Exploring Perceptual Issues of Hiring Discrimination for African Americans in Collegiate Sport

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According to the latest Racial and Gender Report Card: College Sport (Lapchick, 2010), African Americans are severely underrepresented in both administration and coaching positions in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) front offices and collegiate athletic departments. Considering African Americans are overrepresented as student-athletes in the two most revenue generating sports (men's basketball and football), but marginally represented in the positions that oversee these sports (i.e., assistant coach, head coach, athletic director), makes this even more troubling. It becomes more disconcerting when the pool of potential African American coaches in NCAA athletics is large, but the actual coaching numbers do not equate (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). The discriminatory attitudes (e.g., racial stereotypes) toward promotable African American coaches by white decision-makers in college sport (Sartore & Cunningham, 2006) could serve to explicate why African Americans are underrepresented. However, in order to fully comprehend how negative attitudes towards African Americans result in their numerically marginalized job representation, one only has to turn to the broader society.

According to Feagin (2010), hiring discrimination, resulting in the underrepresentation of African Americans in every major institution (e.g., educational, economical, political, legal), is a result of negative attitudes towards this group by a majority of Americans. This becomes evident when considering a survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC, 1998). NORC established that Americans are harboring more prejudice and negative stereotypes towards minority groups, by ranking African Americans and Latinos last and next to last on almost every attribute (e.g., work ethic, reliable, responsible, intelligent) measured. As a consequence of ascribing negative attributes towards African Americans, their ability to obtain jobs becomes problematic. This is illuminated in a study conducted by the Urban Institute in 1991. The Urban Institute sent out equally qualified young African American and white males to 576 randomly selected jobs within the cities of Washington D.C. and Chicago. They found white males advanced further in the selection process twenty-percent of the time over African Americans, whereas African Americans advanced only seven-percent of the time further than whites. Thus, job offers favored whites fifteen-percent of the time, while African Americans only five-percent (Scanlan, 1993).

Based on these perspectives, African Americans’ underrepresentation in sport could be attributed to the negative attitudes towards this group throughout society (e.g., Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Feagin, 2010; Scanlan, 1993). For example, Scanlan (1993) found this to be the case, as negative attitudes towards African Americans resulted in more whites being chosen than African Americans for the same positions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the attributions assigned to both qualified and unqualified African American and white job candidates applying for a collegiate athletic director position. More specifically, this study will determine if such attributions influence perceptions of person-job fit and eventual hiring recommendations.

To formulate the research questions, this study drew from multiple theoretical frameworks: white racial frame, attribution theory, and match-up hypothesis. According to the white racial frame (Feagin, 2010), negative racialized images grow to be part of the white conscious and unconscious mind (Lawrence, 1987), which has been confirmed in multiple “unconscious stereotyping” psychological tests (e.g., implicit association test (IAT); Vedantam, 2005). Other tests have revealed that regardless of what regions of the country whites live, they all share similar positive images and stereotypes about whites and negative images and stereotypes regarding Americans of color (e.g., African American, Latino/a; Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). Because African Americans are framed as biologically and intellectually inferior compared to whites, they are more inclined to discriminatory actions (e.g., access to employment; Feagin, 2010).

When endeavoring to comprehend outcomes, attribution theory holds that people search for causation and explanation (Weiner, 1995). Causality of ethnic and racial discrimination (e.g., hiring practices) is built on
misinformation, stereotypes, and/or myths (Kivel, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2006; Stodolska, 2005). The negative societal attitudes towards ethnic and racial groups, particularly African Americans (e.g., lazy, unintelligent; NORC, 1998), suggests strong support why exclusionary hiring practices exist for this group. Therefore, negative attributions might be made towards African American potential job candidates regardless of their qualifications, which could have an influential impact on perceptions of person-job fit and hiring recommendations. Match-up hypothesis suggests in order to receive a hiring recommendation there must be a match between applicant and specific job (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996), and perceived attributes of potential candidates play an important, mediating role. If person-job fit is decided by more than just qualifications, such as perceived traits of candidates, then negative perceptions towards African Americans could result in African Americans not being considered a good match for the position.

Therefore, this study will examine these possibilities (i.e., ascribed attributions, person-job fit, hiring recommendation). Specifically, participants will receive information on a job candidate applying for an athletic director position in a collegiate athletic department. The race of the applicant will be varied (black or white) and the qualifications the candidate possesses (high or low). Based on the aforementioned literature, three research questions have been established: a) Does the race (black or white) of the job candidate influence the ascription of attributes, regardless of the applicant's qualifications (high or low)? b) Does the race (black or white) of the job candidate influence perceptions of person-job fit, regardless of the applicant's qualifications (high or low)?; and c) Does the race (black or white) of the job candidate influence hiring recommendation, regardless of the applicant's qualifications (high or low)?

Data will be collected from 200 undergraduate students from a major division I university in the Southwest United States. Participants will be given a study packet that contains the manipulations and the questionnaire. Modeling the work of Sartore and Cunningham (2007), the questionnaire utilized is found to be a highly reliable assessment. The first page of the packet contains a consent form, as well as information pertaining to the purpose of the study and an athletic director job description summary. Participants will then be asked to review profile information of the job candidates (in which the manipulations are embedded) on the following page and respond to the questionnaire items (e.g., ascribed attributions, person-job fit, hiring recommendation) on the following pages. Because research has shown that people are more likely to hire people similar to themselves (e.g., Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Whisenant & Mullane, 2007), applicant similarity to one’s self is included in the questionnaire and will serve as a control variable. Results will be available winter 2012.