002; King, 2007; MacKay & Dallaire, 2009). Below a second gendered dimension that influences the media dramatization of women's handball will be revealed.

The commentators' representation of handball is also influenced by cultural conception of sports as entertainment. Within the sport/media complex male sports are portrayed as high-profile *events* (Coakley, 2007; Dahlén, 2008a) where contestants battle each other until death separates the winner from the loser, the men from the boys, the kind from the cunning, and the aggressive from the passive (Broch, 2011; Gee, 2009; Messner,

2002; Messner et al., 2000; Trujillo, 1995). This is also evident in the Norwegian presentation of women's handball:

B: Good job there too. [She] Is tough, stands up, and stands tall.

A: That's a tackle in team handball, and also two points in wrestling (Russia, 18.12.09).

B: [She] Never backs down in these situations, Karoline Dyhre Breivang. We have seen it so many times and we have seen her lie like this so many times [on the hardwood seriously hurt]. She will surely get up on her feet this time as well. That poise, relentless towards herself, she just dives in between the two defenders.

A: When she, with no helmet or no other protection than some pads on her knees, just runs right into the concrete [defensive-]wall head first – I'll give her that (Romania, 10.12.09).

B: We have denied them space on the sides [of our defense]. [...] Good work by Malm Frafjord; in front of Manea when the pass is delivered by Neagu.

A: Yes, we have packed [defensive players] around their attackers. It is the *rawest* [roughest and toughest] work I have ever seen on defense [by Norway] (Romania, 10.12.09).

As with men's handball (Broch, 2012), the performing national women's team symbolizes the nation. The commentators produce a narrative of us/Norway and them/the opposition. As documented elsewhere (Vincent & Crossman, 2012) it is evident in the material that also contemporary women are symbolic bearers of national and masculine virtues. Furthermore, the Norwegian female handballers are metaphorically represented as managing not only team handball, but also other masculine contact-sports such as wrestling (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Successful female handballers are depicted as relentlessly sacrificing their bodies for the nation, the team and for victory – by all means necessary. Physical sacrifice in the sports arena has traditionally defined a key component of the successful male athlete (Broch, 2011; 2012; Coakley, 2007; Gee, 2009; Messner et al., 2000). Empirically evident, it also defines successful female athletes practicing contact sports. We need to analytically separate masculinity from the male and understand that when cultural analogies and metaphors are used in new and creative ways it signifies a narrative effort for socio-cultural change (Bruner, 1990). TV2's commentators are creatively using cultural analogies and metaphors that have historically been preserved for male athletes practicing sports. With massive contemporary involvement of young women in youth and elite sports the dramatic representations historically preserved for men are now being modified and used to present women's athletic conquests. TV2's commentators use narrative repertoires of dramatic contact-sports performances that are readily available within the sport/media-complex. The toughness of the women's successful handball performances is further crystalized through the metaphor of sport as war:

B: It's important – in an even match, as this game is likely to be, [with huge] amounts of warring and battle – that when we fight our way to a penalty shot, it is of utmost importance to convert.

B: We have played a heroic match, there's no doubt about it (Romania, 10.12.09).

The notion of women's handball as war was less prominent during the 2009 World championship, but became a noticeable theme during the European championship of 2010. The notion of sport as war manifests most often when deciding games are to be played, when two teams are evenly matched, and when the combating teams are known for their physical play. This was certainly the case when Norway played Romania in 2009. Prior to the 2010 game between Norway and Denmark both Kjersti Grini and Gro Hammerseng commented on the anticipated level of physicality – former Norwegian women's handball-great Grini as an insider panelist in TV2's studio and the renowned and then captain of the Norwegian squad Hammerseng in an interview by the largest Norwegian newspaper VG:

It's going to be all out fighting. And the Norwegian girls are going to take a lot physical punishment and really just shake it off and get up [on their feet] again and smile (Grini, 2010).

Gro Hammerseng – who here [pictured] almost got tackled out of the European Championship yesterday – sends out a war cry across Skagerak [the sea separating Norway and Denmark]. [...] - It's going to be war. Two physically though teams with good defensive abilities meet. It's going to be though – says Hammerseng (Overvik, 2010).

Like the performed and verbal smiles analyzed above, Grini's use of this cultural conception of femininity signifies to the spectators that the Norwegian women are ready for war – and will perform it with an appropriate feminine appeal. The smiles also manifest the enjoyment of partaking in contact-sports, overcoming physical pain and mental anxieties. Grini knows what she is talking about and informed Norwegians know she knows; she has loads of cultural capital. This counts for Hammerseng as well when she legitimately and successfully, on the front page of the newspaper VG, uses the notion of sport as war in her personal narrative representation of handball. In other words, the sport as war metaphor is used when Norway battles multiple countries and it is used by both Norwegian journalists and women athletes. While Norway and Romania have not met in military conflict, Norway and Denmark share a distant conflict ridden path of Danish rule and Norwegian separation in 1814. “The battle of Scandinavia” and the metaphor of the Viking are commonly used allegories to build anticipation when Scandinavian men's teams battle for advancement in international tournaments (Broch, 2012; Dahlén, 2008).

More so, the sport /media-complex's notion of sport as war has been widely documented as saturating the male media sport context and as preserved for men practicing masculine sports. This has led to many macro-analyses of the war metaphor as a key signifier of masculine and male dominated sports, a stereotypical intertwining of men and masculinity, and the reproduction of patriarchy (Coakley, 2007; Gee, 2009; Jordan & Cowan, 1995; Messner et al., 2000; Messner, 2002; Trujillo, 1995). In relation to represented women's sport reading off gender structure seemingly puts researchers in a double bind: representations of aggressive warrior women challenges a stereotypical intertwining of women and femininity – simultaneously, female athletes' masculine conduct and their mediated representations simply reify the valorization of masculinity and therefore also patriarchy (Coakley, 2007; Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Messner, 2002; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Thorpe, 2008). If we

continue to read off gender/macro-structure in data we are analytically trapped in an endless circle of structuring gender structures that symbolically reproduce societal patriarchy.

A mesosociological analysis can complement this analytic result. Meso-analysis reveals how micro and macro levels interweave in meaningful ways. It illustrates how a culture-structure constrains journalists' creative conceptualization of handball as a women's sport in contemporary Norway. The cultural logics that operate within institutionalized contact sports define success in a traditionalist masculine manner. The use of cultural conceptions of sport as war reifies and bolsters this idea and its specific relation to and valorization of masculinity – not men. Interviewed by the European Handball Federation Gro Hammerseng proclaimed that:

I always play the game tough, especially on defense, but always with a smile on my face. To me, it's an absolute joy to play handball [...]. But, I can get really furious too. (Hammerseng, 2013).

Female participation in sports typified as masculine/male has historically been met with distrust, conservative gender ideology and exclusion in Norway (Goksøyr, 2008; Lippe, 2001). Today, represented women's handball not only challenges traditionalist conceptions of femininity, but enables meaningful comprehensions of particular Norwegian female athletes as waging war with a smile. This meso-structural dynamic is sustained by persons' and groups' affective investment and meaningful use of broadly available conceptions to understand real and immediate practices (Alexander, 2003; Smelser, 1997; Spillman, 2002; Swidler, 2001). Demonstrated above is (1) how the metaphor of sport-war is *actively used* to make sense of and bolster certain understandings of the cultural performance of Norwegian women's handball, (2) the normalization of Norwegian female handballers' gender appropriate performance of sport-war and (3) a processes of meaning-making that potentially *reshape rigid* gender relations and macrostructures through sport communication.

Conclusion: Waging war with a smile

Macro-perspectives on media sports and gender have demonstrated the reproduction patriarchy (Coakley, 2007; Crolley & Teso, 2007; Eliopoulos & Johnsen, 2012; Messner, 2002; Messner et al., 2000; Ólafsson, 2006; Trujillo, 1995) and negotiations of a structured and structuring gender dichotomy (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; MacKay & Dallaire, 2009; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Thorpe, 2008). This article is an attempted to complement these valuable insights by investigating the interesting case of Norwegian women's handball. However, gender structure has not been read off in data and masculinity and femininity as has not been analyzed as mutually excluding dichotomies. Rather, gender has been investigated as a culturally situated practice that is creatively (re)constructed through a person-culture dialectic. Sport communication has been analyzed as constrained by a contextual culture-structure, but as a process of meaning-making formed by and forming cultural conceptions about gender appropriate conduct. The theoretical departure has therefore been from a culture-structure instead of a macrostructure.

The project has mapped the contours of the interpretive process that occurs when Norwegian media and TV2's commentators present women's team handball. This meso-analysis was situated within the socio-historical context of Norwegian handball as a women's sport. The analysis first mapped the binary culture-structure of the institutionalized handball game: aggressive/passive, strength/weakness, fast/slow and masculine/feminine. This binary constrains possible processes of meaning-making when Norwegian media present women's handball. Furthermore, moral *narrative* evaluation defines success as best accomplished

through the women's performance of traditionalist masculine characteristics signified by aggressive and physically forceful conduct. Second, there is no cultural context or narrative sport communication that escapes conscious and unconscious cultural conventions and heritage. Symbolic conceptions of a smile's gendered connotations are brought to life through a combination of the athletes' performances and the Norwegian media's metaphoric emphasis. Norwegian female handballers are portrayed as successfully performing masculine conduct and at the same time being conventionally feminine. Third, the commentators' use of the sport-war trope, readily available within the sport/media -complex, bolsters specific understandings of the female handballers' dramatic and heroic quest for success. Using available conceptions of gender and gendered conceptions of the handball-performance journalists and athletes creatively communicate shared comprehensions of how traditionalist and contemporary conceptions of femininity and masculinity co-exist as embodied female identities.

Shown above is how stereotypical masculine and feminine meaning is constrained by broad cultural conceptions of gender *but* allowed to co-exist within the meso-structured sport communication of Norwegian women's handball. In this narrative the gender dichotomy of masculinity and femininity is no longer mutually excluding oppositions. Instead, stereotypical gender oppositions converge in the legitimation and valorizing of Norwegian women's handball.

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