

Hoop Inequalities: Race, Class and Family Structure Background and the Odds of Playing in the National Basketball Association

WEBSITE CONTENT

Note to Reviewers

We created a companion website for the revised article under review, “Hoop Inequalities: Race, Class and Family Structure Background and the Odds of Playing in the National Basketball Association.” The primary purpose of the website is to more fully explain the theoretical and methodological issues of the article. In the website, we present details of our theory and methodology at a depth that is not possible within a traditional journal format where, understandably, there are limits to article length. Reviewers are invited to download all documents as one PDF file, or to view them on the internet:

<http://hoopinequalities.wordpress.com/>

We feel it is necessary to provide these details because of the length of the theoretical literature and the methodological complexities that arise from using newspaper data to collect social origins data on professional athletes.

In light of the compromise between the reviewers’ suggestions, we reduced the front-end theory section to its essentials. Yet, we did not want to lose the depth the theory provides. Thus, the theory section is in expanded form on the website.

The main methodological issues are as follows:

- (1) Article selection via search engine (Lexis Nexis, in this case) depends heavily on the choice of words put into the search engine (and, thus, the number of missing cases);
- (2) Newspaper articles do not always provide enough information to adequately identify social origins;
- (3) Sampling on the dependent variable;
- (4) Description bias, which refers to a situation in which the newspaper, for a variety of reasons, including its own and its reporters’ prejudices, reports information incorrectly;
- (5) Selection bias is a possibility: the most common type is newspaper-based selection bias, where useful newspaper articles are more commonly found based on criteria particular to the newspaper and the subjects of the articles.

In the article itself, we provide detailed information on how we dealt with issues (1), (2), (3) (4) and some complexities of issue (5). In the companion website, we provide two appendices that more fully address the methodological issues: Appendix A matches article information to themes of class and family structure background; Appendix B provides details on how we addressed issue (5) with a statistical procedure.

Theory and Hypotheses

Studies in sport and mobility devote great attention to the relation between race and athletic involvement, particularly so within professional basketball, given African Americans' overwhelming presence at the NBA level (Azzarito and Harrison 2008; Coakley 2004: 292-97; Edwards 1973: Chapter 7; Hartmann 2000; Ogden and Hilt 2003 Sellers and Kuperminc 1997; Pascarella and Smart 1991; Sailes 1998; Harris 1998; Spreitzer 1994; Harrison Jr. et al. 2004 Eide and Ronan 2001; Ewing 2007; Benson 2000). Common to all is the limited attention major stratification variables, social class origin and family structure background especially, receive (Washington and Karen 2001). The omission is particularly troublesome as many refer to the odds of attainment to sustain their arguments, yet odds estimated in this manner do not account for the intersection of race, class and family structure (e.g. Eitzen 1999; Leonard 1996). Eitzen (1999) says that "...while the odds of African American males making it as professional athletes are more favorable than is the case for whites (about 1 in 3,500 African American male high school athletes, compared to 1 in 10,000 white male high school athletes) these odds remain slim. Of the 40,000 or so African Americans boys who play high school basketball, only 35 will make the NBA and only 7 will be starters." The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) puts the odds of high school players being drafted by an NBA team at 3 in 10,000 (NCAA website). Taking race into account, the odds are reported to be as low as .000002 for whites and .000006 for Blacks (Leonard 1996: 296).

To explain why race matters for athletic attainment, the current literature focuses on debunking genetic theories, and positing theories that explain how social context matters most (Coakley 2004: 292-97; Edwards 1973: Chapter 7; Hartmann 2000; Ogden and Hilt 2003). Most social context theorists debate the intersection of race with micro and macro level social environment mechanisms, such as role model behavior, cultural proclivities, media influences, and limited occupational opportunities (Ogden and Hilt 2003; Edwards 1973;

Sellers and Kuperminc 1997; Pascarella and Smart 1991; Sailes 1998; Harris 1998; Spreitzer 1994; Harrison Jr. et al. 2004; May 2009). Some argue that for historically marginalized groups such as African American males sport is a pathway to upward mobility because it provides college scholarships and psychological intangibles that can be translated into success in the labor market (Eide and Ronan 2001; Ewing 2007). Others argue that persistent racial discrimination, social inequalities and stereotypes attached to African American males' overrepresentation in sports critically impact the relationship between race, sport and mobility. Racial minorities in the US, and African Americans especially, are often locked into lower social positions, a problem for which involvement into professional sports does not offer a straight-forward solution (Benson 2000; Edwards 1973; Washington and Karen 2001: 189). Moreover, the pathway to fame and fortune, especially with regards to the National Basketball Association, goes through "big-time" athletic programs where graduation rates for college basketball athletes are lower than the rest of the college population (Eitzen 1996: 101). In all, however, there is little disagreement that race affects sport mobility.

Occupational attainment research consistently shows that other things considered, people from disadvantaged social origin – in terms of class and family structure -- fare less well in the stratification system than those of more privileged social origin. Family socioeconomic status positively influences the odds of sports participation (Eitle and Eitle 2002; Fjegin 1994; Spreitzer 1994). For those in middle school, family socioeconomic status positively influences the odds of sports participation (Eitle and Eitle 2002; Fjegin 1994). For NBA attainment, however, the effect of socioeconomic disadvantage at the high school level is critical: measuring disadvantage in terms of family income, Spreitzer (1994) argues that freshman high school athletes from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to continue school athletics in their sophomore year and were more likely to have dropped out of athletics by their senior year (368). Since high school is a necessary step to playing in college or, more

recently, a leap into the professional leagues, disadvantaged background should play a substantial role in influencing the odds of becoming a professional athlete. Classic studies of occupational attainment prompt us to consider also the role of players' family structure background. Braddock et al (1981) find that African American male 8th graders from two-parent homes are more likely to participate in interscholastic and intramural sports than those from single parent homes (119), which may indicate that family structure disadvantage influences the pathway to professional athlete attainment. The above-mentioned theoretical considerations point to the complex picture of relative disadvantage that the intersection of race with class and family structure background can produce in the American stratification system.

Support for class related variables in assessing sport occupational attainment was found in a recent *ESPN Magazine* report (Craggs 2008). Craggs used U.S. Census 2000 data to examine the hometowns – their measure of social origins -- of 158 American-born players from the NBA drafts between 1998 and 2008, and found that the majority of these players are from middle class hometowns: “The median household income of our draftees' hometowns was \$38,127, which tracks closely with the national average of \$41,994.” Underscoring this finding is that the NBA draftees hailed from hometowns that had about the same percentage of people who graduated from high school as the national average. While a rather insensitive measure of social origins, it does suggest further inquiry into the class and family background of NBA players.

To date however, very few studies examine the issue of intersectionality with regard to race, class and family structure and sport participation in general, and professional athlete status attainment in particular. For example, whether measured as lower social class position or growing up in a single parent household, African Americans are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than whites (Winant 2000). Race is generally considered to be a

valid indicator of disadvantage (economic, but not only), but one should remember that class and family structure background differentiation *within* racial categories also exists.

Currently, no large N data exist that have professional athletes as the units of analysis and include basic variables of race, class, and family structure background. This limits professional athlete status attainment studies to quantitative analyses of macro-level data that cannot account for the intersection of race, class, and family structure (e.g. Eitzen 1999; Leonard 1996; NCAA), and small N qualitative and case studies that account for this intersectionality but are not generalizable (e.g. the movie *Hoop Dreams* 1994).

Our main research hypothesis states that *race – in conjunction with social class and family structure background - influences the odds of attaining the status of professional basketball players*, in this case, membership in the NBA. This translates into the following expectations:

a) Due to the relatively high level of resources required to achieve a professional athletics career, *African-American players from disadvantaged social class should be less likely to become professional basketball athletes than African American and white players from relatively well-off families*. In other words, they should have lower odds of being in the NBA.

b) The same mechanism leads us to expect that *African Americans from disadvantaged family structure background are less likely than African American and white players from advantaged family structure background to populate professional basketball leagues*.

c) Given our argument that non-white race and disadvantaged social origin intersect, we expect *African Americans from disadvantaged class and family backgrounds to be the least likely to be present in the NBA*.

d) Given this causal chain, we argue that even if the majority of professional basketball players were raised in non-two-parent families, most should come from the middle class and above. In consequence, among professional basketball players *compounded disadvantage*, i.e. *both low social class and non-two parent family structure background*, should be rare, yet more common among African-Americans than among whites.

Data and Methods

Similar to elites in other sectors of society (e.g. CEO's and politicians), professional athletes in major American sports (basketball, football, baseball and hockey) are not acquiescent to traditional survey research methods (e.g. face to face interviews and mail-out questionnaires). As no survey data exist that contain mobility variables for professional athletes, using primary data from secondary sources to address our research question is necessary. On this score, elite studies are telling: despite the resources and best efforts in elite populations research, survey response rates are typically between 30 and 40 percent (for statistics on response rates where top managers are the target population, see Baruch 1999: 431; for a discussion on problems with securing interviews with politicians, see Maisel and Stone 1998).

Note that we explicitly sample based on characteristics of the dependent variable, that is, membership in the NBA. Thus, our research question should read: *Among those who have attempted to become NBA players*, did the intersection of race, class, and family structure background influence their odds of attainment? To evaluate the possible effect of this form of bias on our substantive conclusions, we compare our NBA players to the U.S. population using Census and the General Social Survey data. Results of this analysis are in the Findings section.

Newspaper articles containing basketball player biographies are formulaic; a typical biographical story starts with a brief description of some happening that occurred in the player's life: a tragic death of a loved one, a remembrance of the long hours spent practicing, a particular lesson learned while training that unlocked a hidden potential, a cute story from childhood, and so on. This description is usually supplemented with quotes from parents, friends, mentors, or the athlete himself. Next is a description of the athlete's playing statistics and current on-the-court performance, either for the year or the career to date. After this introduction, the middle part delves into how the happening described at the beginning of the article provides insights into the player's personality or on-the-court performance. The end of the article discusses possible futures for the athlete: how the player's experiences will shape his continued performance or the player's assessment of his own future and the future of his team.

Appendix A: Coding Examples

Social Class

Lower

- “years filled with difficult memories such as poverty...”
- “There was a lot of crime in my neighborhood...”
- “...a single-parent home in the urban projects.”
- “[Player] saw his mother struggle...Such financial struggles are now over.”
- “He grew up...in a housing project.”
- “[Player] would run the 14 flights of stairs in his project...I lived in poverty all my life, too.”

Middle

- “she had worked her way up the corporate ladder...because of her success [there, she] could transfer to just about anywhere in the country.”
- “My dad was in the [military]. He was a staff sergeant.”
- “His family was neither rich nor poor.”
- “becoming a [city neighborhood] business man with his own cab company...”
- “his father, a computer analyst...”
- “Father is an assistant principal...while his mother is a teacher.”
- “...from a two-parent home in a two-car-garage corner of suburbia”

Upper

- “as the son of [an NBA] coach...”
- “[Mother and father], who own an insurance agency...considered [\$12,500 per year tuition per year] a fair price for a school who’s graduates attend some of the country’s top colleges. The family’s five-bedroom home in [exclusive neighborhood]...”
- “His father was a defensive end for the Browns...now an assistant coach with the [professional football team].”
- “A journeyman in the NBA and European leagues...the [family] is financially secure; they don’t need the NBA’s money.”
- “[Father] played nine seasons for the [professional football team] and [professional football team]...”

Family-Structure Background

Two Parent Family

- “his mother, speaking from their home in [town name]...[father] built it 20 years ago at their home in [town name].”
- (father speaking) “My wife and I felt that during the summer it was better for him to...”
- “[Player] and his parents, [mother and father], spoke on parental involvement...”

- “I don’t know how I’d react if my mother was in a single-parent situation, if my father wasn’t around and I saw my mother struggle everyday...”
- “His parents wanted [player] to remain close to home.”
- “...from a two-parent home in a two-car-garage corner of suburbia”

Single Mother

- “as a single parent with two sons, she...”
- “She was a single parent.”
- “He never knew his real father, who left when [he] was 3...”
- “He grew up with his mom...after his dad left them.”
- “...[player] was raised by his mother...”
- “[His] father, who is not married to [mother] and has a separate life and family...”

Single Father

- [Player] was raised...by his father...has met his mother once.”
- “Growing up...his father, [father], supported five children...his mother died of breast cancer.”

Grandparent / Other

- “the grandmother who raised him from early childhood”
- “With his father dead and his mother in and out of prison...moved in with his select team coach.”
- “The two [player and brother] lived together at ____ House for neglected and abused children, until [he] reached high-school age and moved to...another group home.”
- [Player]’s parents had been drug users with marital problems, and when he was 4 he moved in with his grandparents...The death of his parents ... forced [player] to grow up quickly.”
- “...various problems forced him to [live] with his grandparents...and his uncle.”

Appendix B: Assessing the Impact of Newspaper-Based Selection Bias

In terms of statistical modeling, selection bias occurs when the distribution of studied variables among cases included in the analysis (non-missing cases) differs from the distribution of the same variables among cases that potentially belong to the sample (missing cases). To determine whether our data bears this problem, we need to know if the included cases, that is, NBA players for whom information on social origin is available, are significantly different from NBA players for whom such information is lacking. Specifically, considering our hypotheses, we need to ask: “Did newspaper-based selection bias result in richer data on players from advantaged social origins?” For if that were the case, this form of bias would have affected our results.

To answer the question above, we must identify the circumstances under which journalists would report on advantaged NBA players more often than on disadvantaged ones. Considering that newspapers are in the business of attracting customers, it is reasonable to expect that the media most likely focuses their human interest stories on players who are among the best and, hence, the most popular. Selection bias, then, would be toward ‘eminent’ NBA players, i.e. those who are among the best in the league: more detailed information would be given about them, including their social class and family structure background.

According to our theory, players from advantaged social origins are more likely to have made it into the NBA. Extending this assumption to ‘eminence’, namely that the more advantaged the player’s social origins, the more likely he is to acquire the skills necessary to be among the best in the NBA, we formulate the following hypotheses for the mechanism that could lead newspaper-based selection bias to affect our data:

Hypothesis 1: The more eminent an NBA player, the more likely news would report detailed information on his social class and family structure background.

Hypothesis 2: NBA players from more advantaged origins are more likely to be eminent players.

Hypothesis 3: In so far as both the above two expectations are met, newspaper articles would cover in greater detail information on social class and family structure background of NBA players from more advantaged origins.

If Hypothesis 3 were to have empirical support, our data would be biased. While we cannot test it directly, we can determine whether the first two expectations of the newspaper-based selection mechanism hold. Specifically, for selection bias to occur, advantaged social origins *must be related* to being eminent (Hypothesis 2), which in turn should be related to being included in our data (Hypothesis 1). If, on the other hand, the relationship between advantaged origins and being an *eminent* NBA player is not significant, then the news articles have not reported selectively on players from advantaged backgrounds (although they may have selected more often on eminent ones). In other words, as long as Hypothesis 2 does not find support, we can conclude that NBA players for whom detailed social class and family structure background information is available are not more likely to come from advantaged origins than NBA players for whom we do not have similar information (missing cases).

To perform this test, we first determined how the 155 players in our subpopulation rank on eminence. We measured eminence as position in the *NBA draft*, where the higher the score, the higher the draft pick. In particular, those who were the first pick overall in a given year's NBA Draft score highest. Since not all players were drafted, non-draftees are coded with the lowest possible score (6.5% of 155).

These scores obtained from draft position we use as independent variable in logistic regression in which the dependent variable is existence of data on social class and family-structure background (1=yes, 0 = no).

-- Table 1 of Appendix B about here --

Table 1 presents the logistic regression results. Supporting Hypothesis 1, more eminent players are significantly more likely to have information on social class, on family structure, and on both variables combined. For each dependent variable, the model fit is satisfactory.

To assess whether advantaged social origins are positively and significantly related to players' eminence (Hypothesis 2), we employed ordinary least squares regression of player's eminence separately on three independent variables: advantaged social class (middle to upper social class origins), advantaged family structure background (two-parent family), and compounded advantage (both advantaged social class and family structure background). Results (see Table 2) show that that none of the advantaged origins variables have a significant effect on eminence.

-- Table 2 of Appendix B about here --

Substantively, having failed to find support for Hypothesis 2 allows us to conclude that our data is not biased toward advantaged NBA players: in terms of social class and/or family background, players for whom this information is available are not substantively different from players on which such information is lacking (i.e. missing cases).

Table 1 Logistic Regression of Existence of Data on Social Class and Family-Structure Background on Players' Eminence

	Existence of Data (Yes = 1, No = 0)								
	Social Class			Family Structure			Both		
	b	S.E.	Exp(B)	b	S.E.	Exp(B)	b	S.E.	Exp(B)
Players' Eminence	0.03*	0.01	1.03	0.04*	0.01	1.04	0.03*	0.01	1.03
Constant	-0.92*	0.38	0.40	-0.52	0.38	0.60	-1.33*	0.41	0.26
-2 Log Likelihood	205.54			180.73			202.67		
Model Chi Square	9.02*			14.20*			11.12*		
Cox and Snell R ²	0.06			0.09			0.07		
N	155			155			155		

* p < 0.01

Table 2 Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Players' Eminence on Advantaged Social Origin Variables

	B (standard error)
Advantaged Social Origins	
Middle to Upper Social Class Background	4.34 (4.16)
Constant	36.29* (3.49)
R ²	0.01
N	80
Two Parent Family Structure	-2.67 (3.23)
Constant	40.50* (2.26)
R ²	0.01
N	105
Both Forms of Advantage	2.77 (3.98)
Constant	39.10* (2.67)
R ²	0.01
N	70

* p < 0.01

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