

## Who's in Charge? Racial Difference in the Hiring of NBA Coaches

Linghao Liu\*

Nansha College Preparatory Academy, Guangzhou, China

\*Corresponding author: 921680665@qq.com

**Keywords:** racial bias, NBA Coaches, Hiring.

**Abstract:** This paper will evaluate the difference between the hiring and the firing decisions of NBA coaches due to their race. As shown in this context, racism may have existed in the decisions to hire or fire coaches that have been described as questionable or unfair acts by the team's management. By evaluating the data from previous seasons in the National Basketball Association, the paper can provide more information on whether coaches have been treated unfairly due to their race.

### 1. Introduction

Discrimination in the workplace by both race and gender has been a topic of discussion for many years. It has been argued that these behaviors result in reduced opportunities for large numbers of people and lower wages for those who are hired. For example, Nazli Sila Alan shows that African Americans and females are significantly underrepresented among CEOs in American companies.<sup>1</sup> Only 7% of CEOs are female and 5% minority in the entire market. While female CEOs actually have a higher income than male CEOs, minority CEOs are generally paid less. However, the imbalance between the number of females and minority hiring shows that there is potential gender and racial bias in jobs, especially in high-level positions.

However, the recent good news is that there is an increasing trend for female and minority CEOs, sometimes called The New CEOs. Unfortunately, the research shows that almost all the female CEOs possess some previous conditions that need to be fulfilled. The majority of them are married to high-powered professional spouses who have given up their professions to care for their children. This newest finding is shown in the research by Richard L. Zweigenhaft who points out that "almost all of those for whom I could find information were, or had been, married, and most had children. Many are married to high-powered executive husbands, but notably, some have reported that their husbands gave up careers to take care of the children".<sup>2</sup> These conditions seem unfair for female workers as they need to reach extra requirements when seeking these positions that aren't expected of men. In the broader perspective, discrimination in the workplace can be detrimental to society as a whole and is a problem that should be addressed.

The data shown in research by Milica Milenkovic also support the obvious imbalance by gender that persists. "Female CEOs are running 41 Fortune 500 companies. Women made up only 5% of the CEOs appointed in 2020 globally. At the CEO level, men outnumber women by approximately 17 to one. There are two Black women among the Fortune 500 CEOs". One of them, Brown Duckett, stated that "talent is created equally but opportunity is not". Ursula Burns said that Gender diversity encourages both men and women to come together in the center, resulting in better solutions. Believing that diversity is beneficial to workplace productivity, it should be doubtless that addressing the discrimination problem is an important goal.

In the United States, one high-profile example of racism toward African Americans in sports has been in the hiring of coaches. As the research by Eli Boettger shows "most coaches never reach the FBS or Division-I level and even fewer become head coaches in major college sports."<sup>3</sup> Previous

<sup>1</sup> CEO diversity: does it explain CEO-to-employee pay ratio?, Jul 30th, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Diversity Among *Fortune* 500 CEOs from 2000 to 2020: White Women, Hi-Tech South Asians, and Economically Privileged Multilingual Immigrants from Around the World, Jan, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> An Analysis Of College Basketball and Football Coaching Hires.

ADU (A website called Athletic Director U) research studies have covered this subject in detail, such as the role that search firms play in the hiring of coaches as well as data that statistically proves institutionalized discrimination in job searches.<sup>4</sup> In response to this discrimination, the National Football League has implemented hiring rules that require teams to consider African American candidates for coaching jobs. Likewise, other leagues, including the National Basketball Association have also faced criticism in their hiring of coaches. To further investigate these criticisms, I will use NBA as an example, as there is a large quantity of data that can be used for analysis.

Throughout history, some people believe that there have been questionable decisions made by NBA teams when choosing coaches. Hiring decisions seem to place lesser weight on previous coaching experience which reduces the opportunities for black candidates. Moreover, the data also indicate that it is less likely for African Americans to become head coaches regardless of whether they have NBA playing experience. As an example, the New Jersey Nets hired Steve Nash, who had absolutely no coaching experience as their head coach. In response to these hiring decisions, Stephen A. Smith on his ESPN show has argued that this is an example of white privilege. Racial issues in sport are not only a significant concern in the US society and professional sports leagues but in college sports as well.

## 2. Methodology

The data used in this research came from Wikipedia. We collected data on the three most recent coaching hires for each of the 30 NBA teams. Also included in the study are five coaches who had very short tenures, mostly because they were interim hires.

When evaluating the NBA teams' coaching decisions, we separate coaching hires into two parts, coaches with previous NBA head coaching experience and those with none. For those who had no previous head coaching experience, we considered the number of years they served in the position of assistant coach prior to being hired. For those who had head coaching experience in NBA, their previous number of years as an assistant coach and the number of games they coached is evaluated, as well as their previous winning percentage as a head coach.

We also investigated the importance of race with regards to the hiring decisions of the 30 teams. We considered their overall winning percentage with their current team, as well as their current season, winning percentage, and the number of games coached with that team. Finally, we included whether the coach had won a conference or NBA championship during their tenure with their current team.

## 3. Results

A summary of our results for hirings is provided in Table 1. Of the 95 coaches considered in our study, only 33 or 34.7% of the total were black. Moreover, according to the data, 44 out of the 95 coaches were first-time hires with no previous NBA head coaching experience. The imbalance between the race seems more serious among these hires, with only 13 of the 44 (29.5%) being black, while 31 were white. On the other hand, once coaches have had some experience as an NBA head coach, this differential narrows a bit with black coaches accounting for 20 of the 31 (64.5%) of these hirings.

Table 1: Hiring Decisions

|              | ALL Hires | New Hires | Experienced Hires |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| <b>Total</b> | 95        | 44        | 51                |
| <b>Black</b> | 33 (.347) | 13 (.295) | 20 (.392)         |
| <b>White</b> | 62 (.653) | 31 (.705) | 31 (.608)         |

<sup>4</sup> <https://athleticdirector.com/>

### Previous Years Assistant Coaching Experience (Years)

|       | ALL Hires | New Hires | Experienced Hires |
|-------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Total | 7.19      | 7.27      | 7.16              |
| Black | 7.45      | 8.61      | 6.71              |
| White | 7.03      | 6.71      | 7.35              |

|       | ALL Hires | New Hires | Experienced Hires |
|-------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Total | 491.9     | NA        | 491.9             |
| Black | 467.7     | NA        | 467.7             |
| White | 504.8     | NA        | 504.8             |

### Previous Games of Head Coaching Experience

|       | ALL Hires | New Hires | Experienced Hires |
|-------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Total | 0.513     | NA        | 0.513             |
| Black | 0.506     | NA        | 0.506             |
| White | 0.563     | NA        | 0.563             |

### Previous NBA Winning Percentage

#### 3.1 New Hires

By definition, new head coaching hires had little previous NBA history. One important piece of information is their experience as NBA assistant coaches. When looking at all 95 hires, including those with experience, there is a relatively small differential by race, with black coaches needing 7.45 years of assistant coaching experience while white coaches had an average of 7.03 years.

When looking at new hires, racial disparities become more apparent. On average these new coaches had an average of 7.27 years of experience as an assistant coach in the NBA. Among the new hires, blacks account for only 13 of the 41 (29.5%) of the hirings. One explanation for this widening is that blacks needed much more experience as assistant coaches before getting their first head coaching job. To get these jobs, blacks needed an average of 8.61 years of experience as an assistant coach, while whites needed only 6.71 years. This nearly two-year differential significantly reduces the probability of blacks getting their first job

#### 3.2 Experienced Hires

There is extensive evidence that in general, employment outcomes are highly dependent on the early occupations. We have seen that black coaches have greater requirements than whites. We next investigate whether these decisions hinder blacks in their future hiring and firings.

For the remainder of our sample, there are 51 coaches who have previous head coaching experience prior to being hired. Black coaches still accounted for a minority of all experienced hires with only 20 of these positions (39.2%) being black which is significantly higher than the 29.5% hiring rate for new coaches. The data for these coaches with regard to previous assistant coaching experience reveals an opposite finding from the new hires considered above. The data shows that black coaches had an average of 6.71 years of assistant coaching experience, while white coaches had 7.35 years.

There is a similar differential when considering previous experience as an NBA head coach. Black coaches coached an average of 467.7 games compared to the 504.8 games of experience for whites. The winning percentage shows that black coaches had a 50.6% winning rate in their previous games, and white coaches had won 56.3% of their games.

These results indicate that for experienced hires, white coaches need slightly more experience and better previous records than white coaches. However, it is not necessarily the case that this is an indication of a reversal in hiring practices where whites had higher requirements. There is an alternative hypothesis that might explain these results. Despite these results, blacks still represent a minority of experienced hires. The hiring of coaches is often referred to as an “Old Boys Network” where familiar coaches are recycled regardless of their record. If this is the case, this would be

consistent with more white coaches being hired regardless of their record.

### 3.3 Firings

The data for firings are provided in Table 2. Out of all the 95 coaches in our sample, 45 of them (47.3%) were fired. Of these 45 fired coaches, 27 of them were white and 18 of them were black. However, the difference in these numbers might seem more significant when we bring in the total number of coaches. Of the 33 black coaches, 18 out of them were fired, while 27 out of 62 white coaches were fired. This means that 54.5% of black coaches were fired, while this is the case for only 43.5% of white coaches.

On average these coaches have coached for an average of 292.6 games before being fired, and their average winning percentage was 46.9%. Whites coached an average of 281.7 games with a winning percentage of 47.9% while blacks coached an average of 308.8 games with a winning percentage of 45.1%. None of these differences are statistically significant.

The decision to fire coaches is often made with more emphasis on their record for the current season rather than their overall record with the team. When only analyzing their seasonal winning rate, the 45 coaches won an average of 44.8% of their games, which whites winning at a 44.3% rate and blacks 45.6%. This does not indicate significant differences between white and black coaches.

We also included the data on conference and NBA champions in our study. A total of 50.5% of the 45 fired coaches won a conference championship, and 25.8% of them have won an NBA title. While 54.8% of the whites have won the conference championship, only 41.9% of the black coaches have been conference champions. Similarly, for the NBA champion, 30.6% of the white coaches won this title, compared to only 16.1% of the blacks.

In summary, fired black coaches have had similar experiences in the number of games coached and winning percentages compared with fired white coaches. Likewise, their current season records are also similar. Finally, black coaches who are fired won fewer conferences and NBA championships.

There is one consideration before concluding that there is no racial bias in firings. Based on these results, we conclude that black coaches had similar records to white coaches when they were fired. However, it is often argued that blacks are not only less likely to get their first job, but also hired by teams with previously worse records and inferior rosters. This indicates that blacks who were may have actually done better than fired whites even though they had similar records when they were fired.

Table 2: Firing Decisions

|  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| Total                                      | 45 (47.3% of Total) |
| Black                                      | 18 (54.5% of Total) |
| White                                      | 27 (43.5% of Total) |
| <b>Number of Firings</b>                   |                     |
| Total                                      | 292.6               |
| Black                                      | 308.8               |
| White                                      | 291.7               |
| <b>Previous Games Coached Before Fired</b> |                     |
| Total                                      | 0.469               |
| Black                                      | 0.452               |
| White                                      | 0.459               |
| <b>Winning Percentage Before Fired</b>     |                     |
| Total                                      | 0.448               |
| Black                                      | 0.456               |
| White                                      | 0.443               |
| <b>Current Season Winning Percentage</b>   |                     |
| Total                                      | 0.505               |
| Black                                      | 0.419               |
| White                                      | 0.548               |

## Conference Championships

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| Total | 0.258 |
| Black | 0.161 |
| White | 0.306 |

## NBA Championships

### 4. Conclusions

NBA coaches have not been treated differently or unfairly because of their race in all areas. In the hiring of coaches with previous experience, we found that black and white coaches had relatively similar records in their previous jobs, indicating that these hires are unaffected by race. In addition, we found that in firing decisions, coaches had similar records with their current team, which is also inconsistent with racial bias. Although, in some cases, differences between individual coaches might exist, these differences are isolated instances and are not sufficient to justify any overall discrimination.

However, the real problem seems to be due to differences in the hiring of new coaches. In order to get their first jobs, black coaches need, on average nearly two more years of assistant coaching experience than their white counterparts. This results in black coaches being hired for their first jobs at a rate of only 29.5%. Once hired, it appears that teams are more likely to recognize that black coaches have similar qualifications as white coaches. Evidence for this is that the hiring rate for experienced black coaches is 39.2%. However, this is still far less than the percentage of black players in the NBA and increases the overall percentage of black coaches to only 34.3%. So even though they are once hired, black coaches face similar treatment to white coaches, the discrepancy in hiring new coaches persists. Thus, the resulting differential outcomes are not nearly erased. If the NBA is to remedy the problem of the lack of black coaches in the league, it needs to address the issue of how teams choose coaches who are looking for their first head coaching job. Otherwise, the lack of progress that now exists will persist into the future.

### References

- [1] Alan, N. S., Bardos, K., & Shelkova, N. (2021, July 30). *CEO diversity: Does it explain CEO-to-employee pay ratio?* Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/ceo-diversity-does-it-explain-ceo-to-employee-pay-ratio/>
- [2] Boettger, E. (n.d.). *An Analysis Of College Basketball and Football Coaching Hires*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://athleticdirector.com/articles/coaching-carousel-study/>
- [3] Dunn, T. (2021, June 3). *Record 41 female CEOs among Fortune 500 includes 2 Black women for 1st time*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/record-41-female-ceos-fortune-500-includes-black/story?id=78046013>
- [4] Milenkovic, M. (2021, September 24). *The Leadership Gap: 20 Revealing Male vs. Female CEO Statistics*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://www.smallbizgenius.net/by-the-numbers/male-vs-female-ceo-statistics/#gref>
- [5] Norris, L. (2020, November 2). *Stephen A. Smith Somehow Forgot That 9 Black Former Players Were Given NBA Head Coaching Jobs With No Experience*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from <https://www.sportscasting.com/stephen-a-smith-somehow-forgot-that-9-black-former-players-were-given-nba-head-coaching-jobs-with-no-experience/>
- [6] Zweigenhaft, R. L. (2021, January). *Diversity Among Fortune 500 CEOs from 2000 to 2020: White Women, Hi-Tech South Asians, and Economically Privileged Multilingual Immigrants from Around the World*. Retrieved February 8, 2022, from [https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu/power/diversity\\_update\\_2020.html](https://whorulesamerica.ucsc.edu/power/diversity_update_2020.html)