THE ATHLETIC DREAM: THE QUEST FOR WORK EQUALITY IN AN UNEQUAL SOCIETY

Twinet Parmer
The Ohio State University

Victoria D. Coleman
Purdue University

ABSTRACT

African American males have not been afforded adequate access to the work place, and therefore, their work history has been characterized by underemployment and unemployment. However, many African American males have adopted the athletic dream as a path to fame, status, and equality. The purpose of this article is to discuss the quest for equality through the athletic dream in a society where social, cultural, and economic factors limit career development and subsequent work experiences.

INTRODUCTION

This article provides a discussion of the quest for equality through the athletic dream in a society where inherent social, cultural, and economic factors limit career development and subsequent work experiences. The "athletic dream" is defined as the desire of African American youngsters to pursue super stardom through athletics (Parmer, 1987; 1993; 1994). The perception is that athletic performance provides a quick and easy path to success. Such pursuit presumably results in upward mobility characterized by fame, fortune, and status. The athletic dream is especially significant for certain sports where males have traditionally excelled. While the quest for super stardom can exist for any athlete, proportionately more black than white males seem to pursue the dream (Braddock, 1980; McPherson, 1974).

Pursuit of the dream by black males is not a new phenomenon. In the past, other ethnic groups have attempted to utilize the dream as a means of gaining upward mobility. Typically, this has been true for male ethnics of lower socioeconomic status who resided in urban areas (Axthelm, 1980; Braddock, 1980; Weinberg & Arond, 1952). Weinberg and Arond (1952) noted that there has been an ethnic succession to sport. For example, this pattern existed in basketball for Jewish and Irish youngsters in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s (Axthelm, 1980, p. xi). In a pattern similar to that of other ethnic groups, the lives of black males have also been influenced by sport, but the pattern has become problematic for them. Very often black male athletes see athletics as a more attainable career goal than one requiring academic training (Edwards, 1984; Oliver, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1967). Subsequently, their lack of academic training may limit career development, work experiences, and eventually, status attainment.

Dillard noted that career development theories are formulated on two assumptions: freedom of choice, and unlimited access to upward mobility. However, career development research has generally not been designed to account for the inherent social, cultural, and economic factors which influence work within the African American community (Dillard, 1980). According to Smith (1983), ". . .race is the more prepotent factor in determining one's status, income and career development patterns. . . .A major issue in career literature is untangling what is truly racial about an individual's career development" (p. 167). Historically, African American males have not been privileged to have access to the work place. Without access, economic and social conditions such as limited educational resources and knowledge often serve as barriers which impinge upon career development and subsequent work experiences.

WORK IN AN UNEQUAL SOCIETY

Work is an interactive process, defining who we are as individuals and how we see ourselves and others in relationship to society (Cook, 1991). Work is a viable part of the human existence and is therefore important to the development of a psychologically healthy individual. Those who are unable to obtain a level of satisfaction in their work are likely to develop a negative self concept (Super, 1953). Understanding the role of work for all individuals is a complex process. However, because of different social, economic, and cultural experiences, understanding what is important about work for minorities, specifically African Americans, is often problematic (Leong, 1991; Parmer, 1987; Smith, 1983). The literature suggests that career development for African Americans has been examined more frequently than for any other minority group (Smith, 1983). But the literature continues to be incomplete and inconsistent about African Americans' actual work experiences. It has been documented that a large portion of this group continues to be unemployed and underemployed, which leads to a history of negative work satisfaction. For example, African Americans historically have worked in low paying and low status Social, Realistic, and Conventional Work Environments (Arbona &

Novy, 1991; Gottfredson, 1978; Holland, 1985; Parmer, 1987). Thus, it is essential to understand the qualities that African American males seek in their work experiences as well as the barriers that prevent them from achieving a desirable level of satisfaction in their work.

African American males and females have always worked in America (Chester, 1983). However, after almost 400 years in the workforce, numerous racial barriers remain. Racial barriers are detrimental to the career development process because they limit access and exposure to the world of work. The significance of studying race as an influence on barriers to career development is supported by a number of scholars (Sims, 1979; Smith, 1983). For instance, Sims (1979) has made the following assertion:

> It is particularly important to study the educational and occupational expectations and aspirations of black high school students because of the many social, political, and economic factors impinging upon the lives of the entire black race. The history of black people has been characterized by the existence of oppression from the dominant white culture in America. Thus, Blacks have always been denied many educational and occupational opportunities (among other things). (p. 175)

Racial barriers to the career development of blacks often translate into underemployment and unemployment (Coleman & Barker, 1991, 1992; Parmer, 1987). For example, one study of underemployment and unemployment rates suggested that "the jobless rates for black youth were more than twice those of white youth across every educational attainment category" (Devens, Leon, & Sprinkle, 1985, p. 31). In other words, black youth with less than four years of high school have an unemployment rate double that of white youths with similar educational experience. For black youth with one to three years of college, the unemployment rate is statistically three times higher than that of white youth. Consequently, black youth often receive no reward for the desire to work and thus often are not motivated to make career plans.

Many black youth will never work; instead they will remain permanently idle and unproductive members of the underclass (Auletta, 1982). Although there are working members of the underclass, many will be constantly unemployed and never achieve socioeconomic mobility. The underclass typically has been composed of black, urban, inner city youth who lack mobility and are removed from mainstream society. Consequently, many members of that population adopt behaviors inconsistent with the values and mores of society. Work, as it relates to unemployment and underemployment, is the norm for many black adolescents within the urban population; some have attempted to overcome barriers by adopting the athletic dream as a way out of the underclass.

SPORT IN AMERICA

The desire to pursue a career in athletics can be attributed to the position that athletics has been afforded in American society. Sport as a social phenomenon can be observed because of its pervasiveness at all levels (Leonard, 1980; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1983). For example, Boyle (1963) reported that sport affects all of life such that "for better or worse, it gives form and substance to much in American life" (p. 85). This phenomenon can be observed in the amount of time, money, and energy devoted to sport. As spectators, Americans have become consumed with sport fever, as evidenced by what is paid for tickets to athletic events and by the amount of money spent by the media to produce athletic activities (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1983).

Besides watching athletic events, average Americans have also increased their participation in sports (McCallum, 1984). Many Americans work out with Jane Fonda, run marathons, jog, play tennis, ski, and hold memberships in health clubs. Spreitzer and Snyder (1975) found that a majority of both men and women felt that "sports are part of being a well-rounded person. . .that sports are valuable because they teach youngsters self-discipline" (p. 90). The magnitude of the fitness craze can be understood in terms of the revenue generated. As a forerunner of the fitness craze, Jane Fonda's workout book sold 1.25 million hard-back copies and 500,000 copies in paperback sales (McCallum, 1984).

Television has become a major socializing force in American society. In addition to the media generating interest in sport, it is also a major influence on the black male's selection of role models (Berry & Mitchell-Kerman, 1982; Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1983). For example, powerful media attention to sport may be partially responsible for the fact that Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson are more recognizable than the late Thurgood Marshall. This is significant because low income minority children watch more television than children from higher socioeconomic levels (Berry & Mitchell-Kerman, 1982). Generally, television has a negative impact on the minority individual. Through stereotypical presentations of families, males, and females, it devalues and often communicates inaccurate information about cultures and values. Such information may impair the sense of self and transmit values which would not facilitate wholesome development (Berry & Mitchell-Kerman, 1982). However, because of the media status of athletes, emulation is often viewed as positive.

Parents are also attracted to the sport role model. Edwards (1982, 1984) stated that they are the first to encourage and reward athletic involvement. Due to the prevalence of elite African American athletes who are starters in revenue-producing sports, parents believe that their child can achieve a similar status. This vicarious dreaming by parents may be a means of accepting their own limited accomplishments. Thus, parents see their child's success in athletics as an attainable goal, whereby they themselves can become vindicated and recognized in a world which has proven to be a struggle for them (Edwards, 1984). Parents also view sport values as being important in the

process of socialization. They often see early participation as another way to enhance the socialization process of children. The utilization of sport as another means of socialization is substantiated by Snyder and Spreitzer (1973), who found that "one is socialized into sports in the same manner that one might assimilate a religious or political orientation" (p. 249). Therefore, the family, because of its initial influence, is certainly primary in this process.

SPORT AND THE BLACK MALE ATHLETE

For blacks, sport holds an even greater significance than for many other groups. For over three centuries, black Americans have been struggling for citizenship and equality in American society. Yet, only in sports and entertainment can it be said—with some reservations—that blacks have made considerable progress toward equality. For black Americans, many role models have been athletes and entertainers (Ashe, 1977; Hines, 1964; Olsen, 1968). Arthur Ashe (1977) stated that black role models have been individuals who were "runnin' and jumpin' and singin' and dancin'" (p. 2).

In these two areas, no ethnic group with similar restrictions has made as much progress in such a short time (Young, 1963). As a result of the visibility and performance of black athletes and the collective pride in their accomplishments, sport has been assigned a certain significance. Male athletes as symbols for the black race have been significant since the boxing careers of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis propelled them to notoriety in the early 1900s and 1930s, respectively. This trend has become more prevalent since the 1940s, when Jackie Robinson became the first black athlete admitted to major league baseball. Since that time, sport has been thought to serve as a method of mobility if an individual demonstrated athletic ability and a competitive spirit (Govan, 1971). Olsen (1968), in an interview with noted historian Sterling Stuckey, described the role and influence of early sport role models for blacks:

> All along, the black athlete like Joe Louis has meant something to black middle-class people that is quite different from what athletes mean to the society at large. The black athlete is like the black poet in that he is able to do something—in this case on the field—that the Negro is not able to do off the field, or in life in general. The old-style black athlete, within the narrow confines of the sports setting, could meet the white man on his own terms and demonstrate his worth. (p. 18)

An excellent example of a legendary sport role model was Joe Louis. It has been said that "the Brown Bomber was black America's silent deity" (Chalk, 1975, p. 180). In order to explain what Joe Louis meant to blacks, Young (1963) provided an example of an old gentleman encountered in a hotel lobby who was inquiring about the presence of Joe Louis at the hotel. After Young responded that Louis was indeed in the hotel and provided directions, the old gentleman said, "Thank you. I just want to see him before I die. I just

want to touch the hem of his garment" ((p. 8). Touching the hem of Joe Louis' garment is symbolic of a traditional desire for people, and more specifically black people, to have a messianic individual who will help them overcome the types of oppression that they have faced. This statement by the old man was a traditional expression of hope for future generations.

Seemingly, accessibility to certain sports prompts black youngsters, parents, and others to see sports figures as acceptable role models. Olsen (1968) examined one of the many reasons for their attraction to sport role models. He offers the explanation that in a racist and segregated society, sports afford an opportunity for the black man to dominate on the field or court, something he is unable to do elsewhere in society. Further, the attraction to sport role models is influenced by the ability of the model to dominate and to obtain power and recognition relative to the style of play (Riley, 1974). Riley (1974) stated that it was a style characterized by "passion and grace and urgency. . . .the movement, the act, the fact of living whole can be contained in an instant like that. . ." (p. 96). The implications for such style suggest that for "those denied other accesses to power, here is life" (Riley, 1974, p. 96).

If opportunities in other areas are perceived as limited, blacks will attempt to demonstrate competence through athletics. The perception of limited opportunities in a society where social, economic, and political realities historically limit access supports the notion that it is easy to be a professional athlete. Therefore, because of the status and esteem given to athletes, blacks have tended to identify athletics as a profession which will provide both work and a professional career with status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Why should academic counselors and other helping professionals be concerned about the athletic dream as a means to equality for the African American male athlete? One reason is that "elite" or star athletes are likely to be African American males who are very visible because they participate in the revenue-producing sports. These individuals come to counseling with different issues around work and career and thus challenge the expertise of a counselor who functions as though monoculturalism continues to be the norm. In fact, ethical guidelines require that counselors, when working in a diverse environment, no longer operate from the values of the dominant culture (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

A second reason for counselors to consider this issue is that more and more counselors who work with African American athletes are being called upon to provide services beyond the realm of athletics (Parmer, 1993; 1994). New demands require that counselors become more accountable for addressing all aspects of the African American athletes' experiences while in school and beyond their playing careers. Therefore, the counselor must have a greater understanding of who African American athletes are and what motivates them

as people. Thus, counselors who work with African American male athletes must have an understanding of the significance and role of the cultural milieu in shaping their dreams. An intervention within this context may involve recruiting, as personal mentors and academic advisors, African American males who have had similar urban experiences or former athletes who are able to work closely with student-athletes.

Counselors may be inclined to ignore the need to examine their current system as it relates to the personal and career development services to African American male athletes. However, monocultural techniques and those that do not provide services which are congruent to the career and work needs of the athletes are no long appropriate. Because the educational goal of the athletes is to strive for work equality through athletics and because the goal of the institution is to provide the education which will facilitate this process for the athletes, there are significant implications relating to policy, training, counseling, and research.

First, understanding and resolving work and career development behaviors can be difficult for anyone. But when compounded by minority status, young adulthood, and athletic status, these issues become even more problematic. The athletic dream for African Americans begins when families and significant others realize that a child may have athletic ability which peaks in college as the last entree to a job in professional sports. Yet, there is very little emphasis on career development in the elementary and middle school (Seligman, Weinstock, & Helfin, 1991). Further, little attention has been paid to the career experiences of young adults as they make the transition from school to work (Salomone & Mangicaro, 1991). Policy must be changed in order to provide career development information across the life span of the athlete (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). Because personal problems can confound career issues, what is needed are systematic programs designed to ensure that athletes work toward three goals: (a) pursue dreams other than the athletic dream; (b) learn to make a smooth transition from the job of athletic performance to a job in the workforce; and (c) make post-athletic career plans and psychological adjustments. For example, a number of developmental models designed to assist athletes in identifying life skills useful in making transitions from the profession of athletics to a career in the work force have been outlined (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992; Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992).

A second significant implication for counselors to understand is that the role of work and the process of career development for African American male athletes is complex. In order to facilitate the career development of this population, academic counselors and other helping professionals who work with them must acquire specialized skills and knowledge of their community and environment. This is significant because many "elite" athletes live in urban black communities. Although no monolithic black community exists, there is a body of literature that acknowledges the presence of "a social system. . .value consensus and congruence. . .held together by adherence to commonly shared

values and goals" (Blackwell, 1985, p. 14). Billingsley (1992) identified four factors which describe the presence of a black community. He noted that most black people are bound geographically in communities, and within this environment there is a sense of community which fosters a shared set of values, an identification with a common heritage, and an identification with various organizations and institutions, such as churches and schools (p. 72). Counselors must assess their skills by asking, "What do I know about the black community? What do I know about the career development of this population?"

The third point for counselors to remember is that Eurocentric or traditional counseling techniques may not be appropriate for counseling African American student-athletes. Counselors must be aware of their limitations when counseling this population, as well as ways to overcome these obstacles that may interfere with the counseling process. Counselors must be aware of their stereotypes about African American athletes and how these may facilitate bias in the helping relationship. For example, what assumptions do the counselors hold about the families of African American male athletes (Parmer, 1992)? Issues such as values, language and communication style, assessment techniques and practices, and learning style must be considered (Richardson, 1993). Pre-college training may be in traditional educational environments but is also pursued in non-traditional settings such as community centers and/or religious institutions provided by those individuals more familiar with the values and culture of the black community. In addition, counselors must be aware that although they may have training in specific techniques, given their limited world view the best source for learning about African American male athletes may be the athletes themselves. This notion is consistent with the goals of counseling, which are "to help clients to understand and clarify their views of their lifespace, and to learn to reach their self-determined goals through meaningful, well-informed choices. . ." (Burks & Stefflre, 1979, p. 14).

Finally, there continues to be a dearth of research and literature related to the career development of African American student-athletes. A wealth of opportunity exists to explore topics such as the qualities athletes seek in work before and after a career in sports, the role of parents in the athletic dream process, the impact of life skills training on work behavior, the role of longitudinal studies in assessing specific aspects of career and work across the life span, and the influence of the black community in fostering work values. An examination of the work behavior of African American males would provide information about motivations, aspirations, and decisions made relative to career behavior. The significance of work and the absence of systematic research which would provide a clear picture of the career behavior of African American male athletes dictate the need to know more about the process of career development for that population.

CONCLUSION

This article has outlined issues associated with African American males' desire to achieve work equality and overcome barriers to status attainment by pursuing the athletic dream. There continues to be a major deficiency in the research literature in understanding how the athletic dream affects the career development of such athletes. Academic counselors have the responsibility to develop programs which will foster a successful transition from the job of an "elite" athlete to a career in the workplace. Overall, some gains have been made in addressing the school-to-work needs of African American male athletes. However, many programs have not adequately addressed the needs of black athletes because academic counselors are not always culturally aware of the athletic dream within the context of the African American experience.

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Twinet Palmer, Ph. D., is an assistant professor in the counselor education program at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on three areas: the career development of African Americans (the athletic dream and work values); issues affecting African American families (counseling and wellness); and holistic sexuality education (parent-child sexuality communication).

Victoria D. Coleman, Ph. D., is a counseling psychologist and an assistant professor of vocational education at Purdue University. She is a licensed psychologist, counselor, social worker, and marriage and family therapist. Coleman conducts research and publishes extensively on the career development of multicultural and special needs populations.