

Diversity in the NBA, Dress Codes, and Organizational Culture: A Narrative Policy Analysis

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Organizational theory/culture

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**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

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The introduction in 2005 of a new dress code by the National Basketball Association (NBA) was met with a wave of controversy, with some stakeholders claiming that the policy was necessary to repair the image of the league, and others interpreting it as an attempt by the league to appeal to white corporate sensibilities (Buffery, 2005; Cholo, 2005). The central question of this study is focused on how this kind of policy, or any other kind of organizational policy that is interpreted in radically different ways, can be studied by the policy analyst. The conflicting reactions to the dress code as an organizational policy places the policy analyst in a difficult position by creating a context characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and polarization, which is not very well suited to traditional policy methods (Roe, 2003).

Consequently, a different approach is required to examine the dress code, and for this reason Roe's (2003) narrative policy analysis is selected. This method is composed of four steps. First, the researcher orders the uncertain situation by searching the discourses developed around the issue for stories understood as narratives that either have a beginning, a middle, and an end or premises and conclusions. Second, those narratives missing the characteristics of a story (nonstories) or running against the dominant policy narratives (counterstories) are identified. In the third step, the two types of narratives (stories, on one side, and nonstories or counterstories, on the other) are compared in order to find a broader metanarrative. Finally, the metanarrative generated in the previous phase is analyzed to determine whether it recasts the stories, nonstories and counterstories in a way that makes them more amenable to policy making. The ability of this method to bridge the gap between opposing views through the introduction of a metanarrative makes it particularly suited in the context examined here.

The narrative analysis was carried out on media discourses (Breit, 2010; Canto-Mila & Lozano, 2008; Mazza & Alvarez, 2000; Vaara & Tienari, 2000, 2010) concerning the dress code for two main reasons. First, the new policy was framed by David Stern, the commissioner of the NBA, as an attempt to improve the image of the league, considered necessary in light of a series of unflattering incidents like a brawl between players of the Indiana Pacers and Detroit Pistons (Cunningham, 2005). Since the new dress code is construed as a public relations policy, its success or failure is determined by its ability to change public attitudes, reflected in the media. Second, unlike in most other cases, the professional sport industry is constantly under the scrutiny of the media, which places labour negotiations in the major leagues in a "fishbowl atmosphere" (Staudohar, 1999), to a significant extent open to the public, which means that both the athletes and the NBA management have an opportunity to both present their points of view and try to influence the public perception of their positions (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011).

The narrative analysis was performed on media discourses present in articles published between 1982 and 2011 in newspapers from the US and other English-speaking countries, accessed through a search based on the combination of keywords "NBA" and "dress code" in the Lexis Nexis database. 979 documents resulted, but after the duplicates and irrelevant articles were eliminated, 129 of them were retained. Narrative analysis (Kaplan, 2002; Roe, 2003) and applied linguistics (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1987) were applied, relying on Roe's (2003) definition of narratives, as composed of premises and conclusions, which can later be transformed into a means of identifying narratives, and using Fairclough's (1995) concept of "genre", so that finding narratives means identifying a genre of discourse that is argumentative in nature. 250 argumentative passages were identified, almost equally divided between the two positions. Inductive analysis was applied to identify the most frequently used types of arguments, followed by a deductive analysis, to confirm the central role of these arguments (Patton, 2002).

In the first phase, two central narratives are identified, one that focuses on economic factors, arguing that this policy is legitimate by the financial situation of the league and that no other consideration should legitimately be taken into account when examining the dress code, referred to as the economic narrative. The second narrative, the cultural narrative, explores the dress code in a broader cultural context, focusing on its racial overtones and its oppressive nature. The two narratives are incompatible, a fact that is visible in their different methodological commitments, as

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the economic narrative places the dress code in the context of the organization, ignoring any outside influence, while the cultural narrative views the organizational context as just a place where broader social trends manifest themselves. Therefore, a policy analysis has to either take a side in this methodological debate or find a framework that allows at the same time the isolationism of the economic narrative and the integrationism of the cultural narrative.

In the second phase of the narrative analysis, counterstories and nonstories were identified. Of particular interest was a social class-focused nonstory, which reflects the attitudes of fans regarding highly paid athletes criticizing the dress code, thus offering a glimpse of how the incompatibilities between the cultural and the economic narratives can be overcome. This nonstory has a complex structure, challenging both narratives from the inside, i.e., on the basis of their own premises, not on the basis of the other narrative's premises.

This nonstory offers the blueprint for how a metanarrative can mediate between the opposing main narratives: first, it needs to be able to analyze the dress code both within the context of the organization, and in the context of broader social forces; second, it needs to be able to challenge each narrative from the inside, in such a way as to provide an opening toward the other. The metanarrative proposed here interprets the dress code as an organizational culture policy. Unlike previous similar attempts (Hughes, 2004; McDonald & Togliola, 2010), which have defined organizational culture along the lines of the strong culture model, strictly linked to potential competitive advantages (Killman et al., 1985; Peters, 1988; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sathe, 1983), this metanarrative casts doubt over the central tenets of the strong culture model, questioning both narratives in ways that makes them open toward each other. With regard to the economic narrative, the organizational culture narrative can provide empirical data to challenge some of the assumptions at the basis of the introduction of the NBA dress code, like the isolationist methodological stance, by pointing out that organizational cultures are influenced by outside factors (Hofstede & Peterson, 2000; Schneider, 1988) and that attempts to change values within organizations is unlikely to succeed (Alvesson, 2002; Martin, 1992; Turner, 1986). With regard to the cultural values, it points out power relationships within organizations (Ocasio, 2002), drawing attention to the role of economic factors in the oppressive nature of dress codes.

In conclusion, a framework for mediating between highly conflicting positions regarding diversity in organizations is provided, one that could offer a way to bring together in the sport management research both the economic discourse of efficiency and the sociological discourse of oppression. For the policy analyst, this organizational culture framework helps develop organizational diversity policy that is more sensitive to the broader social conflicts involving race, gender, or social class, while avoiding sociological constructs that are unlikely to resonate with the efficiency-minded sport managers. At the same time, it provides managers and policy makers with a realistic image of how far can diversity management policies succeed in increasingly diverse organizations, in view of surrounding larger social and historical trends.