By most accounts, diversity represents one of the most important issues for managers of organizations for sport and physical activity today (Cunningham & Fink, 2006; Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2008; Thomas & Dyall, 1999). Within the US, changing demographic trends, federal and local equal opportunity laws, and societal pressures have positively influenced the demographic and deep-level diversity in the workplace. With the increased diversity also comes the hope and promise of improved organizational processes and outcomes. Researchers have shown that, relative to their homogeneous counterparts, diverse groups and organizations convey a greater sense of inclusivity (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999), experience decreased employment legislation (Robinson & Dechant, 1997), greater creativity (McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996), better decision making (Cunningham, 2008; Phillips, Mannix, Neale, & Gruenfeld, 2004) and performance gains (Cunningham, 2009; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004a). Given these many benefits, it is hardly surprising to learn that sports leagues around the world are engaging in various diversity initiatives aimed at increasing the diversity of their personnel, players, and consumers (for overviews, see Cunningham, 2007; Taylor et al., 2008).

This increased attention, both among scholars and sport managers, to diversity might lead one to believe that sport is a place where diversity and inclusion are the norm. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Rather, people who differ from the typical majority—that is, people who are not White, able-bodied, heterosexual, Protestant males—are likely to face prejudice and discrimination based on their personal demographic characteristics (Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2001), and this is certainly the case for African American coaches of university athletic teams. Consider the case of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football teams.¹ Though African Americans represent the plurality of the players on these teams (DeHass,
Given the pervasiveness of this disturbing trend, several researchers have offered potential explanations. Reasons advanced to explain this phenomenon include institutional racism (Eitzen & Sage, 2003), prevalent stereotypes (Brown, 2002; Davis, 2007), discrimination toward the coach (Anderson, 1993; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2001; Lawrence, 2004), a lack of role models (Abney & Richey, 1991), barriers to entering the profession (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008), and racial differences in opportunities and career experiences (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006; Hill, 2004; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005), among others. While these studies have contributed to the general understanding of the under-representation of African American head coaches, they are, by and large, limited by their focus on a single level of analysis. Such a singular concentration is largely incomplete because it fails to recognize that sport organizations are multilevel entities that both shape and are shaped by myriad factors (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000; for similar arguments, see Benschop, 2006; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2006). Theoretical frameworks should reflect these complex realities. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to advance a multilevel model aimed at explaining the under-representation of African Americans as university athletics coaches. To do so, I draw from multiple theoretical frameworks to argue for micro-, meso-, and macro-level explanations. In the following sections, I present the pervasiveness of the phenomenon and outline the specific tenets of the framework.

1. African Americans in coaching positions

Interpretation of the data pertaining to African Americans’ representation in head coaching positions varies. To further cloud the issue, the figures vary based on the sport. For instance, African Americans represent 28.9% of the head coaches of men’s Division I basketball teams, figures that Robinson (2009) described as “robust,” but they constitute 20.8% of all men’s cloud the issue, the figures vary based on the sport. For instance, African Americans represent 28.9% of the head coaches of men’s Division I basketball teams, figures that Robinson (2009) described as “robust,” but they constitute 20.8% of all men’s track and field head coaches, and 8.4% of all women’s volleyball head coaches (DeHass, 2007). Thus, one is left with questions of how to make sense of these data and to what to compare the proportion of head coaches. Researchers have advanced two options.

Some analysts compare the proportion of African American head coaches to their representation in the general US population, a rationale that is consistent with federal affirmative action standards. As an example, in his 2008 Racial and Gender Report Card, Lapchick gave NCAA men’s basketball a grade of “A” since the proportion of coaches of color (24.2%; DeHass, 2007) was greater than their corresponding proportion in the US population (24%). And, women’s basketball received a grade of “B” since the proportion of racial minority head coaches (14.1%) was less than their representation in the US population (24%). Others have countered that the aforementioned comparison standard is overly munificent. Cunningham (2007), for instance, has suggested that “from a practical standpoint, not all people in a population have an equal chance to enter a particular league or sport, especially as a coach” (p. 90); thus, using the general population as a standard of comparison is flawed and potentially provides too generous a picture of the diversity-related culture in a particular sport. As an alternative, several researchers have argued that former athletes represent the largest pool of potential coaches, and as such, this proportion should be used as the standard of comparison (e.g., Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). Statistical evidence seems to support this rationale, as a strong majority of coaches previously participated in university athletics (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002).

When considering players as the point of comparison, conclusions drawn are less than optimistic. In Fig. 1, I draw from various data sources (www.census.gov; DeHass, 2007, 2008) to present the proportion of African Americans in the general US population and their proportion as players, assistant coaches, and head coaches in four different contexts: the entire NCAA, NCAA Division I women’s basketball, NCAA Division I men’s basketball, and NCAA Division I football. At each level, the proportion of African American assistant coaches and head coaches is markedly less than the corresponding proportion of African American players. The biggest differences occur in football, where 46.4% of the players, 23.2% of the assistant coaches, and just 6.1% of the head coaches are African American. Framed another way, African Americans are 7.6 times more likely to be seen as a player than they are as a head coach in the football context. It is also worth noting that even in women’s and men’s basketball – contexts where the proportion of African American head coaches has been described as “robust” (Robinson, 2009) – African Americans are at least twice as likely to be seen as a player than they are as a head coach. The evidence is clear: African Americans are severely under-represented as both assistant coaches and head coaches of university athletic teams. But, why is this the case? In the following section, I provide possible explanations for this occurrence.

2. A multilevel model to explain the under-representation of African American coaches

The multilevel model addresses factors at the macro-level (i.e., institutionalized practices, political climate, stakeholder expectations), meso-level (i.e., prejudice on the part of decision makers, discrimination, leadership prototypes, organizational culture of diversity), and micro-level (i.e., head coaching expectations and intentions, occupational turnover intentions). Consistent with a systems theory approach (Chelladurai, 2009; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), the factors at each level...
are also thought to influence one another. An illustrative summary is presented in Fig. 1, and the model’s underlying tenets are presented in the following space.

2.1. Macro-level factors

Macro-level explanations for the under-representation of African American head coaches focus on those elements external to the specific athletic department but which still exert considerable influence on that entity. The most prevalent of these are institutionalized practices, political climate, and stakeholder expectations.

2.1.1. Institutionalized practices

Activities become institutionalized when, as a result of habit, history, and tradition, they become standardized and unquestionably accepted as “the way things are done” (Scott, 2001). Over time, and as the result of varying legitimizing forces, entities within a given environment are likely to implement similar institutional practices and activities, consequently coming to resemble one another. This process has been termed institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and has been observed in various contexts in sport and physical activity (Danylchuk & Chelladurai, 1999; Kikulis, 2000). As organizations continue to adhere to these institutionalized activities, the practices become further embedded, habitualized, and perpetuated. Through language and the socialization process, new members of an organization or profession come to see those behaviors as the “obvious” or “normal” way to do things. As Zucker (1987) noted, institutional activities “are maintained over long periods of time without further justification or elaboration, and are highly resistant to change” (p. 446).

By many accounts, racism has become institutionalized in the US. Feagin (2006), for instance, argued that with its slavery ties, the United States represented “the only major Western country that was explicitly founded on racial oppression” (p. 2), and consequently, racism has been systemic in the country. This perspective is consistent with that held by critical race theorists, who suggest that racism is endemic in America such that it is embedded in the social institutions, laws, and culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Indeed, the way in which public schools are organized and financed, racial profiling among many enforcement agencies, the informal nature of job selection, health care provisions, the organization of the US legal system, and even the notion of meritocracy all serve to privilege Whites while casting persons of color, including African Americans, as “others” (Applebaum, 2003; Coates, 2003; McIntosh, 1990; Williams, 2004).

Racism is also an institutionalized practice in sport (Eitzen & Sage, 2003; Long, Robinson, & Spracklen, 2005; Singer, 2005a, 2005b). Consider the evidence. Racist ideologies that promote Whites as smarter, more ethical, and better leaders than their African American counterparts are continually perpetuated in sport (Coakley, 2009). This ideology serves to reinforce common stereotypes that denigrate and subjugate African American athletes and coaches (Sails, 2000). Institutional racism impacts the positions African Americans play (e.g., Sack, Singh, & Thiel, 2005) and the coaching and administrative duties they are able to assume (Anderson, 1993; McDowell & Cunningham, 2007). Not only have these ideals

been intact for centuries (Rader, 1999), but also they are continually transmitted through various media sources (Buffington, 2005; Woodward, 2004) and conveyed to others through language and socialization (Coakley, 2009). Not surprisingly, Yale head football coach Tom Williams, an African American, described the painfully slow pace of diversity-related change in university athletics as “glacial” (as cited in Robinson, 2009). All of these factors have served to limit the career advancement and opportunities of African Americans, thereby resulting in their under-representation in head coaching positions.

2.1.2. Political climate

In addition to institutionalized practices and processes, another factor thought to influence diversity-related initiatives is the political climate. The prevailing political climate and social dynamics of a particular time or administration has the potential to influence a sport organization in a number of ways, including the emphasis placed on competitive and participant sport opportunities (Coakley, 2009), the provision of funding for sports facilities (Crompton, 1995), empowerment (or lack thereof) of unions (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000), education (West & Currie, 2008), and most relevant to the current discussion, diversity-related activities. For instance, the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, among other achievements, guaranteed employment protection for women and racial minorities in the US, and Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ensured the voting privileges of racial minorities, were both signed into law under President Lyndon Johnson, who was a member of the more progressive Democrat party. Compare this to the attempts of President Ronald Reagan and President George W. Bush, both members of the more conservative Republican party, to alter Title IX of the Education Amendments—a law outlawing gender discrimination in federally funded educational activities that served to dramatically increase sport opportunities for girls and women.

Of particular importance to the current discussion is the influence of the political environment on equal employment opportunities and the enforcement of laws governing such activities. Saguy (2002) noted that the framing of diversity issues “is informed by political and legal traditions” (p. 256), and there is considerable evidence to support this contention (Marshall, 2005; Ogmundson, 2005). For instance, enforcement of equal employment legislation and fair labor practices is thought to be more stringent when the political climate is more progressive than conservative. Cunningham and Benavides-Espinoza (2008) found support for this contention in their analysis of sexual harassment, as the claims filed with federal agencies mirrored the political environment in the United States during that time. In discussing the nature of their findings, the authors suggested that “the actions and social policies of the president of the United States may set the tone for the political environment, and in a related way, the emphasis on civil rights (p. 781).

In drawing from this literature, I argue that the political environment is also likely to influence the proportion of African American head coaches. With a more progressive or liberal political environment, opportunities for African Americans should increase, while with more conservative political environments, opportunities should remain stagnated or potentially decrease. There is some initial support for this proposition: at Ivy League schools, which are located in the more progressive East Coast of the US, nearly 50% (7 of 16) of the football and men’s basketball coaches are African American—a percentage far greater than any other athletic conference (Robinson, 2009).

2.1.3. Stakeholder expectations

Expectations from stakeholder groups represent a third macro-level factor. Stakeholders are key constituents who can both impact and are impacted by organizational activities (Freeman, 1984). These constituents can be classified into various groups, such as alumni, students, faculty, athletes, and so on, and each stakeholder group is thought to possess unique perceptions, desires, and needs. Thus, from a strategic management perspective, “understanding the priorities of and dealing with identifiable stakeholders… offers strategic and cognitive efficiency advantages over conceiving of an organization’s environment as being composed of innumerable individuals and institutions” (Wolfe & Butler, 2002, p. 64). Or, framed differently, gaining insights into and addressing the perceptions, needs, and wants of key strategic stakeholder groups can result in optimal organization–environment fit, thereby increasing the success the organization enjoys.

Alumni and boosters represent one stakeholder group that has a particularly strong influence on university athletic departments, their operations, and the persons (especially coaches) they employ. The strength of this stakeholder group is augmented all the more when considering the relative homogeneity of priorities expressed by its members (Wolfe & Butler, 2002), thereby ensuring the consistency of their message. To understand the extent to which athletic departments are reliant upon alumni and boosters, one simply need examine the financial reports presented by Fulks (2008): during the 2005–2006 academic year, 24% of the total revenues generated by NCAA FBS athletic departments came from alumni and booster donations. This amounts to a median of US $8.5 million annually. And, make no mistake, these monies are rarely altruistically donated, but rather, oftentimes come with strings attached (see also Sperber, 2000). Given this tremendous financial influence, the persuasive power of alumni and boosters is undeniable.

Because athletic department rely so heavily on alumni and boosters for their monetary donations, there is the perceived need to employ personnel with whom the donors can identify. This perceived need is most heightened when hiring coaches, and particularly those who coach football—a sport that has been referred to as the “front porch” of an institution (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). As Michael Rosenberg of the Detroit Free Press (Rosenberg, 2004) noted:

It is largely about money. It is about a face to show the alumni, especially the ones with big wallets. College coaches don’t just coach; they are, in many ways, the public faces of their schools. And if the big donors don’t like a coach because of his weight/accent/skin color, schools will stay away.
Lapchick drew similar conclusions:

I have had discussions with people in searches for coaches and athletic directors that the final decision was made to hire a White male because they were afraid their alumni, who also happen to be strong boosters of the football program, would not contribute nearly as much as or as readily to an African American athletic director or football coach (as cited in Wong, 2002, p. 1).

These quotations illustrate the need for boosters to (a) identify with the head coaches and (b) to give large sums of money to support the department’s activities, two factors that may result in preference for White coaches over coaches of color.

2.2. Meso-level factors

Research at the meso-level typically focuses on factors operating in the organization and the ways in which decisions, structures, and processes at that level of analysis serve to perpetuate the under-representation of African American coaches. Meso-level factors include prejudice on the part of the decision makers, discrimination, leadership prototypes, and organizational cultures of diversity.

2.2.1. Prejudice

By far, prejudice and discrimination represent the most common explanations for the under-representation of African Americans in coaching positions. In providing these explanations, authors will sometimes use prejudice and discrimination interchangeably, and other times, they will refer to prejudice and discrimination as if they were unidimensional constructs. Both practices provide incomplete pictures of these complex phenomena. A close examination of the social psychology and sociology literatures demonstrates (a) that prejudice is a psychological term focusing on people’s attitudes and beliefs while discrimination has sociological foundations and is concerned with people’s behaviors (Abercrombie et al., 2000), and (b) both prejudice and discrimination are multidimensional constructs (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Hing, Chung-Yan, Hamilton, & Zanna, 2008). As the influence of discrimination is addressed in the following section, the remainder of this section focuses on the various forms of prejudice and how they influence the under-representation of African American coaches.

Discussions of racial prejudice may conjure images of the “old fashioned” racist who explicitly and openly harbors negative attitudes and emotions toward racial minorities. While “old fashioned” racism still exists, it is increasingly taboo to openly express such prejudice. In fact, as early as 1947, Campbell described overt racism as antiquated and socially unacceptable, and people’s willingness to voice racist sentiments has decreased over time (Dowden & Robinson, 1993). In its place is a more subtle form of racism coined aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2005). Aversive racists are people who consciously and sincerely support egalitarian ideals and do not believe that they personally harbor prejudiced feelings toward racial minorities; nonetheless, these persons unconsciously have feelings of unease toward historically disadvantaged groups and therefore seek to avoid interracial interactions. When such interactions are unavoidable, aversive racists will experience anxiety and discomfort, and will also try to end the interaction as quickly as possible. Finally, aversive racists are likely to behave differently than “old fashioned” racists. Unlike the “old fashion” racist, who will openly discriminate, aversive racists will not discriminate in situations with strong social norms or when the discriminatory acts could be attributed to the self. Rather, aversive racists will tend to discriminate when the normative structure is weak, when there are vague guidelines for the appropriate course of action, and when a negative response can be attributed to a factor other than race (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2005). This dynamic is what Son Hing et al. (2008) refer to as the attribution-ambiguity effect.

A number of studies have supported this framework (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, for a review). Of particular interest here are two studies related to employment. In the first, Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) varied African Americans’ and Whites’ qualifications for a job and then examined recommendations for hiring. When the applicant was clearly qualified or clearly unqualified, discrimination against African American applicants did not exist. However, when the qualifications were less obvious and the appropriate decision more ambiguous, Whites recommended hiring the White candidate more frequently than they did for the African American. Another noteworthy portion of this study is the authors’ ability to track responses over time. From 1989 to 1999, “old fashioned” forms of prejudice (as measured on a self-report scale) decreased, but the pattern of subtle discrimination—that which would be manifested by aversive racists—remained unchanged.

The underlying dynamics of these decisions was addressed in a study by Hodson, Dovidio, & Gaertner (2002), where participants made recommendations for admissions into college. As with the Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) study, differences in the recommendations did not vary based on race when the applicant was especially strong or especially weak; however, for those applicants with ambiguous information, prejudiced Whites were more likely to recommend admission for Whites than they were for African Americans. The authors found that the differences in recommendations were based on the way the raters viewed the supporting materials. When prejudiced Whites reviewed the African Americans materials, they were likely to weigh the weaker portions of the packet (e.g., standardized test scores) as more meaningful and important than they did when reviewing the Whites packets. Thus, the standards shifted to accommodate the racially biased decision so the rater would not be viewed negatively. Similar findings have been observed with legal decisions made by jurors (Hodson, Hooper, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2005).
This research has clear implications for the under-representation of African American coaches. While I do not doubt that “old fashioned” racists are in some decision making roles within university athletics, to paint all forms of racial prejudice against African American coaches in this light is both unreasonable and counterproductive. As researchers have demonstrated, when job applicants are clearly qualified or clearly unqualified, racial bias is unlikely to influence the decision. However, most coaching searches are not this straightforward. Many coaches (sometimes hundreds) apply for a given job, all with varying strengths and weaknesses. Standardized selection procedures are also lacking. This situation neatly fits the conditions for when aversive racism will manifest: when the normative structure is weak, guidelines for apposite behavior are ambiguous, and when a potentially controversial decision can be justified with other supporting evidence (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2005).

Thus, the prevailing norms, processes, and structures for hiring coaches of university athletics teams make it ripe for aversive racism to prevail, and for African Americans continue to be under-represented in those employment roles.

### 2.2.2. Discrimination

Though the underlying dynamics differ, both “old fashioned” and aversive forms of racism result in discrimination against African Americans. But, just as prejudice has different dimensions, so too does discrimination. Specifically, Greenhaus et al. (1990; see also Igen & Youtz, 1986) identified two types of discrimination—access and treatment. Access discrimination prevents members from a particular group from entering a particular job, organization, or profession. Treatment discrimination, on the other hand, “occurs when subgroup members receive fewer rewards, resources, or opportunities on the job than they legitimately deserve on the basis of job-related criteria” (Greenhaus et al., 1990, pp. 64–65). Researchers have found that both forms of discrimination are prevalent in the university athletics context.

The data presented in Fig. 1 illustrate that African Americans have limited access to coaching positions across a variety of sports, and one might conclude from these data alone that access discrimination is present. What the statistics do not convey, however, is whether or not access to the coaching positions is dependent upon the race of the head coach. This is an important distinction because access discrimination is concerned with limiting opportunities for members of historically under-represented groups (Greenhaus et al., 1990); thus, if access discrimination is truly present, then differences should be observed in the racial compositions of the coaching staffs guided by Whites and those guided by African Americans.

Cunningham and Sagas (2005) found that this was the case in their analysis of the racial composition of men’s basketball coaching staffs. They compared the proportion of assistant coaches of color on the staff to the corresponding percentage of all former men’s basketball players who had graduated (48%). This standard was based on the aforementioned argument that former athletes represent the largest pool of potential coaches (Cunningham & Sagas, 2002; Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). Their results were telling. Overall, African Americans represented just 33% of all assistant coaches—a proportion significantly less than the 48% standard. But, the results varied dramatically based on the race of the head coach. African Americans comprised just 30% of the coaches on staffs headed by a White head coach, but among those guided by an African American, they represented 45% of all coaches. Thus, the under-representation was due to their lack of access to coaching positions when the head coach was White.

Equally striking, among the staffs guided by a White head coach, 1 in 6 (or 16.2%) did not have any assistant coaches of color.

While Cunningham and Sagas’ (2005) research focused on the access assistants had to coaching positions, their findings are applicable to the discussion of head coaches as well. Consider, for instance, that these findings were observed among men’s basketball staffs, a context continually praised for the diversity of its coaching staffs (Lapichick, 2009; Robinson, 2009). How much more, then, would the findings be observed for head coaching roles or in settings less convivial to African Americans, such as football or baseball? Further, that the race of the head coach substantially influenced the race of those hired to his staff is particularly meaningful for discussions of head coaches. After all, 90% of all athletic directors are White (DeHass, 2007), and thus, pro-similarity bias is likely to be even more prevalent when hiring head coaches. There is considerable support for this latter point. For instance, a participant in one qualitative study noted, “Administrators hire White coaches because the vast majority of administrators are White” (as cited in Brown, 2002). Powell (2008) advanced similar arguments, albeit from a different perspective: “As long as blacks are unable to hold true power in sports, the issue of hiring will remain” (p. 213). Collectively, these dynamics limit the access African Americans have to head coaching positions.

Just as access discrimination limits access to head coaching positions, treatment discrimination negatively affects African American head coaches when they are on the job. Most of the research in this area focuses on assistant coaches, with findings suggesting that African Americans face open hostility from opposing players (Lawrence, 2004), are oftentimes valued more for their ability to recruit and relate to athletes (most of whom are African American) rather than for their coaching abilities (Brown, 2002), and receive fewer returns for their human and social capital investments than do Whites (Sagas & Cunningham, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2006). Anecdotal evidence points to a similar pattern among head coaches. Consider, for instance, that African American football coach Tyrone Willingham was the only head coach in University of Notre Dame history to be relieved of his duties prior to his contract expiring (Whitlock, 2005). Further, a given African American’s failures (such as not winning enough games) are oftentimes painted as representative of all African Americans, though this is not the case for Whites. In expounding on this dynamic, Wojciechowski (2008) wrote that “the trickle-down effect is that skittish university presidents and athletic directors can use those failures as an excuse not to hire head coaches.”

In the same article, University at Buffalo athletic director Warde Manuel further noted the apparent contradiction by adding, “If I White person is not successful in a particular position, that doesn’t mean that another White person would not be successful” (as cited in Wojciechowski, 2008). The differential treatment of and adjustable standards applied to African Americans is characteristic of treatment discrimination (Greenhaus et al., 1990) and perpetuates their under-representation.
2.2.3. Leadership stereotypes

Just as prejudice and discrimination limit the opportunities African Americans have to be a head coach, so too do leadership prototypes. According to leadership categorization theory (Lord & Maher, 1991), people develop mindsets over time of who can lead and what leaders should be. These characteristics develop into leadership categories such that people develop ideas of a standard example or typical leader. People then contrast a given leader with the leadership prototype they have developed in their minds, a process known as recognition-based process. Those persons who possess characteristics that are consistent with the stereotypes are likely to be viewed as more effective than are their counterparts.

In a study that is particularly relevant to the current analysis, Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008) drew from leadership categorization theory to argue that, “at least in the United States, a central characteristic of leadership is ‘being White’ and accordingly, evaluators will perceive that White leaders are more prototypical business leaders than are leaders who are racial minorities” (p. 759). Consider, for instance, that people are consistently seeing Whites in prominent leadership positions, such as company executive, congressperson, and the like. Further, US history influences these perceptions, as over time, many of the top leaders in politics and business (e.g., Bill Gates, George Washington, Conrad Hilton, and John D. Rockefeller) have been White. These factors are thought to shape who people believe should be leaders and how effective leaders of different races are. Rosette et al.’s studies provided support to this rationale, as “being White” was seen as a prototype for business leaders, though not necessarily for everyday employees (Studies 1 and 2), and White leaders were considered to be more effective than were leaders of color, especially when the organization’s success was attributed to the leader (Studies 3 and 4).

Leadership categorization theory (Lord & Maher, 1991) and the findings from recent studies (Rosette et al., 2008) inform the current discussion as well. Specifically, it is possible that coaches of color are perceived as better suited as players, assistant coaches, or recruiters (Brown, 2002; Anderson, 1993) than they are for head coaching roles. These expectations are shaped by who people have historically seen in these roles and by who they believe is best suited to handle these responsibilities (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rosette et al., 2008). Consider, for instance, that Whites have historically held the primary leadership and coaching positions on athletic teams (for recent trends, see DeHass, 2007), and, as former head coach Fitz Hill has commented “You say you’re trying to find the best person for the job, but when you do that you don’t have a qualified African American picture that comes to mind” (as cited in Brown, 2002). Thus, the historical trends shape people’s perceptions about who can and cannot hold particular job roles and contribute to the continued under-representation of African American head coaches.

2.2.4. Organizational culture

The culture of the workplace is the final meso-level factor that influences the representation of African American head coaches. Schein (1990) defined culture as “(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 111). An organization’s culture is manifested through observable artifacts, values, and basic underlying assumptions. Culture is strongly shaped by the people within the organization (Schneider, 1987; Weese, 1995), influences the attraction and recruitment of employees (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000; Schneider, 1987), and has been linked to a number of important outcomes, including organizational effectiveness (Smart, 2003; Smart & Wolfe, 2000).

As might be expected, organizational culture also impacts a number of diversity-related outcomes. For instance, Doherty and Chelladurai (1999) argued that organizational cultures of diversity—that is, ones that are characterized by respect for differences, exhibit tolerance for risk and ambiguity, have a strong people-orientation, and value equifinality—are likely to enjoy more success than are their counterparts, particularly when that culture is meshed with actual employee diversity. Cunningham’s (2009) recent study provided empirical support for this contention. Fink and Pastore (1999) advanced similar arguments, though their framework described such organizations as proactive in nature. Across a variety of contexts, these authors found that proactive cultures were linked with a number of desired outcomes, including employee diversity, attraction of a diverse fan base, and overall effectiveness (Fink et al., 2001; Fink, Pastore, & Riemer, 2003).

This research suggests that the culture of the workplace has the potential to meaningfully influence the diversity of the employees, including the head coaches. Those athletic departments characterized by a culture of diversity and inclusion are much more likely to have diversity enmeshed into all organizational activities, create mentoring activities that better enable persons of color to move up the organizational hierarchy, have bold top management leadership, and be proactive in their recruitment and hiring of persons from historically under-represented groups (Cunningham & Singer, 2009). Such workplaces stand in stark contrast to those with a culture of similarity (e.g., Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999)—those with closed membership, homologous leadership teams, unstructured hiring and promotion standards, and that see diversity as a liability rather than an asset. Indeed, cultures of diversity and inclusion are needed to address the under-representation of African American head coaches.

2.3. Micro-level factors

Finally, micro-level factors also influence the under-representation of African American head coaches. Researchers in this tradition focus on the coaches themselves and have predominantly incorporated psychological (e.g., social cognitive career
theory; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and social psychological (e.g., social identity theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) theories. I incorporate two micro-level factors into the current model: head coaching expectations and intentions, and turnover intentions.

2.3.1. Head coaching expectations and intentions

In their articulation of social cognitive career theory, Lent et al. (1994) described various factors thought to influence one’s decision to follow a particular academic path or pursue a given profession. These included perceived barriers, supports, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations—all of which could be considered one’s expectations related to a particular activity. Each of these factors is thought to then influence behavioral intentions and, ultimately, the given behavior. Empirical support for these relationships is robust, having been used successfully to understand and predict career choices (Flores & O’Brien, 2002), managerial aspirations (van Vianen, 1999), and academic choice among college students (Ferry, Fouad, & Smith, 2000), and, particularly germane to the current discussion, head coaching intentions (Cunningham & Singer, in press; Cunningham, Doherty, & Gregg, 2007), among others.

Research pertaining to racial differences in coaching expectations is mixed. Student-athletes of color anticipate considerable barriers related to coaching, including limited advancement opportunities (Cunningham, 2004), that their race will be held against them during their coaching careers (Cunningham & Singer, in press; Kamphoff & Gill, 2008), and that they will have few professional role models racially similar to them (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008). Interestingly, however, racial minority student-athletes anticipate high levels of satisfaction from coaching and a strong intent to enter the profession (Cunningham & Singer, in press, Study 1). Focus group interviews shed light on this dynamic, as the athletes intimated that they expect to experience discrimination in whatever profession they pursue, and consequently, they believe that remaining involved in athletics will offer enough benefits to counteract the anticipated barriers (Cunningham & Singer, in press, Study 2). The desire to help and mentor other minority athletes reach their potential also contributes to this desire (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008).

Assistant coaches of color have expressed similar sentiments when asked about their prospects in the coaching profession. Across multiple studies and samples, African Americans have indicated that they experience racial discrimination, have truncated advancement opportunities, and enjoy less career satisfaction than do their counterparts (Cunningham et al., 2006; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004b, 2007; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005). These effects are especially pronounced among football coaches, and there is little doubt why, when one considers their dismal representation as head coaches of that sport (see Fig. 1).

Despite these poor work experiences, African American coaches, like the student-athletes they coach, have continuously expressed high intentions to pursue and apply for head coaching intentions (Cunningham et al., 2006). Thus, despite the data suggesting that doing so might be a fruitless endeavor, coupled with a history of facing prejudice and discrimination during their career, African Americans continue to pursue leadership positions. As one African American coach commented, “after a while, it makes you think, ‘Why go through with it?’ because you’ve seen the track record. But at the same time, you have to make yourself go through with it because you don’t want to allow the excuse, ‘Well, they’re not applying’” (as cited in Wixon, 2006).

2.3.2. Turnover intentions

While the repeated discrimination and truncated career chances do not seem to limit African Americans’ decision to apply for head coaching positions, there is considerable evidence that it does negatively impact their career longevity (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004b, 2007; Cunningham et al., 2006, 2001). As with the head coaching expectations, these findings are also strongest among football coaches, though they have been observed across a variety of coaching contexts. Declining health (Cunningham et al., 2006), a lack of time with family (Cunningham et al., 2006), a lack of advancement opportunities (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004b, 2007), low career satisfaction (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004b, 2007), and treatment discrimination (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007) all contribute to this end.

Racial differences in occupational turnover can have serious repercussions, not the least of which is a potential supply-side shortage of African Americans to fill head coaching positions. As Tsui and Gutek (1999) articulated, “small effects could accumulate and lead to non-trivial consequences. For example, a small tendency for the most different groups to leave can, over time, result in increasingly more homogeneous groups as one moves up the organizational hierarchy” (p. 40). The data presented in Fig. 1 supports this contention, as in each coaching context, the proportion of African Americans negatively trends the higher up the organizational hierarchy one moves (i.e., from player to assistant coach to head coach). When the differential turnover rate is coupled with the macro- and meso-level factors already working against their advancement, understanding the under-representation of African Americans in coaching positions becomes crystallized.

2.4. Relationships among multilevel factors

For simplicity’s sake, factors and the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis have been presented separately. In practice, however, the different levels do not operate in isolation, but instead, influence and are influenced by one another (Chelladurai, 2009; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Such reciprocal relationships are illustrated in Fig. 2, and examples are provided in the following space.
Perhaps the most evident examples of the multilevel effects come in the area of what Kozlowski and Klein (2000) referred to as direct effects models. Here, factors at one level influence the outcomes at another. For instance, treatment discrimination (meso-level) impacts coaches’ desire to leave the profession (micro-level) (Cunningham & Sagas, 2007). While direct effects certainly occur, a more plausible specification takes into account how factors at multiple levels of analysis subsequently influence the outcomes of another. Kozlowski and Klein referred to this dynamic as a mixed determinants model. Indeed, my articulation of the current framework has focused on degree to which macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors all affect whether or not an African American obtained a head coaching position (micro-level).

As another possibility, Kozlowski and Klein (2000) suggested that mixed effects models are also possible. In this case, factors at a single level of analysis are thought to influence subsequent processes and outcomes at multiple other levels. As an example, proactive cultures of diversity influence a member of an under-represented group’s likelihood of employment (micro-level), employee satisfaction (micro-level), workplace creativity (meso-level), and organizational performance (meso-level) (Cunningham, 2009; Fink et al., 2001, 2003). Further, given that organizations in a given environment oftentimes seek to replicate the effective practices of others (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; but see also Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007), it is likely that diversity practices among successful athletics departments (e.g., Stanford University) will influence industry efforts (macro-level).

3. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to outline the comprehensive framework for understanding the under-representation of African American head coaches. In doing so, I have argued that factors operating at the macro-level (i.e., institutionalized practices, political climate, stakeholder expectations), meso-level (i.e., prejudice on the part of decision makers, discrimination, leadership prototypes, organizational culture of diversity), and micro-level (i.e., head coaching expectations and intentions, occupational turnover intentions) all shape the current trend. While other researchers have predominantly focused on a single level of analysis and its subsequent influence, the model presented here is the first to explicitly recognize that the under-representation of African American head coaches is a multilevel, dynamic phenomenon. In addition to explaining what factors are at work, I have also articulated how, why, and when these factors exert their influence. While the framework was conceived to provide an understanding why African Americans are under-represented as head coaches, it also has the potential to influence policy and change initiatives.

From a multilevel, systems perspective—such as the one adopted here—change efforts cannot focus on a single level, but instead, need to recognize and take into account the intersectionality of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors. Let us consider steps taken by the NCAA. At the macro-level, action is needed to change the institutionalized nature of racism in university athletics. Some steps have been taken in this general area, such as when the NCAA issued a mandate barring institutions with hostile and abusive Native American imagery from participating in NCAA-sponsored championships or hosting championship tournaments (Williams, 2005b; see also Staurowsky, 2007), but more efforts are needed to address the institutional factors that continually reproduce African Americans’ absence in leadership roles. At the meso-level, the NCAA has been active in providing diversity training for member institutions and in various activities aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion at the departmental level (Williams, 2005a). Additional efforts, such as adopting policies like those in the National Football League, where all head coaching searches must include one interview with a coach of color (i.e., the Rooney Rule), would likely yield immediate results. Finally, at the individual level, the NCAA provides minority coaching and leadership clinics—programs aimed at increasing the human and social capital of coaches of color. Many of these change activities have only recently been implemented, so time will tell as to their effectiveness.

While the NCAA’s change efforts represent a bottom-down initiative, change can also have emergent properties, such as when individuals influence organizational structures and social policy. Powell (2008) provides an exceptional overview of how activism on the part of several African American athletes helped improve the conditions, recognition, and pay athletes receive today. He writes:
Activism by Curt Flood and John Mackey, pioneers in free agency, made baseball and football players rich. Activism by Jim Brown and Bill Russell and other black athletes pushed the envelope and racial boundaries, broke barriers, created awareness, shattered myths and stereotypes, held white folks accountable, and essentially boosted and improved sports in general for the black man (p. 28).

And, other examples abound: John Thompson’s advocacy for African American athletes, Arthur Ashe’s fight against discrimination in tennis and his efforts to raise AIDS awareness. C. Vivian Stringer’s battle against prejudice and bias expressed toward female athletes of color, and Harry Edwards’ fight to change people’s racial attitudes and beliefs through sport. These activists, and other like them, have tirelessly worked to not only change individual’s views toward race, but also the racist systems in place.

As these examples illustrate, change is possible. But, it takes a collective effort—a unified endeavor to transform the institutionalized systems in place, ensure a political environment where diversity is valued, eradicate decision makers’ prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination, create and sustain university workplaces characterized by diversity and inclusion, and transform the coaching profession into one where opportunities for African Americans abound. While daunting, these change efforts are critical to ensuring that sport is a place characterized by diversity and inclusion. Inaction is not an option.

References


