“You’ll Face Discrimination Wherever You Go”: Student Athletes’ Intentions to Enter the Coaching Profession

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We conducted 2 studies to examine student athletes’ intentions to enter the coaching profession. In Study 1, participants responded to a questionnaire designed to assess the major constructs from social cognitive career theory. Results indicate that although racial minorities, relative to Whites, expected more positive outcomes with being a coach and had greater intentions to pursue that profession, they also anticipated more barriers associated with coaching. To clarify this relationship, we conducted a focus group interview (Study 2) with 6 male athletes of color. Participants indicated that prejudice and discrimination were expected across their potential vocational choices, not just coaching. Thus, given the many positives associated with coaching, they preferred to encounter those barriers in the coaching context.

Despite calls for increased diversity in coaching and leadership positions (Brooks & Althouse, 2007; Cunningham, 2007), racial minorities continue to be underrepresented in these roles (DeHass, 2007). Consider the case of intercollegiate athletic coaches. Some have suggested that athletes represent the most viable pool of potential coaches (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998). Following this rationale, since African Americans represent 23.7% of all Division I athletes, similar figures might be expected among coaches. This is not the case; African Americans are underrepresented relative to the proportion of athletes as assistant coaches (15.9% and 20.5% for women’s and men’s teams, respectively) and head coaches (10.6% and 11.6% for women’s and men’s teams, respectively) at the Division I level (DeHass, 2007). Similar patterns emerge among revenue-generating sports, such as football, men’s basketball, and women’s basketball, where most of the athletes are racial minorities. In this context, coaches of color are still underrepresented, relative to the percentage of players, at both the assistant and head coaching levels (DeHass, 2007).

Consequently, a burgeoning amount of research has been undertaken to understand the reasons behind these figures and possible solutions to the

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problems. Several studies have focused on the coaches themselves, with findings suggesting that racial minorities face barriers in obtaining coaching positions (Cunningham & Sagas, 2005). When they do earn those positions, coaches of color are often placed in peripheral roles (Anderson, 1993) or hired to aid in recruiting minority athletes (Brown, 2002). When on the job, coaches receive fewer returns for their social capital investments (Sagas & Cunningham, 2005), have fewer opportunities for advancement (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006), and perceive discrimination based on their race (Cunningham et al., 2006). Perhaps not surprisingly, given their differential treatment, racial minority coaches are also likely to leave coaching earlier than their White counterparts (Cunningham et al., 2006; Cunningham, Sagas, & Ashley, 2001), creating a potential supply-side shortage of potential head coaches.

In addition to the research focusing on coaches, others have examined athletes’ experiences and how these potentially shape their intentions to become collegiate coaches. This research has shown evidence of stacking, both in terms of where racial minorities play (Smith & Henderson, 2000), and in terms of the academic tracks they pursue (Singer, 2005). With respect to the latter occurrence, athletes of color sometimes believe that they are valued more for their athletic accomplishments than for their academic ones (Sailes, 2000) and also have been shown to believe that they are limited in their academic choices by their school counselors (Spigner, 1993). Racial minority athletes may have strained relationships with their White coaches, with a feeling of “being used” predominating (Anshel, 1990). These negative effects perhaps cumulatively affect their attitudes toward becoming collegiate coaches, as Cunningham (2003) found that racial minorities have less interest in coaching than do Whites.

That athletes of color are potentially less likely than Whites to pursue intercollegiate athletic coaching as a career path is troubling. Such differences not only signal potential perceived opportunity differences, but they also substantially hamper efforts to increase racial diversity among coaches. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine this issue in greater depth by considering antecedent conditions of the decision to be a coach. Specifically, we draw from social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) to examine the influence of personal and environmental factors on athletes’ intentions to enter the collegiate coaching ranks. We conducted two studies, the first with a quantitative focus and the latter qualitative in nature.

Theoretical Framework

In drawing from Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) is a framework that has been used
extensively to understand people’s academic and vocational choices. The utility of the theory is perhaps best illustrated by the number of contexts in which it has been successfully utilized, including investigations of career choices (Flores & O’Brien, 2002), managerial aspirations (van Vianen, 1999), and academic choices among high school students (Lopez, Lent, Brown, & Gore, 1997) and college students (Ferry, Fouad, & Smith, 2000). Central to the theory are three person–cognitive variables (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, choice goals), and how these factors interact with environmental forces (i.e., barriers, supports) to predict people’s behavior.

The first person–cognitive variable, *self-efficacy*, refers to “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). It is largely seen as one of the most important factors influencing human agency (Bandura, 2000) and is predictive of the goals people set, the effort they exert in a given activity, the expected outcomes of certain behaviors, and overall performance (Bandura, 2000). From a social cognitive career theory perspective, people are more likely to choose certain career paths if they believe they can be successful in that role. For instance, Cunningham, Sagas, and Ashley (2003) found that among assistant coaches of women’s teams, head coaching self-efficacy was positively associated with intention to pursue a head coaching position.

Outcome expectations represent the second person–cognitive variable. *Outcome expectations* are defined as “beliefs about the outcomes of various courses of action” (Lent et al., 2003, p. 458). As Lent et al. (1994) noted, while self-efficacy focuses on one’s ability to complete an activity successfully, outcome expectations are concerned with the particular outcomes of a behavioral choice, and whether or not those outcomes are desirable (Doherty & Johnson, 2001). Note that this reasoning is congruent with expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), in which behavior is seen as a function of the outcomes associated with that behavior and the value placed on said outcomes. Within the coaching context, people are more likely to pursue a career in coaching when they perceive valuable outcomes (e.g., high satisfaction) associated with that choice.

*Choice goals*, or the intentions to pursue a behavior (Lent et al., 1994), represent the final person–cognitive variable. Like Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behavior, social cognitive career theory proposes that such goals are the most proximal antecedent of actual behavior. Meta-analyses in the management (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000) and exercise (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002) literatures have supported this link. Thus, if one intends to perform an action, such as applying for a head coaching position, it is quite likely that she or he will actually do so.
According to social cognitive career theory, the three person–cognitive variables should be related to one another, such that self-efficacy and outcome expectations both give rise to choice goals and, ultimately, behavior (Lent et al., 1994, 2003). However, factors outside the individual also influence the choices people make. Therein rests the importance of environmental barriers and supports (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). These environmental influences include discriminatory hiring practices and the availability of role opportunities (i.e., barriers), as well as one’s network contacts and career-relevant learning experiences (i.e., supports; Lent et al., 2000). They have been shown to exert their influence on choice goals through self-efficacy, such that people who face considerable barriers are likely to have lower efficacy estimates and subsequent behavioral intentions to pursue a vocational option (Cunningham, Bruening, Sartore, Sagas, & Fink, 2005; Lent et al., 2003).

**Study 1**

In drawing from the social cognitive career theory framework, the purpose of Study 1 is to explore potential racial differences in the theory’s primary constructs. As previously noted, past research among student athletes has shown that racial minorities express less interest in becoming collegiate coaches than do their White counterparts (Cunningham, 2003). As interests give rise to choice goals (Lent et al., 1994), it stands to reason that racial differences might also exist in intentions to pursue coaching as a profession. Thus, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 1.** Racial minority athletes will have less intention to pursue collegiate coaching positions than will White athletes.

Recall that, according to social cognitive career theory, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are both positively associated with choice goals (Lent et al., 1994). Thus, racial differences in intentions to pursue collegiate coaching as a profession might also signal differences in efficacy beliefs and the outcomes associated with coaching. For instance, in their study of assistant coaches of women’s teams in Canada, Cunningham, Doherty, and Gregg (2007) found that women, relative to men, not only had fewer intentions to pursue head coaching positions, but they also expressed less head coaching self-efficacy and less positive outcomes associated with being a head coach. These findings are supportive of social cognitive career theory and can be applied to the current investigation as well. That is, as racial minorities are expected to be less likely to pursue collegiate coaching positions, they might also have less coaching self-efficacy and anticipate less positive outcomes.
associated with being a coach than do their White counterparts. Based on this rationale, we predict the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** Racial minority athletes will express less coaching self-efficacy than will White athletes.

**Hypothesis 3.** Racial minority athletes will express less positive outcomes expectations associated with coaching than will White athletes.

Finally, we also expect that racial differences might emerge concerning environmental factors: barriers and supports. Bandura (1999, 2000) suggested that barriers and supports influence choice goals indirectly through their effects on self-efficacy; that is, these environmental factors are thought to have a direct influence on one’s efficacy beliefs to execute a given behavior. These beliefs, in turn, should influence outcome expectations, interest, intentions, and behaviors. Empirical studies across a variety of contexts support this link (Cunningham et al., 2005; Lent et al., 2001, 2003).

Based on this theory and the supporting empirical evidence, we expect that racial minorities, relative to Whites, might expect more barriers and fewer supports for becoming a coach. Indeed, past research supports this reasoning, as coaches of color have been shown to face discrimination in the hiring and selection process (Anderson, 1993; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005) and anticipate that racial discrimination will limit their upward mobility (Cunningham et al., 2006). Further, they receive differential returns on their human and social capital investments (Sagas & Cunningham, 2005), meaning that even when supports are present, minorities are not rewarded for them in the same manner as are Whites. To the degree that athletes are aware of these conditions, they might expect to encounter barriers to being a coach and, likewise, anticipate that they will receive few supports. Thus, in drawing from Bandura’s (1999, 2000) arguments and the aforementioned research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**Hypothesis 5.** Racial minorities will perceive greater barriers associated with collegiate coaching than will Whites.

**Hypothesis 6.** Racial minorities will perceive fewer supports associated with collegiate coaching than will Whites.

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were collected from 128 student athletes (76 men, 52 women) who were attending a large, public university in the southwestern United States.
Most of the participants were White \((n = 69; 53.9\%)\), followed by African American \((n = 48; 37.5\%)\), Hispanic \((n = 5; 3.9\%)\), native American \((n = 1; 0.8\%)\), “other” \((n = 3; 2.3\%)\), and 2 persons who did not provide their race \((1.6\%)\). Participants’ mean age was 19.1 years \((SD = 1.3)\).

**Measures**

Participants were given a questionnaire asking them to provide their demographic information, as previously outlined, and to respond to various items designed to measure coaching self-efficacy, outcome expectations, choice goals, barriers, and supports. For each measure, the mean was used as the final score.

**Self-efficacy.** We measured self-efficacy with nine items adapted from Everhart and Chelladurai (1998). Consistent with Doherty and Johnson (2001), the measure was specific to the domain of collegiate coaching. Participants first read the following statement: “The following questions focus on activities college coaches would perform. Please rate the level of confidence you have that you could complete the following tasks.” Sample items include “Resist the interference by parents, alumni, and other groups” and “Make intelligent coaching decisions.” All items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (no confidence) to 7 (complete confidence). The measure’s reliability estimate \((\alpha = .82)\) was acceptable.

**Outcome expectations.** We measured outcome expectations with nine items adapted from Cunningham et al. (2005). Consistent with Bandura’s (1986) theory, the measure included items reflective of physical, social, and self-evaluative outcomes. Participants were asked to “respond to the following items concerned with the outcomes you might expect from being a college coach.” Sample items include “Becoming a coach will mean high status,” “I would earn approval from others if I became a coach,” and “My career satisfaction would be high if I became a college coach.” Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability \((\alpha = .84)\).

**Choice goals.** Following Hagger, Chatzisarantis, and Biddle’s (2001) conceptualization of behavioral intentions, we measured choice goals by asking participants the extent to which they planned to, intended to, and would try to become a collegiate coach following graduation. Cunningham et al. (2007) used a similar measure to assess head coaching intentions. A sample item is “I intend to become a college coach following graduation” \((\alpha = .76)\). Items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
**Barriers.** Following Lent et al. (2000) and Cunningham et al. (2007), we used six items to assess barriers. Participants were asked to “respond to the following items concerned with the factors that might influence your decision to become a college coach.” Sample items include “People with demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex) similar to mine typically have a hard time obtaining a coaching position,” and “Too many other people are seeking coaching positions for me to have a good chance of obtaining one.” Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measure had an acceptable reliability estimate (α = .87).

**Supports.** Again drawing from Lent et al.’s (2000) conceptualization and Cunningham et al.’s (2007) empirical work, we used six items to measure supports. The items are reflective of human (e.g., “I have sufficient contacts to help me become a coach”) and social capital (e.g., “I have the experience needed to become a college coach”) investments (α = .89). Participants responded to each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

**Procedure**

Athletic department personnel (i.e., coaches, academic counselors) were approached with the idea of the study, and their help was requested in distributing the questionnaires to student athletes. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation, and providing the contact information of the lead researcher and university’s human subjects office in the event of questions.

**Data Analysis**

We computed means and standard deviations for all variables. Hypotheses 1 to 5 predicted racial differences in self-efficacy, outcome expectations, choice goals, barriers, and supports. These were examined by a two-way MANOVA, with race and sex serving as the independent variables. Inclusion of the athletes’ sex in the model was warranted, given previous research that has shown that an athlete’s sex can also influence attitudes toward coaching (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998).

**Results and Discussion**

The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. In analyzing the data, we categorized athletes’ race into White and racial minority. Results
Table 1

*Means of Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Racial minorities</th>
<th></th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (M, SD)</td>
<td>Women (M, SD)</td>
<td>Overall (M, SD)</td>
<td>Men (M, SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice goals</td>
<td>4.30, 1.26</td>
<td>4.15, 1.68</td>
<td>4.26, 1.37</td>
<td>3.31, 1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>5.85, 0.82</td>
<td>5.78, 0.80</td>
<td>5.83, 0.80</td>
<td>5.71, 0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome expectations</td>
<td>5.04, 1.08</td>
<td>5.03, 0.76</td>
<td>5.04, 0.10</td>
<td>4.53, 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>3.72, 1.28</td>
<td>3.17, 1.20</td>
<td>3.57, 1.27</td>
<td>2.77, 1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>4.09, 1.41</td>
<td>4.46, 1.47</td>
<td>4.19, 1.42</td>
<td>4.02, 1.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the MANOVA demonstrate significant effects for race, \( F(5, 118) = 4.04, p < .01 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .15 \); but not for sex, \( F(5, 118) = 0.46, p = .81 \); or the race \( \times \) sex interaction, \( F(5, 118) = 0.93, p = .46 \).

Follow-up univariate ANOVAs were then computed to understand the nature of the differences. The results indicate significant differences in choice goals, \( F(1, 122) = 13.05, p < .001 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .10 \); outcome expectations, \( F(1, 122) = 6.62, p < .05 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .05 \); and barriers, \( F(1, 122) = 7.06, p < .01 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .06 \). As seen in Table 1, racial minorities had greater choice goals (i.e., intentions) and expected more positive outcomes with coaching than did Whites. However, they also expected more barriers to coaching than did Whites. There were no differences in self-efficacy, \( F(1, 122) = 0.28, p = .60 \); or supports, \( F(1, 122) = 1.88, p = .17 \). Thus, Hypothesis 1 (choice goals), Hypothesis 2 (self-efficacy), Hypothesis 3 (outcome expectations), and Hypothesis 5 (supports) were not supported, while Hypothesis 4 (barriers) was supported.

Several points warrant further discussion. First, the fact that racial minorities, relative to Whites, expressed greater intentions (i.e., choice goals) to become collegiate coaches runs counter to previous research in this area (Cunningham, 2003). It is possible that attitudes toward coaching have changed over the years since the other investigation into this issue. Indeed, since that time, the NCAA has instituted a number of initiatives aimed at increasing the diversity of the coaches and the leadership of athletics departments (see www.ncaa.org). To the degree that the findings are generalizable to other student athletes around the country, the findings also suggest that the underrepresentation of racial minorities in the coaching ranks is not a result of a lack of interest among those persons (for similar findings with respect to assistant coaches, see Cunningham et al., 2006).

Second, given that racial minorities did express greater choice goals, it is consistent with social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) that they also anticipated more pleasant outcomes associated with coaching. Interestingly, however, racial minorities anticipated significantly more barriers to become a coach than did Whites, and yet still expressed greater intentions to enter that professional domain. This is counter to both theory (Lent et al., 1994) and empirical research among students choosing a profession (Cunningham et al., 2005) and assistant coaches choosing to pursue a head coaching position (Cunningham et al., 2007). Indeed, it seems counterintuitive that one would consciously choose a professional path knowing that substantial barriers would likely limit his or her advancement in that field. Rather, other options—ones where such barriers did not exist—might be more appealing. This incongruity warrants further investigation and, therefore, serves as the impetus for Study 2.
Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 is to examine why athletes of color would choose to pursue collegiate coaching as a profession, even though they also anticipate substantial barriers in that profession. As previously noted, such a relationship is antithetical to social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) and related research. We conducted a focus group to explore this issue and were guided by the following research question:

*Research Question.* Why do athletes of color view collegiate coaching as a viable career path, even in the face of substantial barriers?

*Method*

*Participants*

Study participants (N = 6) were African American male scholarship athletes in the football program at a major NCAA Division I-A research university in the southwestern United States. With regard to their status, 4 of the participants were in their junior year (2 were junior college transfers); 1 was a sophomore; and 1 was a first-year student. In addition, 4 of the participants played defensive back; 1 played wide receiver; and 1 was a defensive lineman. Their academic majors included the agricultural sciences, political science, psychology, and undecided.

*Data Collection*

A focus group interview was used as the primary method of data collection for Study 2. The focus group interview is essentially a qualitative approach to research that involves guided or unguided discussions addressing a specific topic of interest to the group and the researchers (Berg, 2001). The object of the focus group interview is for researchers to secure meaningful, quality data in a social context that allows research participants to consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 1987). Most focus groups consist of a small group of participants (typically 6 to 8) under the guidance of a facilitator, usually called a moderator. The 6 participants in this study were asked questions pertaining to their interest in being a collegiate coach, barriers to coaching, and the influence of race on their coaching prospects.
Although both authors participated in the interview process for the present study, the second author served as the primary moderator, while the first author focused on note taking and observation of the interactions between the research participants. This approach was necessary and beneficial, especially since we made a conscious decision not to audiotape the focus group. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that such an approach is appropriate when discussing sensitive topics, such as this one. Thus, we wanted to encourage participants to speak freely and honestly about the topic at hand—something we believed would be aided by note taking, as opposed to audiotaping.

The approximately hour-long interview took place in a conference room in the building where the football program offices are located. We believe that, given the nature of our discussion (i.e., references to race and these athletes’ experiences in and perspectives on the football program), it was imperative for us to create as comfortable of an environment as possible for participants.

**Procedure**

In order to gain access to the participants for this study, we solicited the assistance of a graduate assistant for the football program. He assisted us with access and data collection for Study 1, and was instrumental in contacting the potential research participants and setting up the date and time for the focus group interview. Furthermore, he initiated the focus group discussion by providing the participants with an overview of the project and providing his insights into issues of race and the coaching profession. Once he finished his overview, we introduced ourselves, and then asked each participant to introduce themselves briefly before we began the actual focus group interview.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis can be done simultaneously because it allows researchers to focus and shape the study as it proceeds (Glesne, 1999). This is important for our study because our decision not to audiotape the focus group forced us to analyze and interpret the limited amount of data as they were being collected. That is, we had to reflect on the discussion and interaction as they occurred so that we could begin to make sense of the data that were being generated.

Moreover, we engaged in a moderator and assistant moderator debriefing session after the focus group was completed. During this brief session, we each provided our general impressions of how the focus group went, as well
as some of our initial observations from the interview. The first author then transcribed the field notes that were taken during the focus group. After we both reviewed the field notes, we each generated themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas and then met to discuss and solidify these constructions. The findings from our analysis are presented and discussed here.

Results and Discussion

In an effort to address the major research question for this study, our focus group interview focused on a few broad topics of discussion. First, the participants were asked if they had an interest in being a collegiate coach, and if so, why they wanted to and what they expected to get from it. The athletes in this study expressed an interest in coaching at the college level because, for many, continuing to be around the game after their playing days ended was important. For example, one of the participants who was in his junior year had injured his knee during the season, and with graduation right around the corner (i.e., December of that year) for him, he began to realize that perhaps his playing career was winding down. Another one of the juniors in this study indicated that the next season was his last year of eligibility and that he had considered coaching, especially if things did not work out to where he could continue to play football beyond college. He posed the rhetorical question, “If I don’t make it, what will I do after?” In his mind, coaching appeared to be the logical choice, or the next best thing after actually playing the game.

Both of these athletes indicated that they had a psychological commitment to the game. Because they had been around the game virtually their entire lives, it was important to remain in and around the game. One of the participants wanted to coach so that he could contribute and help give back to the game that has meant so much to him. His teammate echoed that sentiment by stating that he “had to be around the game.” To illustrate this, even while he was injured, he still came to watch films, advise others on how to play against certain teams, and even helped the graduate assistants with the plays (e.g., diagramming). Clearly, some of the participants in this study expressed strong intentions to enter the coaching profession, and based on their experiences playing and being around the game, these athletes expected to contribute to the game as future coaches.

Next, our discussion during the focus group shifted to whether or not these African American males saw any potential barriers to their entering the coaching profession. Some of them indicated that their race could inhibit them from the success they might otherwise be able to have as coaches. Two of the participants chimed, “It is tough to get to the top as a Black male.” Another agreed and asserted, “It is a White man’s world.” He pointed to the fact that we had yet to have an African American U.S. President as evidence
for his claim. One of his other teammates insisted, “Black people are a small factor here in the U.S.” He further suggested that African Americans will be put in certain leadership positions, but that such positions are not meaningful, and it is only done to appease constituents (i.e., the African American athletes). In his words, “They put you in that position to make you feel equal, but it is just a title.”

One of the other participants actually provided an example of how one of the African American coaches for their team was a case in point. This particular coach, according to many of the study participants, was treated as the lowest of all of the coaches: he was rarely afforded the opportunity to address the team (though other coaches were), and his interactions were limited to those with the special teams players and running backs. Furthermore, they discussed how, although this coach’s official title was assistant head coach, he was passed over and dismissed as a serious candidate for the interim head coach position after the head coach was fired.

The athletes in this study discussed how African Americans rarely are given the opportunity to be in positions of power and influence because they are seen as inferior to Whites. They argued that African Americans must be better qualified than their White counterparts to get the high-profile leadership positions. When asked his thoughts about the status of the current Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and the former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, as examples of African Americans who have held positions of power at the highest levels, this athlete insisted that both Rice and Powell were overly qualified (Rice with her multiple degrees and Powell had served as a general in the armed forces). He also suggested that they had to be better than anyone else to retain their jobs, pointing to the number of mistakes Donald Rumsfeld made before he was fired. In his words, “You have to be twice as nice to get the job.” These findings suggest that the athletes in this study definitely perceived race to be a factor in the leadership opportunities that African Americans are afforded in society in general, and the coaching profession in particular.

Finally, we asked the participants to specify how their race might influence their coaching prospects. One of the participants indicated that not seeing any head coaches who are African American is discouraging to him, making being a head coach a “damn near impossible” goal to achieve. In his mind, it would entail going against the grain and beating the odds. Another one of the athletes insisted that even when African Americans did get head coaching positions, they were not given the good jobs.

He further remarked that African American head coaches are held to different standards than are their White counterparts. The case of Tyrone

2This study was conducted before the election of President Barack Obama.
Willingham, an African American male and former coach at the University of Notre Dame, and Charlie Weiss, a White male and current coach at the University of Notre Dame, came up during the discussion. They discussed how race was an influential factor in Willingham being fired after only 3 years on the job and Weiss being allowed to retain his position after 3 years. This occurred despite the fact that Willingham actually had a better win–loss record than did Weiss, and Weiss recently completed his third year with one of the worst win–loss records for a season in the history of the storied Notre Dame football program.

We then further questioned the participants as to why, given the discrimination they anticipated confronting, they would still see coaching as a viable option. The athletes suggested that racial discrimination would likely be encountered in a number of career options, not just coaching. In referring to the presence of discrimination, one athlete noted, “That is everywhere you go and everything you do.” These comments suggest that if racism and discrimination are constants in vocational settings, then one might as well experience those barriers in coaching, given the numerous positives also associated with that activity.

General Discussion

In drawing from social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), the purpose of this research project was to examine possible racial differences in intentions to pursue collegiate coaching, as well as the antecedents thereof. The results from Study 1 indicate that racial minority student athletes, relative to Whites, express greater intention to pursue a career coaching collegiate athletes (i.e., choice goals) and also expect more positive outcomes associated with doing so. Interestingly, these differences exist despite racial minorities expecting to encounter significantly more barriers (i.e., lack of opportunity, discrimination) than their White counterparts.

A subsequent focus group, conducted to clarify this relationship, indicated that racial minorities expected to experience discrimination in whatever profession they chose to pursue. Thus, given the positive aspects associated with coaching, they might as well experience the discrimination in that context.

Contributions and Implications

The results of the present studies have potential implications for the context of intercollegiate athletics. In seeking to provide potential explanations for the underrepresentation of racial minorities in the coaching
profession, Cunningham et al. (2001) suggested that, given the prejudice and discrimination present in the athletics context, it is possible that racial minorities simply do not see coaching as a viable career option. Later work among male college athletes seemed to support this rationale, as Cunningham (2003) observed racial differences in the perceived opportunity associated with coaching and interest in pursuing that line of work. More recently, however, such differences have not been supported.

In a comprehensive study of NCAA Division I-A assistant football and men’s basketball coaches, Cunningham et al. (2006) found no evidence of differences in intentions to seek a head coaching position, despite perceptions of substantial barriers that might impede that pursuit. Similar findings were demonstrated in the current investigation of college athletes (Study 1). Thus, the problem of the underrepresentation of racial minorities in the coaching ranks does not appear to be a result of a lack of interest. On the contrary, athletes of color in this investigation expressed greater intentions to be a collegiate coach, even in the face of perceived barriers. Thus, the underrepresentation of coaches of color appears to be a function of human resource decisions (i.e., personnel selection; Cunningham & Sagas, 2005); historical precedents (Hill, 2004); donor and alumni expectations (Wong, 2002); or discrimination (Brown, 2002; Lawrence, 2004; Sagas & Cunningham, 2005).

Findings from the study also contribute to the understanding of career choices people make. As previously noted, the pattern of results among racial minorities was not congruent with the theoretical tenets (Bandura, 2000; Lent et al., 1994) or past empirical research that has examined the influence of barriers (Cunningham et al., 2005, 2007; Lent et al., 2000, 2003). Rather, our findings are more consistent with an emerging stream of research in the diversity literature pointing to differential impact of diversity on Whites and racial minorities (Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992).

According to the nonsymmetry hypothesis, the effects of being different from others in a group or dyad will be more negative for someone who is not accustomed to that role (e.g., Whites) than it is for someone who regularly occupies such a position (e.g., racial minorities). Thus, for example, being demographically different from one’s supervisor might have a stronger, more negative impact on well-being for a White employee than it would for an employee of color. In support of this rationale, Tsui et al. (1992) found that the effects of being demographically different from others in the group produced more negative effects for Whites and men than they did for racial minorities and women.

Given the pattern of findings in our two studies, we suspect that similar nonsymmetrical effects might be taking place here. That is, athletes of color expected to experience discrimination, even suggesting that “It’s a White man’s world” (Study 2), and there is evidence that racial minority athletes
continually experienced discrimination during their collegiate playing days (Singer, 2005). Thus, for these athletes, racial discrimination might be a given. Therefore, the fact that they might also experience such negative treatment in the coaching context apparently did little to assuage their efficacy expectations or interest in coaching. We would not expect similar findings for Whites, as facing barriers based on their demographics would likely negatively influence their expectations. Indeed, past research using predominantly White samples (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2005) bears witness to this relationship. Thus, in terms of theory development, we suspect that people’s demographics might moderate the previously articulated relationship between barriers and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000).

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strengths of the present research, there are also limitations. First, the data from both studies were collected from athletes at a single university. Thus, it is possible that the pattern of findings is context-specific. The fact that the pattern of results mirrors those of recent studies conducted in other contexts (Cunningham et al., 2006) allays some of these fears, however.

Second, some may perceive our decision to take notes rather than to audiotape the focus group interview as a limitation. Indeed, such concerns would be legitimate if we were unable to capture some of what the athletes conveyed. It is worth noting, however, that the decision is supported in the literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Our use of focus groups in Study 2 allowed us to build on the survey research from Study 1 because we were able to begin providing a deeper, layered understanding (see Inglis, 1992) of how athletes might think about the issue of entering the coaching profession.

Finally, our decision to interview only men in Study 2 could be viewed as a limitation. The decision was largely based on the lack of gender differences observed in Study 1. We do recognize, however, that women could have provided a different pattern of responses. Thus, future researchers should seek to include women in their qualitative analyses as well.

Given the results of the present study, we advance several possibilities for future research endeavors. First, researchers should consider further testing and expanding social cognitive career theory. We have suggested that race might moderate some relationships, but other extensions—especially those with a diversity focus—might be warranted. Second, longitudinal work with athletes entering the coaching profession is needed. How do their anticipated outcomes, whether positive or negative, materialize? How long do they plan
to remain in coaching? Answering these questions could shed more light on the underrepresentation of racial minorities in the coaching profession, an endeavor that is sorely needed.

References


