
AN ASSESSMENT OF WILSON AND FRAZIER'S PERSPECTIVES ON RACE AND RACIAL LIFE CHANCES

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Wilson's Perspective: The Declining Significance of Race

Changes in the mode of production, economy, and advances in technology has affected the situational-circumstances, cultural context, social exchanges, and interactions between Blacks and Whites. Wilson's (1978) basic tenet seems to suggest that American society has undergone race-specific changes resulting in the declination of race as a significant determinant of cultural success. Moreover, these race-specific changes have contributed to the rising importance of economic class position in determining life chances (i.e. the acquisition of scarce resources, material success, social prestige, privilege, and power). Wilson (1978) contends that because of social structural changes, America has progressed through three stages of race relations: (1) the Antebellum South/Pre-Industrial stage, (2) the Industrial stage, and (3) the Post-Industrial/Modern Industrial stage.

During the Pre-Industrial (Antebellum South) stage, the economy was based on production, especially in the south. Blacks were the primary source of free labor. Social exchanges between Blacks and Whites were affected by the situational context of slave owners (usually White men) and slaves (usually Black people). Production and management was effective and efficient because Blacks did not have any horizontal or vertical mobility within the slave-caste system as evidenced by the nonexistence of pay increases and movement to higher positions. The plantations owners' interests (e.g. their investment in slavery, slave discipline, plantation production, and costs) were legally and socially protected by an impartial, value-laden judicial system.

Northern industrial expansion began during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Since slavery was abolished in the north, the Industrial stage witnessed class conflict develop from legal, formal, and informal social practices of Jim Crowism. Thus, even in a slave-free state, Jim Crow laws eliminated Black competition and reflected the rising power of the White laborer. Enforced Jim Crow laws demonstrated that racial group affiliation prohibited social advancement. Additionally, the fact that certain classes of Whites openly participated in informal practices of racial oppression served as evidence that racial group characteristics adversely impacted social success. Prior to the New Deal era, as Whites were protesting and striking for better employment conditions and compensation, unskilled, semiskilled, and non-unionized Blacks were hired into industry as under-cutters or strikebreakers (Blacks

were being employed for less pay). The employment industry's actions surely perpetuated and intensified social conflict between Blacks and Whites. Eventually, industries ignored racial norms, reversed racial policies and began actively hiring Blacks, which increased their social mobility. However, social tension, envy, jealousy, hatred, and contempt for Blacks remained, making equitable liberty and the pursuit of happiness racially specific (Wilson, 1978).

It was not until the end of the New Deal era, post-World War II, and the 1960's and 1970's, that the significance of race began to decline. The above mentioned historical events signified the beginning of the Post- or Modern Industrial stage, where a free open market system with supposed equal opportunity to pursue and be employed in primary (career-oriented with opportunities for advancement or upward mobility) and secondary (marginal semiskilled jobs with limited advancement and benefits) mobility jobs became the norm. Equitable opportunities became available for Blacks as individuals were hired based on their ability to help companies advance. Hence, Blacks and Whites began competing for wealth, prestige, and power because companies were more concerned with technological advances and being elite in their respective industries. This is the stage that race had declined in its significance, as ability became the proving factor for advancement. Individuals' abilities, skills, and relative employment status (primary or secondary occupations) created different classes, which led to better life chances for some and worse for others.

Several other transitional stages coincided with the three stages of American race relations. Continuously long periods of racial oppression dominated social exchanges during the Antebellum South. The Industrial stage inherently had systems of racial inequality oriented around employment, income, education, housing and health. However, the Post-Industrial stage witnessed the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968, and Affirmative Action, which afforded minorities the right to public accommodations, the right to vote, the right to fair housing, and equitable consideration for job opportunities, respectively. Essentially, these structural and social changes created a society motivated by profit, and economic class more than racial group affiliation dictated opportunities to achieve successful cultural goals (Wilson, 1978).

Frazier's Perspective: Racial Class Transcendence

Alternatively, Frazier's (1957) perspective concerning the Black bourgeoisie seems to imply that the life chances of contemporary African-Americans are similarly dependent upon racial group affiliation and racial exchanges, just as Negroes' life chances, cultural goals, social circumstances, and conditions had been influenced by their traditional encounters with Whites. Frazier (1957) seems to be implying that the emergence of Black class stratification, particularly the Black middle class, was

influenced by race-specific historic events and social exchanges. He posits that the southern plantation system of agriculture developed on the basis of the “enslaved Negro labor” (Frazier, 1957:9). The plantation system was generally divided by field servants and house servants. The house servants lived in close association with their masters, and learned the European culture and speech at a much faster pace than field slaves. House servants received moral and religious instruction as a form of discipline, while field servants were subject to brutal beatings as a form of discipline. Given the differences in treatment, house servants identified and were socially bonded to their masters, while field servants probably did not identify nor feel bonded to their slave masters because of the harsh conditions to which they were subjected. Free Negroes residing in places where plantations were not established experienced different social conditions and circumstances as they were able to accumulate wealth and pursue life chances at a better success rate than both house and field servants. Moreover, White slave owners decided whom they wanted as house servants and whom they wanted as field servants. Free Negro status along with Whites’ interactions with Blacks and decisions concerning Blacks’ positions on the plantation could have contributed to their positions in society when the economy changed to a free market system (Frazier, 1957:12-15). It logically follows that Frazier’s description of free Negroes, house servants, and field servants could very well have been the preliminary skeletal structure for contemporary Black class stratification. Contemporary upper/upper middle, middle, and working to lower classes could very well be African-Americans’ modern-day version of traditional free Negroes, house servants, and field hands, respectively.

It seems logical to assume that Frazier’s analysis of class stratification suggests that race has historically been and may still be a significant factor in determining the life chances (particularly those that represent social prestige and power) of Blacks. Alternatively, Wilson’s analyses of class stratification suggests that race has yielded to social class position as the significant determinant of Blacks’ life chances.

In order to determine which perspective seems more appropriate relative to contemporary African-American life chances, opportunities for professional athletes in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL) were examined. Professional sports have been cited as the most successful employment sector for Black males and has been praised for its noble attempts to address and eradicate racial segregation and discrimination (Braddock, 1989:54). Sports has provided Black athletes with opportunities to succeed and assimilate into the American culture (Coakley, 1978:274). Furthermore, African-American NBA players currently comprise 78% to 80% of the well-compensated employees on the 29 NBA teams. Currently, the 31 (soon to be 32) NFL teams have approximately 1,736 total players, and 67% to 75% are African-American. It appears that Black male basketball and football athletes have a higher representation at the professional sport level than

in any other prestigious occupation. Apparently, professional sports represent the model of equal opportunity, as professional athletics seem to be the only area where individuals are said to be judged and hired solely on the basis of their ability. Professional sports seemingly enhance social mobility, advance the material life chances, and increase certain opportunities that Black men would not otherwise experience (Braddock, 1980).

On the surface, professional sports appear to be the model institution for Blacks to be involved in; however, the professional athletic industry has numerous flaws. Professional sports have noticeable levels of discrimination, inequality, and injustice. To begin with (comparable to slaves at auctioning and slave trade markets), the Black athlete is regarded as a machine (from body measurements, estimations of physical endurance and strength, which traditionally begins at NBA camps and NFL combines). Additionally (comparable to the mentality of plantation or slave owners), White team owners, executives, general managers, and coaches use Black athletes as they see fit then disregard them when they (Black athletes) become ineffective on the playing field (Edwards, 1969:25).

Rainville and McCormick's (1978) findings suggest that the content of announcers and sportscasters reveal that Black players receive more criticism and less praise than White players. Announcers build a positive reputation for White players and indirectly create negative reputations for Blacks, particularly by focusing on the Black athlete's social background during live broadcasts. Also announcers have a tendency to make references concerning White athletes' mental capabilities more than for Black players. For example, it seems to be the norm (for sport's announcers or broadcasters) to focus on a White quarterback's mental ability (ability to read defenses, understand the game plan, call plays, etc.) or refer to him as "cerebral," while openly discussing a Black quarterback's physical abilities (use of arms and legs) more than their intellectual ability (sometimes you may hear that a Black athlete is an "articulate" or "bright" guy). Moreover, it is all too common to hear sport's announcers, media agents, coaches, and other players refer to Black players as physical specimens and even freaks of nature. Such comments are skewed more towards Black players than White. The problem here is that when announcers make this the focal point, without attempting to strike balance (in terms of intellectual ability), it perpetuates social stigmas, stereotypes, discrimination, and inequality. Furthermore, media agents have a tendency to crucify the wrongdoings of Black athletes to the point of social convictions, ridicule, and condemnation before any legal proceedings begin, but this is certainly not the norm for White athletes (e.g. The 2000 NFL season: Baltimore Raven's linebacker Ray Lewis (Black) as opposed to former Green Bay Packer tight end Mark Chmura (White) in their differences in NFL income fines: \$250,000 for an innocent Ray Lewis who pleaded guilty to misdemeanor obstruction of justice, and a noticeably smaller penalty for Mark Chmura, acquitted of all charges,

even though both athletes' actions represented conduct detrimental to the NFL).

Professional sports certainly has inequality relative to professional/managerial selection processes between Blacks and Whites. Out of the 29 NBA teams (recall Black player representation is 75%-80%) there are currently ten Black head coaches – a little over one-third of all NBA head coaches (Nate McMillian/Seattle Sonics, Sidney Lowe/Vancouver Grizzlies, Alvin Gentry/Los Angeles Clippers, Isaiah Thomas/Indiana Pacers, Paul Silas/Charlotte Hornets, Doc Rivers/Orlando Magic, Byron Scott/New Jersey Nets, Lenny Wilkens/Toronto Raptors, and Leonard Hamilton/Washington Wizards). The National Football League (recall Black players make up 67%-75% of NFL rosters) is much worse as Blacks who had previous assistant coaching experience had until recently (if you consider Art Shell in 1989, recent) never become head coaches even though opportunities to serve as assistant coaches was a major determinate for obtaining a head coaching position. The National Football League appears to have a “buddy referral system” as its means for recruiting head coaches. Head coaching jobs in the National Football League are sometimes filled before they are known about. The candidates are usually referrals and even friends of other prominent individuals; therefore, Blacks are not usually considered for head coaching jobs (even though they are qualified) because of the buddy referral system, which is a definite form of discrimination (Braddock, 1989:72). (Currently, the NFL has 32 teams with three current Black head coaches: Dennis Green/Minnesota Vikings, Tony Dungy/Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and Herman Edwards/New York Jets, and just three other former head coaches in the history of the league: Art Shell/Los Angeles Raiders, Ray Rhodes/Philadelphia Eagles and Green Bay Packers, Terry Robiskie/Washington Redskins interim coach for final 4 games of 2000 NFL season.) As far as NBA or NFL team ownership, general managers, high-ranking executives, and other positions of power, Black representation is even smaller than that mentioned for NBA and NFL head coaches. The prevailing message seems to be that certain positions of power and ultimate social prestige are still limited, restricted, reserved, and controlled by White owners.

A careful examination of the NBA and NFL reveals that these two supposedly model leagues are grossly imperfect in terms of franchise social mobility (from the courts and fields to positions in the front office). Despite these gross imperfections, both leagues' willingness to consider Blacks as coaches may be a sign of changes to come. The important point of clarification is that these changes (i.e. promotion to positions of prestige and power) apparently will remain very much dependent upon predominantly White ownership. Hence, race (even for proclaimed model leagues) is still a significant factor when determining the life chances of those Blacks associated with professional sports.

Summary and Conclusions

Recall that Wilson suggests that race has declined as the number one factor that once determined the life chances of minorities. Essentially, Wilson believes that Whites do not have as much control over the life chances of Blacks as they did in the early stages of race relations (i.e. Antebellum South and Industrial). Frazier would argue that the life chances of Blacks are still controlled by Whites. For example, Frazier states “Blacks seize opportunities as they arise but because Blacks don’t control these opportunities, these opportunities were not of their own making, so Blacks lack control over their own destiny.” National forces or White people control the destiny of Black people, which affects the Black community class stratification (Landry, 1978:212). Wilson discussed how opportunities became abundant to Blacks over a period of time but it appears that he failed to recognize that Whites controlled the opportunities that Blacks had. White elites (team owners, presidents, and general managers) still have the power to make decisions to hire Blacks (as evidenced by two different sport leagues); therefore, they control the destiny of Black athletes (Frazier’s perspective). Wilson has only described life chances in terms of Blacks’ ability to seize the opportunities afforded to them by Whites and may have narrowly conceptualized life chances as the acquisition of material possession. If we accept this version of life chances, then perhaps Wilson’s contention has some merit. After all, social class (to a certain degree) has always afforded certain privileges and luxuries (evidenced by Negroes purchasing their freedom to become free Negroes) (Frazier, 1957). However, it appears that Wilson became too indulged in the rising opportunities for Blacks and neglected to recognize the people or persons in charge of those opportunities. Frazier recognized that power over one’s own destiny is the true sign of freedom and opportunity. Given that the masses of Blacks have never had complete control over their destiny (since the beginning of slavery), it is difficult to suggest that race has declined in significance in relation to Blacks and their life chances.

Frazier suggests that as early as slavery, Blacks’ success had depended upon White rule because Whites controlled the opportunities that Blacks received. Frazier’s perspective seems more appropriate and credible for contemporary African-American life chances (at least for the supposed “model” professional arena). Through its pay inequality, administrative, and managerial discrimination, the sport’s arena illustrates how race is still a significant factor in determining the types of franchise-related opportunities Black athletes receive. It logically follows from Frazier’s perspective that just as White slave masters controlled whom they made house servants and whom they made field servants, White owners and presidents of NBA and NFL teams control who will be administrators, managers, and coaches. If we were to examine public accommodation facilities (Feagin, 1991) or other institutions (corporations, legal, and social justice systems) that potentially affect Blacks’ life chances, it may similarly reveal that Whites still hold positions of power, which control the

social order, regulation, and sanctioning of Blacks as well as the majority of opportunities afforded to Blacks (Arrigo, 1999; Cureton, 2000(a); Cureton 2000(b); Gilbert, 2000; Hagan, 1994; Jones-Brown, 2000; Reiman, 2001; Tittle, 1994).

Essentially, the structure of racial class stratification has not changed as Wilson suggests, but has transcended time. Because Wilson appears to focus on opportunity over time, his perspective is limited and should not be taken as a strong indication for improved race-related life chances for Blacks in the United States. Because Frazier's perspective assesses power and people who have control of their destinies, one can see how the significance of race has not declined but has transcended time.

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