Hoosier Whiteness and the Indiana Pacers: Understanding Strategic Change from a Critical Race Based Sensemaking Theory

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Answering Singer’s (2005) call for sport management research to address epistemological racism, this paper examines the process of organizational change from a new perspective. Placing ‘race’ at the forefront of analysis, the arguments put forth by the author are generated by resituating organizational sensemaking theory (Weick, 1979; 1995) underneath the lens of critical race theory. It is believed that a melding of these two theoretical frameworks can enhance our understanding for strategic change in sport organizations, which has heretofore tended to ignore racial politics (especially whiteness).

Sport is not void from social inequalities that plague the rest of society. In fact, it often exists as a medium through which these discriminatory and prejudiced beliefs become safely rearticulated due to the popular misguided notion that sport is a utopian world free of everyday social and political ills. Sport organizations, therefore, require further scrutiny as they act as potential channels for the reproduction and institutionalization of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, to name a few. This paper specifically investigates the National Basketball Association (NBA) Indiana Pacers as one such organization to recently engage in this reproductive practice. In particular, the franchise’s leaders appealed to a racist discourse (i.e., Hoosier whiteness) as a means to accommodate (white) fans’s desired image(s) for the team. As such, this paper’s purpose is to illuminate whiteness as a potential force through which strategic change becomes problematically legitimized and marketed by sports organizations.

With the understanding that sport fans shape and construct their identity by associating or dissociating with teams (Gialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman & Sloan, 1976; Funk & James, 2001; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 1999; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), it is imperative to question how such decisions become influenced by racial judgments. Even though these schematic perceptions represent a form of sensemaking from which all people comprehend, white folks occupy a position of power and privilege since their whiteness is overlooked as merely the norm (and not influenced by their race). Unconcealing this invisible whiteness is of utmost importance to critical race theorists, as it serves the covert majority as a source for psychic wealth while it simultaneously oppresses and imposes limits upon the subjectivities of a hypervisible minority (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Giroux, 1997; McDonald, 2005). For the Indiana Pacers, it is argued that fans came to dissociate with the team based upon their culturally embedded sensemaking process of Hoosier whiteness. Since the organization did not share in this knowledge structure (resulting in a disgruntled and confused fanbase), a strategic change initiative was unveiled to incorporate this institutionalized schema into the club’s own sensemaking. In turn, fans began to re-associate themselves with the team.

To unconceal this whiteness, the paper begins by situating “Hoosier basketball” within a historical narrative to understand the cultural significance ascribed to Indiana basketball. Noting the consistent historiographic privileging of white athletes, coaches, and teams, it is argued that such whiteness continues to operate as a fundamental component to white Indiana’s sensemaking (i.e. Hoosier whiteness). In comparison, black histories are pushed aside with little to no romanticization; and, are instead meant to act as a moral threat to the values that provide Hoosier whiteness with its sociopolitical importance. Beginning with the infamous brawl in 2004, some of the Indiana Pacers’s black athletes were chastised in the local and national media for engaging in “unscrupulous” behaviour. Not surprisingly, then, fears of black masculinity became reified for those subscribing to Hoosier whiteness, resulting in a tarnished organizational image for the Pacers. Hoping to restructure according to the fears and desires of its fanbase, team owner Herb Simon articulated the need for strategic change: “We’re talking about restructuring, re-thinking, all the things you do when your team is in crisis…winning is important, but also how we present ourselves to the community. In that case, we’ve all done a horrible job.” Therefore, to uncover the racialized significance of this change, this paper takes the advice of Gioia et al. (1994) to examine the “symbolism, sensemaking, and influence processes that serve to create and legitimate the meaning of the change” (p. 364).

By exploring symbolic sensemaking processes through a critical race theory perspective, the Indiana Pacers’s period of strategic change revealed itself as appealing to whiteness. This paper examines four events in particular: (a) the hiring of white, Indiana-native, Larry Bird to act as sole decision maker of basketball related affairs (b) the reconstruction of the team’s roster, which saw a dramatic increase in white, American-born athletes; (c) the banishment of black, point guard Jamaal Tinsley from the team (despite being healthy and under contract); and (d) the 2008-2009 Indiana Pacers marketing campaign, which sought to confirm and remind audiences of “Hoosier whiteness” and its associative values as being the “right” way to play basketball.

Since undergoing these changes, the franchise has witnessed a turnaround in public perception and similarly enjoyed increased attendance rates. While it would be unfair to singularly attribute these developments to the organization’s strategic change.
efforts, it is likely that many Indiana fans – having come to think of basketball in highly racialized, value-laden terms – were encouraged by the organization’s adoption of a Hoosier whiteness sensemaking process. Harkening back to an era when Indiana’s prized basketball tradition reflected superior morals, innocence, and purity requiring protection from the mysterious black athlete, the Pacers effectively managed to reinscribe this sentiment to provide audiences with a source for white pride. Coexisting with contemporary racist discourse that positions black male athletes and hip hop culture as dangerous threats, the franchise similarly constructed a criminalized “dark” past with a “bright” future appealing to the tastes of whiteness.

However, this whiteness can be made visible. Sport organizations from everywhere undergo change and transformation with the intent to present a better image to constituents. Sport management research must therefore ask, on what level does this change represent a “bright” future for the sensemaking processes involved?