Dressing for the Part: An Examination of Sport Organization Dress Codes as a Gendered Organizational Practice

Lauren Hindman, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Management - Diversity (Professional Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Management/Diversity

Abstract 2021-107  
Mode: Synchronous  
Friday June 4, 2021, 11:45 AM - 12:05 PM

The underrepresentation of women in sport organizations can be explained not only by the biases and actions of individuals, but also through examination of socially constructed organizational practices (Calás, Smircich, & Holvino, 2014). This study examines one such practice—dress codes—to understand how dress contributes to gender disparities in sport organizations. Dress is an informal practice that communicates differences between men and women (Shaw, 2006). On the job, acceptable dress is learned through interactions with coworkers and dress code policies (Dellinger, 2002). In addition to gender, dress can communicate status and power (Crane, 2000). For example, men strategically use dress to construct masculinities appropriate for different situations—choosing a suit to convey authority or casual clothes to appear more relatable (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008).

While prior literature has demonstrated that dress signals gender differences, the purpose of this study is to understand how dress codes affect men and women differently. Data stem from an ethnographic study of the administrative offices of two men’s professional sport organizations and include more than 165 hours of observations, 29 interviews, and dozens of documents and digital artifacts. Field notes, transcripts, and artifacts were analyzed in NVivo 12 using an inductive coding strategy (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Analytical and reflective memos were used to capture patterns, themes, and research questions (Charmaz, 2014).

Findings reveal that gender differences exist not only in expectations of dress, but also in how work clothes make women and men feel. Women describe the challenges of dressing for their jobs, viewing dress expectations as burdensome and in conflict with their responsibilities—for instance, needing to wear women’s business professional attire while performing physical labor or working in uncomfortable temperatures. Men, on the other hand, view dress expectations as in line with their job responsibilities and find empowerment in their clothes. They describe putting on a suit as feeling like they are dressing for the part of being a sport manager. Men intentionally select clothing—in particular, their ties—to convey personality and connect with customers. In addition, while both men and women face critique for their clothing, critiques toward men are superficial, amounting to teasing. In contrast, women face judgment of their dress that affects evaluations of overall professionalism and job performance. In one case, a manager cites complaints about one woman’s dress as a reason she is let go from the organization.

Implications of this study include furthering understanding of how sport organizations are gendered (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003) through its demonstration of ways in which everyday work practices create and sustain gender inequality. Beyond communicating gender differences (Shaw, 2006), the final presentation will demonstrate how gendered norms about dress disadvantage women in sport, where jobs often require physical labor in non-office settings and women’s professional dress does not align with such roles. Further, gendered evaluations of dress lead to women facing professional consequences when their appearance does not meet social expectations. The findings highlight the need for sport organizations to evaluate how dress codes may create barriers for women and contribute to gender inequalities in the workplace.