# The Good and Bad of It All: Professional Black Male Basketball Players as Role Models for Young Black Male Basketball Players

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It is a generally accepted belief, affirmed in the media, that professional Black male basketball players from the National Basketball Association serve as role models for young Black males. Very little empirical evidence, however, is available about how the young men think about these relationships. Using the concept of *role model* from social learning theory as a lens, I analyze interview data drawn from a convenience sample of 19 young Black men who participated in high school basketball to investigate the idea of "professional Black male basketball players as role models." I find that young men do not necessarily accept the "good/bad" role-model dichotomy presented in the media, but rather, they are discerning in their acceptance and rejection of certain role-model attitudes and behaviors.

Il y a une croyance généralement admise et affirmée dans les médias que les joueurs noirs de l'association nationale de basket-ball (NBA) servent de modèles pour les jeunes hommes noirs. Cependant, il existe très peu de données empiriques sur ce que les jeunes hommes pensent de ces relations. En utilisant le concept de « modèle de rôle » de la théorie de l'apprentissage social, j'analyse les données provenant d'entrevues avec 19 jeunes hommes noirs qui participent au basket-ball à l'école secondaire pour enquêter sur l'idée des « joueurs noirs de la NBA en tant que modèles de rôle ». J'ai trouvé que les jeunes hommes n'acceptent pas nécessairement la dichotomie « bon/mauvais » en ce qui a trait aux modèles de rôle tels que présentés dans les médias mais plutôt qu'ils sont doués de discernement dans leur acceptation ou leur rejet de certains comportement ou attitudes de modèles de rôle.

I am not a role model. I'm not paid to be a role model. I am paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court. Parents should be role models. Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids.

> Former NBA All-Star Charles Barkley
> (1993 Nike Commercial Advertisement)

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In the early 1980s, the National Basketball Association (NBA), under the leadership of Commissioner David Stern, began cultivating the identity of the NBA to improve its commercial appeal (Cole & Andrews, 1996). This move by Stern has contemporary relevance because it provided the backdrop against which the role-model image of professional Black male basketball players developed for the young men who participated in the current study. A central concern for the NBA leadership in the 1980s was the image of the league and its professional Black players whose behaviors were thought to alienate them from the White consumer majority (Cole & Andrews, 1996).

Most of the public viewed the league, made up of 70% African American players, "as a space of racial threat and criminal menace" owing to the widely publicized incidences of violence and drug use by the league's players (Andrews 1999, p. 505). In this regard, the Black NBA players were presented by the media as an extension of a broader Black community purportedly plagued by "social pathologies" the likes of which included disproportionately high rates of homicide and other forms of criminal violence (Wilson, 1987). In a 1980s Reagan era, undergirded by a philosophy of individual responsibility and the criminalization of Black males, these social pathologies were viewed largely as a result of individual choice rather than stemming from historical discrimination and social inequality, the context in which these social pathologies arise (Wilson, 1987).

Within this sociopolitical context, Commissioner Stern, to improve the marketability and profitability of the NBA, took steps to remold the league's cultural and commercial image. He implemented various disciplinary strategies designed to curtail player behavior and began negotiating with mass media outlets, network television stations in particular, to improve the visibility of the NBA (Andrews, 2006). Although professional Black athletes historically have been considered role models for young Black males (Edwards, 1969; Lines, 2001), the actions by Stern and the NBA in the 1980s helped to cultivate a contemporary context within which professional Black male basketball players would be *marketed* as role models.

The 1984 arrival of Michael Jordan, a Black male athlete who possessed the requisite athletic talent and skill to become a superstar, helped enhance the NBA's self-generated image of a league that had been transformed (Cole & Andrews, 1996). Jordan, despite having to contend with racial stereotypes in the media that associated Black males with criminality, aggression, and physicality (Carrington, 1998, 2001; McDonald & Andrews, 2001), was remolded by various marketing agencies in an attempt to produce a racially nondescript promoter of the NBA to the world (Cole & Andrews, 1996; Andrews, 1996, Kellner, 2001; McDonald & Andrews, 2001). Although Jordan could not completely escape his Blackness, his remolding was essential to the process of what Andrews (2006), borrowing from Bryman (1999), characterizes as the Disneyization of the NBA—that is, the creation of the league as an "integrated spectacle" with the fusion of sport, logics, practices, and products of the media entertainment domain (Andrews, p. 92).

Since Jordan other professional Black male basketball players have been presented by the media and presumed by conventional wisdom to serve as role models for young Black males. Yet, these very same athletes have undergone intense

public scrutiny for behavior that violates the ideal of "role model" cultivated by the NBA and presented in the media. Berry and Smith (2000), in their analysis of media representations of African American athletes argue that the public scrutiny of Black athletes is unfair and grounded in race as the master status that defines "the actor as crime-prone, regardless of other traits, skills, or accomplishments" (p. 190). Given the tension between the NBA promoters' efforts to package an image of professional Black male basketball players that is appealing to a broader White viewing audience and the contrary media presentations that emphasize the criminality of professional Black male athletes, it seems important to understand how young Black males themselves think about professional Black basketball players as role models.

## Professional Black Male Basketball Players and Young Black Males

It is clear from the use of professional Black male basketball players in advertising campaigns that these athletes enjoy a level of celebrity and influence. Companies spend millions of dollars using athletes to serve as public spokespersons thus supporting the idea that athletes are role models. Furthermore, the NBA's emphasis on community service reinforces the idea that these Black male basketball players are role models. Still, although there is evidence that professional athletes have influence on the purchasing practices of Black teens (Armstrong, 1999; Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004; Wilson & Sparks, 1996), there is little empirical evidence to date that explores how young Black males, let alone young males in general, think about professional Black male basketball players as role models. Given the high visibility of professional Black basketball players, what is their significance as role models for young Black males?

Professional Black male basketball players are presented in the media as role models for young people in general, but the media seems to give greater significance to athletes as role models for young Black males, especially those young men from low-income communities such as the boys in the current study. These professional Black male basketball players are depicted as having achieved the American Dream (Smith, 2008). Furthermore, as Eitzen (2006) suggests, these athletes are shown to have embraced, "the American creed that everyone should aspire to a higher social position," and their lives are models for that success (p. 174). As I indicate elsewhere, these media depictions might not be "explicit calls for the young men to invest their time in trying to achieve the dream of playing basketball at the professional level," but merely appealing media depictions "of black athletes playing with their toys of consumption" that "paint desirable pictures of success for many young black men" (May 2008, p. 161). Hence, this media representation seems to improve the possibility that young Black males will view professional Black male basketball players as role models.

One underlying assumption supporting this idea of professional Black male basketball players as role model is an apparent lack of *direct* role models—that is, those role models who have sustained interpersonal contact with the subject—in many of the desolate urban communities from which these young men hail (Anderson, 1990; Davis, 1999; Hartmann, 2000; Wilson, 1987; 1996). The logic

is that since Black males experience disproportionately high rates of joblessness and incarceration—for instance, one third of all Black men between the ages of 18 and 39 can expect to be involved with the criminal justice system (see Ferber 2007)—young Black males turn to professional Black male basketball players as models for success. Furthermore, these young Black males focus primarily on professional players as role models to the exclusion of other potential role models such as doctors and lawyers (see discussion in Hartmann, 2000, p. 236). Perhaps this is a result in part of what Carrington (2001) characterizes as the hypervisibility of professional Black athletes and the affirmation that young Black males receive for their athletic pursuits (May, 2008).

Some scholars argue that the media's preoccupation with young Black males and their choice of role model often reduces a young Black male's failure or success to a simple question of whether he has chosen the "right" role model (see McKay, 1995, for example). In presenting a young Black male's success or failure as a matter of selecting the "right" role model, the media mythologizes notions of individual responsibility while at the same time failing to critically assess the structure of systemic racism, discrimination, and inequality that has helped to constrain some young Black males' choices of role models to professional athletes (May 2008; McDonald & Andrews, 2001; McKay, 1995; Wilson, 1997). In this context White viewers are able to deny the existence of institutional racism in sport and American society in general (McKay, 1995). Instead, the White viewing public can focus on which professional Black athletes serve as "good" or "bad" role models. As Wenner (1995) indicates, this "good" versus "bad" framing has serious implications because, "given the relative paucity of Black men in the public eye, sports stories about these particular good guys and bad guys are being generalized into moral lessons about something dangerously familiar: good blacks and bad blacks" (p. 228). This good Black/ bad Black imagery conjures up ideas of control and conformity and has implications for the choices of role models that the young men make in the current study.

Ferber (2007), drawing on the idea of "good" Black athletes and "bad" Black athletes as discussed by Collins (2005), argues that Black athletes who are perceived to be good are those whose bodies are controlled by White males as they were in an historical sense during slavery (p. 20). On the other hand, Black athletes are labeled as "bad boys" as a means to exert control over or "tame" them. The justification for this "taming" arises within a context where the media are constantly using its power to serve the interests of a White male power structure by highlighting the criminal behavior of Black athletes while all but ignoring similar behavior by Whites athletes (Berry & Smith, 2000; Ferber, 2007; McDonald & Andrews 2001).

Boyd (1997), in a more pointed comparison of the Black athletes who meet with media approval, uses the terms "good niggers" and "bad niggers" to draw out the slave symbolism. Boyd argues that the "nigga imagery," in limited doses, has been profitable for the NBA in general and for some players in particular. He suggests that some Black players are permitted to embrace this imagery in a convenient sense because "all forms of black popular culture are fair game for representation within the massive circuit of entertainment" (p. 140). This highly visible media representation of the good and the bad of professional Black male basketball players gives the impression to viewers that Blacks are readily sharing in the

American Dream (Andrews, 1996, 2006; Ferber, 2007; Cole & Andrews, 1996; McDonald & Andrews, 2001).

Like Boyd (1997), Wilson (1997) supports the argument that professional Black male basketball players are generally framed as either good Blacks or bad Blacks in the media. Yet for Wilson these framings are "not mutually exclusive stereotypes" because he perceives "oscillating representations" of Black professional basketball players (p. 179). Accordingly, professional Black basketball players might be represented in more complex ways that simultaneously frame them as both good and bad. Consistent with this idea of oscillating representations, Tucker (2003) locates "contemporary representations of Black male athletes within the constantly turning cycles of cultural lore" (p. 307). She argues that the dynamic of Whites' fears and desires regarding Black male athletes reflects "historical images of Black men as hypersexual criminals" and that "the methods by which White America manages its fearful and voyeuristic responses to Black male athletes are representative of how it manages its relationships to Black men generally" (p. 307). Key to Tucker's argument is the idea that cultural lore "functions as a system of documentation through representations that are saturated with history and meaning" (p. 308). Hence, for Tucker, contemporary representations of professional Black male athletes cannot escape the strictures of history that have represented Black males as a threat to be controlled.

Although this literature focuses on the complexity of contemporary representations of professional Black male athletes, I draw on it to examine the possible complex interpretations young Black males might have of professional Black male basketball players as role models. Specifically, I address the following questions: Given the media presentation of professional Black male basketball players and the conventional idea that these players serve as role models for young Black males who aspire to athletic careers, how do young Black males think of professional Black male basketball players as role models? Do they emphasize the mediated imagery of the professional Black male basketball player as a "good" versus "bad" role model? Furthermore, does social learning theory, as a means for explaining how individuals select role models, fully explain young Black males' selection of professional Black male basketball players as role models? This article is a step in conceptualizing, from empirical data, the nature of the relationship between professional Black male basketball players and those young Black males who observe the athletes' behaviors and attitudes. My analytic approach draws on the role-model concept from social learning theory.

## Social Learning Theory and Role Models

Although rooted in the ideas of psychology, social learning theory provides important concepts that can be used for understanding the potential social influence that professional Black male basketball players have on the young men in this study. The principals of social learning theory, developed for the purpose of explaining how individuals model human action, thought, and motivation (Bandura, 1977), are typically used in sport studies to focus on matters of self-efficacy, athletic outcomes, and deviance (see e.g., Coakley, 2007; Connelly, 1988; Leonard, 1998). Social learning theory is used also to explain socialization, in particular how athletes develop identities and learn and perform sports roles

(see e.g., Gadson, 2001; Jarvis, 1999). One key concept developed in this line of research is the concept of role model.

According to Bandura (1977), a pioneer in the field of social learning theory, a role model can be anyone with whom an individual comes into contact that might influence that individual's behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations. *Direct* role models, like parents, teachers, and peers, have sustained contact with individuals and can influence their everyday behavior, whereas *indirect* role models, such as professional athletes, have mediated contact with individuals—through television, for example—but still model behaviors and attitudes (Bush, et al., 2004). These role models are seen as possessing character traits that one should learn if one expects to achieve similar success.

Individuals acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations of their models through observation. This learning "takes place when an individual observes the behaviors of another person, or model, and then enacts these behaviors himself or herself in an applicable future situation" (Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006, p. 23). Although individual models provide important information that guides the acquisition of behaviors and attitudes, "the process of modeling may not be limited to straightforward imitations of all behaviors observed from a single model" (Masciadrelli, et al., p. 24). In fact, individual observers are creative and might take "only selected behaviors and attitudes from a model and then create new combinations or adaptations" (Masciadrelli, et al., p. 24). This process of drawing on a role model's attitudes and behaviors stems from the observer's belief that the role model's success is attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), a belief that might be influenced by factors such as social environment, age, and race and ethnicity.

A number of factors may mediate the nature of the relationship between the young men in this study and professional Black male basketball players. For instance, the fact that most of these young men do not have the opportunity for direct contact with professional Black male basketball players means that they establish relationships with their presumed role models through identification from a distance (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995; Wann, Ensor, & Bilyeu, 2001). Identification with a role model takes place within an immediate sociocultural context that could influence how the young men think about their role models. In addition, a young man might identify with a professional Black male basketball player, but the athlete could be among a number of role models chosen by the young man (Vescio, Wilde, & Crosswhite, 2005). Hence, the level of influence that a single role model such as a professional basketball player might have on a young man could depend on whether the young man has multiple role models. These are empirical considerations for the current study.

There are no longitudinal studies on the relationship between young Black males and professional Black male basketball players that I know of, but I speculate that the selection of a professional Black male basketball player as role model is a dynamic rather than a static selection. That is, young men likely choose a role model based on a number of factors that shift over time and space. Despite the variable use of social learning theory's role model concept in the literature, this concept still allows for investigation as to whether professional Black male basketball players are guiding models for behavior and attitudes for the young Black males in this study. I argue that the often over-simplified concept of "professional

Black male basketball player as role model" might well involve a number of interpretive meanings for the young men. I develop this argument by examining the responses of those young men who identified professional Black male basketball players as role models. Before proceeding, a brief discussion of methodology is in order.

# Methodology

The data for this article were drawn from a convenience sample of 19 young men who participated in a larger study of young Black male high school basketball players. The participants were members of the Northeast Knights basketball team in Northeast, Georgia—a metropolitan area with a population of approximately 110,000.[1] The study investigated the young men's playing experiences, as well as their aspirations for post high school athletic careers (May 2008). I gained initial access to the young men during my tenure as an assistant coach for the varsity basketball team from 1998 to 2005. As a coach and an African American male, I was able to become familiar with the young men and this familiarity facilitated the interview process.[2] At the conclusion of their playing careers, I invited each senior to participate in an exit interview about their experiences. Each interview was tape-recorded and lasted about one-and-one-half hours.

In spring 2001, after my third year of coaching the Knights, I conducted my first round of in-depth exit interviews. (There were six interviews in 2001, five in 2002, and eight in 2003.) I selected senior basketball players for a number of reasons. First, they were able to consent to their own interview because all those whom I interviewed were 18 or 19 years old. Second, these young men would be more open to criticizing coaches without fear of repercussions. Indeed, the ease with which the young men questioned me about some of my perspectives on coaching during their interviews was interesting. Finally, these young men's high school basketball careers had ended, and they could better reflect on their experiences.

During the interview I asked the young men a variety of questions including questions about their backgrounds, families, sports participation, sources of support and encouragement, friends, media, professional athletes, role models, extracurricular activities, academics, future sport orientation, and their greatest memories from sport participation (see May, 2008). About midway through each interview, given my familiarity with respondents, the character usually changed to that of an easy-flowing conversation. This is when I asked questions about particularly sensitive issues.

Once I completed my list of questions, I kept the tape recorder running and invited the young men to ask me any questions or share anything they thought was important. This invitation was significant. The players easily shared their disappointment about some of my and the other coaches' shortcomings. They criticized us for particular losses, team policies, or game strategy. In short, the young men took the opportunity to be forthright. Although the power relationship between the interviewees and me might seem to hinder open conversation, I believe that my intimate relationship with the players actually facilitated better communication than if I had been a stranger.

The Northeast Knights were average high school players in terms of height, weight, and basketball skill; they had not experienced any special recognition for their playing ability beyond the local context, but they still held aspirations of playing college and professional basketball. All of the players were African American, and most lived in one of the three low-income housing projects adjacent to the high school. Their communities were plagued with the blight associated with poor, densely populated, urban communities in which crime, drugs, violence, and a sense of hopelessness prevail (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1987). The media commonly assumes that professional athletes have the greatest influence on these communities because the high rates of joblessness, unemployment, and incarceration among adult Black males suggests that there are few direct role models for those young men who have aspirations for success outside their communities (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1987).

During my open-ended interviews with the young men, I asked them specific questions about professional athletes as role models. These questions included: Do you consider any athletes your role model? Which athletes? Why? The young men's responses to these questions provide the foundation for the arguments I make regarding the popular perception that professional Black male basketball players serve as role models. Although these questions do not address the ways in which the young men incorporate ideas about professional Black male basketball players into their everyday lives, it is a starting point for understanding how the young men conceptualize their relationships to professional Black male basketball players.

## Professional Black Male Basketball Players as Role Models

Several of the young men of Northeast selected professional Black male basketball players as role models.[3] Their selection of an athlete as a role model was based on the young men's general sense and ideas about what it means to be a role model. The young men think of a role model in much the same way as the idea is defined in the social learning literature—that is, a model that influences the observer's attitudes, behaviors, or aspirations. A sampling of the young men's responses to my request for them to "tell me what a role model is" produced the following kinds of responses: "a role model is somebody you look up to," "someone who is positive," "someone who gives back to the community," or "someone you want to live like."

Although role models might also be engaged in behavior characterized by some as negative (Lockwood et al., 2002), the young men's conceptualization of professional Black male basketball players as role models focuses on those characteristics that have been defined by the media as positive and desirable. In other words, they focused on the kinds of behaviors that Boyd (1997), Ferber (2007), Wenner (1995), and Wilson (1997) among others have identified as media-constructed attributes of "good" Black athletes. Each young man viewed his chosen role model as a resource to the overall Black community. Thus, the young men take into consideration professional players' off-the-court behavior. For instance, respondents tell what they like about the athletes that they consider role models.

Shaq is my role model. He is a person that's, uh, you know, he does things good on the court and off the court. Like he's, uh, you know, a good citizen.

I would say Michael Jordan would be my role model. He is a good person you know. Uh, yeah, Michael Jordan is a good person, and he gives back to his neighborhood and do stuff for the kids.

In my eyes, a role model is, like, somebody who is, like, just a positive, just positive all the way around man. Tim Duncan, that's a positive man. He does a lot of things with the kids too. He donates, like, some computers or something to the Boys Club or something like that.

For the respondents, these professional Black male basketball players are role models because they fit the mold of an individual who contributes to the community. These young men have selected professional Black male basketball players as their role models focusing on general themes of behavior that the media has presented as the expected behavior of role models in the sociocultural context of America. The young men describe their role models as "a good citizen," "a good person," and "a positive man." Or they indicate general actions that have been deemed by those who shape the idea of role model as worthy of recognition, like doing "stuff for the kids" or donating "computers or something like that." In doing so, the young men have grasped the key idea of "giving back" that is expected of a high-profile sports figure. These young men's responses are indicative of the media influence involved in the selection of their role model. It is worth noting that these young men use categorical language to define the character of their role models without questioning the overall presentation of the "good" Black athlete. It is as if professional Black male basketball players, because they are giving back to the community, meet the criteria of being suitable role models. Indeed, NBA players frequently use the language of giving back when they are participating in league-organized community service projects. Hence, the young men's comments above suggest that the NBA's investment in community service programs is well worth the time and money from a public relations standpoint.

Of course, these young men's thoughts about a role model's responsibility are formed within the context of the mass media's frequent and incessant reporting of Black male athletes' wrongdoings. As Berry and Smith (2000) suggest, media reporting emphasizes Black male criminality without considering that White athletes engage in similar behavior. Furthermore, they indicate that although Blacks "are indeed overrepresented in crime statistics, a substantial and substantiated part of the explanation is bias in the criminal justice system" (p. 173). Thus, the frequent media reporting of African American athletes' involvement in crimes does not take into account a criminal justice system that is predisposed to criminalizing Black men in general. Hence, it would appear that the young men in this study, despite viewing the frequently disparaging presentations of professional Black male athletes in the media, might be simply selecting "good" qualities of professional Black male basketball players to avert the frequent association of Black men as criminals that the young men face everyday in media bias.

Although some of the young men selected role models based on their contributions to society, others selected their professional athletes solely on their athletic ability and performance on the playing field. From this standpoint, the

significance of the role model shifts from perceived behavior in the community to the glory of sports performance. This performance-based assessment of the viability of the professional Black male basketball player as a role model harkens back to the view of athletes as heroic figures who were successful on the playing fields, where high ideals of fairness, equality, and good conduct were emphasized (Lines, 2001). This performance-based evaluation of a role model comes through as one respondent talks about his role model, Kobe Bryant.

> Role models just, you know, they got they head on straight, you know. They, you know, stay truthful—don't have to lie or nothing. They just set an example, and let you know that you can do whatever you wanna do . . . so probably Kobe Bryant. Yeah, like he came straight out of high school and went to the NBA and he's winning championships. You know, that's something that seem like it couldn't happen, but you know he proved a lot of people wrong. . . . I haven't really seen Kobe Bryant, you know, too much off-the-court activities.

Kobe Bryant, the NBA all-star guard for the Los Angeles Lakers, is a role model for this respondent because of his success on the court. Bryant was consistently productive in helping the Lakers win three consecutive NBA titles from 2000 to 2002. In addition to his statistical productivity, Bryant displays athletic moves that are regularly featured in game highlights. Young men admire Bryant for the glory associated with being a high-level performer at the highest level of competitive play. For those individuals who aspire to become professional athletes, players like Kobe Bryant stand as paragons of success—someone who should be emulated.

For this young man, Kobe Bryant's success, despite the very long odds of becoming a professional basketball player (see Leonard, 1998), enhances his belief in the possibility of making it as a professional player. In fact, it is Bryant's willingness to go against these long odds that contributes to the young man's view of Bryant as a role model. It is interesting to note that Kobe Bryant's rise to professional success does not reflect the typical "rags to riches," "against all odds" story that is affirmed in the media and accepted by many fans. Bryant, the son of a former NBA player, grew up in a two-parent home, is well educated, and has had an overall middle- to upper-middle class experience. These characteristics are all contrary to the broadly accepted "American Dream" script that emphasizes individual responsibility for overcoming social, economic, and family disadvantage to achieve success (May, 2008). In fact, it was Bryant's preprofessional basketball life experience that was central to sport commentators' early debates as to whether Bryant would be marketable to young Blacks, who were more likely to identify with the "street" persona of players such as Allen Iverson. It appears that for this young man, Bryant's on-the-court success transcended his limited "street" experience. Yet, admittedly, this young man has not "seen too much off-the-court activities" of Kobe Bryant. For this young man's evaluation of Kobe Bryant as a role model, Bryant's off-the-court experience seems irrelevant.

Despite the fact that the respondent's admiration for Kobe Bryant focuses on Bryant's playing ability, the young man also identifies social expectations that are consistent with those held more broadly for role models' off-the-court behavior.

He describes role models as individuals that "stay truthful," "set an example," and inspire you and let "you know you can do whatever you wanna do." Although he recognizes these as vital qualities for a role model, he is drawn to Kobe Bryant primarily because Bryant is a gifted athlete.[4] This respondent's recognition of Bryant's athletic ability is further supported by the disproportionate number of African Americans playing professional basketball coupled with mass-media and sports-marketing presentations of African American athletes as inherently athletic (see, for example, Buffington, 2005). Such emphasis lends credence to racist ideas about the genetic superiority and intellectual inferiority of Black males thereby limiting the ways in which Black men can be viewed (Ferber, 2007; Hoberman, 1997).

The explicit choice to emphasize a professional Black male basketball player's athletic qualities over social qualities is apparent in one interviewee's comments about Allen Iverson, a successful yet controversial figure in professional basketball. Allen Iverson, the 2001 NBA Most Valuable Player, has a history of run-ins with the police. Among these incidents are Iverson's 1997 arrest on marijuana charges and his arrest in 2002 on assault weapons charges and for making terrorist threats. Although charges in both cases were subsequently dropped, Allen Iverson remains an athlete with a reputation, cultivated by the media, for having an overall defiant attitude. Hence, although Iverson's basketball skills are admired, his off-the-court behavior is inconsistent with the qualities that some of the young men expect of their professional Black male basketball player role models, especially given the constant media blitz of "good" versus "bad" Black athletes. For instance, one interviewee had the following to say about Allen Iverson as a role model.

Allen Iverson is my role model. Well, like ,Allen Iverson, he's, like—I wouldn't wanna be, like, his—like, how his personality is, but I would like to play like him—and do all the other things he can do.

Allen Iverson's "bad" mediated personality traits do not prohibit this young man from selecting Iverson as a role model. The interviewee simply accepts the qualities he thinks are noteworthy—namely his basketball ability and wealth—while rejecting qualities he thinks are not. Interestingly, it is not clear as to whether this interviewee has accepted the mediate representation of Allen Iverson as a "bad" Black or whether the respondent himself is rejecting Iverson's "bad" behavior based on his own set of values and attitudes about how players should behave off the court. Although scholars like Tucker (2003) have argued that representations of professional Black male basketball players cannot escape historical references to Black males as criminal, I would argue that individuals' views of these media representations will also be influenced by the immediate context in which viewers engage these images.

Furthermore, I argue that it is difficult to suggest that this respondent or any of the others are simply "cultural dupes" who uncritically accept media presentations of professional Black male basketball players as "good" or "bad" without knowing more about how the young men's experiences influence their assessment of players like Iverson. This assessment would require far deeper analysis than the purposes of the current study. Irrespective of this limitation, it is safe to say that

the media presentation of Iverson is the primary source of representation to which this respondent has access and this mediated image of Iverson is subject to the influence of those in control of the media (Berry & Smith, 2000; Ferber, 2007; McDonald & Andrews 2001). Hence, it seems intuitive that a young man's evaluation of Iverson's behavior is unlikely to be independent of media influence.

Although this interviewee accepts only part of Allen Iverson's persona, another respondent embraces Iverson's entire persona. He finds admirable the fact that Iverson is able to maintain a tough street persona while balancing the success of being a professional athlete and giving back to his community.

> I like Iverson 'cause he don't really care what other people think. He's gonna do what he gotta do anyway. People talk about, like, his tattoos, or the way he dresses, or the way he talk and every thing. He don't care. . . . He's successful. If you're successful you can do whatever, you know. He's doing his thing now . . . and helping the community. . . . I'm gonna be on that plateau too. . . . Like, the young Black kid that can't do nothing—'cause he's the poor kid that really can't do nothing 'cause you know, they just go to school and come home and they don't have much. He probably gotta help his momma out working or whatever. I'd just have a community center for him and give him a job to work there, or something, or give him something fun to do. And they would have something else to do other than sit at home.

The complexity of Allen Iverson as a role model is not lost on this young man. He sees Iverson as someone to emulate because of his obvious basketball skills and because he is able to do "his thing"—live his life in the manner that he chooses. At the same time, Iverson is perceived by the interviewee to be "helping the community." Despite his community service efforts, some commentators designate Iverson as a bad-boy type because of his off-the-court behavior. I argue that this designation serves a functional purpose for the viewing public because it provides an example of a professional Black male basketball player who should be rejected as a role model.

In fact, those professional athletes like Iverson who are judged the toughest and who go against conformity in sport are the ones who receive the greatest media attention. Although such media attention may be an overrepresentation that characterizes professional Black male basketball players in a biased manner (Berry and Smith, 2000), the coverage might also serve to stimulate interests in what would otherwise be simply the game of basketball. In this regard, the sport seeks to achieve the level of integrated spectacle in order to produce more capital (Andrews, 2006). As Boyd (1997) indicates, it is the Allen Iverson types of "bad nigger" that help sell the game of basketball. Furthermore, as Tucker (2003) argues, it is a simultaneous fear that Whites have of the criminalized Black male and their desire to observe Black males' aggressive on-the-court behavior that enhances White spectators' intrigue with professional Black male basketball players. The implication here is that feeding audience intrigue via mediated images that dichotomize professional Black male basketball players' behavior into "good" and "bad" is an effective means of generating interest and thereby profit. Still, at the interpersonal level of model and observer, these mediated images of athletes as nonconformists helps some of the young men from Northeast give meaning to the idea of a role model.

Although Iverson receives critical assessment as a role model from the media, it is clear that the interviewee is inspired by his perception that Iverson does community service. The young man envisions emulating Iverson's benevolent activities once he is "on that plateau." Like other young men who select professional athletes as their role models, this respondent views giving back as an important character trait for a role model. This sense of responsibility to give back takes on great significance in the Black community, where communal sharing has been necessary to combat the oppressive conditions of racism and discrimination against Blacks, and where residential segregation created enclaves in which Blacks primarily relied upon the services of other Blacks (see e.g., Drake & Cayton, 1962). At the same time, the young man's goal of opening a community center for the "poor," "young Black kid," like himself is consistent with the kinds of highly publicized community service efforts of professional Black male basketball players. It would appear that this young man draws his conception of role models from the image of a "role model" presented in the media. Yet, he has selected a role model who has been characterized in the media as a "bad" Black who refuses to submit to the control of coaches, teammates, and the NBA.

Given the above commentary from the interviewees who selected professional Black male basketball players as role models, what might be said about the nature of the relationship between role model and observer? Based on the interviews, the young men in this study who selected professional Black male basketball players as role models seemed to base their evaluation on three considerations. First, the interviewees considered the extent to which a professional Black male basketball player exhibited qualities highlighted by the mass media as positive. "Is the athlete a good citizen or someone that people would want to look up to?" "Does the athlete give back to his community, or is he selfish with his time or his money?"

Although the young men used conventional standards to measure an athlete's viability as a role model, these standards were applied within a particular context of the young men's own experiences. I argue that whether a professional Black male basketball player is a good citizen or giving back to the community is a relative judgment that each young man determines for himself. Indeed, mass media has influenced the expectations that individuals have for professional Black male basketball players as role models, but these mediated ideas are still evaluated within "interpretive communities"—groups within which individuals interpret and assimilate cultural understandings (Wilson & Sparks, 1996). Thus, the young men of Northeast examined professional Black male basketball players using their own experiences in their mostly low-income communities to determine after whom they should pattern their lives (May, 2008). Still, these assessments seem uncritical of the broader influence that media has on their understanding of success, failure, and what is good and bad. In this regard the respondents appear to be like many consumers who uncritically accept what is provided through the media as the opportunity for success. Yet, the nuanced ways in which some young men selected professional Black male basketball players labeled "bad" as their role models while emphasizing "good" attributes suggests that these young men engaged in a complex process of role-model selection that was not directed by media presentation alone.

The second consideration the interviewees seemed to take into account in their evaluation of role models was the extent to which a professional Black male basketball player's socially acceptable attributes could be separated from less desirable attributes. The young men determined which characteristics—for instance, athletic ability and skill—they wished to emulate and then compartmentalized those characteristics as good and rejected other characteristics. Because professional Black male basketball players were successful on the playing field, the young men recognized that the athletes possessed attributes that they, too, should have if they wished to be successful in their sport. Through this process of positively evaluating a specific aspect of a role model's persona, the young men developed what might be called a "partial" role model.

In some instances, interviewees, rather than reject parts of a role model's behavior socially defined as negative, were drawn to that behavior. Thus, a third consideration that the interviewees seemed to take into account in their evaluation of professional Black male basketball players as role models was the extent to which an athlete frequently exhibits nonconformist behavior. Some young men sought out role models who pushed the boundaries of social acceptability and still enjoyed the good life. These "bad" boy types were admired because they were doing their own thing. Implicit in the acceptance of these role models is the idea that a particular professional Black male basketball player, because he was a "star," could disregard rules less talented athletes would be expected to adhere to. The young men saw that the more talented a professional Black male basketball player was, the greater the tolerance for his behavior otherwise defined in the media as unbecoming. This is the kind of nonconformist behavior that Boyd (1997) and Tucker (2003) suggest functions to keep the NBA interesting to White viewers.

There was a sense of empowerment for young men who selected "nonconformist" professional athletes as their role model. That is, the professional athlete was perceived to enjoy the fruits of his hard work and athletic ability while not having to compromise his identity. The young men perceived this identity to be a tough street mentality that resists broader society's mandate for "acceptable" behavior. To conform would be to lose one's identity. Such an identity, I argue, is rooted in an urban counter-culture that emphasizes resistance as a measure of manhood (May, 2008).

This counter-culture stems from social adaptation to the conditions of poor, densely populated urban communities that have grown out of racism and social inequality in which Blacks are disproportionately represented (Anderson, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Feagin, 2001; Wilson 1996). Hence, whether the professional athlete is rejecting league rules, coaches' practice mandates, or team curfews, he is thought by some young men in this study to be exercising his freedom to do "his thing." Accordingly, he is acting like a man in the context of an America, which, as Tucker (2003) writes, has been identified as "a prison writ-large for Black men" and that "bears the traces of a history of cultural exploitation and unspeakable acts of violence" against Black men (p. 308). Thus, on a symbolic level, the professional Black male basketball player's resistance reflects the frustration that many Black men might feel when having to confront racism, or, as Ferber (2007) suggests, a "White Supremacists' culture" that finds Black men acceptable only when they are "under the control and civilizing influence of Whites" (p. 22). Thus, some

young men are drawn to this idea of being empowered as a man, recognized as a talented athlete, and adored as a person of wealth and fame.

Despite some young men's admiration for the socially defined "nonconformist" professional Black male basketball player, most of the young men who selected professional athletes as role models did so because their role model was "good," and "gives back." Selecting such professional Black male basketball players as role models with these characteristics seems consistent with generally understood expectations for role models' behaviors and attitudes as presented in the media.

# Discussion and Conclusion

Professional Black male basketball players are highly visible commodities in the world of professional basketball, in particular the NBA. Their visibility might be the result of a number of factors including: (1) the NBA's campaign to improve its own marketability and profits through mass media (Andrews, 2006; Cole & Andrews 1996; McDonald & Andrews, 2001; Wilson & Sparks, 1996); (2) the historical and contemporary racism and discrimination that blocked alternative pathways to mobility but celebrated sports as a possibility for African Americans to achieve the American Dream (Anderson, 1990; Eitzen, 2006; Hartmann, 2000; Smith, 2008, Wilson, 1996); and (3) racist assumptions that Black athletes are naturally superior athletes in sports like basketball (Carrington, 2001; Entine, 1999; Hoberman, 1997). Factors such as these shape the context within which young Black males, even those of limited skill and ability, aspire to hoop dreams in disproportionate numbers (May, 2008).

Because a relatively high number of African American men participate in professional basketball and because the mass media focus on the play, celebrity, and the personal lives of professional athletes (Andrews, 2006; Carrington 2001), conventional wisdom assumes that professional Black male basketball players serve as role models for young Black males who aspire to careers in basketball. Furthermore, the literature suggests that these mediated images provide viewers a dichotomous image of "good" and "bad" Black athletes (Boyd, 1997; McKay, 1995; and Tucker, 2003). Given the explanation in the literature, is it the case for the young men of Northeast who have selected professional Black male basketball players as role models that they accept this dichotomous imagery advanced in the media presentations of professional Black male basketball players?

The evidence presented here suggests that these young men did not uncritically select their role models because they were successful athletes, but rather because professional Black male basketball players used language that reflecected both the athletes' acceptance of broader mass media characterizations of what role models should be, as well as the young men's expectations, which were influenced by their immediate social context. This suggests that the young Black males in this study used a more complex approach to evaluating professional Black male basketball players as role models than might have been presumed given mass media commentary criticizing professional Black male basketball players for "bad" behavior.

Indeed, I argue that the young men who select professional Black male basketball players as role models are discerning in their acceptance or rejection of

particular behaviors and attitudes of their role models. In the current study, those individuals who selected professional Black male basketball players as role models admired the athletes' accomplishments on the court, but most of the young men based their selection of the professional athlete on noncompetition-related characteristics that they viewed as admirable. For instance, the young men saw value in the rhetoric of the community service campaigns that presented professional players as giving back to their community.

Whether this value is based on the young men's own grounding from their community experiences or on the NBA's media campaign to emphasize these kinds of efforts is an empirical question for further investigation. What is clear is that the young Black males in this study generally viewed role models in a complex way. For instance, some respondents recognized that giving back is an important part of one's role as a professional athlete. Even those young men who admired the "bad" behavior of players such as Allen Iverson still recognized Iverson for his efforts to "give back" to the community. Rather than simply rejecting professional Black male basketball players characterized by the media as "bad," the young men demonstrated the ability to compartmentalize athletes' "bad" behavior while accepting their "good" behavior. This ability demonstrates support for the idea that "the heroic sporting qualities and contradictions of inappropriate behaviour stressed by media narratives can be open to liberal readings by young people" (Lines, 2001, p. 298). The data in this study suggests that the young men from Northeast were capable of such complex readings of professional Black male basketball players as role models.

Like the White and Black Canadian teens' responses to professional Black basketball players in Wilson and Sparks' (1996) study of consumer habits, I find that the young men's readings of media narratives in the current study are also contrived within their own "interpretive communities." These communities are shaped by cultural difference and the distinct social locations of individual viewers. The fact that the young men in the current study are from poor, Black, urban communities helps to shape how they think about professional Black male basketball players as role models.

Although the interviews for this study provided rich data about the experiences of young Black males in Northeast and how they think about professional Black male basketball players, there are limitations to what I may generalize from this convenience sample. First, the sample is small and nonrandom and does not represent the vast number of individuals who compete as high school athletes. Thus, the respondents' views about professional Black male basketball players as role models might not reflect the views of all aspiring young Black male athletes. Second, because the young men experienced their playing careers in a particular context in which dynamics of race and poverty might influence how they think about professional Black male basketball players as role models, the young men's views might not reflect the views of individuals pursuing athletics in other social contexts. Still, what the young men said is suggestive of how individuals choose professional Black male basketball players as role models and the nature of those relationships.

Finally, I conclude that the theoretical concept of "professional Black male basketball players as role models" is limited because it fails to take into account

the complexity of the ways in which a variety of factors influence how much or how little role models impact the behavior and attitudes of an observer. In general, the role-model concept drawn from social learning theory suggests that an observer selects a model to pattern their behavior after (Bandura, 1977), yet this concept gives little consideration to the influence of context on the selection of role models. Based on the data in this study, I propose that by giving more attention to the context in which individuals select their role models, social learning theory can be used to map and understand more accurately the influence that role models have on those who select them. For instance, I argue that although a young man may select a professional Black male basketball player as a role model, such a selection is one of a series of selections a young man will make over time, across contexts, and for various functions. Indeed, individuals might actually select multiple role models that represent examples to be followed in the various realms of their everyday lives (e.g., the professional, moral, or social realms) and have varying degrees of influence. Thus, it might be rare for a single role model—such as a professional Black male basketball player—to have considerable influence over the entire range of behavior and attitudes adopted by a particular individual. I conclude that it is problematic to suggest that mediated images of professional Black male basketball players alone have significant influence on the behaviors and attitudes of young Black males without further investigation as to the nature of the role model–observer relationship and the contexts within which that relationship is established. Thorough consideration of this idea will require a more finely grained analysis of individuals' choices of role models over time and in a variety of contexts.

## Notes

1.    All names of individuals and places are pseudonyms.

2.    For an extended discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of my race, class, and gender on this research methodology, see May, 2008, pp 195–202.

3.    Although some young men indicated athletes as role models, their assessment was nuanced and contextualized. The tension in how the young men viewed athletes as role models is revealed in the analysis of both those players who selected athletes as role models and those players who selected nonathletes as role models. Given limits on space, I discuss here only those young men who selected athletes as role models.

4.    This interview took place before a Colorado woman accused Kobe Bryant of sexual assault in 2003. As a result of the highly publicized case, Bryant lost several corporate endorsement deals and his off-the-court reputation was tarnished. In 2004, the prosecutor dropped the charges against Bryant.

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