Climbing the ladder or getting stuck: An optimal matching analysis of racial differences in college football coaches’ job-level career patterns

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the documented racial inequality in access to high status positions within the American labor market, this study investigates racial differences in job-level career patterns within the college football coaching profession. Using data on the career histories of 319 college football coaches from the 2009 season, this study examines whether black and white coaches have different job-level mobility patterns throughout their careers using optimal matching sequence analysis. Descriptive results identify five common career trajectories within the college football coaching profession that are distinguished by their relative levels of job mobility and stagnation, and the amount of time spent at the lower college and high school levels of competition before reaching the highest level of college football. Subsequent analyses indicate that white coaches are more likely to follow upward career trajectories while black coaches are more likely to get stuck in careers characterized by low-level positions. These racial differences are due, in part, to coaches’ experience as football athletes (i.e. position played). However, even given the same pre-career experience, racial differences emerge in the likelihood of traversing mobile or stagnant career pathways. The results point to particularistic processes operating to perpetuate racial inequality within the college football coaching profession similar to those that have been shown to operate in other high-status labor market contexts.

1. Introduction

African Americans have made considerable strides over the last 50 years towards entering the upper echelons of the American occupational structure. Not only has the American workforce become more racially diverse, African Americans have increasingly entered managerial positions across these occupations (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). However, evidence suggests that gains starting in the 1960s, in part because of equal employment opportunity legislation, have stagnated since the 1980s, as political pressure and enforcement have waned (Collins, 1997; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012; Wilson, 2011). As a result, racial inequalities in access to job authority and promotions persist, especially in the highest paying and most prestigious occupations (Baldi and McBrier, 1997; Smith, 2002; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012; Wilson, 1997, 2012; Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, & West, 1999).

Prior research and theory on racial differences in pathways to promotions and job authority has emphasized a confluence of both formal and informal processes that advantage white workers and disadvantage black workers. Many of these processes stem from job-level segregation. Because black and white workers are segregated into different jobs and occupations, they differ in their opportunity to develop and display the tangible and intangible skills and experience, and to cultivate and mobilize the network contacts that produce favorable mobility outcomes (see Baldi & McBrier, 1997; Collins, 1997; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Kim & Tamborini, 2006; Maume, 1999; Mueller, Parcel, & Tanaka, 1989; Paulin & Mellor, 1996; Smith & Elliott, 2002; Wilson et al., 1999). Furthermore, even when occupying the same job, informal and particularistic processes operate to produce divergent mobility outcomes for black and white workers, particularly in high status occupations (Day, 2015; Harvey Wingfield, 2009, 2012; Wilson, 2012). However, given that prior research has relied predominantly on broad occupational categories, narrow career segments, and/or single promotion events, the processes that lead to racial differences in workers’ job tasks and mobility pathways throughout their careers are not fully understood.

To better understand racial differences in managers’ and professionals’ career pathways, this study investigates job-level career patterns within the college football coaching profession. Drawing on research and theory from the sociology of sport and sports management literature on stacking—the racial segregation of athletes into positions based on their responsibility for controlling the outcome of competition—as well as the more general sociological literature on racial inequality in promotions, authority attainment, and downward mobility...
tangible biased positive assessments of their skills and abilities (Mueller et al., 1989; Smith, 2005; Wilson, 2012; Wilson et al., 1999). It also contributes to the literature on racial inequality in general labor market contexts, particularly high status occupations, by leveraging the unique demographics of the college football coaching profession to examine racial differences in the stagnation or growth in job authority and status in a professional/managerial labor market among black and white workers who begin their careers in similar positions and with similar pre-career experience.

2. Literature review

2.1. Particularistic mobility & minority vulnerability in high status occupations

George Wilson and colleagues (see Wilson, 1997; McBrier & Wilson, 2004) have proposed two complementary theories—the particularistic mobility thesis and the minority vulnerability thesis—to explain why African Americans experience different rates of promotion, are less likely to attain authoritative positions within work organizations, and are more likely to experience downward mobility in high status occupations. Both perspectives were originally put forward to challenge traditional race-neutral theories of workplace mobility and authority attainment that assumed racial differences in workplace rewards and penalties (e.g. promotions, demotions, and authority) resulted from racial differences in various supply-side (e.g. human capital and background socioeconomic status) and demand-side factors (e.g. occupational- and job-level segregation). Specifically, these earlier frameworks assumed, sometimes implicitly, that if granted access to the same amount and type of pre-career training and experience, the same types of occupations and jobs, and the same job-related networks as white workers, minority workers’ careers would follow similar mobility pathways (see Wilson et al., 1999 for a review of this critique).

The particularistic mobility thesis is the predominant theoretical explanation for racial differences in both authority attainment and promotions. According to this perspective, performance indicators in high-level positions are inherently vague and uncertain (Jackall, 1988; Kanter, 1977), and the characteristics that upper management look for when considering promotions such as loyalty, leadership potential, trust-worthiness, and achievement orientation are not easily measured and quantified. As a result, promotion decisions are prone to “particularistic manipulation,” or the subjective (mis)perceptions of upper-management that are often structured by workers’ race (Baldi & McBrier, 1997; Kluegel, 1978; Wilson, 1997). According to the particularistic mobility thesis, these racialized perceptions of workers’ intangible skills and abilities lead minority workers to follow circumscribed pathways to high-level positions where they are limited to formal channels of mobility based on their objective experience, credentials, and skills (Mueller et al., 1989). White workers, on the other hand, have a broader range of mobility pathways, both formal and informal, available to them, including the subjective and sometimes biased positive assessments of their skills and abilities (Mueller et al., 1989; Smith, 2005; Wilson, 2012; Wilson et al., 1999).

The minority vulnerability thesis is a complementary theoretical perspective to the particularistic mobility thesis that, instead of predicting racial differences in promotions and authority attainment, focuses on racial minorities’ increased risk for layoffs and downward mobility (Bielby, 2012; McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Wilson & McBrier, 2005; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). Rooted in many of the same causal mechanisms as the particularistic mobility thesis, the minority vulnerability thesis suggests that black workers, particularly those in high status professional and managerial occupations, are vulnerable to layoffs and demotions through a broader range of forces than white workers (see Wilson & McBrier, 2005). Specifically, black workers are more vulnerable to downward mobility because of their segregation into racialized jobs and networks (Collins, 1997; Spalter-Roth & Deitch, 1999; Wilson, 1997), and decision makers’ cognitive biases (Elvira & Zatzick, 2002) and their particularistic manipulation of performance criteria and (un)desirable employee characteristics (Wilson et al., 1999).

The majority of support for both the particularistic mobility and minority vulnerability theses is indirect, coming from research demonstrating that, compared to white workers, attitudinal and human capital indicators (e.g. achievement orientation, education, general work experience, occupational work experience, and job tenure) are more predictive of black workers’ promotions and authority attainment (Baldi & McBrier, 1997; Mueller et al., 1989; Smith, 2001; Wilson, 1997; Wilson & Maume, 2014; Wilson et al., 1999) and less predictive of their demotion and layoffs (McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Wilson & McBrier, 2005; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). This suggests that black workers’ attitudes, credentials and abilities are more scrutinized by management than that of white workers (Mueller et al., 1989). As a result, black workers must be “objectively” better than white workers to attain the same level of hierarchy or receive the same number of promotions, yet excelling in these objective characteristics does not fully buffer them from layoffs and demotions (Wilson & McBrier, 2005).

Research on racial differences in performance evaluations offer the most direct evidence of the particularistic manipulation of promotion, demotion, and layoff decisions by finding that black workers’ performance is evaluated less favorably than that of white workers net of human capital and other objective and subjective performance indicators (Elvira & Town, 2001; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2001). Scholars have posited out-group bias and in-group favoritism as the key sources of these differences (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2001), but they have also been linked to minorities’ segregation into organizations, occupations, and jobs that do not allow them to develop the skills, connections, or display the particularistic criteria necessary for promotions (Collins, 1997; Dickerson, Schur, Krue, & Blasi, 2010; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Smith, 2005; Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Maume, 2014; Wilson & Roscigno, 2010). Congruent with these predictions from the particularistic mobility and minority vulnerability theses, recent work examining racial differences in returns from occupying the same job or occupation suggests that black and white workers who start out similarly, do not necessarily have similar career outcomes (Day, 2015; Harvey Wingfield, 2009; Wilson, 2012).

To my knowledge, the particularistic mobility and minority vulnerability theses have not been explicitly integrated into one framework. However, they rely on many of the same causal mechanisms (e.g. particularism and segregated networks and job functions) in explaining racial differences in career mobility. Together, they outline a constellation of processes that lead to stagnant and more precarious careers for black workers, and mobile and more reliable careers for white workers; even when they begin their careers with similar levels of human capital, commitment to success, and occupy similar jobs or occupations. In the following section, I outline how the processes described by the particularistic mobility and minority vulnerability theses may operate in a specific high-status labor market context—major college football coaches—and how this particular profession allows for a more complete examination of these theories’ predictions.

2.2. Particularistic mobility and minority vulnerability in the college football coaching profession

The college football coaching profession, especially at the highest
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