Institutional Constraints in Elite Sport: Connecting Institutional Theory and Rigid Environment

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Relevance/significance of the topic to sport management

Despite the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) erasing the “Caucasian Only” clause from the Constitution and Bylaws and implementing strategic initiatives aimed at increasing minority interest in careers with golfing industry, the increase in African American PGA members has been insignificant (PGA, 2014). African American males account for only 85 of the 28,000 members in the Professional Golfers Association (PGA) of America (Evans, 2011). Patterson, Arthur and Washington (2016) characterize the golf industry as a rigid environment. A rigid environment is described as “one with a strongly established culture that includes significant barriers to change” (Patterson et al., 2016, p.275). Central to our inquiry, it is better to understand how actors (i.e., institutional entrepreneurship) daily lives and institutional logics constitute each other within rigid environments – is entirely missing from institutional logic research (Cornelissen et al., 2015). Drawing from institutional theory literature, this paper investigates various constraints (i.e., normative and cognitive) impacting African American males in the PGA to gain a sense of why these considerable difficulties are not changing through time. Understanding the characteristics of this environment coined with the actors’ experiences at an elite-level may provide insight into how to make changes in practice, policy, and even beliefs.

Research Context and Methodology

A qualitative research method was used in this study to investigate African American males’ experiences on their journeys to obtain PGA membership. Research participants participated in this study were both African American males and PGA Members - eight golf teaching professionals, three assistant golf professionals, three directors of golf operations, two general managers, two college professors, one vice president of golf operations, one director of instruction, one collegiate golf coach, one player development manager, and one PGA university administrator. The sample size of this study was 25 African American males. Interviews lasted between 45 and 118 minutes.

Results /Discussion/Contributions

Results are in progress, but initial findings show that participants expressed their concerns for the current path the PGA regarding diversity and inclusion. For instance, one of the emerging themes showed that the prevailing discourses around the environment are too constraining, indicating a culture of hegemonic power. The status quo in private golf facilities may not be ready for more diversity until the Good Old Boy Club culture changes in private golf club boardrooms. While opportunities exist for a more diverse PGA membership, there are also pockets of the industry that are extremely exclusive, specifically in private golf facilities.

The current study explicates the interaction between marginalized actors and context-specific barriers and adds an essential dimension to institutional theory literature from the very micro level. Second, this article highlights various factors that attributed to the taken-for-granted nature of rigid environments. In this fashion, we touch upon the potential roadblocks (Agyemang et al., 2018) that encompass historical, cultural, and operational variables for marginalized individuals within ridged environments. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest a strategic approach perhaps to reshape some institutional logics which exist in impermeable cognitive organization.