Creating and Maintaining Diversity and Inclusion with Sport: The Role of Positive Institutional Work

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Sport is a context where the very best and very worst of diversity and inclusion practices are routinely manifested. On the one hand, cases of harassment, abuse, prejudice, and discrimination are abundant (Almasy & Close, 2018; Chappell, 2018; Wolken, 2018). On the other hand, there is growing evidence that diverse and inclusive sport organizations enjoy far better organizational outcomes than do their less inclusive counterparts. Sport organizations that foster diversity and inclusion may attract otherwise marginalized sport participants (Spaij, 2015), attract and keep talented employees (Fink, Pastore, & Reimer, 2001, 2003), realize workplace improvements and outperform their less inclusive peers on objective measures of performance (Cunningham, 2009a, 2011b).

Though researchers have devoted considerable time to understanding the outcomes of diversity and inclusion, or a lack thereof, they have devoted less attention to theorizing about the topic. To be sure, some scholars have developed models of inclusive diversity strategies, focusing on what an idealized sport organization might resemble (Cunningham, 2009b; DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). Although they contribute to the understanding of diversity in sport organizations, much of the theoretical work ignores the creation and maintenance of diverse and inclusive spaces. How, for example, do organizations characterized by diversity and inclusion maintain such a culture, particularly given the transient nature of sport organization coaches, athletes, and staff (Lee & Chelladurai, in press; Raedeke, Warren, & Granzyk, 2002) (RQ1)?

We seek to fill this gap in the literature and answer this question in two ways. First, drawing from the tenets of positive institutional work (PIW; Nilson, 2015), we develop a perspective for creating and sustaining progressive institutions of diversity and inclusion within sport organizations. PIW provides an inclusion-based framework for instituting positive cultures and ideals within organizations. This framework accounts for the unique lived experiences of individuals and provides the necessary flexibility within institutional structures to adapt and adjust to individual perceptions. PIW adopts the logic of agency as an inquisitive process where actors seek to understand and account for all perspectives in the creation and maintenance of institutional structures. Thus, we argue that inclusivity and equality within sport may be achieved through the practices within this framework. Second, we conducted on-site observations (over 50 hours) and qualitative interviews with employees (N = 72) at four progressive sport organizations.

Our sample was mostly Caucasian (68.3%), heterosexual (87.5%), and male (62.9%). After using NVivo 12 software to analyze the interview transcriptions and field notes, our findings illustrate how PIW has been activated within the sport industry. Four main themes emerged from the data: Inclusion Matters for Everyone, Embrace Ambiguity and Fluidity of Practices, Importance of a Learning Mindset, Welcome Difficult Conversations, Ensure Inclusion does not Exclude. During the presentation, we will further discuss how inclusivity and equality within sport may be achieved through the practices of PIW. Additionally, we suggest that PIW offers the means necessary for achieving institutional stability. Especially for those endeavoring to institute inclusivity, PIW may be effective at minimizing conflicting logics which tend to destabilize institutions (Besharov & Smith, 2014).