Conceptualizing the Role Social Networks Play in the Lack of Black College Football Coaches

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Historically, the hiring processes of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) programs have consistently failed to promote black individuals into head coaching positions (Agyemang & Delorme, 2010). Indeed, only 11% of FBS head coaches are black, even though 56% of student-athletes participating in FBS are black (Myerberg, 2018). Assistant coaches with an offensive background are more likely to become head coaches (Turick & Bopp, 2016), however previous research indicates that black coaches are also underrepresented in offensive coordinator positions. Some studies suggest that black coaches feel advancement opportunities are limited, with fewer promotions and less organizational proximity compared to white coaches (Saga & Cunningham, 2005). Social network theory and analysis has successfully been used to help uncover specific social dynamics that can constrain individuals’ ability to rise into leadership positions (Ibarra, 1993; Kram, 1988). In this presentation, social network theory will be used to explore the potential differences in social networks between the promotion and hiring patterns of black coaches and white assistant and head coaches in FBS programs.

The factors attributed to why black coaches are underrepresented at the head coaching level are varied. For example, previous research has investigated this problem through homologous reproduction (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005) and stacking theory (Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005). Homologous reproduction theory suggests that dominant groups, systematically reproduce themselves by hiring and promoting people with similar characteristics. Stacking theory suggest that the hiring practices of the dominant group may consciously and intentionally lead to the lack of hiring of black coaches into the highest leadership positions. In contrast, social network theory suggests that some of the upward mobility of black assistant coaches may be constrained by underlying subconscious social determinants related to the relational network positions within which they reside. When combined with social network theory, homologous reproduction may be particularly useful for explaining why black assistant coaches are bypassed for white coaches when important positions like offensive and defensive coordinator open up. Offensive coordinator assistant coaching positions are most proximal to the head coach and are often viewed as a stepping stone to a head coach position. Moreover, cross-race ties are typically weaker than matching-race relationships (Ibarra, 1993; Kram, 1988), which serve as an additional barrier for many black assistant coaches.

During this session, a conceptual model integrating previous theories tied to underrepresentation in sport leadership positions and social network theories will be presented. Discussion of the model will entail robust consideration of how social network theory overlaps, complements, extends, and/or potentially contrasts with prior work to advance understanding of the perpetuation of limited promotion of black coaches from assistant coaching positions to head coaching positions. Relevant future research questions and a research agenda will be proposed, including a study that will specifically incorporate the use of social network analysis to test hypotheses regarding social network characteristic differences between minority and non-minority coaches.