

A Theory of the Preferred Worker: A Structural Explanation for Black Male Dominance in Basketball

Scott N. Brooks

University of California – Riverside, USA

Michael A. McKail

University of California – Riverside, USA

Abstract

Black males' 'dominance' in basketball is taken for granted and often explained in terms of racial difference and socio-environmental factors. However, this is only one side of the coin. Power needs to be considered for a fuller understanding. This article does this, providing a structural perspective of black male integration into basketball that builds from Edna Bonacich's work on labor and group relations. An occupational niche is two-way; a group finds and occupies a niche that they have been given access to by a hiring group. Black males do not dominate the collegiate and professional ranks of basketball simply because of ability. They were given access to the opportunity because it benefited capitalist interests and because of their marginalized position in society. In this specific context, they represent the most profitable labor source.

Keywords

exploitation, hoop dreams, intersectional subordination, preferred labor, urban crisis

Introduction

There are no workers without owners in our capitalistic economic system. Therefore, examinations of workers implicitly speak of workers-owners/capitalists relationships. Employer/capitalist control is a function of the relative inequality between owners and workers. Large differences between the two (or more) groups lead to greater exploitation; capitalists prefer cheaper workers who are willing to do whatever it takes to work, get paid, and get the work done.

Preferred status can be used to describe relationships between owners and groups of workers that they hire. Hiring occurs with an ideal worker in mind. Profiles of the best

employee are implicitly or explicitly known to those who conduct hiring through directives from superiors, job descriptions, experiences with previous employees, and expectations and notions of 'fit' and compatibility. Prospective employees are matched against these profiles. This process can be institutionalized when it is believed that members of certain groups fit the ideal type and are profitable. Short cuts are created and implemented to weed out the 'wrong' types and accumulate the 'right' groups of people. Groups that establish a majority position in some job/industry are seen as having a niche. This gives them a feeling of security. They may develop a social identity as a specialized type of worker. They believe (and others do too) that they have a distinct advantage over other groups, perhaps even superiority, based upon some said characteristics shared by their group.

Niches are fleeting however. Capitalists continuously seek to maximize cost efficiency and profit and look for alternative sources of cheap labor. Preferred status erodes when those in power believe that another group of workers can serve them better and more cheaply. A theory of the preferred worker makes the power relationship explicit, when all things are considered equal, employers prefer 'cheaper' workers that give them a comparative advantage. Workers from a socially constructed group, one with a marginalized position in society due to their race, gender, and socioeconomic position, are preferred and chosen by a capitalist class. The power of the capitalist class is evident by their positions of control and ownership, the level of their profit making, and their ability to hire, manipulate, and regulate others. In contrast, workers from marginalized groups present little or no threat to the overall hierarchy and power structure because they have little power in hiring and determining wages, have low rates of mobility, and lack cultural, economic, and social resources. In short, they lack the position and power to confront the capitalist group and be considered an equal. Agitation and unionizing is made difficult because they are especially vulnerable to dislocation and employment discrimination. Their competition typically comes from other members of their group, or people from other marginalized groups who are willing to accept what the employer offers.

Research in the area of race and work has often discussed racial/ethnic trends in terms of ethnic/racial niches, whereby interlocking organizations, networks, and activities are part of how one figures out what work to do, how to get a position, and how to do the work. Waldinger theorizes that 'the social organization of the second generation [of immigrants] serves as a mechanism for channeling people into the labor market; once a favorable niche develops, informal recruitment patterns can quickly funnel in new hires' (1996: 23). In this way, racial/ethnic groups find and secure niches, institutionalizing them informally through social organization and informal recruitment patterns. Similarly, Park's contact hypothesis purports that racial/ethnic groups (typically as immigrants) enter a cue and gradually move up the occupational ranks and class via a process – contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation. However, something is missing – power. How do groups gain a foothold – get their niche? How do they supplant another group?

This article addresses these questions, revisiting some of Edna Bonacich's theoretical ideas about and research on race/ethnic relations and labor. Then, it extends her more

recent insights about employment trends and class relations within Los Angeles' garment industry by applying her structural approach to analyze the employment patterns and class relations within the basketball industry. Last, it presents a case study of the *preferred worker*, considering the conditions of young black men from urban poverty who play basketball at the highest level and the race and class differences between them and their employers.

Edna Bonacich – Theories of Group Relations and Niche Workers

Edna Bonacich's scholarship has left an indelible print on race and ethnic studies and work and labor studies. This began three decades ago and her early scholarship on ethnic labor groups remains relevant and useful today. One major contribution is that she places conflicts between labor groups in a structural context. Owners profit from group competition and 'divide and conquer' workers to advance their own agendas. They split the labor market and manipulate workers to accept lower wages and to compete with other groups via racial/ethnic antagonism (Bonacich, 1972). Ethnic antagonism is 'specifically produced by the competition that arises from a price differential' (1972: 554). Competition between cheaper labor and higher paid or expensive labor is important to capitalists because it affects the initial price of labor or wage and profits. Laborers' *resources* (level of living, information, and political resources) and *motives* (fixed or supplementary income goals and the desire and willingness to work for lower wages, longer hours, and their convenience to the employer) vary for different groups of workers. Both are significant to price. Powerful, expensive labor groups can resist the competition when they have the ability to exclude a cheaper labor group from establishing a numerically significant presence, or when they control the occupational hierarchy (who gets what jobs and the levels of wages), maintaining a difference between themselves and the cheaper labor. Competing groups increase the supply of labor, affecting price to some extent. But price is driven down significantly by a cheaper group's willingness to accept a lower wage, to work longer hours, and to reject or ignore unionizing.

Bonacich also contributed a rich theoretical description of 'middleman minorities'. Middleman minority describes the status and economic position of race and ethnic minorities, typically immigrant groups, who 'occupy an intermediate rather than low-status position' (1973: 583). They have middle management jobs or are small businesspersons. They exhibit a high degree of internal solidarity and remain aloof from other groups. They are strangers, betwixt and between; neither the owners or executives of a large corporation nor the bottom level workers. This status creates hostility from native folks and older immigrants of similar and lower positions. It also enables them to have social distance, work and trade with anyone, and be less invested in others' interests – they work for specific purposes and are primarily concerned about their business and their own group. Middleman minorities are significant because they fill the space between the elites and masses of workers, while posing little threat to the overall power structure. To the advantage of the elites, they serve as a model minority and a scapegoat for both sides; proof that mobility is possible and that the market operates based on

merit, while being the target for angst by groups in lower positions who have not been upwardly mobile.

In more recent work, Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000) study firms in Los Angeles' garment industry and reveal 'a return to sweatshops'. 'A sweatshop is usually defined as a factory or a homework operation that engages in multiple violations of the law, typically the non-payment of minimum or overtime wages and various violations of health and safety regulations.' (2000: 3) In particular, Bonacich and Appelbaum find employment trends in terms of the interaction of gender and ethnicity. According to their statistics, the industry has a diverse workforce: Europeans/whites, Asians, Latinos, Middle Easterners, Africans, and African Americans. However, it is predictably stratified. Most whites occupy the highest levels (professionals, managers, and salespersons). Some Asian men and Latinos act as 'middlemen minorities'. They are factory managers and small business owners who contract workers and serve as 'go betweens'. The apparel companies are able to avoid contact with the garment workers. They also distance themselves from the contracting firm, the Latina workers, and 'sweatshops'. Middlemen have carved out their own piece of the profits while exploiting the workers but it is the pressure to provide a cheap service from the large garment companies that creates the environment for exploitation. More Asian men and Latinos are managers than Asian women and Latinas. Additionally, Latinas and Asian women make up about two-thirds of all garment workers (operators and sewers), 55% and 11% respectively, while Latinos and Asian men are only 22%, 20%, and 2% respectively.

Bonacich's work with Appelbaum once again shows a sharpness for including larger forces and controlling interests. Latina workers filling the majority of operator and sewing positions in Los Angeles's garment industry fits corporate interests. The garment industry is large and profitable. Latinas are preferred workers because they are socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged, or intersectionally subordinated. These findings are consistent with Crenshaw's (1997: 359) argument that 'Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden interacting with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.' These women lack the resources to protect themselves from being exploited and have a strong need and desire to work. They are paid less as women, limited to 'women's' work (they cannot do the construction that many of their male counterparts do), have little knowledge and power to demand proper wage and treatment due to their immigration status (including undocumented immigrant status), lack high levels of formal education and English fluency. Employers, directly and indirectly, use Latinas' fragile position as leverage to exploit their labor and violate worker rights under the radar of regulation and enforcement. In this way, Latina garment workers do not simply choose their occupation/industry and develop a niche – they are chosen by owners and managers as ideal or *preferred* workers.¹

In what follows, we explore how this latter insight, and Bonacich's concept of middleman minorities, help us to understand the position of black men within the basketball industry. Despite the vast differences in the wages and working conditions between Latina garment workers and black male professional basketball players, both

groups represent preferred workers whose vulnerability to labor exploitation is exacerbated by racism, employer discrimination, and the dynamics of split labor markets. We also argue that black male scouts, recruiters, and coaches can be understood as 'middle man' minorities.

The Preferred Basketball Worker

Blacks have been playing basketball since its earliest days. Black men were introduced to the game at racially segregated YMCAs. They were not allowed to play on integrated teams in white professional leagues and colleges until much later. Now the majority of collegiate and professional ball players are black, something that is taken for granted. Blacks are only 12–13% of the USA's total population but make up 60% of men's college players (for Division 1) and nearly 80% of all men's professional players in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Basketball has a distinct racial and class hierarchy: black men, primarily from urban poverty, sit at the lowest levels while wealthy, white men are at the top. Some research estimates that as much as two-thirds of all black collegiate basketball players come from poor, urban backgrounds (Sailes, 1986). This proportion is even higher in the professional ranks. Popular explanations for this trend often claim black athletic superiority, but these claims are based solely on outcomes – what we see and *not* how it has happened – and are tricky to disentangle from racism. Men from other racial/ethnic groups exhibit similar athleticism in soccer, volleyball, and show aggression in rugby, hockey, and lacrosse. It is not proper to sample an elite group and extrapolate to blacks as a whole. Genetic testing has not been conducted to verify or create racial classifications or to show how much 'blood' or genetic material is necessary to be black (Bashi and McDaniel, 1997). Instead, it is known that there is greater genetic variability within populations than between them. Race is a social construct, having meaning in the context of a racial hierarchy. Moreover, notions about 'natural' ability negate the individual work and efforts required to become an excellent athlete. 'Natural' ability implies strength in one area, but it also must lead to a 'natural' weakness. This reading of black dominance reinforces our society's racial hierarchy with whites on top and blacks on the bottom: blacks have superior athleticism and whites must have superior intellect. Black men are depicted as the Other, the 'ideal type of savage', different from whites who are the norm (Drake, 1987).

Niches, aspirations, and outcomes need to be understood as part of larger structural factors² and the result of micro and macro factors impacting individual decisions. The skewed numbers of blacks in basketball (and football) and their absence in other sports highlights that something special is operating. Being a basketball player is a prized identity that young men work hard to earn (Brooks, forthcoming). It garners respect and status from peers that can last a lifetime. So, young black men work hard to be able to run fast, jump high, shoot, dribble, and pass. They learn from others and practice. They navigate multiple fields, teams, and leagues, utilizing social networks to get on the radar of national scouts, recruiters, and college coaches. There are also some advantages to

place, as urban areas and certain regions are known for 'producing' talented players. At the same time, blacks' presence is a structural phenomenon. Black men have a peculiar history in sport. They have been given different levels of access throughout American history, steered, stacked, and even flipped into and from certain positions based upon notions of racial inferiority and incapacity. Basketball represents an open opportunity conveyed through the media and the heavy recruitment of black men to play college basketball.

Today, the NBA is roughly 80% black, which is the lowest percentage since its 1991–92 season (Lapchick, 2005). Four NBA players (out of 403 players) earn over \$20 million/season; the top thirty players all earn \$12.5 million/season or more; the average salary is over \$4.5 million/season; and the average age for all players is 26.62 years old (hoopshype.com, 29 May 2007). They have worked on their skills for a long time and have played in intense competition and so much is at stake. They are willing to be consumed by their 'basketball identity' and put less emphasis on other areas of their life because basketball is their ticket to status and possible fame and fortune.³ They have no power to resist other groups that enter the market and are given jobs. They cannot use exclusionary tactics, such as denial of opportunities to other groups, to protect themselves because of their race and class position; they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy (for men) and the industry's hierarchy, maintained by limited numbers of blacks in the managerial ranks and ownership. And so, black men have little power to control and improve their opportunity, combat their exploitation, and resist the entrance of competitors into the market.

The Basketball Industry

Early on, collegiate athletics were student-run, with no paid coaches, conferences, or governing boards. In 1859, Brown, Harvard, Yale, and Trinity formed the College Rowing Association. Conferences were then created in other sports, including football. Football surpassed rowing and other collegiate sports in popularity by the 1880s, bringing in large gate revenues and enlarging the names of schools (Zimbalist, 1999). In 1905, under pressure from President Roosevelt, the NCAA was formed as a way to regulate recruiting practices and reduce violence in football. Between 1920 and 1940, college football grew tremendously. As a result, 40 new, large stadiums were built around the country. These greater investments and popularity also brought forth an indomitable pressure to win. Scandals increased, and the Carnegie Commission issued a report in 1929 that found that 'the heart of the problem facing college sports was commercialization: an interlocking network that included expanded press coverage, public interest, alumni involvement and recruiting abuses (Thelin, 1994: 26).'

The marriage of athletics to academics espouses the NCAA historical rejection of amateurism, as opposed to professionalism, whereby athletes are student athletes and students first. However, low graduation rates for black male student athletes, plus huge television and marketing revenues suggest that black athletes are essentially laborers. The

explicit core purpose of the NCAA is to govern competition in a fair, safe, equitable, and sportsmanlike manner and to integrate intercollegiate athletics into higher education so that the educational experience of the student athlete is paramount (NCAA, 2001). Its core values emphasize the importance of both academics and athletics, with athletics described as 'supporting' the higher education mission. However, black male athletes give much more to the NCAA and their colleges/universities than they receive. Certainly, student athletes have an opportunity to get an education, but it does not come in the form of a standard educational opportunity and their graduation rates attest to this, at least partially (Purdy et al., 1982). They provide labor in exchange for this opportunity and the sports machine reaps huge revenues. Universities, sports apparel and equipment companies, television and media, professional franchises, and even cities that host tournaments get a piece of the pie made by an exploitable group of workers.

Black male athletes are roughly 24.6% of total (Division 1) student athletes and 58% of all college basketball players (NCAA, 2005b). Less than 50% of all black male athletes graduate. This is misleading because basketball players, in particular, have a dismally low graduation rate of 41%.⁴ Yet, the NCAA is dependent on basketball and these black men. The hallmark of good recruiting is finding new players who can outplay incumbent players. Thus, athletes work in a constant flow of competition, understanding that someone has been or is being recruited to replace them. Either they perform or they will lose their position. College athletes experience it worse. They are student-athletes, technically, and do not get paid to play but have overwhelming demands on their time and pressure to fight for and earn/maintain their position and standing on a team. Black student athletes in big time programs also have to deal with social exclusion, and sometimes discrimination in the classroom and as a part of everyday campus life (Edwards, 1969; Sellers et al., 1991).

The NCAA is a profit engine and the only big fish in a market that it controls. The NCAA has 1250 member schools over five divisions of competition – Division 1 is the highest. It makes contracts with television companies, owns the licensing of collegiate merchandise, and creates and enforces its own rules for play, equipment specifications, player eligibility, scholarships, and much more (Becker, 1985; Brown, 1993, 1994; Fleischer et al., 1992; Zimbalist, 1999). It has acted as a cartel or monopoly (Zimbalist, 1999). Courts ruled in 1987 that the NCAA violated the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 by making restrictive agreements with television networks to control which football games could be televised. This arrangement limited the options for television viewers, eliminating a 'free' market. Control over television has opened and is negotiated between schools, conferences, bowl games, and television networks. However, the NCAA still manages the structure and rules of college football. Basketball is operated more as a monopoly since March Madness is organized and negotiated by the NCAA. The NCAA playoff tournament, or March Madness, is one of America's mega-media-events and routinely earns higher television ratings (by more than 30%) than baseball's World Series and the NBA Finals (Isidore, 2001). CBS television network currently has an 11-year contract to televise March Madness for \$6 billion that expires in 2014 (Fizel and Fort, 2004). And 90% of the NCAA's >\$500 million budget for all sports is derived from this basketball tournament. It earned \$27 million from the Division I men's basketball championship tournament for the

2004–05 season (NCAA, 2005a). Colleges/universities reap profits from the tournament as well. The NCAA does profit sharing with its membership schools. In 2004–5, several schools received \$5 million or more (NCAA, 2005c). In addition to revenues, some university administrators believe that athletic success impacts public name recognition and its number of applicants, although research has not validated this (Zimbalist, 1999).

The National Basketball Association (NBA) is even more monopolistic than the NCAA. It is the 'only game in town' and it controls who can enter and when they can enter. The only major semi-professional league is partially owned by the NBA – NBA 'D (developmental) League' – and its explicit goal is to develop talent that might be used in the NBA. It controls the professional and semi-professional ranks by eliminating competitors who might otherwise disrupt their expansion and profit potential. The American Basketball Association or ABA was partially merged with the NBA in 1976 (four teams); the rest of the league folded shortly thereafter. A new ABA began in 1999 after owners purchased licensing rights from the NBA – it has a minimal and struggling existence. The Continental Basketball Association or CBA declared bankruptcy in February 2001. Its defunct assets were purchased by a combined group of basketball leagues (the CBA, the International Basketball Association or IBA and the International Basketball League or IBL) and the league was restarted. After the 2006 season, four of its six teams announced that they were leaving to join the NBA's D-League (CBA, 2006), which will likely force the league to fold again.⁵ Players have only one opportunity for playing professionally in the USA. Subsequently, they have little recourse when bargaining and negotiating with the league, even though they have a union. Players have and can strike, but there are plenty of aspiring players interested in strike breaking before the league shuts down to flex its muscle. The league's strength is shown in its policies, such as the minimum age/schooling for entering players. Originally, players could not enter the NBA until their college class had graduated. In the late 1960s, players could leave college early or after high school graduation. But in 2005, the NBA eliminated this rule and now players must at least attend college for one year for draft eligibility.

Integration, the Urban Crisis, and the Development of Hoop Dreams

White college/university administrators and sports franchise owners integrated sports.⁶ They were motivated by social pressure, the push for civil rights and desegregation, and held high hopes for improving winning percentages and their accompanying profits. Black athletes who entered college early in the first half of the 20th century were primarily interested in earning a degree and being upwardly mobile in something beyond sports after graduation. Playing professional sports in all-black leagues did not require higher education. There was better money to be made for those with a college degree. Opportunities to play integrated sports professionally and in college grew after World War II, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, and Jackie Robinson's successful reintegration of baseball. The first black man to play in the NBA was Earl Lloyd in 1950, although Chuck Cooper was the first black man drafted by a team (his team played a day

after Lloyd's). College basketball lagged behind. There were several black players in the 1950s, but they were sprinkled across the nation on all-black teams or in sparse numbers as one or two on all-white teams. In the 1960s, colleges stepped up their existing recruiting efforts of black men from urban areas because they showed so much promise. Young men were recruited to faraway places – in distance and culturally. This led to the surprising defeat of the dynastic, all-white, University of Kentucky and Adolph Rupp in 1966. Texas Western (now University of Texas, El-Paso) became the first national champion to have an all-black starting lineup.⁷ Most of the black players were from major urban areas outside of Texas (Fitzpatrick, 1999). The game showed that black players brought something new to the game, in terms of intensity, excellence, determination, and entertainment. The new television market for college basketball grew exponentially over the next decades.⁸

The success of growing numbers of black collegians and professionals spurred black interest. Blacks came to see basketball as a tremendous opportunity to earn a scholarship to college and attain a high paying career. Through most of the 1950s, professional players earned small dollars to play a game and worked during their off-season to make ends meet because basketball alone could not sustain a family. This began to change at the end of the 1950s. The elite professional could earn a living – Wilt Chamberlain's rookie salary was \$30,000 in 1959 (Heffernan, 1959). The 1960s served as the dramatic rise and time of the black athlete and black athletes gained national and even global attention: Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe in tennis, Wilma Rudolph, Tommy Smith, John Carlos, and Bob Beamon in track and field, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman in boxing, Jim Brown and Gale Sayers in football, and Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar (Lew Alcindor) in basketball.⁹ 1968 was a landmark year for professional basketball. With the Hardship Rule, Spencer Haywood and the Seattle Supersonics (of the ABA) ushered in the contemporary era of younger black men entering the professional ranks, including some directly from high school.¹⁰ Haywood declared himself eligible for the professional draft before graduating college (or the year that his class would graduate) because his family was in financial 'hardship' and becoming a professional would enable him to help his family.¹¹

Professional basketball in the 1970s and 1980s flip-flopped from a modest business enterprise to a huge multi-million dollar industry. By 1970, the average salary was \$35,000 and by 1980 average salaries jumped to \$180,000. Franchise values appreciated more than 600% in the same period (Friedman, 2005). Black players became household names and were given commercial endorsement deals. Julius 'Dr. J' Erving, Earvin 'Magic' Johnson, Michael Jordan, and some others represented the new NBA: urban, hip, entertaining, athletic, and black. Athletic achievement became synonymous with black males. Younger and older black men played sports for respect and as proof of their masculinity (Dyson, 1993; George, 1992). Companies made unprecedented moves to have players and teams endorse their products. They paid incredible salaries, separate from their team salaries, and made black men their spokespersons (LaFeber, 1999). The USA's 1992 Olympic basketball team, nicknamed the 'Dream Team', was proof that the black NBA had grown into a global phenomenon.¹² Murals of Michael Jordan were

multi-stories tall in the heart of Barcelona, and the team traveled in a security motorcade rivaling rock stars.

The development of young black men's basketball niche is connected to the urban crisis that worsened after 1960. Between 1961 and 1980, young black men from the inner-city were courted rigorously, and greater than 25% of all recruited players came from seven cities: New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles (Rooney, 1980). Playgrounds in the blackest and poorest neighborhoods were considered the best places to find black talent.¹³ At the same time, black male youth in major cities were becoming an 'endangered species'. According to research analyzing most of the major social indicators, black males faced exacerbated conditions between 1960 and 1980 (Gary, 1981; Gibbs, 1988; Jones, 1994; Madhubuti, 1991; Staples, 1982). The general perception had been that blacks were doing significantly better and closing the income and education gap after decades of affirmative action programs, antipoverty programs, and national economic progress. The black middle class had grown since 1960 but the black urban poor were in the midst of an urban crisis.¹⁴ William Julius Wilson (1987: 140) wrote:

In the mid-1960s, urban analysts began to speak of a new dimension to the urban crisis in the form of a large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasted sharply with the behavior of the general population. Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s.

Interestingly, the USA was experiencing an economic boom in the Reagan era but it was harder for poor black women and men to find jobs, gain adequate education, and be upwardly mobile. They were experiencing greater social isolation. Jobs moved to the suburbs, the economy shifted, and the black middle class left their segregated and mixed income neighborhoods. Young black men in the inner-city felt a push from their communities to pursue basketball, while at the same time, there was a pull from colleges, universities, and professional ranks, who wanted to win more games and improve their profitability. The push-pull effects created the hoop dream: unbridled hope in athletic achievement as a means to escape the urban crisis.

The crisis hurt. A look at residence, unemployment/employment, education, and poverty statistics highlights blacks' continuing vulnerability. More than 50% of all blacks live in central cities (US Census Bureau, 2004). Blacks account for nearly one-quarter of the nation's total population living in poverty. They face external and internal community factors, including: unemployment, incarceration, death rates, and an unbalanced gender ratio that favors women (McAdoo, 2002). The experiences of black women and men are different. Black men are entering college at lower and lower rates; projected statistics reflect grimly that by 2024 all black graduates with advanced degrees will be women (Cross and Slater, 2000). Generally speaking, black men experience the lowest

life chances of any other race and gender group – their survival rate has been worsening while the rate for black women and other groups has been improving (McAdoo and McAdoo, 2002). Poverty and racial discrimination are the main causes (Gary, 1981; Gibbs, 1988; Jones, 1994; Madhubuti, 1991). The rate of poverty for black men (22%) is three times the rate for non-Hispanic white men (7%). The unemployment rates for black men are twice the rate for non-Hispanic white men, 11% and 5% respectively. Black men are more than twice as likely as non-Hispanic white men to be in service occupations and nearly twice as likely as non-Hispanic white men to be operators, fabricators, and laborers. A mere 16.4% of black men have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 31.7% of non-Hispanic white men. Poor, black men who fail to live up to patriarchal standards, are criminalized as a social fact – being 'black and male in public' (Anderson, 1990, 1999a, 1999b). They have to work at proving themselves good, trustworthy, and respectable. They are significantly absent in homes as income earners, fathers, and brothers due to incarceration, violence, drugs, and other health issues, such as AIDS. Black women and families feel the effect of this. The rates of single mother-headed families, family poverty, and the homicide rate of young men are increasing, and the stress of these trends is carried by mothers, extended family, and older children who help to support the family. Another underestimated effect is how black men and women make sense of this for their lives. Black parents raise their children, boys and girls, with racial inequity and survival in mind (McAdoo, 2002; Peters, 2002). But low black men's survival is the single largest concern of the black community and frames relationships between men and women and gender politics; young black men are valued higher than young black women and a premium is placed on maintaining men in positions of power (Collins, 2005). This is not pathology. It is proof of blacks' Americanness and sexism, but it also works against black community progress as women are not fully integrated.

Basketball Players' Marginality

Blacks, as a whole, experience widespread occupational and wage discrimination. They typically work in 'colored' (majority non-white) departments and are paid less for doing the same work (Kmec, 2003). They experience discrimination and are not hired as often as other groups when all things are equal (Pager and Western, 2006). Even black corporate elites face a glass ceiling and race conscious practices (Collins, 1989).¹⁵

Black players experience the blessing and curse of race, gender and class in big time sports. Professional salaries and the value of athletic scholarships might seem to contradict ideas of worker exploitation. Black males from urban areas are motivated by poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and masculinity role strain – failing to live up to dominant, white standards of masculinity, such as the male provider role. As an adaptation, some men take on an 'athletic identity' (Messner, 1989) or exhibit a 'cool pose', a culturally specific, expressive form of masculinity that masks alienation, low self esteem, and a low sense of self worth (Majors and Billson, 1993). High salaries and fame and the societal desire for upward mobility also encourage aspirations and interests. All of this

makes young black men from urban poverty vulnerable to exploitation by the NBA, NCAA, and colleges/universities. Athletes operate in a saturated market with a glut of talent and their bodies and abilities have a relatively short life, compared to more traditional occupations. This intensifies competition and desperation, magnifying the potential for their being exploited. They have to accept intense media scrutiny, abuses, harassment, threats from coaches, and policing by NCAA and NBA administrators and owners (Leonard, 2006).

The inequality gap between black men and the white establishment that determines their fates on the basketball court renders black men powerless. They do not have the resources to protect their interests. The highest level of the sports industry is ownership (for professionals) and college president/chancellor (for collegiate athletes), which is held overwhelmingly by highly educated upper class white men. Owners and collegiate sports administrators cry that athletics do not make money but valuation requires different accounting. The average sell price for an NBA franchise is \$241 million dollars (Vine, 2004). Franchise and college assets include franchise/college agreements and contracts with cable networks, advertisers and vendors, stadiums, and season ticket holder subscriptions. Owners are business owners/former business owners outside of sports who run their teams as a hobby – their primary businesses (and former businesses) include Disney, casinos (Sacramento Kings owners), cruise lines (Miami Heat owner), and Microsoft (Seattle Supersonics owner). The ‘ego factor’ for owners describes the excitement, control and status associated with their position and is a cost that is generally not factored in franchise value (Vine, 2004). College presidents/chancellors manage academic ships that use basketball as a money maker and public relations tool and to subsidize other athletic programs; the status of their team has no bearing on the academic integrity and ranking of the institution, but a good team brings in revenue. Multimedia and competition drive the gift horse and total income includes payouts for television, athletic apparel companies, camps, and speaking engagements.

College coaches in the ‘cash sports’, basketball and football, have gone from earning hundreds of thousands 15 years ago, to a million ten years ago, and now several earn more than \$2 million – the average salary for Division 1 football coaches is \$950,000 (Upton and Wieberg, 2006). Basketball coaches are paid less, seemingly because they manage fewer students and staff, and therefore have a lower budget. Still, the top coaches earn salaries exceeding \$1 million.

Mobility patterns highlight a lack of blacks’ control within this industry. Professional basketball players’ careers last an average of four years (Sailes, 1986).¹⁶ Then what? Basketball careers end and there is little else for them to do without retraining and redirection. Elite athletes have specialized skills, but it has been said that their skills are not transferable and they are not given much opportunity to advance into the highest non-playing levels of sports. Al Campanis offered this assessment in 1987: ‘[blacks] may not have some of the necessities to be, let’s say, a field manager, or, perhaps, a general manager.’ Campanis was general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers (professional baseball) at the time and he was quickly fired. Twenty years later, opportunities for coaching, management, and ownership still lag far behind black participation in professional sports

(Rhoden, 2006; Shropshire, 1996). Black men are 23.2% of all men's basketball head coaches and 10.3% of the athletic directors in the NCAA's Division 1 (Lapchick, 2005). In the NBA, 40% of coaches are black. The few who are given opportunities act as middleman minorities – scouting and managing the talent directly, rather than becoming owners. Black professional basketball and football players have been called 'forty million dollar slaves' because they are laborers with little to no possibility for becoming owners (Rhoden, 2006). Only one team has a black owner with majority ownership and he is not a former player – Bob Johnson, founder and former CEO of Black Entertainment Television is owner of the Charlotte Bobcats.¹⁷

Blacks have served white America as entertainers, entertainment, and spectacle. From the Hottentot Venus exhibition in Europe, white men in black face, Aunt Jemima, and Uncle Tom characters in Shirley Temple and other classic white American films, to black comedians, musicians, and athletes. This continues today, epitomized by the coverage of black male athletes, and female athletes to a lesser extent – Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Serena and Venus Williams, Tiger Woods, Terrell Owens, and Barry Bonds.

Moreover, there is an ideological process at work – the fantastic growth of media has been necessary to 'hoop dreams' and the continuing niche that black males have in basketball (and football), acting as part of the 'informal curriculum' that tells young men what they should become. Poor black males living in inner-city poverty believe that they can become pro players because 'rags-to-riches' stories are plentiful and highlighted. The probability of a male high school basketball player playing college Division 1 ball is 1 in 130, and of these players, the odds are over 10,000 to 1 against their becoming a professional (Lapchick, 1991). Yet black males are seven times as likely as white male children to be encouraged to play sports by their parents. *Sports Illustrated* conducted a survey of middle and high school students, and concluded that 57% of the black males surveyed felt they could 'realistically' become a professional athlete while only 17% and 14% of them felt that they could become lawyers and teachers, respectively. On the other hand, 41% of white males felt they could realistically become a pro athlete and 27% and 28% of them felt they could become lawyers and teachers, respectively (Price, 1997).¹⁸ The male basketball player ideal-type is black, male, poor, having grown up in a single, woman headed household, and lived in an urban low-income housing project with multiple siblings. He has dodged bullets and avoided drug dealing by playing ball. The niche opportunity, combined with urban poverty and job inequality, creates a tremendous overflow of aspirants, while only an infinitesimal number of young black men who play basketball in high school will play in college and become professionals. The continuance of the ideal-type, captured and perpetuated by the media is an ideological mechanism that not only presents a picture, but also suggests what people should do. In this case: young, poor, and urban black men should try to become basketball players because they are 'naturally' gifted and have a competitive advantage over men from other groups. The opportunity cost is that poor, young, black men's life chances and career options are narrowed further.

But *preferred* status is not permanent and may not last; it is a capitalistic process. The growing presence of non-American labor suggests that black American males' time as the preferred worker in this industry may be waning. The NBA's Golden Age (the time when Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan played) has been replaced by an image of black players who scare white middle class fans. They are portrayed as the 'thug' and hip hop athlete – tattooed, cornrowed, and from urban poverty – epitomized by players like Allen Iverson. A new labor group, defined more by nationality or non-American status, is gaining a foothold. This new group is perceived as less threatening, and has widened a global revenue stream by multiplying the world's interest in basketball.

Millions around the world watch the NBA playoffs and championship; and more and more players from overseas 'invade' the NBA. It now boasts that 83 of its players or over 20% come from outside the US – they are black, Asian, Latino, and European (NBA, 2006). Of course the process of 'invasion' is two-way. The NBA invades smaller basketball markets in countries around the world to increase its fan base. It has modified its practices to have a bigger impact globally. Non-American players act as ambassadors and diplomats. In the off season and preseason, they take their team mates home to do community service, run camps for youth, and show goodwill. Teams also play games overseas to promote the league. Local and national communities are bridged. Now a seven-foot tall prospect from Spain, Serbia, or China becomes known in the USA by playing in international leagues where US professional scouts are present, and playing in Nike-sponsored basketball exhibitions throughout the world before being drafted by a US professional franchise.

Conclusion

Like the Latina garment workers studied by Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000), black male basketball players are *preferred* workers, not simply because of their skills and perceived 'natural ability', but also because of their socio-economic position, vulnerability, and usefulness to larger structural interests. This statement is theoretical and not meant to compare the wages, working conditions, or living conditions of garment workers and professional and collegiate basketball players, which are profoundly different. Instead, it highlights the similarity in how Latinas and black men are considered in terms of their labor and profit potential to owners and managers within particular industries.

Poor, urban, young, black men are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy; athletics and entertainment are considered their niche, and so little is needed to develop and encourage their participation; they have limited options for accumulating wealth; and they come from desperate economic and social backgrounds where sports offer something relatively unattainable – college, travel, public attention, and mobility. Black male scholarship athletes and professionals also lack the social and cultural capital, resources, and power to go against controlling interests and voice opinions of being exploited; they

are seen as being 'lucky' and privileged because so many black men aspire to be in their position. When athletes stand up for themselves they are called 'ungrateful' and it is said that they 'have an attitude.' Class and social background is used as leverage against black male athletes' empowerment and resistance: they should be thankful and grateful to coaches, administrators and owners for their unique and tremendous opportunity to earn fame and fortune. The racial and class hierarchy is maintained by black athletes' dispensability – they are easily replaced by another kid with a similar background who is hungry to achieve and make money.

Bonacich's work, throughout her career, has analyzed labor in terms of structure and power. Black male professional athletes as a group represent a type of worker that has risen out of poverty to earn millions of dollars and fame. A theory of *preferred* workers highlights how owners and hiring managers think about labor and characterize potential workers based on race/ethnicity, gender, and class. Bonacich and Appelbaum write: 'The more serious discrimination is that which they [garment workers] cannot see: the institutional discrimination of an industry that is structured to use race, ethnicity, and immigration status to maintain a low wage labor force.' (2000: 194) The profane salaries that black male athletes earn serves as a distraction – real power and money is above them. Yet, their pay also indicates that race, gender, and class are social constructions that are not simply in our heads, but are also real commodities and symbols of difference used to define, advantage, and marginalize groups of people.

Notes

- 1 Bonacich and Appelbaum found that there has been a noticeable rise in male participation at the operative/garment maker level. Rather than interpreting this as a contradiction to the targeted exploitation of Latinas, they claim that sewing and operative/garment work is culturally acceptable to Latinos and is not simply women's work (2000: 170).
- 2 See MacLeod (1987) for a nice ethnographic study on aspirations and the negative effects of cultural capital on outcomes.
- 3 See Adler & Adler (1990) for more on individual role engulfment in college sports.
- 4 Black men participate at a very low rate outside of basketball and football. They represent 45.4% of all football players, so their overall participation rate of 24.1% in all sports is heavily skewed. Black women graduate at a rate of 56%, equivalent to that of all college students, a trending improvement and increase over the last two decades.
- 5 Similarly, the only visible women's professional basketball league in the USA is the Women's National Basketball Association, or WNBA. As its name suggests, it is owned by and modeled after the NBA. The WNBA, following in the NBA's tradition, helped its only competitor, the American Basketball League (ABL), to fold by encouraging players to defect with the promise of greater visibility and stability. The ABL declared bankruptcy in 1998 and most of its players moved to the WNBA or retired. The WNBA has not been more profitable than the ABL; the NBA has operated the WNBA at a loss every season (Heath, 2006).
- 6 Baseball was one of the few integrated sports in the early 1900s, but blacks were locked out and then reintegrated when Jackie Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

- 7 While Texas Western was the first champion to have an all-black starting five, Cincinnati started four black men in a championship loss the prior year and Loyola (Chicago) started four in the championship game one year after Texas Western won.
- 8 Ronald A. Smith's *Play-by-Play* (2001) offers a wonderful historic look at the increasing coverage of sports by media and television.
- 9 See classic sociology of sport texts on the black athlete such as Edwards' *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969) and Scott's *The Athletic Revolution* (1971).
- 10 Until 2005, 'leaving early' was the typical path for elite college players, and in the mid-1990s the number of high school graduates entering without any college experience exploded.
- 11 The NBA would adopt the 'hardship rule' in 1971 after the ABA folded.
- 12 See LaFeber (1999) for an in-depth look at Michael Jordan's effect on a global economic scale. Also look at Miller and Wiggins (2004) and Andrews (2001).
- 13 Two classic books by sports journalists documented this trend intimately via participant observation in New York: Pete Axthelm's *The City Game* (1970) and Rick Telander's *Heaven is a Playground* (1976).
- 14 Gains for the black middle class have not been as great as publicly speculated. A segment of the black population, particularly those with college degrees, benefited from Affirmative Action and EEOC but these jobs often placed them in isolated, dead end, racialized jobs and not in the executive ranks of corporate planning and strategy (Collins, 1996).
- 15 Some research suggests that black males are less protected than black women by the legal system because racial discrimination and the negative attitudes about black men erase the advantages of maleness (Semple, 1991).
- 16 The authors speculate that the average career length has decreased because of shorter initial contracts and the greater number of non-American players who compete for positions. Sailes (1986) did a 'quick and dirty' study regarding football and basketball players' career earnings and compared this to the lifetime earnings of doctors, lawyers, and businesspersons. He found that the latter earned more than pro athletes.
- 17 There were six persons of color with minority ownership in 2003–4 (Lapchick, 2005).
- 18 While some may question the credibility of Sports Illustrated as a source for such information, the notion that blacks emphasize athletic achievement and encourage the pursuit of professional athletics over more traditional career paths is prevalent in informed discussions on race and sports. In *Darwin's Athletes* (1997), John Hoberman asserts that sport is more important to most black men, of all economic classes, than to their white counterparts. Demonstrating athletic ability fills a need that goes beyond recreation and fitness. Gary Sailes claims that sport participation is an essential part of African American male socialization (1986). And it is of particular importance in poorer African American neighborhoods where youth view sport as the only opportunity to gain social respect and material success, when doors to other opportunities appear to be closed.

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For correspondence: Scott N. Brooks, University of California – Riverside, Riverside, CA, 92521–0419, USA. Email: scott.brooks@ucr.edu