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Racial Essentialism and the Segregation of NFL Positions

Introduction

Sports serve as a powerful social force, uniquely capable of fostering community development and social inclusion. However, sports can also represent an elevated platform for the promotion of racial essentialism—the prejudicial (and pseudoscientific) belief that race is a fixed biological property that genetically determines a person's aptitudes (Zeng et al., 2022). In 2016, National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick's bold decision to protest the United States national anthem drew significant attention to systemic racism in and outside of professional football, reminding audiences that sports are not immune to the broader social inequities experienced by marginalized groups. By placing individual athletes in direct competition with each other, sports like professional football invite racial comparisons from both lay audiences and sports organizations themselves. As a result, competition between athletes often recreates fallacious assumptions regarding genetic racial difference, particularly with respect to athletic performance.

Like other systems of racial inequality, racism in professional football manifests itself as the consolidation and preservation of racial hierarchy. The often-racialized evaluation of athletes is rooted in essentialist perspectives of race difference—an assumption that is associated with “prejudice toward Black people and negative stereotyping of Black athletes’ intelligence and work ethic.” (Sheldon et al., 2007). Assumptions about biological race differences in turn create

and sustain inequalities in professional football, since essentialist conceptualizations of race are used to justify and normalize the lack of minority representation in certain on- and off-field positions.

The Paradox of Integration

In *The Paradox of Integration: Racial Composition of NFL Positions from 1960 to 2020*, author Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde analyzes racialized patterns in player position and career duration. Using data from 20,357 players and 60 seasons of the NFL, Marquez-Velarde describes two key findings regarding racial segregation/integration in professional football. First, Marquez-Velarde finds the “cumulative hyper-segregation” of Black players in positions with the highest injury risk (e.g., running back, defensive back, defensive line, and wide receiver), which in turn has consequences for the quality and duration of those players’ NFL careers (Marquez-Velarde, 2023). Conversely, the analysis finds very little integration of Black players into the most prestigious position: quarterback. Despite Black players constituting a large majority of the overall player body (74 percent for the period 2014–2020), there is a glaring asymmetry in the proportion of Black quarterbacks.

Quarterbacks, punters, and kickers—positions predominantly occupied by White players—experience extended careers and exhibit lower susceptibility to adverse health effects, cognitive injuries, and post-career declines in quality of life (Karton et al., 2020; Marquez-Velarde, 2023). This trend extends to management and ownership roles, where individuals secure significant status and financial benefits without exposure to the physical risks endured by active players. Overall, Marquez-Velarde finds that the rise in the representation of Black players in the NFL since the league’s on-field integration has not translated into

commensurate status, acceptance, or fair integration of Black players within organizational structures.

Marquez-Velarde attributes this observation to "racial stacking", or the tendency to channel players into specific roles or positions based on stereotypes related to athleticism and intellectual prowess. Decision-makers within organizations rely on cultural schemas to envision the ideal candidate for each position (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Marquez-Velarde, 2023). These cultural schemas draw on racial ideologies pertaining to ability and competence, aligning prospective players with the characteristics of the job-specific "ideal worker." Consequently, cultural schemas function as mechanisms for translating racial ideologies into organizational practices that perpetuate status hierarchies (Marquez-Velarde, 2023). These cultural schemas reinforce racialized patterns of occupational attainment by justifying unequal outcomes, often by referencing purported natural or innate differences in aptitude (i.e., racial essentialism).

This channeling happens most frequently during the NFL Draft. Comparing and assessing NFL prospects—particularly through a scouting process that depersonalizes and commodifies individual players—enables various forms of both tacit and explicit racial bias. Specifically, the NFL Scouting Combine is often employed to perpetuate offensive stereotypes about Black athletes (Bigler and Jeffries, 2008). The most harmful stereotype is that Black football players are athletically superior yet intellectually inferior to their white counterparts—a dichotomy that is frequently normalized in the draft process. As a result, Black quarterbacks are “routinely rated lower on leadership, intelligence, and decision-making compared to White athletes by NFL draft experts” (Marquez-Velarde, 2023).

Since the world of professional sports is an inviting domain for the study of social difference, there are a number of relevant papers with which to review key findings and popular

methodological approaches in analyzing perceptions of racial essentialism, specifically with regards to sports and athletics. It is also necessary to consider the role of organizations, since work organizations are the “primary sites where racial hierarchies are produced” (Marquez-Velarde, 2023). The following analysis explores and summarizes papers in all of the aforementioned domains—situating Marquez-Velarde’s research in a broader literature of sports, social difference, and organizational behavior.

Science and Social Difference

In analyzing racism in professional football through a social scientific lens, it is first important to identify how the topic interacts with the academic literature on genetic race difference. Ann Morning’s *The Nature of Race: How Scientists Think and Teach about Human Difference* examines the dichotomy of a constructivist versus essentialist view of racial difference, both in formal academic presentations of race (such as in textbooks, classrooms, and research universities) and in broader social attitudes (evinced in surveys and interviews with the lay public). Ultimately, Morning concludes that racial essentialism is both a “shared discourse that is mutually reinforced by laypeople and academic scientists”, as well as a powerful notion transmitted and amplified by institutions. In perhaps her most germane finding, Morning finds that 70 percent of survey respondents believe that “genes explain black/white differences in athletics” (Morning, 2011).

Meanwhile, in *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-Create Race in the Twenty-First Century*, author Dorothy Roberts explores the ways in which new genetic science and technology has redefined race as a biological division. By depoliticizing the definition of race and focusing on differences at the genetic level, Roberts finds that important

institutional and social inequities are concealed, showing again how the perpetuation of biological race differences can sustain systemic inequalities. Additionally, in analyzing the use of genetic science in the medical field, Roberts identifies the commercial incentives to racialize pharmaceutical production. While Roberts' work never exclusively focuses on racial difference in athletics, her attention to the economic and commercial interests in reinforcing racial essentialism remains relevant to any study of race and inequality (Roberts, 2011).

Sports, Social Difference, and Organizational Behavior

In *Toward a Natural History of Team Sports*, authors Kevin Kniffin and Michelle Sugiyama present a fascinating exploration of the evolutionary and social history of “play”. The authors posit that one such behavior—playing in teams—derives from motivational architecture rooted in the human species' history as both a foraging and industrialized society (Kniffin and Sugiyama, 2018). It is no surprise then that sports have evolved to become such an instrumental element of human social interaction. This idea is corroborated by economist James Buchanan in *Group Selection and Team Sports*, who finds that team sports offer “direct analogies with evolutionary explanations of the conflict between individual and group objectives”. Sports teams thus operate as a means of evaluating interpersonal behavior and evolutionary dynamics, which extend into the analysis of hierarchies and segregation—such as that performed by Marquez-Velarde.

Aptly, Kniffin and Sugiyama explicitly acknowledge the previously discussed misconception of biological race differences, writing, “the application of biological perspectives to the study and management of team sports has been muddled by now-discredited perspectives on race” (Kniffin and Sugiyama, 2018). At the same time, the authors suggest that contemporary

work on the subject of gene-environment interactions “is markedly more sophisticated for questions focused on sports”. Fortunately, a number of social scientists have addressed these questions directly.

In *Sport, Genetics and the 'Natural Athlete': The Resurgence of Racial Science*, author Brett St. Louis explores the ubiquity of racial science and mistaken suggestions of a racially distributed genetic basis for athletic ability and performance. St. Louis concludes that the use of genetic science in order to “describe and explain common-sense impressions of racial physiology and sporting ability is founded on erroneous premises of objectivity and disinterest, and inflates the analytical efficacy of scientific truth claims.” (St. Louis, 2003) St. Louis’s findings are particularly redolent of NFL organizations’ use of NFL Scouting Combine data to draw spurious conclusions about player performance.

In *White Americans’ Genetic Explanations for a Perceived Race Difference in Athleticism*, authors Jane Sheldon, Toby Jayaratne, and Elizabeth Petty discover that “the more (survey) respondents endorsed genetic underpinnings for a perceived race difference in athleticism, the greater their level of prejudice and negative stereotyping about Black people” (Sheldon et al., 2003). By identifying an important association between racial essentialism and racist stereotyping, the authors shed light on a consequence of the assumptions regarding genetic racial difference—one that is certainly prevalent in media discussions of Black athletes.

Matthew Hughey and Devon Goss reveal similar media attitudes in *A Level Playing Field? Media Constructions of Athletics, Genetics, and Race*. Here, the authors explore how recent mainstream journalism has “collectively advanced the proposition that black athletic success is the product of little more than genetic traits”, even in a “postracial” and “color-blind” dialogue (Hughey & Goss, 2015). Through the detailed analysis of nearly 300 English-language

newspaper articles, the authors evince the construction of racial essentialism in media narratives—particularly, the reinforcement of the racist notion of “black brawn vs. white brains”.

As discussed in *The Paradox of Integration*, these biased attitudes towards Black athletes have material consequences in terms of organizational influence and economic rewards. Marquez-Velarde accordingly points out that organizations function as “critical gatekeepers for access, advancement, and rewards as well as for status, prestige, and power” (Marquez-Velarde, 2023). In the case of Black NFL players, the consequences of positional segregation include (but are not limited to) lower relative salaries, greater injury risk, and the denial of leadership opportunities. While some might argue that the economic disadvantages experienced by well-paid professional athletes are minimal, Kevin Kniffin’s *Evolutionary Perspectives on Salary Dispersion within Firms* reveals that disparities in relative salary standings challenge evolved preferences to “seek the reduction of variance within groups when compared with more steeply hierarchical alternatives” (Kniffin, 2009). This suggests that, despite most NFL players earning comfortable salaries, it is the pronounced inequality in relative earnings that is most impactful.

Conclusion

The potential for sports as a force for social good is evident in both its tangible socioeconomic impact and its capacity to serve as an instructive analogy to “impart life skills and reshape moral values” (Hills et al., 2019). While sports may recreate systems of social inequality, they also have the power to subvert them. Since 2015, Black quarterbacks have won five NFL Most Valuable Player (MVP) awards. Before, only two had won the award in the entire sport’s history. This fact points to a disconcerting truth about the position’s historical lack of representation, but also illustrates positive developments in de-segregation over the last decade.

Additionally, while much of this discussion has decried the lack of commensurate representation in NFL leadership, it certainly surpasses the degree of inclusion in almost all other fields. Hopefully, an increased understanding of our own biases will help sustain progress in the league's continued integration. Ultimately, the rejection of racial essentialism in the NFL will help motivate positive social change in and outside of the sport—an outcome far more meaningful than just MVP awards.

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