Predicting Defiant Behavior of National Football League Players

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Research across many disciplines has examined criminal and other defiant behaviors among athletes across various sport levels: youth (Garry & Morrissey, 2000), adolescents (Kreager, 2007; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Humphreys & Ruseski, 2011), and college (Crosset, Benedict, & McDonald, 1995; Wechsler, 1997; Huang et al., 2007). Research examining professional sport and criminal/deviant behaviors has focused on the policy implications for both the criminal justice system (O’hear, 2001; McKelvey, 2001; Standen, 2009) and professional leagues and its member clubs (Ugolini, 2007; Ambrose, 2008; Young Kim & Parlow, 2009). This stream of literature also examined certain types of criminal behavior such as violence against women (Crosset et al., 1995; Masteralexis, 1995; Dabbs, 1997; Welch, 1997).

The NFL has been a source of highly publicized incidents of players committing crimes over the past decade (Ugolini, 2007). A study by Benedict and Yaeger (1998) of NFL players in the 1996-1997 season found that 21 percent of players sampled were either arrested or indicted for a minimum of one crime in which the authors determined was a serious crime. Some of the general public felt that punishment by the league and its member clubs towards players who committed a violent crime were too lenient (Dabbs, 1997; Ambrose, 2008). For example, Ambrose (2008) commented that “As late as the 1990s, ‘murder’ was the only criminal offense said to bar an athlete from playing in the NFL” (p. 1071). This leniency by the league and its member clubs “allowed the NFL to continue to feed the public’s obsession with football by showcasing the best physically skilled players on the field. Feeding this obsession eventually led to the NFL’s emergence as the richest and most profitable sports league in the world” (Ambrose, 2008, p. 1071).

Our research question is thus: What are the society, role, and position-based influencers on professional football players’ likelihood of exhibiting defiant behaviors? Our core argument is that professional football is a place where there are logics of actions (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), that while sensible in a football context, are not sensible for society in general. For a professional football player, the game of football requires one to be physically aggressive and “violent” towards the opponent, spurring a logic of aggression. That logic of aggression is in conflict to one’s behavior in the general public, as acts of aggression towards others are subject to criminal prosecution.

Theoretically, we ground our present study in the research on institutional logics. Research on logics provided both the conceptual argument and empirical evidence of the presence of multiple, contending logics in a given field and across fields (DiMaggio, 1991; Haveman & Rao, 1997; Lounsbury, 2002; Thornton, 2002; Washington, et al., 2005). These contending logics provide a source of contradiction in the field in the sense that they represent coherent alternatives to both the current legitimate activity in the field and the dominant status ordering.

The academic literature recently begun to connect institutional logics to individual-level action (e.g., Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Reay and Hinings (2009), for example, examined how the competing logics of medical professionalism and business-like healthcare impacted physicians in Alberta, Canada. Tracey, Phillips and Jarvis (2011) examined the role of competing institutional logics in the entrepreneurial efforts of two people that created a new organizational form. Trank (2001) found that academics trained in universities with a strong patenting logic are more likely than peers to patent after taking positions in universities with a strong publication logic.

In order to answer the proposed research question regarding how multiple logics influence individual action within the field, we examine NFL players’ run-ins with law enforcement. Since 2000, the San Diego Union Tribune has been collecting data of all documented incidents with law enforcement officers involving NFL players. The database includes a write-up of the incident and what resolution (if any) occurred. This data provides a unique opportunity to examine criminal behavior among NFL players from 2000 through 2008 that is not present in the current academic literature.
In order to predict the probability of an NFL player being involved in criminal behavior in a given year, we use a rare event logistic regression model. A rare event logistic regression model is necessary in the present research since the number of documented incidents (2 percent) is extremely rare within the overall sample (10,099 player-season observations). The rare event logistic regression model addresses documented biases in predicted probabilities when sample sizes are large and events are few (King & Zeng 2001a). The conventional logistic model is nested within the rare events model, meaning that when a rare events adjustment is necessary, the rare events model provides less biased results than the conventional logistic model; however, when a rare events adjustment is unnecessary, the rare events model provides identical results as the conventional logistic model (King & Zeng, 2001a; 2001b).

In investigating the complexity of the origins of logics of action (criminal behaviour) for individuals in a field, we theorize and control for the internalization processes of a logic of action across three distinct levels—acculturation at the team level, acculturation at the role level, and internalization of a status at the individual level. At the team level, we control for university win-loss percentage and if the player came from one of the top NFL producing universities during the sample period. At the role level, we control for player position as some positions (example Wide Receiver) may lead to a higher probability of have a run-in with law enforcement than other positions (Quarterback). At the individual level, we control for the overall draft pick where each player was selected in the NFL draft. We theorize that players with lower draft pick numbers (and thus the highest status) are more likely to take actions that are congruent with a reciprocal view of the self as being of higher status or importance compared to others.

The results from the proposed research provide further insight into individual athlete’s behavior when confronted with various and, sometimes, conflicting logics. The results will provide insights for team decision makers regarding examining personal conduct when researching amateur players that could be available to the team in an upcoming amateur player draft. The results can also inform the NCAA in terms of better preparing its elite football players for the contradictions that might occur as they progress onto careers in the NFL. More broadly, the present study can help sport managers understand how societal influence can impact individual behavior. Lastly, this study continues a strong connection between institutional theory and organized sports.