Practicing Homogeneity by Constructing Difference

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Despite an emphasis on positive aspects of diversity and an increase in the socio-demographic heterogeneity of employees in sport organizations, the senior managerial level is still known for its relative lack of social diversity, that is, its homogeneity, due to the underrepresentation of social groups such as women and ethnic and sexual minorities. Top management plays a central role in organizational constructions of diversity and policies (Cunningham, 2009). Edelman et al. (2001) argue that managerial discourses are "both a reflection and a producer of organizational culture, [and] constitute a key vehicle for the flow of norms, scripts, and models of management ..." (p. 1631). Social diversity is not however, a neutral or natural fact but a discourse that is informed by a constellation of social relations of power such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality that constitute organizational members (Konrad et al. 2006). The purpose of this study is to examine how constructions of women and ethnic and sexual minorities by senior managers in sport organizations may converge and diverge and together inform practices of diversity and homogeneity. Research on the underrepresentation of women and minorities as managers suggests that the discourses managers draw on to describe (lack of) diversity at the managerial level depend on the categorical group that is focus of the study. The possible convergence, divergence and interrelationships of discourses managers use to construct these groups in their particular organization has received relatively little scholarly attention. Yet together this constellation of discourses constitutes discursive practices of diversity and homogeneity. Comparisons of these categorical constructions and the underlying ideologies may yield insights that add to understandings of practices of diversity and homogeneity and of the complexity of bringing about change at the senior managerial level.

Theoretical framework: We use a Foucauldian approach drawing on the literature in the areas of critical management and sport and feminist studies. Specifically, we explore the technology of normalization by which some individuals and populations are designated as the norm and others as deviant/problematic. We assume managerial attributions about diversity are situated in norms that are used in categorical sorting processes to differentiate among individuals and assign them to groups. In this study we explore how senior managers working in sport engage in such sorting through their constructions of women, gays and lesbians and ethnic minorities.

Methodology: Since men collectively dominate senior managerial positions, the focus of this study was on male senior managers. At the time of the study all Dutch senior managers in sport were white men. We sampled across as many national sport associations and agencies as possible until data saturation was reached. The resulting sample consisted of 12 managers who were directors of national sport associations or managers of governmental agencies dealing with sport. The topics for the semi-structured interviews included a discussion of definitions and value (if any) of social diversity and explanations for the current demographic composition at the senior managerial level in their organization/sport. We analyzed the data using a constant comparative analytic method. Subsequently we used the literature to locate the themes/arguments in various discourses and in underlying ideologies.

Results: These managers valued difference in the generic sense and saw it as 'normal.' Women managers were seen as adding value to sport organizations since sport is formally structured in terms of gender. Yet these managers discursively normalized diversity (Beck, 2007) by arguing they selected managers as individuals and in an unbiased way regardless of ethnicity and gender. They felt they could do little to increase social diversity. Normality as represented by the invisible norm of white heterosexual men was used as a discursive resource to explain the under-representation of women and minorities. The categories of ethnic minorities, women and gays were constructed as consisting of those who failed to make the required choices or who lacked the necessary skills, abilities and behaviors to fit organizational demands. Although at one level these managerial constructions of gender, ethnicity and sexual preference diverged, they converged at the subtext level since the constructions of the categories were situated in discourses reflecting essentialist ideologies. We draw on feminist postcolonial perspectives to explain how the use of essentialist discursive practices to create categorizations based on perceived differences not only
describe and explain absence but produce and reproduce these differences as universal and static (Narayan, 1998). The use of this essentialism allowed these senior managers to use their power to maintain their privilege to normalize, categorize and exclude and include. These practices ignore the multiplicity of identity and fluidity of categorizations. We conclude that lack of diversity in the managerial ranks in sport organizations is a multi-layered practice that is embedded in gendered, sexualized and ethnicized relations of power that need more attention from researchers and policy makers/HRM departments.