Cultural Values and Gender Equity on National Olympic Committee Boards

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Introduction
Around the world and across different occupational settings, women are under-represented in leadership positions. For example, according to the 2016 Fortune 500 list, women held 21 percent of the board seats and just 4.2 percent of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions in American corporations. Similar trends are apparent in European organizations, too (European Commission, 2015). These patterns are not limited to the corporate setting, as researchers have shown that women are under-represented in sport organizations, including as administrators and coaches in college athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), commissions for the Australian Sports Commission (Australian Sports Commission, 2014), and board members of Sport England (Sport England, 2014), among other settings (see also Burton, 2015). The lack of women in leadership roles is important for several reasons. From an ethical and social obligation perspective, sport organizations have a responsibility to be inclusive (Cunningham, 2015). Furthermore, top management teams with a gender balance signal inclusiveness to internal and external stakeholders, arrive at better decisions, and frequently outperform their peers (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Robinson & Dechant, 1997).

There are a bevy of multi-level reasons for the under-representation of women, including societal factors and gendered expectations for women and men, organizational cultures of similarity, biased decision making, prejudice, and discrimination (Burton, 2015). The purpose of the current study was to expand on this understanding in several ways. First, we investigate the representation of women in National Olympic Committees. Given that much of the gender research is set in North America and Europe, considering the gender equity of sport organizations around the world adds a novel contribution. Second, we draw from Hofstede’s theory on cultural values to empirically consider the role of macro-level factors on the representation of women in leadership positions.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
Hofstede (1991) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category people from others” (p. 5). In his early work, Hofstede measured the nations’ culture to explain the similarities and differences among human cultures and also concluded organizations are culturally tied (Hofstede, 1980, 1984). He later refined this thinking to suggest national culture exists along five dimensions (Hofstede, 1991). Power distance, refers to the degree to which resources and influence are concentrated around a select few; uncertainty avoidance pertains to the degree to which people view uncertainty as a threat and subsequently seek to eschew such situations; individualism versus collectivism refers to the strength of bonding, concern for others, and collaboration among people; femininity versus masculinity refers to the traditional role for women and men, with countries high in femininity valuing cooperation, modesty, and caring for others; and finally, long-term orientation refers to the degree to which people in a society value tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and the past.

Hofstede’s theory of cultural values provides some explanatory value in understanding the representation of women on governing boards outside of sport. For example, Carrasco et al. (2015) found that women were under-represented on boards in countries marked by power imbalances (high in power distance) and a preference for traditional roles of men (high in masculinity). In a related study, Ng and Burke (2004) observed that cultural values were predictive of attitudes toward diversity. Finally, Ringov and Zollo (2007) observed that masculinity and power distance were associated with poorer social performance among firms in their study, and as social performance might be linked with inclusiveness, the findings inform the current research.

Building on Hofstede’s theory and the subsequent empirical work outside of sport, our work was guided by the following research question: What is the relationship between a country’s cultural values and gender equity on its National Olympic Committee?
Method and Results
We relied on archival sources for our data. The Rio 2016 Olympics website listed every country’s National Olympic Committee website, and we consulted these sites to gather the number of board members and gender of each board member. We used Hofstede’s site (https://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html) to collect data concerning the country’s cultural values. Members of the research team independently collected data from 10 countries to examine consistency in coding. Agreement was reached, and the remaining data were collected from the lead author.

The average National Olympic Committee had 12 members, 19.7 percent of whom were women. Eight countries had a committee with no women, while one country had an equal proportion of women and men. This country also had the largest proportion of women. The mode representation of women on the committee was 25 percent. In terms of committee leadership, 94.2 percent of the committees had a man as president, and 85.3 percent had a man as secretary general.

We computed a multiple regression analysis to examine the research question. Given the small sample of complete data (n = 64 countries), we interpret alphas at the .10 level. We included the size of the board as a control variable, though the effects were not significant (beta = -.14, p = .12). The block of cultural values variables was entered in the second step. The total model accounted for 41.6 percent of the variance (p < .001). Three cultural values were significant at the .10 level: power distance (beta = -.24, p = .09), masculinity (beta = -.31, p = .005), and uncertainty avoidance (beta = -.31, p = .006). We examined eta-square values, which showed that power distance accounted for 4.8 percent unique variance, masculinity accounted for 12.9 percent unique variance, and uncertainty avoidance contributed 12.5 percent unique variance.

Discussion
Our study yielded several noteworthy results. First, gender equality on National Olympic Committees was the exception, not the rule. Almost all of the committees had a man as president, over 85 percent had a man as secretary general, and 6.6 percent had no women on the board. In fact, 67 percent National Olympic Committees with fewer than 25 percent women. These results suggest administrative work at elite, international levels is largely reserved for men.

Second, three cultural values significantly predicted the representation of women on the National Olympic Committee. Lower power distance, aversion from the traditional male values, and a comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity were all associated with a higher proportion of women on the board. While national cultural values might be difficult to change, it is possible to embrace such positions in organizations (Hofstede et al., 2010). As gender diversity on boards is associated with multiple valued outcomes, sport managers should embrace such values and promote them in the workplace.