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Intro to Sociological Theory

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December 8th, 2023

Perception vs Reality in the Realm of Sport

There are two aspects to work and activities that are done in public. There is the perception; of what one concept looks like from the outside or a specific group. Then there is reality; what happens or what the subject's primary intent is. The National Football League has a steady and successful owner-to-player-power relationship. But that relationship is built on exploitation and inequality, just like Karl Marx's proletariat/bourgeoisie system and capitalism. The National Basketball Association once implemented a dress code banning baggy clothes and headwear stating they were inappropriate. "They are concerned that "Main Street USA" thinks the league is too gangsta, too hip-hop, too urban, all of which is code for "too young, Black, and scary" (Zirin 2007:1). But players like Allen Iverson were expressing their own African American culture, something that W.E.B. Du Bois's "Double Consciousness" explains. Deion Sanders was a polarizing athlete who dominated both Major League Baseball and the National Football League in the 1990s. There was a time when he had a baseball and football game on the same day, and Sanders fulfilled both obligations. The perception was that he was selfish for not focusing on one sport. That could be far from the truth. Deion Sanders showed gratitude by even attempting to appease both respective parties on the same day. Sanders's onstage behavior is in line with Erving Goffman's dramaturgy concept. Perception and reality are two aspects of sport that influence how the story of sport is told.

The NFL's Owner vs Player Relationship

Capitalism is everywhere in western societies today. Societies are practically built for private corporations to take advantage of workers and average citizens to profit from them. Just like modern society, the NFL is a great representation of capitalism. The National Football League is run by 32 owners of 32 teams. The owners control the coaching staff, the players on the team, their stadium design, and other things that are related to their respective teams. But of course, they need something to run their operation, and that is where the players come in. They play the games, increase fanfare, and generate a huge share of the total profit generated from the NFL. Essentially, the owners own the means of production. And the players create the production through the games they play. This dynamic of economic production is remarkably similar to sociologist Karl Marx's concept of capitalism. Karl Marx explains how the bourgeoisie and proletariat make up production in capitalist societies. The bourgeoisie own the means of production, while the proletariat create the production, exactly like the owners and players of the National Football League. Karl Marx was very vocal about how the proletariat had almost no control over their production and wanted more support for them. And just like the proletariat, NFL players believe they are being exploited by their work. American football is a 7-day, 24-hour job when you include film study, rehabilitation, and media obligations. Additionally, football is one of the most physically taxing and dangerous sports; the players have little to no control over their team and organization. If an owner decides to discard them from their franchise, they can in an instant. Even President Donald Trump once encouraged owners to dismiss players who don't follow their bidding. "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now . . . out. He's fired. He's fired!'" (Trump 2017: 2). Players are treated as able working bodies, not human beings. As former Houston Texans owner Bob McNair once said, "We can't have

inmates running the prison” (McNair 2017:1). This statement shows you a behind-the-scenes look at how NFL owners view their players, which is very similar to how capitalists view their workers.

According to Karl Marx, it is human nature to chase commodities. Marx describes a commodity as an “object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (Marx 1859:140). The commodities that NFL owners strive to obtain include winning, a Super Bowl championship, and money. NFL owners will do anything to obtain those commodities. This path includes severing relationships with players with the tip of a pen. For example, an NFL owner can promise a player that they are the cornerstone of their franchise, the best thing since sliced bread, bound to be one of the greatest players of all time. But as soon as that player gets hurt or cannot perform, he is out of there. Capitalists value their workers as much as how much they can work for them as well. NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick explained the NFL-owner dynamic in his Netflix documentary *Colin In Black and White*. “What they don’t want you to understand is what’s being established is a power dynamic,” Kaepernick narrates. “Before they put you on the field, teams poke, prod and examine you. Searching for any defect that might affect your performance. No boundary respected. No dignity left intact” (Kaepernick 2021:1). The owner only cares if the player can perform and produce for them, the player’s well-being comes second.

NBA Dress Code, To Promote Professionalism or Limit African American Culture?

From 1984 to 1998, Michael Jordan was the perfect role model for the National Basketball Association (NBA). He was undoubtedly the best player in the league, leading his team to six NBA championships. He brought the game to new heights internationally being the first professional basketball player to own a major shoe line and dominate win an Olympic gold

medal. Most importantly, Michael Jordan did it with class. He always wore a suit and tie to his press conferences and locker room interviews. He spoke with a professional vocabulary and rarely spoke harshly against other figures. These were all aspects of Michael Jordan's persona that white America appreciated. As long as he did not make a disturbance to the white culture, he was free to do what he wanted and make as much money as he wanted. In the early 2000s, Allen Iverson was an NBA player who was the complete opposite. He wore baggy clothing in NBA public appearances. He was known for his expensive clothing and his durags. He even used to get his hair braided during NBA games. These were all aspects of African American culture that were not accepted by the mass media, especially by audiences with a heavy white population. Allen Iverson was unapologetically himself, something sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois constantly debated. "If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America?" (Du Bois 1897) Du Bois understood the division and nonacceptance of African American culture in white America, just like the nonacceptance of Allen Iverson's persona in the NBA.

In 2005, the NBA's commissioner David Stern implemented a dress code that banned chains, headgear, and other similar clothing items. The NBA stressed it was a professional move. They argued that the dress code would increase "accessibility to fans, their community service, and their professionalism – both on and off the court" (McDonald and Toglia 2010). But there was still a sense it was a decision for white audiences specifically. "Predominately white administrators of the largely black playing force were attempting to appease white, middle-class crowds..." (McDonald and Toglia 2010).

Frequently throughout the NBA season, Iverson was repeatedly fined for his wardrobe. Allen Iverson eventually had to conform to the NBA dress code. But he was just being himself,

expressing his persona W.E.B. Du Bois explained the struggle of African Americans' ability (or inability) to express themselves freely which is defined as "Double Consciousness." "He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois 1903:344).

Du Bois argued that African Americans should not hide their true selves for "white Americanism." Almost saying that you could be two people at once, one of Black culture and one of white culture. It isn't easy, but it must be done. That is the same struggle that Allen Iverson went through, the struggle of accepting Blackness or conforming to white America.

Deion Sanders's Onstage Behavior judged by Tim McCarver

Deion Sanders dominated the National Football League from 1989 to 2005. He was known for his blazing speed and his uncanny ability to intercept passes and return them to score touchdowns. And when he reached the endzone, his persona was on full display. Sanders often performed his signature high-step dance and Prime Time Shuffle which were loved by fans across the nation. As dominant as Sanders was off the field, he was more influential off it. Sanders could be seen in popular television shows, donning his signature shoes, or even in his own rap video Must Be the Money. Even with the myriad of occupations in Sanders's life, he was also a professional baseball player in Major League Baseball. Oftentimes Sanders would spend all summer playing baseball and then switch to football once the NFL season started. The decision to not play baseball or football full-time angered a lot of fans and sportscasters. They believed he was not respecting the game by not putting in his full time and perceived full effort into one profession. Hall of Fame baseball player and sportscaster Tim McCarver was one of

them. He believed Deion Sanders was selfish for not dedicating his full time to baseball.

McCarver was especially dismayed when Sanders decided to play for two Atlanta Braves games and one Atlanta Falcons game in 72 hours. McCarver said he was “flat-out wrong” for Sanders to play a baseball game, then fly to Miami for the Falcons game, and then fly back to Pittsburgh all in the same week (McCarver 1992). McCarver felt Deion Sanders was doing a disservice to baseball.

Although it looked to be a self-centered decision from Deion Sanders, that was only a perceived notion. Sociologist Erving Goffman believes that every human in a society has an impression on others in their society. Some people create their impressions for good, but others could look to deceive their audience who are observing their decisions. “A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc.” (Goffman 1953). And that same audience judges a person in society based on their impression or performance, just like McCarver describes Sanders’s performance “Where's Deion when you need him?” These were some of the remarks Tim McCarver made about Deion Sander’s inability to stick to one sport. (McCarver 1993). In the public eye, it looked like Deion Sanders was looking to play both sports for personal gain. His performance on the front stage was labeled as selfish because he was trying to play multiple sports instead of remaining loyal to one. What comes with in public or on stage as Goffman would say, comes judgement from outsiders like McCarver.

Conclusion

Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy concept was the theory and theorist closest to the main argument: Perception vs reality. The perceived impression that people put on others sometimes counters the individual’s true intent. In this case, Deion Sander’s true intent to help both teams

were contradictory to Tim McCarver's perception that he was doing it for self-centered motives.

Examining other prominent athletes would be best for further research on this topic. How do players like Odell Beckham Jr., Cam Newton, and Dennis Rodman feel about their outside persona and daily decisions being constantly attacked, whether just or unjust? All in all, every human will make decisions that will mean one thing to one group of people, but different to others.

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