

Hoop inequalities: Race, class and family structure background and the odds of playing in the National Basketball Association

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Abstract

The popular image of the African American National Basketball Association (NBA) player as rising from the 'ghetto' to international fame and fortune misleads academics and publics alike. This false image is fueled, in part, by critical shortcomings in empirical research on the relationship between race, sport, and occupational mobility: these studies have not adequately examined differences in social class and family structure backgrounds *across*, and especially *within*, racial groups. To address this problem, we empirically investigate how the intersection of race, social class and family structure background influences entry into the NBA. Information on social class and family structure background for a subpopulation of NBA players ($N = 155$) comes from 245 articles published in local, regional and national newspapers between 1994 and 2004. We find that, after accounting for methodological problems common in newspaper data, most NBA players come from relatively advantaged social origins and African Americans from disadvantaged social origins have lower odds of being in the NBA than African American and white players from relatively advantaged origins. A discussion of the implications of these findings for academics and publics concludes the article.

Keywords

NBA, newspaper data, occupational mobility, race, social class

The popular image of the African American National Basketball Association (NBA) player as rising from the 'ghetto' to international fame and fortune misleads academics

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and publics alike. This false image is fueled, in part, by critical shortcomings in empirical research on the relationship between race, sport, and occupational mobility: these studies have not adequately examined differences in social class and family structure backgrounds *across*, and especially *within*, racial groups (e.g. Craggs, 2008; Eitzen, 1999a, 1999b; Leonard, 1996; NCAA, 2010). Theories of how racial inequalities impact occupational mobility through sport and the popular perceptions of African American male athletes would benefit from empirical evidence of the social origins of professional athletes.

The purpose of this study is to empirically examine how the intersection of race, social class and family structure background influences sports occupational attainment; specifically, in the odds of attaining a position in the NBA. We build on the theoretical assertion that the intersection of race, class and family contextualizes the opportunity structure for entry into professional athletic career. On a unique dataset constructed by coding 245 articles published in local, regional and national newspapers in the period 1994–2004, we demonstrate that the majority of NBA players come from relatively advantaged social origins and that African American players from disadvantaged social origins have lower odds of being in the NBA than African American and white players from relatively well-off families. We supplement the newspaper content analysis with US Census 2000 and General Social Survey data and find that, in comparison with relevant subgroups in the US, NBA players are more likely to come from advantaged social origins.

Theory and hypotheses

Studies in sport and mobility devote great attention to the relation between race and athletic involvement, particularly so within professional basketball, given African Americans' overwhelming presence at the NBA level (Azzarito and Harrison, 2008; Benson, 2000; Coakley, 2004; Edwards, 1973; Eide and Ronan, 2001; Ewing, 2007; Harris, 1998; Harrison Jr et al., 2004; Hartmann, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; May, 2009; Ogden and Hilt, 2003; Pascarella and Smart, 1991; Sailes, 1998; Sellers and Kuperminc, 1997; Spreitzer, 1994). Common to all is the limited attention received by major stratification variables, social class origin and family structure background in particular (Washington and Karen, 2001). The omission is particularly troublesome as many refer to the odds of attainment to sustain their arguments, yet odds estimated in this manner do not account for the intersection of race, class and family structure (Craggs, 2008; Eitzen, 1999a, 1999b; Leonard, 1996; NCAA, 2010).

Occupational attainment research consistently shows that other things considered, people from disadvantaged social origin – in terms of class and family structure – fare less well in the stratification system than those of more privileged social origin. For adolescents and young adults, socioeconomic status positively influences the odds of sports participation (Eitle and Eitle, 2002; Fjegin, 1994; Spreitzer, 1994). Family structure background is another crucial variable that influences the earning capacity and distribution of resources within the household (Downey, 1995). While in statistical sense growing up in a family without both parents influences later achievements, social class origin strongly influences the family effect (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

To date however, very few studies examine the intersection of race, class and family structure and sport participation in general, and professional athlete status attainment in particular. Whether measured as lower social class position or growing up in a single parent household, African Americans are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than whites (Winant, 2000). While race is generally considered to be a valid indicator of disadvantage (economic, but not only), class and family structure background differentiation *within* racial categories also exists.

Our main research hypothesis states that *race – in conjunction with social class and family structure background – influences the odds of attaining the status of professional basketball player*, in this case, membership in the NBA. This translates into the following expectations:

a) Due to the relatively high level of resources required to achieve a professional athletics career, African American players from disadvantaged social class should be less likely to become professional basketball athletes than African American and white players from relatively well-off families. In other words, they should have lower odds of being in the NBA.

b) The same mechanism leads us to expect that African Americans from disadvantaged family structure background are less likely than African American and white players from advantaged family structure background to populate professional basketball leagues.

c) Given our argument that non-white race and disadvantaged social origin intersect, we expect African Americans from disadvantaged class *and* family backgrounds to be the least likely to be present in the NBA.

d) Given this causal chain, we argue that even if the majority of professional basketball players were raised in non-two-parent families, most should come from the middle class and above. In consequence, among professional basketball players compounded disadvantage, that is, both low social class and non-two parent family structure background, should be rare, yet more common among African Americans than among whites.

Data and methods

Similar to elites in other sectors of society, professional athletes in major American sports (basketball, football, baseball and hockey) are not acquiescent to traditional survey research methods such as face-to-face interviews and mail-out questionnaires. As no survey data exist that contain mobility variables for professional athletes, using primary data from secondary sources to address our research question is necessary.

For our analyses, we follow data collection and bias detection techniques that are common among researchers of political phenomena (see Earl et al., 2004; Oliver and Meyers, 1999; Woolley, 2000), and construct a unique dataset on professional basketball players' social origin through newspaper coding. Specifically, 245 articles published in local, regional and/or national papers between 1994 and 2004 provide biographical information on a subpopulation of 155 National Basketball Association (NBA) players. Lexis-Nexis, an electronic database of newspaper articles deposited by participating newspaper organizations, served as our bibliographic search engine, or online index.

Our data collection strategy is closest to what Woolley (2000: 157) describes as ‘record-coding’: coding to create an event record, or ‘count’. In practice, instead of gathering every article that referred to social origin for a particular player, we stopped searching for news articles if a) the same information was repeated in multiple articles and b) after exhausting all possible word searches.

Note that we explicitly sample based on characteristics of the dependent variable, that is, membership in the NBA. To evaluate the possible effect on our substantive conclusions, we compare our NBA players to the US population using Census and the General Social Survey data. Results of this analysis are in the Findings section.

Sampling frame

Our sampling frame comes from a complete listing of NBA players who were in the league and appeared on the official NBA website as of 15 July 2002.¹ Of the total 475 NBA players listed, 465 had information that pertained to birth date and race.² From this number, we selected those African American and white players who were born on or after 1977 in the United States and Canada ($N=155$). We chose 1977 as the boundary for year of birth to focus our attention on a manageable subpopulation for whom we could – to the extent possible – control for selection bias based on newspaper reporting styles that may change over time. Given the birth year threshold, we found useful articles with sufficient biographical information between 1994 and 2004, a range that encompasses the sampled players’ experience from high school or college to when they were drafted and/or played their first few years in the NBA. We eliminated players who were born outside of the US and Canada because of possible country-level variations in the differences in, and effects of, class and family-structure background, which would be impossible to explain with the limited number of cases. The number of Canadians in our subpopulation is two. The racial composition of our subpopulation is roughly equivalent to the total NBA population in 2002: 86 percent of our sample are African American and 14 percent are white, compared with 77 percent African American and 21 percent white for the entire league. Overall, our percentages are substantively similar to those reported in other sources (e.g. Coakley, 2004), indicating that our method of identifying players’ racial background is reliable.³

Coding

Classic sociological definitions of social class and family structure background guided our coding process of article text. To identify social class background, we examined words and phrases indicating parental occupation, description of neighborhood, and general statements of class position. Our definition of social class follows that of Weber (1946), referring to social groups whose position in society differ according to their relative access to economic resources. We define class primarily in economic terms (Myles and Turegun, 1994), relying heavily on parental occupation as the best single indicator of class background (Breiger, 1995). However, we used parental occupation only in cases where it was clear that the parents contributed to the player’s upbringing. Two examples illustrate journalistic phrases: ‘Father is an assistant principal ... while his mother is a

teacher' and '[player's mother] had worked her way up the corporate ladder at [company name] . . . Because of her success at [company name], [player's mother] could transfer to just about anywhere in the country.'

Economic resources influence residential situation. Thus, we took neighborhood descriptions as a further marker of class position.⁴ Neighborhood description consists of two possible indicators. The first is physical appearance of housing: '[Player] would run the 14 flights of stairs in his project' or '... home in a two-car-garage corner of suburbia'. The second refers to perceived level and types of crime: 'The dangers of the big city came to the [player's childhood family] doorstep ... a car drove past, shots were fired', and 'In the neighborhood we grew up in, you look around. Everybody is selling drugs.'

General statements of class position refer to players' identification of relative economic standing, for example, 'I was neither rich nor poor' indicating, in this case, middle-class status. The other type was journalists' direct reference to class position, for example, 'he was raised in an upper middle class suburb' to indicate above middle-class status.

Using information on parental occupation, neighborhood descriptions, and general statements of class position, our coding yielded three categories of social origin: 1) lower class, 2) middle class, and 3) upper middle and upper class.

To identify family background, we examined words and phrases indicating presence or absence of mother, father, or both. A non-grandparent two-parent family corresponds to two parents having raised the player. For this category, it did not matter if the father and mother were living together or are biologically related to the player. A necessary condition was that two parents were present and contributing during much of the respondent's childhood upbringing. For most cases we found direct indicators (e.g. 'raised by a single mother'), but some were indirect (e.g. 'I never had a father around'). If player or reporter indicated 'father was never around', we assumed that the biological or step-father was either de jure or de facto separated from, and not contributing to, the household.

Considering the source of data, it was virtually impossible to determine the exact length of time a respondent was with or without two parents. Hence, we relied on media reports that clearly indicated who was present during a substantial portion of the pre-college or pre-NBA (depending on method of NBA entry) years. We treated step-parent families as two parents unless it was clear that the intervening single parent time spanned most of the respondent's childhood.⁵

We coded responses to family structure background as falling into four categories: 1) raised by single father, 2) raised by single mother, 3) raised by grandparent(s) or social welfare institution, and 4) raised in non-grandparent two-parent family.⁶

Difficulties in coding

In some cases indicators for social class and/or family background were blurry. Whenever descriptions did not fall clearly into a particular category, we did not code them, that is, we treated that player as missing data for that variable. The following description is an example of how information can yield no useful codes:

[player's name] comes from the small town of [player's hometown name], the second of eight children. His mother is on disability and his father is in . . . prison. [Player's name] thinks often

of his grandparents' farm in [place name], where he spent his first seven years. He still likes to return in the summer, doing chores and fishing with his cousins.

Despite a rather detailed description of this player's personal life and upbringing, parental occupation is not clear. One could assume that he belongs to the lower class, but cannot be sure: we do not know the respondent's father occupation prior to imprisonment, nor the mother's employment status prior to disability. Neither do we know the extent to which the grandparents provided support outside of summertime invitations to the farm. In addition, missing information on when the father went to jail prevented us from making a family-structure decision. As such, we treated this record for this player as missing data on both social class and family structure.

For more description of the matching of newspaper data to social class and family structure background, see the Appendix A on the Hoop Inequalities website.

Procedure to reduce missing data

Following Woolley (2000), word searches via Lexis-Nexis was a two-step process designed to reduce missing data. We first crafted words that were likely to be included in a player biography article: [player name], basketball, mother, mom, father, dad, grandparent(s), grandma, grandfather, parent(s), family, and class. We then refined the word search process based on our evaluation of the usefulness of the words and their combinations, noting that some words, like the player's name and the word 'family', were more likely to yield social origin indicators. Variations on mother, such as 'mom', were used, providing some articles that we would not have found otherwise but often-times not yielding valid enough indicators of parental status. We used multiple word combinations in the search process for each player: for example, we used [player name], basketball, and mother in the same search, and in subsequent searches for that player, we replaced mother with father, parent, family, class and others we identified in the first step of the process.

Since not all newspaper articles provide the same type of information, we have different sample sizes for different variables. 'Response rates' for social class origin are 52 percent, and for family structure background 68 percent. For 46 percent of our respondents, we have information on both social origin variables.

Reliability checks are an important part of the process, and thus we used a common inter-rater reliability procedure. After gathering what appeared to be relevant articles, we each coded them independently. We then compared our codes, discussing similarities and discrepancies in light of our criteria for the coding categories. For social class, the inter-rater reliability percentage was 89, taking into account only those cases that had sufficient information with which to code. Similarly, our inter-rater reliability percentage for family structure background was 94. We resolved discrepantly coded cases through focused discussions. When discrepancies could not be resolved, the indicator was coded as missing. On average, we use two articles per player where social origin information could be coded; often, multiple indicators were found in the same article.

Methodological issues in using newspaper data: Selection bias and description bias

Obtaining primary data from secondary sources is a well-established technique used in research of political phenomena (Earl et al., 2004; Woolley, 2000) and sport and society (Farquharson and Majoribanks, 2006; Hardin et al., 2004; Hartmann, 2000; Murrell and Curtis, 1994; Wilson, 1997; Yu, 2009). Yet, newspaper data also incur potential methodological problems, selection bias and description bias especially (Earl et al., 2004).

Newspaper based and indexing procedure selection bias

Selection bias stems from the contexts and practices of the news agencies in choosing which events are worthwhile reporting, and which are not. It creates ‘the difficulty . . . that one risks confounding the substantive phenomenon of interest with the selection process’ (Berk, 1983: 391). In the context of our data selection bias could stem from newspapers selectively reporting on a) some players biographies’ but not on others, and/or b) on some players’ social class and/or family structure background but not on others.

Whether the old media adage ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ is the mechanism, or the media’s tendency to present African Americans as poor (Gilens, 1996), there is reason to suspect that newspapers would be more likely to feature articles on players who faced extreme hardships, deliberately leaving out players who had very little newsworthy tragedy in their lives. In our data, almost all players had some aspect of their life history told in the newspaper, but variation in the length and depth of the story produces differences in the frequency of valid indicators of class and family structure.

To account for this possible problem, our total of 245 articles comes from the widest array of newspapers, ranging from local and regional (e.g. *Sacramento Bee*, *Atlanta-Constitution Journal*) to national (e.g. *USA Today*, *New York Times*). The form and magnitude of selection bias varies by newspaper constituency (Earl et al., 2004; Oliver and Meyers, 1999). We followed the argument that mixing newspaper types, even for the same player and especially at the local level, yields better data: ‘all things equal, the more local the focus of attention, the more credible the use of newspapers as a source of event data’ (McAdam and Su, 2002: 705).

Another form of newspaper selection bias occurs when the included cases are significantly different from NBA players for whom we do not have social origins information. We perform a common statistical procedure to address this issue: please see Appendix B: Assessing the impact of newspaper-based selection bias on the Hoop Inequalities website. We conclude that in terms of social class and/or family background, players for whom this information is available are not substantively different from players on which such information is lacking.

The practices of the online search index, in our case Lexis-Nexis, could also introduce selection bias, one potential problem being a reduction in the total number of possible available articles (see Woolley, 2000).⁴ However, as Woolley points out, when used effectively, online indexing can be superior to consulting indexes created by newspaper publishers or private organizations (Woolley, 2000).

Description bias

Description bias refers to a situation in which the newspaper, for a variety of reasons including its own and/or its reporters' prejudices, reports information incorrectly. Researchers of newspaper accounts of protest events note that description bias is less of a problem with hard news – that is, who, what, when, where, and why – where facts are more dutifully recorded and with less overt prejudice, and more of a problem with soft news – that is, editorializing of hard facts (Earl et al., 2004).

NBA players' biographies can be either hard news or soft news, depending on the newspaper article author's purposes. Players' biographies have media value inasmuch as they are stories of 'human interest and human drama' (Oliver and Myers, 1999: 46). To accentuate newsworthiness, authors may provide their own judgments and embellish the story, thereby turning hard news into soft news; or, even worse, they may simply lie. With the type of data collection this article employs, it is impossible to determine the authors' purposes. This is, perhaps, the greatest limitation of our methodological approach.

How serious is the threat of description bias for our analyses? We have no statistical means to detect incorrect information in newspaper authors' depictions of NBA players' biographies. What we do instead is look at the most likely sources of potential misrepresentation of players' social background.

Trouble with reliability across indicators of social class and family structure background could occur if reporters apply sociological concepts *ad verbatim*, because they may use them in the wrong context. In our data, sociological terms rarely appeared as such: for example, out of the 245 analyzed articles, only five contained the term 'class' in reference to economic position or life chances. Usually, 'class' referred to descriptions of behavior (e.g. 'class act'), or to school. In coding we were aware of potential misuse of sociological jargon, but noticed that little of it was present. Furthermore, our data collection approach relies on journalists' strong suit, that is, detailed observations of the neighborhoods they visit and the people they meet, which are akin to hard news and can be successfully used in sociological work (see Earl et al., 2004 on this point).

Even if journalists are biased in the indicators that they report, the forms of bias are likely to be contradictory, in a sense canceling each other out. For example, research suggests that Americans tend to classify themselves as middle class when more objective measures indicate otherwise, and journalists may exhibit this behavior in their reporting (Jackman and Jackman, 1983; Luo and Brayfield, 1996). If this is so, our results would over-represent middle-class NBA players. On the other hand, given the media's tendency to show African Americans in poverty, journalists may report more indicators of low class position, bending our results toward an overrepresentation of lower class African American NBA players (Gilens, 1996). Moreover, 'rags-to-riches' stories are popular American fare, compelling journalists to seek out these stories whenever possible (McManus, 1994; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). If this is the case, then the number of NBA players who rose from poverty to NBA wealth and fame would be over-represented, rather than under-represented, in our data. While we cannot statistically examine description bias, each of the considerations above suggest that it does not substantially impact our findings.

Potential media bias – coupled with the fact that the media reproduces racial stereotypes – raises the issue of what, exactly, the units of analysis in these data are: are they

Table 1. Social class background by race (%)

	Race	
	African American	White
Upper middle class and above	8.96	35.71
Middle class	56.72	57.14
Lower class	34.33	7.14
N	67	14

real people, or representations of real people? In one sense, all data – whether it comes from in-depth interviews, content analysis or survey research – consist of representations influenced by the very procedures that brought the cases to light. All newspaper data – from political protest events to NBA players – are influenced by media processes. We followed procedures well-established in the large literature on newspaper data collection (e.g. Earl et al., 2004; Woolley, 2000) to systematically document and account for all possibilities of bias in our data collection procedure. These sources of bias do not appear to distort our results. In sum, we both captured detailed representations of real NBA athletes and feel as confident in our ability to generalize to the NBA population as social movement researchers feel in their ability to generalize from their representations of protest events.

Findings

Our first interest is the social milieu from which NBA basketball players are most likely to come. Confirming our hypothesis, these data indicate that most players come from the middle class and above, and not from the lower social classes (Table 1). Looking at the combined categories of upper and middle class of origin reveals that 66 percent of African Americans and 93 percent of whites have advantaged social background. One can see that across racial groups, the proportion of African Americans coming from a disadvantaged class is significantly larger than that of whites ($z = 2.76, p < 0.01$). Yet, irrespective of race, the vast majority of professional basketball players in the NBA come from a relatively advantaged social origin.

With regards to family structure background composition, the picture is more complex. Results in Table 2 show that the majority of white players come, as we expected, from two-parent families (81%). For African Americans, this type of family background makes up only 43 percent of the sample. The majority of African American players, 57 percent, grew up in families with only one parent. Single-mother households dominate this form of disadvantage, as they constitute well over one third (44 percent) of the environment African American NBA players were raised in.

To determine whether the differences in family structure background composition between whites and African Americans are not due solely to chance, we performed the test of differences between proportions. Results confirm that the race difference is statistically significant ($z = 2.80, p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Family structure background by race (%)

	Race	
	African American	White
Single parent		
Mother	44.44	18.75
Father	3.33	0
Grandparent(s), other	8.89	0
Two parent	43.33	81.25
N	90	16

Table 3. Compounded social origin disadvantage by race

Form of disadvantage	Race	
	African American	White
Lower class or non-two-parent family	58.76%	21.05%
N	97	19
Lower class and non-two parent family	28.33%	0%
N	60	11

Next, we were interested if professional basketball players who made it into the NBA display compounded disadvantage of low socioeconomic origin and disadvantaged family structure background. To find out, we first calculated the percent that had either lower class or non-two parent family structure backgrounds, and then the combination of both (see Table 3). Among white players, 21 percent has either form of disadvantage, and no one has both. In the case of African Americans, well over half have either form of disadvantage (59%), yet only 28 percent has both. The race difference is statistically significant ($z = 3.01, p < 0.01$). However, we stress that for both race groups the proportion of players with compounded disadvantage is relatively low (see discussion below for comparisons to the general population), supporting our expectation that among professional basketball players the presence of both low social class and non-two parent family structure background would be rare.

Comparing NBA players to the US population: Sampling based on characteristics of the dependent variable

Analyses in this article are performed on basketball players who have made it into the NBA. This raises the methodological issue of sampling based on the characteristics of the dependent variable, that is, as to whether we accurately account for the effects of the causal mechanisms on the dependent variable (Stolenzberg and Relles, 1997; Winship and Mare, 1992). Causality is defined here as a clear temporal chain of events where social origins (race, class and family structure) influence social destinations (attaining

NBA status). Our causal model assumes an NBA sorting process as the mechanism for players' selection into the league. Following sorting, which occurs before teams select players into the NBA, players are selected into the league (1) or not (0). In our approach, sampling on the dependent variable is akin to what Winship and Mare (1992) refer to as 'truncated sample explicit selection' (p. 330): we only have cases of the dependent variable selected into the league, and characteristics of those not selected are unknown.

To assess whether sampling on the dependent variable affects our substantive conclusions, we would need to know the characteristics of those who were eliminated by the NBA sorting process, and hence not selected into the league. According to our hypothesis, aspirants who come from advantaged social origins are more likely to be selected into the NBA than those who do not. If the majority of people not selected into the NBA were from lower social origins, then disadvantage decreases the odds of attaining an NBA position, in line with our expectation. If, however, most of those not selected were advantaged aspirants, then advantage decreases the odds of attainment, a situation contrary to our hypothesis.

We approximate the population of basketball aspirants as male children in the US. We analyze two data sources containing these potential aspirants – the US Census 2000 and the General Social Survey (GSS) 1972–2002 – and compare the results with the newspaper data.⁶

For the US Census 2000 data on male children, we define lower social class as a category at or below 150 percent of the poverty line in 2000. In 2000, the average poverty threshold was \$17,608 for single person households and \$26,412 for a family of four. Using these data we estimate that 45 percent of African American male children live in a lower social class context, while only 34 percent of African American NBA players come from lower social class background ($z = -1.80, p < 0.05$).⁷ Similarly, 23 percent of white male children live in a lower social class context, while only 7 percent of white NBA players were from a lower social class background ($z = -1.42, p < 0.10$).

The differences in family structure between the relevant comparison group in the US population and NBA players are in the same direction, but less pronounced. Among African American male children, 62 percent come from non-two parent families, while in the NBA sample, 57 percent of African Americans do ($z = -0.95, p = 0.17$).⁸ Similarly, 26 percent of all white male children and 19 percent of white NBA players come from non-two parent families ($z = -0.63, p = 0.26$).

For compounded disadvantage, we used the General Social Survey 1972 to 2002, including only males. For this data set, we defined lower social class as the category of respondents reporting below-average family income level at age 16. For family structure background, we created a dummy variable distinguishing two-parent family from the rest.

For African Americans, 28 percent of the NBA players come from compounded disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 39 percent in the GSS sample ($z = -1.66, p < 0.05$, one-tail test). None of the white players in our study come from compounded disadvantaged origins, compared to 30 percent in the GSS sample ($z = -2.17, p < 0.01$). These results indicate that NBA players as a whole are less likely to come from compounded disadvantaged backgrounds than their counterparts from the general population.

With regard to social class, family background, and the combination of the two, comparisons between potential basketball aspirants and NBA players indicate that the latter

are significantly better off in terms of social origins than the former. This finding is in line with our research hypothesis that the advantaged are more likely to be selected into the league than the disadvantaged, and suggests that in this study sampling based on characteristics of the dependent variable did not substantially alter the substantive conclusions.

To further illuminate how the intersection of race, class and family structure background influences the chances of NBA attainment, we used data from the US Census 2000 and the General Social Survey to calculate odds ratios. In terms of odds ratios, we estimate that among African Americans, a child raised in lower class family has a decreased likelihood of 37 percent to become an NBA player than a child raised in middle or upper class family. An analogous figure for whites shows that children from lower class families are even more disadvantaged (decreased likelihood of 75 percent). In the case of non-two-parent families, the coefficients for African American and whites are more similar than in the case of social class. Among African Americans a child from a non-two-parent family has 18 percent lower chance to become an NBA player than a child raised in two-parent family. For whites the figure is 33 percent.

Summary and discussion

Using a unique data set consisting of newspaper articles coded for social class and family structure background, we empirically demonstrate that these major stratification variables intersect with race and are key components that influence membership in the NBA. African American players from disadvantaged social origins have lower chances to be in the NBA than African American and white players from advantaged backgrounds. The statistical tests to determine if sampling on the dependent variable and newspaper-based selection bias are a serious threat to our substantive conclusions allow us to conclude that this is not the case.

This study contributes to critical reflections on the relationship between race and sport. Some argue that for historically marginalized groups such as African American males sport is a pathway to upward mobility because it provides college scholarships and psychological intangibles that can be translated into success in the labor market (Eide and Ronan, 2001; Ewing, 2007; see also Spaaij, 2009). Yet, racial minorities in the US, and African Americans especially, are often locked into lower social positions, a problem for which involvement into professional sports does not offer a straightforward solution (Benson, 2000; Edwards, 1973; Singer, 2008; Washington and Karen, 2001). These seemingly contradictory arguments generate heated debate on what policy sport enthusiasts and activists should follow.

Dispensing with dubious genetics-based theories (e.g. Entine, 2000; Goldberg, 1991), we find that complex groups comprised of social intersections – race, class and family structure background – populate the contested terrain of race and sport (Hartmann, 2000; see also McCall, 2005). To speak only of racial discrimination is to unfairly de-emphasize class differences in professional athlete attainment; to speak only of class inequality is to engage in economic reductionist arguments that displaces the very powerful, very real racial dynamics inherent in sport and American society (Adair and Rowe, 2010; Edwards, 1973; Eitzen, 1996; Winant, 2000; Wilson, 1996, 2009). Empirical research on intersectionality applied to race, sport and mobility simultaneously complicates and clarifies our understanding of sport as a career.

A strong undercurrent that ripples through these critical reflections is the heavily racialized social environment that is the NBA and this environment's impact on public perceptions of African Americans. In explicitly accounting for within race differences, we hope to dispel the myth that professional basketball is the last bus out of the ghetto. The NBA is as racialized as it is 'classed', such that the men who shoot hoops for a living have beaten the odds by virtue of their relatively privileged starting position, one that is way ahead of their same-race peers.

Overall, these results suggest that NBA attainment is not an entirely meritocratic process, as the intersection of race, class and family structure background presents unequal pathways into the league. We stress here that meritocracy cannot be gleaned just from the pronouncement of 'the odds', as academic and non-academic reports tend to do. To place this study in proper perspective, the most anyone can say about the odds is that the intersection of race, class and family contextualizes the opportunity structure of NBA attainment. Thus, before invoking 'the odds' for or against the merit of sports for upward mobility of disadvantaged groups, one should specify the ultimate goal of attainment: if it is the NBA, then referring to the odds as an indicator of the unlikelihood to succeed through basketball playing is useful, as clearly the league is virtually unattainable for disadvantaged youth, particularly disadvantaged African Americans.

Finally, we encourage other scholars to replicate our results for other NBA eras and for other professional sports associations. Replication of scientific endeavors is not as common as it should be (King, 1995); we provided a clear, detailed methodological roadmap to enable expansion of our data collection approach.

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Notes

Appendices for this article, as well as expanded theoretical and methodological sections, are found on the companion website maintained by the authors: <http://hoopinequalities.wordpress.com/>.

1. Since July represents the period after the NBA draft and before training camp, it allows for the maximum number of potential NBA players, including those who would eventually be cut from their team before the first official league game. Thus, one could argue that a percentage of our players may not have been in the league long enough for reporters to write human interest stories about them. This possible newspaper based selection mechanism is not likely to bias our results, as our pool of articles spans 1994–2004 including those written about the player when they were in high school and/or college, when they were selected by the NBA team, or when they reappeared in the league in 2004.

2. Most data on birthplaces come from the official NBA website; where the NBA website did not list the birthplace, we sought the information from newspaper articles.
3. Race is a crucial variable and was difficult, if often times impossible, to determine from reading players' biographies in the newspaper. Following the strategy likely employed by Murrell and Curtis (1994), we determined race by examining available pictures of the athletes from the official NBA website. We examined as many of the most recent studies that we could find with race as a variable and where professional athletes were the units of analysis; none posited an alternative procedure to ours in determining the race of an athlete. A substantial proportion of white NBA players come from outside the US and Canada; thus the differences between our subpopulation and that reported in other sources likely stems from the case-selection logic we employed.
4. We note, however, that African Americans are more likely to reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods than comparable whites (Iceland et al., 2005; Villemez, 1980). Thus, this indicator could bias our results towards finding more African Americans from lower social class backgrounds. Because we combined as many indicators of parental occupation, neighborhood descriptions, and general statements of class position as possible, this bias is unlikely to change the substantive conclusions. Specific examples of indicators are provided in Appendix A on the Hoop Inequalities website.
4. Due to the lack of detailed income and sibship information in our data sources, we could not examine effects of family size on class position (Downey, 1995). Acknowledging the role of resource dilution (as a product of family size), we use information on social class that is as detailed as possible to determine discrete class categories (see Appendix A on the Hoop Inequalities website).
5. Woolley (2000: 164) also points to an inconsistency between newspapers on the editions they send to Lexis-Nexis: 'Newspapers do not always consistently store the same edition with online databases.' We do not know of a credible argument for how variations in newspaper editions would systematically and in a non-random fashion influence the likelihood of finding indicators of class and family structure in players' biographies.
6. The Census and the GSS data do not contain social class indicators directly comparable to ours; however, considering the ubiquity of income as an indicator of both socioeconomic status (SES) and social class, income in these data sport a valid proxy (Iceland et al., 2005). Family structure background variables are reasonably comparable.
7. Current Population Survey (CPS) (2002) available at: http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032001/pov/new22_005.htm, accessed 24 February 2005.
8. Available at: http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/childstats/report2002_5.pdf Appendix A: Detailed Tables: Table Econ1A, accessed 24 February 2005.

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