Centrality and Racial Discrimination in Coach Promotions

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Descriptive statistics contrasting the stark differences between the low percentage of black head coaches and high percentage of black players in the National Football League (NFL) have been well documented (Lapchick, 2012, 2013). The lack of black head coaches may be a result of discrimination occurring in lower rungs of the promotion ladder (Solow, Solow, & Walker, 2011). However, Becker’s (1971) seminal research on discrimination stated employer discrimination is highly unlikely in competitive labor markets, but the market for football coaches operates with many potential barriers to entry including the benefits of having connections in the industry (Fast & Jensen, 2006) as well as racial (Madden, 2004), gender (Lapchick, 2013), and institutional discrimination (Finch, McDowell, & Sagas, 2011). One form of institutional discrimination which may prevent fair competition in the promotion of NFL coaches is based on the idea of centrality.

Leavitt (1951) stated people who held centrally located positions within a group were more likely to be selected as leaders due to the inherent structure of the group. Grusky (1963) used centrality to explain why infielders are more likely to become managers in Major League Baseball (MLB). Grusky further generalized his findings by stating people in central positions must communicate with those around them more, providing more opportunities to develop better social skills. These refined social skills allow individuals to receive better performance evaluations, interview skills, recommendations, and ultimately, chances for promotions (Grusky, 1963). Anderson (1993) assessed the degree of racial discrimination, which results from centrality, using media guides from 88 intercollegiate football programs from the 1990 season. Using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, Anderson found career opportunities for blacks to be restricted due to institutional discrimination which limits blacks’ access to central positions. More recently, Finch, McDowell, and Sagas (2011) provided a 15-year update of Anderson’s 1990 study by analyzing the same descriptive statistics using chi-square tests with media guides from 116 intercollegiate football programs from the 2005 season. In both the Anderson (1993) and Finch et al. (2011) studies, discrimination was analyzed on the basis of who was in the coaching positions and what was their racial and playing/coaching position background. Though Finch et al. (2011) stated “[t]he hiring mechanisms often seen in Division I football may also contribute to a lack of access and interviews for Black coaches” (p. 48), neither Anderson nor Finch et al. (2011) examined the hiring practices which may be facilitating the discrimination. Furthermore, neither study examined the years of experience or levels of success each coach had achieved to earn their positions. While centrality has been investigated in the college sport context (e.g., Anderson, 1993; Finch et al., 2011), there is little research examining centrality in professional sport. The updated results and comparison against Anderson’s findings provided by Finch et al. (2011) suggested institutional racism still potentially limits African Americans’ access to central positions, and ultimately, the visible and prestigious positions of head coach and coordinator. These results are not surprising considering Anderson (1993) stated “the pattern is likely to continue in the absence of meaningful interventions” (p. 61).

In the NFL, the Rooney Rule provides a league-level intervention intended to increase racial diversity in the head coaching ranks. The Rooney Rule, which was implemented in 2003, requires teams without named successors to interview minority candidates for head coaching vacancies (Solow et al., 2011). Examining race and centrality among NFL coaches from the 2000 season through the 2006 season, Braddock, Smith, and Dawkins (2012) found significant differences in the races of coaches assigned to central positions and offensive/defensive coordinators, but not for head coaches. It is interesting to note that though the Rooney Rule was implemented midway through the sample period utilized by Braddock et al. (2012), there was no control variable for the rule or indication of discrimination trends throughout the years at any coaching level.
Thus, the purpose of the proposed research is to examine the role discrimination plays in the promotion of assistant coaches in professional sport. The empirical setting is the NFL where league executives have been cognizant of the lack of job interview for minority coaches. As such, league executives instituted the Rooney Rule which is defined provides a good opportunity to examine changes in coaching promotions in the NFL before and after this policy was implemented. Data from the 1998 season through the 2007 season will be used to examine any changes which may have occurred five years before and after the implementation of the Rooney Rule. The unit of observation for this study will be a coach-season whereby a separate observation will exist for each coach (i.e., head coach, offensive and defensive coordinators, position coaches, and other assistant coaches) in a given season. To account for potential discrimination as a result of hiring practices, and to hold other variables constant (e.g., experience and success), a logistic regression will be estimated where the dependent variable is an indicator variable coded 1 if the coach was internally or externally promoted after the observed season and 0 if the coach was not promoted.

The independent variables of interest in this proposed research are (a) the minority status of the coach, (b) whether the coach has experience playing or coaching a central position, (c) an interaction variable between minority status and central position experience, (d) a Rooney Rule indicator variable for seasons 2003 through 2007, and (e) an interaction variable between minority and Rooney Rule variables. These variables will provide insight into whether race or position centrality are factors in discrimination before and/or after the implementation of the Rooney Rule. The control variables in this proposed research will include years of coaching experience at different levels within the coaching hierarchy, the standardized level of success at each level of coaching (e.g., points scored for offensive coordinator, rushing yards for running backs coach), an interaction variable for each level of coaching where years of experience will be interacted with level of success, an indicator variable for whether a coach played in the NFL, an indicator variable for if the coach has experience as a graduate assistant coach, and fixed effects for seasons and coaching level (e.g., head coach, offensive/defensive coordinator, position coach). Data regarding years of coaching experience from the college and professional ranks coaching success at each level will be obtained from coachingroots.com and pro-football-reference.com, respectively.

The findings in this study will have implications for both scholars and practitioners. Many scholars attempted to identify whether discrimination exists in NFL hiring practices and why few minority head coaches exist in the league compared to the number of minority players. Furthermore, the Rooney Rule has been debated regarding whether it is necessary and/or effective. The proposed research may assist the NFL administrators in deciding whether to extend the scope of the Rooney Rule to lower level coaching positions. Additionally, the results of the proposed research can be used to inform college football administrators who may be interested in implementing policies aimed at mitigating discrimination in coach hiring practices.