Reflections on the 'race' equity landscape in senior leadership in sports

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Dr Steven Bradbury considers key findings from the research and provides some additional reflections on the existing and prospective 'race' equity landscape in senior leadership in sports. In doing so, he encourages the sports sector to adopt a holistic and transformational approach to 'race' equity, and outlines ways in which sports bodies might enable enhanced representational and inclusive outcomes for ethnically diverse senior leaders.

From diversity to inclusion?

Efforts to capture the levels of representation of ethnically diverse groups in the senior leadership workforce in sports constitute an important part of 'race' equity work. In particular, in outlining the extent to which such positions are populated by ethnically diverse groups, and providing a benchmark against which sports bodies can measure representational change over time.

However, whilst the focus on achieving policy targets regarding representation remains laudable, it can also lead some sport bodies to overlook the processes through which such outcomes might be best realised. In doing so, this can leave the organisational structures and cultures which underpin racialised inequities untouched. For example, as indicated in this research study, with respect to those structures, pathways and preferences which inhibit the career prospects of ethnically diverse groups, and the cultures of White racial similarity and subsequent lack of belonging and allyship experienced by ethnically diverse groups in such settings.

In this respect, future work in this field might focus more purposefully on ensuring that processes and practices of selection and recruitment at Board and SLT level are more equitable, and that senior leadership workplace cultures are more welcoming and supportive of ethnically diverse senior leaders. In doing so, work might also pay greater attention to and prioritise inclusion as a central element of organisational activities and experiences in such environs.

From resistance to reflection?

This research study indicated a lack of knowledge and understanding of barriers to career progression experienced by ethnically diverse groups at some sports bodies, and a more general belief in the 'assumed innocence' of the sports leadership environments under review. Further, in some cases, there was some organisational and individual resistance to the implementation of positive action measures designed to redress racialised inequities in senior leadership contexts. Such thinking is reflective of the general preference within the sports sector in the UK more broadly towards liberal notions of equality which prioritise notions of sameness and equal treatment, and which favour generic EDI approaches to diversity and inclusion.

However, at other sports bodies there existed a stronger recognition of the existence of racialised barriers and some conceptual and operational support for positive action measures designed to embed 'race' equitable practices in recruitment and development. These more 'race' conscious approaches were underscored by a shift in thinking from '*race' equality* to *'race' equity,* and the

related consideration that for ethnic diversity and inclusion to be achieved, a stronger emphasis on recognition, difference, and equitable treatment is required.

In this respect, future work in this field might focus more strongly on educating and increasing the cultural competence of senior decision makers at Board and SLT level in sports. This might enable the sports sector to move from a position of organisational resistance at a strategic, operational, and attitudinal level, and encourage greater reflexivity as to the ways in which the institutionalised structures, practices and cultures of sports bodies might impact negatively on the experiences and career progression of ethnically diverse aspiring senior leaders. This would likely engender a more culturally informed commitment to 'race' equity and the related implementation of targeted measures to transform the ethnic diversity and inclusion landscape of sports leadership.

From continuity to change?

The contested reception and lack of prioritisation of work to embed 'race' equity in the leadership tiers of the sports workforce, will likely maintain the apparent disjuncture between the high profile public commitments of sports bodies and the lack of meaningful policies and actions in practice. In particular, in rendering such commitments as a largely gestural, symbolic and non-performing substitute for action, and in maintaining continuities of under-representation and marginalisation in the senior leadership workforce.

Conversely, the adoption of a more holistic and transformational approach to 'race' equity is likely to enable sports bodies to establish more 'race' equitable processes and practices of recruitment and better support the development and career progression of ethnically diverse aspiring senior leaders. As indicated in this research study, such efforts will also likely lead to representational gains in ethnic diversity in the senior leadership workforce. Further, where such ethnic diversity exists in such environs, it is also likely to enhance the functionality, cultural appeal and inclusivity of sports bodies, and increase aspirations towards the sector amongst other ethnically diverse aspiring senior leaders.

In this respect, future work in this field might focus on supporting sports bodies with appropriate financial and human resource support and opportunities for knowledge exchange. In particular, to enable the shift from operational continuity to meaningful change. Further work might also examine the shape, scope and effectiveness of developing efforts to establish good 'race' equity practice, and the extent to which such actions have engendered positive representational and qualitative outcomes in relation to ethnic diversity and inclusion in the senior leadership workforce in sports.

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