How do Elite Sport Organizations Frame Racial Diversity?

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Sport organizations frequently present themselves as committed to diversity and inclusion by creating and promoting policies, programs, and other initiatives. Scholarship examining diversity ideology and impression management has illuminated the existing ideologies and frameworks that organizations use to create a positive image. However, opportunistic rhetoric about diversity and inclusion often fails to align with actual organizational practices, and leadership positions in the sport industry remain disproportionately dominated by White men. To provide insight into the ways elite sport organizations frame race in the context of diversity and inclusion, the current study analyzed documents produced by the National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Football League (NFL), and the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC).

While each organization publicized numerous policies, programs, events, and other initiatives ostensibly intended to promote racial diversity, the term “racism” did not appear once in the organizations’ diversity documents. Rather than directly addressing racism, these organizations commonly framed people of color as a group to be managed (NBA, NFL & MLB), included (NBA), developed (MLB & USOPC), and acknowledged, supported, and addressed (NFL). Using insights from Ray’s Theory of Racialized Organizations and Critical Race Theory, the presenters will describe ways in which the racialized content intended to foster and support racial diversity operates as a means of publicly signaling a commitment to racial diversity without challenging systems of structural inequity in a meaningful way. Racialized reporting tools were identified as one way this phenomenon was demonstrated. As each organization publicized internal racial and gender demographic data, the purpose, intentions, and effects of these publicized mechanisms merit scrutiny. For example, the USOPC annually produces detailed demographic-based scorecards that give each National Governing Body and High Performance Management Organization a racialized benchmark for front office diversity, but many organizations perpetually fail to hit their benchmark. Further, the current study identified a lack of attention to racism as a structural or institutional phenomenon. For instance, the NFL framed diversity as a micro-level, individualized issue by implicitly equating racism as an act of individual cynicism.

A key implication of these findings is that when organizations fail to address (or even recognize) the structural root causes of inequality, any initiatives they promote are unlikely to foster meaningful systemic progress with respect to social justice. The presenters will conclude by providing guidance for sport professionals about how to frame diversity more productively with respect to promoting institutional progress. By shedding light on the meso-level racial inequities sport organizations perpetuate, the presentation will inform sport professionals on how they can challenge systems of oppression within the sport industry and society at large.