



Fall 2018

# Nature or Nurture? The Concentration of African Americans in Specific Sports

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# Nature or Nurture? The Concentration of African Americans in Specific Sports

## **Abstract**

The prevalence of African Americans in certain American professional sports is certainly evident. Their prevalence is particularly pertinent and commonly associated with sports such as basketball, football, and track. The percentage of the players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) that were African American in the 2017-2018 season was 73.9% (Lapchik, 2018). Additionally, the percentage of players that were African American in the National Football League (NFL) during the 2016-2017 season was 69.7% (Lapchik, 2018). These statistics however differ from proportions of African Americans representing these respective sports at the Division I college level. The percentage of African Americans at the Division I college level in basketball is 53% and 44.2% in football (Lapchik, 2017). These statistics clearly show that African Americans represent the majority of the players in these respective sports at a professional level, a subject that is often discussed and debated. Often times these discussions extend further as to why African Americans represent the majority of these leagues. There are two prominent theories as to why African Americans represent the majority of players in certain sports, such as football and basketball; one attributing it to their genetics and other attributing to their environment. This paper will articulate on the two prominent theories that offer explanations as why African Americans constitute the majority in specific sports. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the theory that suggests that their athletic abilities and prevalence in certain sports is attributed to genetic differences; and use research to discredit such claims. Additionally, this paper will offer explanations as to how this notion has come into existence and how has sustained. Ultimately, this paper will illustrate the importance of the environment when analyzing the representation of African Americans in certain sports, and how these different atmospheres interact with one another.

## **Keywords**

African Americans, sports, segregation, race

## **Disciplines**

Africana Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Sports Studies

## **Comments**

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sporting.

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Running head: THE CONCENTRATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN SPECIFIC SPORTS

**Nature or Nurture?: The Concentration of African Americans in Specific Sports**

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The prevalence of African Americans in certain American professional sports is certainly evident. Their prevalence is particularly pertinent and commonly associated with sports such as basketball, football, and track. The percentage of the players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) that were African American in the 2017-2018 season was 73.9% (Lapchik, 2018). Additionally, the percentage of players that were African American in the National Football League (NFL) during the 2016-2017 season was 69.7% (Lapchik, 2018). These statistics however differ from proportions of African Americans representing these respective sports at the Division I college level. The percentage of African Americans at the Division I college level in basketball is 53% and 44.2% in football (Lapchik, 2017). These statistics clearly show that African Americans represent the majority of the players in these respective sports at a professional level, a subject that is often discussed and debated. Often times these discussions extend further as to why African Americans represent the majority of these leagues. There are two prominent theories as to why African Americans represent the majority of players in certain sports, such as football and basketball; one attributing it to their genetics and other attributing to their environment.

This paper will articulate on the two prominent theories that offer explanations as why African Americans constitute the majority in specific sports. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the theory that suggests that their athletic abilities and prevalence in certain sports is attributed to genetic differences; and use research to discredit such claims. Additionally, this paper will offer explanations as to how this notion has come into existence and how has sustained. Ultimately, this paper will illustrate the importance of

the environment when analyzing the representation of African Americans in certain sports, and how these different atmospheres interact with one another.

The notion that African Americans outperform other athletes in specific sports due to their genetics and biological traits suggests that African Americans are innately more athletic. There are numerous different reasonings that people offer as to how African Americans are naturally more athletic, such as being naturally more powerful, having larger bones, or having faster muscles (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2018). This notion largely stems from Darwin's theory "the law of compensation" (Sheldon, Jayaratne, & Petty, 2007). This theory suggests that physical characteristics that people associate with "primitiveness", which is commonly stereotyped with African Americans, are inversely associated intelligence (Sheldon et al., 2007). This runs parallel to the mentalities of many whites during the colonization of Africa, as many of them viewed Africans as uncivilized. Additionally, "the law of compensation" suggests that intellectual ability and athleticism are inversely correlated (Sheldon et al., 2007). Darwin also hypothesized that African Americans athletic ability is the result of the hardships of slavery, producing only the most physically fit (Sheldon et al., 2007). This argument claims that African Americans are innately more athletic because of the manual labor and physical hardships that their ancestors endured.

The idea of African Americans being athletically superior did not always exist (Sheldon et al., 2007). Furthermore, African Americans have been historically viewed as inferior in every aspect by many whites, and to this day many racist individuals still agree with this notion (Sheldon et al., 2007). This suggests that this idea is a social construct rather than being factual (Sheldon et al., 2007). Additionally, it is generally

accepted by anthropologists that race is neither genetic or biological, but is a social construct in itself (Kerr, 2010). This genetic explanation differs immensely with this notion because it is intrinsically associated with essentialist beliefs (Sheldon et al., 2007). Essentialism solely focuses on “naturalness”, therefore does not incorporate the environment or social atmosphere when analyzing a phenomenon. As argued by Kerr (2010), there is only one human species, which genetic differences between people are astoundingly minimal. Groups of people with non-overlapping traits do not exist, and countless scientific studies have failed to convey any biological traits that are exclusive to specific populations (Kerr, 2010). Furthermore, all humans in general, including white Americans, have African ancestors (Sheldon et al., 2007) This conviction contradicts essentialists intrinsic perceptions, as the foundation of essentialism relies heavily on scientific research and backings; which are absent in this argument. Kerr (2010) goes on to state that to validate genetic determinism and attribute it to this argument, one must validate three things: 1) there are systematic differences between whites and blacks; 2) there must be consistent genetic differences between the two different populations; 3) the genetic differences can clearly demonstrate athletic differences. However, this argument cannot validate any single one of those points.

It has also been found that individuals' essentialist perceptions are positively correlated with their level of stereotyping, and that white Americans believing in these genetically-influenced race differences have increased levels of racial prejudice (Sheldon et al., 2007). Whites are also more likely than African Americans to attribute their respective athletic abilities to innate biological differences, however there still are African Americans that do believe this to be true (Sheldon et al., 2007). One argument

that Sheldon et al. (2007) gives is that whites believe this myth to be true to exert their social dominance. This theory illustrates that people who hold a social dominance orientation are more likely to support social inequality, and find reasons to justify the existing social structure (Sheldon et al., 2007). Furthermore, this may be a “backhanded compliment”, as it acknowledges the athleticism displayed by many of these African Americans, however negates their work ethic (Sheldon et al., 2007). It also is connected Darwin’s “law of compensation” because as African Americans are perceived as being more athletic, they are also perceived as being less intelligent; therefore, white professional athletes are often considered to be the result of intelligence and their work ethic (Sheldon et al., 2007). This argument marginalizes the work ethic that all of the great African American athletes put in to improve their craft in their respective sports. For example, it would be ludicrous to say that LeBron James’ capabilities and skills of are natural; and not the result of practicing throughout the year. One cannot logically justify that his ability to shoot the and pass the basketball, two abilities which he is notable for, are naturally occurring skills.

The percentage of African Americans in certain sports cannot justify this argument that they are genetically more athletic because there are plenty of sports that require similar athletic abilities where whites make up the overwhelming majority. For example, weightlifting is overrepresented by whites, and if it were true that African Americans were naturally more powerful, it would only make sense that weightlifting consisted of mostly African Americans (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Similarly, the proportion of African Americans in baseball should be significantly higher as well. Whites make up the most represented ethnic group in baseball, representing 57.5% of

the players, while African Americans only represent 7.7% of the players (Lapchik, 2017). Similarly baseball is a sport where power and speed is necessary, which according to this argument, African Americans are genetically inclined to have.

The portrayal of African American athletes by sports media is believed to have a substantial impact on the notion that African Americans are genetically superior. Although they do not overtly illustrate African Americans as being genetically superior, there are many factors that can incline individuals to perceiving this as reality. The sports media industry is an institution that is predominantly dominated by white males; making up the majority of journalists, editors, commentators, analysts, and owners (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Furthermore, sports media has a great deal of power and influence due to their abilities to reach countless amounts of people at the same time (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). It has been demonstrated in numerous studies that African American athletes receive more praise by sports media about their physical attributes than their white counterparts do (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Additionally, white males make up a large percentage of professional sports fans, such as the NFL and the NBA, therefore they would be already more inclined to believe this notion to be true. Also, football and basketball, which have the highest representation of African Americans, are the most popular sports in the United States; with the NBA and the NFL being the most popular sports regarding television views. Therefore, these subconscious inclinations indicating that African Americans are genetically superior has a much larger impact. Holding the social dominance theory true, it makes sense that individuals in sports media often promote this stereotypical image of African American athletes being superior to maintain their socially dominant

positions in society; ultimately reproducing and reaffirming this stereotype that African Americans are genetically more athletic (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). This notion further takes away from their perceived work ethic, as they are portrayed as “natural specimens” that allow them to excel at their particular sport, rather than the result of their hard work.

A contrasting and more compelling theory as to why African Americans represent the majority of athletes in specific sports at a higher caliber suggests that it is due to their socioeconomic statuses. Their overall lower socioeconomic statuses limit them to competing in certain sports that require less financial investments in regard to equipment and access to facilities. As a result, African Americans are seen predominantly in sports such as basketball, football, and running (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). This notion also argues that African Americans use their participation and abilities in sports as a vehicle to for success, and view sports “as a way out” rather than recreationally. This argument is much more practical sense, and has compelling statistical research to support it.

Sports such as basketball, football, and running require much less equipment than other sports. Basketball requires no other financial investment to play other than a pair of sneakers and a basketball; similar to running, which only requires a pair of sneakers. Furthermore football only requires a pair of cleats, as football teams provide all of their players with the necessary equipment, such as pads and helmets. However, other sports such as baseball require much more equipment that can be quite expensive, such as a baseball bat, glove, cleats, and baseball pants; where the price of baseball bats and gloves alone can be as high as \$400. With that being said, African

Americans only represent 7.7% of the players in Major League Baseball (MLB) (Lapchik, 2017). Moreover, hockey is regarded as another expensive sport to pursue, as it requires an extensive amount of equipment and protective gear; which most teams do not provide for their players, and are forced to purchase them. Throughout the history of the National Hockey League (NHL), there have been just over 70 African American players as of 2015, throughout its nearly 100 year history (Whiting, 2015). These statistics differ immensely from the statistics shown prior; depicting that African Americans represent 73.9% of the NBA and 69.7% of the players in the NFL (Lapchik, 2018; Lapchik, 2018). Additionally, the only considerably notable African American professional golfer, Tiger Woods, was born as into a middle-class family; therefore he was not restricted to barred from playing and practicing golf as he was growing up. Usain Bolt can be used as a prominent example of a black male exploiting sports to reap its economic benefits. Usain Bolt was born and raised in Jamaica, and suffered from extreme poverty. Bolt grew up in the small village Sherwood Content. Sherwood Content is a village that suffers from immense poverty, with little access to running water. However, track is a sport that does not require any other gear, therefore, it was one that he was able to practice and develop. Now, Bolt is universally considered the fastest man in the world, with numerous Olympic gold medals. Bolt serves an epitome of a black male who was forced to exploit sports to increase their socioeconomic status; a phenomenon that many black athletes are forced to do around the world, especially in the United States.

A study conducted Allison, Davis and Barranco (2016) examined the socioeconomic statuses and backgrounds of drafted African American athletes,

comparing them to the socioeconomic statuses of drafted white athletes and national averages regarding socioeconomic statuses. They found that many black athletes come from hometowns that have statistically significant differences in indicators such as income, unemployment, and percentage of people in poverty; when compared to the hometowns of drafted white athletes. (Allison et al., 2016). The percentage of individuals in poverty in the hometowns of drafted black athletes was 10.9%, while the percentage of individuals in poverty in the hometowns of drafted white athletes was only 7.6% (Allison et al., 2016). Additionally, the per capita income in the hometowns of these drafted black athletes was \$37,495, which is lower than the national average; while the per capita income in the hometowns of drafted white athletes was \$51,759, which is higher than the national average (Allison et al., 2016). The hometowns of these drafted black athletes were lower in numerous other categories as well, including median household income, unemployment, and percentage of individuals who had never earned a high school diploma (Allison et al., 2016). These findings further support the argument that socioeconomic status is a more compelling explanation for the discrepancies in the representation of African Americans in certain sports.

Analyzing the percentages of African Americans in collegiate sports can also be used to support this argument. The difference in the percentage of African American athletes at the Division I level, Division II level, and Division III level decrease respectively; being that that Division I colleges have the highest percentage of total African American student-athletes and colleges at the Division III level have the lowest percentage of African American athletes (Lapchik, 2018). This supports this argument because Division I colleges are permitted to offer more athletic scholarships to student-

athletes than colleges that are Division II; while Division III colleges are not allowed to offer any athletic scholarships to student-athletes. The percentage of African American that represent all student athletes at the Division I level is 22.3%, while the percentage of African Americans that represent all student-athletes at the Division II level and Division III level are 20.4% and 12.2% respectively (Lapchik, 2018). The difference of African American athletes in the Division III levels is the most significant as they do not offer any athletic scholarships, while the others do. Therefore, one can make the argument that this difference is due to the amount of African Americans that are able to afford to go to college without an athletic scholarship. Furthermore, many Division III schools are private colleges and liberal arts schools, which tend to be more expensive than public universities.

The growth of African Americans' representation of all student athletes at the Division III level is also very important as well. The overall percentage of African Americans in poverty within the United States has been decreasing throughout the years. The percentage of African Americans that were below the poverty line in 1991 was 45.9%, while the percentage of African Americans that were below the poverty line in 2017 was 29% (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018). This trend indicates that African Americans are on average rising in socioeconomic statuses, and this trend can also be seen in the representation of African Americans student-athletes at the Division III college level. The percentage of African Americans that represented all student-athletes at the Division III level during the 2008-2009 school year was 9%, while the percentage during the 2016-2017 school year was 12.2% (Lapchik, 2018). One may argue that a mere 3.2% in change is not significant or that this is merely due to colleges' purposive

efforts to increase their diversity. However, when analyzing the percentage of African Americans that were below the poverty line in 2008 to 2017, the percentage below the poverty line in 2008 was 24.7%, indicating a 3.5% change during the same nine-year span (Fontenot et al., 2018). Therefore, this supports the notion that the decreasing rates of poverty among African Americans may contribute to the increase of African American student-athletes at the Division III level, since there was only a 0.3% difference.

These statistics can be used to support the notion that many African Americans do rely on sports as a vehicle to achieve success, and can serve to demonstrate their reliance on athletics to gain a college education. Furthermore, these statistics show that as African Americans socioeconomic statuses increase, the number of African Americans that are able to exploit sports for recreational purposes also increases; which can be seen through increasing percentages of African American student-athletes at the Division III level, along with decreasing percentages of African Americans suffering from poverty. Similarly the percentage of African Americans that represent the total amount of basketball and football players at the Division I level has been decreasing throughout the years as well, also indicating their reliance on sports as a vehicle for success has diminished with increasing prosperity among African Americans (Lapchick, 2018).

The prevalence of African Americans in specific sports is very evident, especially in regards to basketball, football, and track. The popular notion that genetics attribute to the success of black athletes, as examined prior, is riddled with fallacies. There is no scientific or biological evidence suggests this theory has any validity. In fact, there is a plethora amount of evidence that suggests this assumption is erroneous and is in fact

socially constructed. There is no scientific research that suggests that African Americans have different biological traits, and it is even accepted that race is not a biological trait itself, but a social construction (Kerr, 2010). Similarly there is no scientific research that can prove any observable physical traits are exclusive to any specific populations (Kerr, 2010). However, as mentioned previously, there is evidence that suggests that the beliefs of African Americans being innately superior in athletics is intrinsically associated with increased stereotyping (Sheldon et al., 2007). Furthermore, being that notion is also intrinsically associated with essentialism, it fails to incorporate other important factors such as social interactions and the environment. After analyzing the contrasting arguments, there was overwhelmingly more statistical evidence and data that illustrated the importance of the environment; and also made much more logical sense.

Although this research cannot solidify the explanation as to why African Americans are overrepresented in certain sports, it undoubtedly verifies the importance of the environment and offers a substantial amount of evidence that discredits the theory which attributes genetics to African Americans success in sports. In conclusion, the environment plays a substantial role in both promoting these false accusations of black athletes having superior genetics, along with influencing and limiting the sports that they participate in.

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