Examining the influence of skin tone on playing position in the Premier and English Football Leagues

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Abstract

Within the present manuscript we explore the role of skin tone on playing position within English football’s top four professional leagues. Player data (N = 4,515) was collected across five seasons (2010-2015). Results indicate that in general, darker skin toned players are more likely to operate within peripheral rather than central positions. Using both one and two-way ANOVAs, results suggest significant differences between skin tone and individual playing positions. Between league differences were, however, non-significant. Although darker skin toned players are still more likely to occupy peripheral positions, the situation is more nuanced than first thought. Instead of segregating players by central versus peripheral roles, it appears that darker skin toned players occupy positions associated with athleticism. In contrast, lighter skin toned players appear to fulfill roles requiring organization and communication skills.

Keywords: Racial stacking; Racial Stereotypes; Racial Stratification; Soccer; Positional Segregation
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Lapchick, Dominguez, Haldane, Loomer, & Pelts (2014) suggest that although coaches are less likely to assign position based on race than they were in the 1980s, they are still, in part, basing their decisions on outdated notions of social Darwinism. Although epidemiological differences between light and dark skin-toned individuals are often anecdotally cited (Entine, 2000), the notion of increased skin pigmentation improving athlete physiology or performance is absurd (Kerr, 2010). Instead, variation in physiological capabilities is largely derived from the environment in which an individual was born into, rather than the tone of one’s skin (Harpalani, 2004). For example, although Kenyan athletes have become synonymous with long-distance running, it is not their skin-tone that dictates the level of performance. Instead, the Kenyan people’s success in this field is far more likely to be the result of how they have adapted to their environment and the way in which distance running is revered socially within their culture (Larsen, 2003). As such it is highly unlikely that the tone of one’s skin or any other physical characteristic used to define race has any discernible bearing on the ability to run long distances.

As Harpalani (2004) suggests, race is neither a genetically nor biologically sound paradigm, but rather a social construct based on Western society’s obsession with superficial physical features.

Despite these examples, skin tone and race are still regularly referred to within sport as having an influence on sporting performance and playing characteristics (Furley & Dicks, 2014; Rasmussen, Esgate & Turner, 2005). Within the media, for example, it is commonplace for broadcasters to discuss darker skin-toned players as naturally athletic and lighter skin-toned players as intelligent (Buffington & Fraley, 2011, Eastman & Billings 2001; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1997). Recently, former footballer turned pundit, Mark Lawrenson, made
the following statement about Middlesbrough Football Club’s Adama Traore: “When he has to think about things, he struggles, [but] when it’s instinctive, it’s easy” (Finch, 2016, November 21). Although such comments may at first appear benign, if an individual repeatedly suggests that certain characteristics are representative of a social group (e.g., that darker skin toned players lack game intelligence), this suggests that stereotypes are being drawn upon in the evaluative process. According to Koch, Sackett, and D’Mello (2014) such stereotypes are cognitive shortcuts that represent a set of qualities that are thought to represent the essence of group membership. In other words, stereotypes are the typical picture that quickly comes to mind when considering a specific social group (Lippmann 1922). However, the speed in which stereotypes can be recalled often comes at the expense of considering individual qualities (Macrae, Milne & Bodenhausen, 1994).

Beyond reflecting general beliefs about the traits which characterize typical group membership, stereotypes also provide contextual information around social groups (e.g., the social roles) and generate expectations about group members’ anticipated behavior (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). When applied at a group level, stereotypes often result in the systematic and favorable evaluation of one’s own membership group (i.e., in-group) as opposed to those outside who fall outside of own group membership (i.e., outgroup). Steele (1997) suggests that when an occupant of a social group becomes aware of a negative stereotype related to the task being undertaken, their performance may become impeded. Steele and Aronson (1995) first defined this phenomenon as ‘stereotype threat’ and suggest that it is the by-product of one’s reduced working memory capacity. Similar to the phenomenon of ‘choking’ when under pressure, scholars believe stereotype threats are the result of heightened attention to tasks typically completed instinctively (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell., 2007; Schmader & Johns,
2003) or by a lowering of effort (Stone, 2002). Stereotype threat may also lead to self-stacking, by which the pressure to conform to stereotypes influences the individual’s choice of playing position (Anderson, 2010). Eitzen (2016) argues that stacking refers to situations in which minority group members are relegated to specific team roles and excluded from competing for others. Consequently, stacking can lead to a form of racial stratification, whereby players are categorized based on the tone of their skin. Within soccer these stereotypical beliefs may lead coaches to conclude that such individuals are more suited to peripheral (i.e., full back and wide midfield) positions. In contrast, players of a lighter skin tone are viewed as creative, intelligent and ultimately, more suited for central (i.e., goalkeeper, central defense, central midfield and forward) positions.

Prior literature and the need for further exploration.

Given the documented influence of skin tone on playing positions within sport, it is somewhat surprising that only limited research has explored this phenomenon outside of North America (Furley & Dicks, 2014). Although the consequences of racial stereotyping have been explored extensively in basketball and American football (for a review see Coakley, 2010), only Melnick (1988) and Norris and Jones (1998) have empirically examined the aforementioned processes within English football. Although the previously mentioned research has undoubtedly advanced our understanding, both studies are somewhat outdated and have methodological limitations that cannot be overlooked. For example, Melnick (1988) gathered player information by contacting the public relations officers of 22-football clubs and requested that they provide a list of their players names (n = 468), primary playing position, and race. It is worth noting here that by ‘race’, Melnick appeared to solely refer to the tone of skin as no further physical, social, or ancestral characteristics were requested. Using a playing position x race (i.e., binary skin tone)
chi-square, Melnick’s results suggest an under representation of darker skin toned players in midfield and goalkeeping positions, an overrepresentation in attacking positions, and equal representation in defensive positions. Next, Norris and Jones (1998) evaluated 10 pre-recorded Premier League games before assembling squad information (n = 1937) for each of the 92- football leagues clubs based on newspaper reports during the first 20-games of the 1994-95 season. Using the same binary black-white distinction as Melnick (1988), Norris and Jones (1998) also reported a disproportionate representation of skin tone x playing position. For example, they found that black goalkeepers were underrepresented when compared to white goalkeepers, while black centre forwards, were overrepresented when compared to white centre forwards. Building upon this initial observation, Norris and Jones (1998) contacted 25 of the 92 teams evaluated for their perceptions on whether some positions are more important for team success than others. Of the 25-managers contacted, 10 replied and suggested that the three key positions are: (1) goalkeeper, (2) central defense, and (3) central midfield. Unfortunately, they did not state why only 25 team managers were contacted, which newspaper was used to generate the squad lists or how race was identified within their study. Although these studies are not without limitation, they do provide a baseline for further research to examine if and how attitudes have changed.

**Data and method**

Our data comprise 4,515 male professional football players across five seasons (i.e., 2010 to 2015) and four leagues (i.e., English Premier League, Championship, League One, and League Two). For each player the data consists of a unique player ID, name, date of birth, leagues in which the player has played in during the 2010-2015 season's, primary playing position (i.e., the position in which the player made the most appearances), nationality, ethnicity,
and skin tone. The latter is rated on a 20-point scale from lightest skin tone to darkest. Each of
the variables included within the present study have gone through the following four-stage
quality assurance process: (i) Each club is assigned their own researcher who is required to
watch each player regularly throughout the season. Within the leagues included, it is expected
that researchers attend at least one game per week (i.e., First, reserve, and youth teams). A
constant comparative approach is also adopted at club level, whereby researchers compare
reports when observing each other's teams for accuracy. Across the five seasons reported, this
equates to approximately 380-460 observations of the 4,515 players included. (ii) Club
researchers report to league researchers who then cross-check the data against photographic and
video evidence three times per season. (iii) The data are then re-checked by a six-person internal
research department. (iv) The data is checked for errors by two-million users with errors reported
via a dedicated forum.

Our analytic strategy is to first investigate the question of whether skin tone has an effect
on central versus peripheral playing positions in English football (Melnick, 1988), before
exploring in greater detail the possible differences between individual playing positions and
leagues. In Melnick’s study, skin tone was judged by club officials and based on a black versus
white dichotomized scale. However, we are uncomfortable in adopting the same approach, as for
us, skin tone is a continuous variable. Due to the methodological limitation of previous research
within this area, the present study is not identical in design as those that have gone before, which
limits us from conducting confirmatory research. However, the notion of identifying whether
there is a relationship between position and tone of skin remains. Finally, as there are now vast
financial discrepancies between the top four divisions in English football, we investigate the
question of whether there are between league differences in playing position by skin tone.
We began these analyses by examining conducting descriptive analysis (see Table 1) to outline the basic features of the population. From there the distribution of players across skin tone and playing position were assessed (see Table 2). A t-test was then conducted to examine potential differences in skin tone between central and wide playing positions across the four professional leagues in England (i.e., the Premier League, the Championship, League One, and League Two). The results suggest that, like Melnick (1988) we report a significant difference in the skin tone of players who occupy either a central (i.e., goalkeeper, central defender, defensive midfielder, central midfielder, attacking midfielder, and striker; $M = 8.14, SD = 4.69$) or peripheral (i.e., right fullback, left fullback, right wing, and left wing; $M = 8.80, SD = 4.78$) playing position; $t(4513) = -4.24, p < .001, d = .14$.

A One-way ANOVA was then conducted (see Figure 1) to provide a more detailed analysis of how playing position may vary according to skin tone ($F(9, 4505) = 31.10, p < .001$, partial $\omega^2 = .06$). Tukey post-hoc comparisons demonstrated significant differences in skin tone based on playing position (see Table 3).

A two-way ANOVA was then conducted to explore the effect of skin tone on playing position across the four professional football leagues in England (See Figure 2). Results suggest that there is no statistically significant interaction between skin tone and playing position across the four leagues. Although the previously identified differences between positions are still observed, they relatively consistent across the four leagues.
Discussion

The current manuscript investigated the role skin tone plays in positional allocation in English league football. By building on the methodological underpinnings of previous investigations (e.g. Melnick, 1988; Norris & Jones, 1998), the results suggest that darker skin toned players are more likely to operate in peripheral rather than central positions. As such, our results are in line and consistent with previous literature examining racial stacking (Pitts & Yost, 2012; Stone et al., 1999). The present study also advances the literature by being the first to assess the role skin tone plays in positional allocation across the entire population of the English professional football leagues. Further, the present study is also the first to demonstrate a detailed analysis of where the imbalances occur. For example, the results suggest that although darker skin toned players may occupy central roles, lighter skin toned players still dominate the types of positions traditionally associated with organization and communication (i.e., central and attacking midfield, and goalkeeper). In contrast, darker skin toned players appear to primarily fulfil positions linked to athleticism (i.e., full back, wide midfield, and striker).

The findings also suggest relative parity in the distribution of skin tone by playing position across the four professional leagues assessed (i.e., Premier League, Championship, League One, and League Two). Given the financial resources available in the Premier League, it was thought that clubs would purchase the most suitable candidate for the position. However, this fails to consider that, according to Pitts and Yost (2012), the most suitable candidate may also mean the one who best fits the stereotype. As Melnick (1988, p. 126) states:
“In the absence of any compelling evidence to support the belief that white and black soccer players possess certain physical and/or psychological characteristics which make them better suited for playing particular positions, one must look elsewhere for an explanation of these findings.”

With this in mind, we consider whether issues such as stereotype threat and racial stratification, result in players experiencing such processes upon entering sport; therefore, culturally normalizing the phenomena in childhood (Thomas, Good & Gross, 2015). Further, the lack of exemplars available to counter the stereotypes may also function to perpetuate the cycle. As our data show, there are outliers who counter the stereotype within the population, within some positions (e.g., goalkeeper, and attacking midfield), however, such individuals are few and far between. Research examining the processes in which playing positions are allocate should therefore investigate potential barriers to access and solutions to resolve this disparity.

It is worth noting that although issues around racial stereotyping and stratification are inferred within the present manuscript, as an exploration of cross-sectional data, causality is by no means implied. Although we have advanced the literature by conducting a detailed exploration of the present landscape in English football, further analyses are required that explore the processes discussed in other parts of Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Australasia. Additional research that examines both why and how this phenomenon occurs is also required. Given that many of the processes described are likely to operate at a subconscious level, special attention should be paid to better understanding how implicit attitudes and stereotypes are formed, accessed, and acted upon. To achieve these aims, a longitudinal design could be adopted to identify why and how racial stereotypes in sport develop. Further, quasi-
experimental research could be conducted to examine whether existing attitudes can be modified and if so, what effect this has on providing more equitable opportunities. Given the socially sensitive nature of such attitudes, the authors encourage the development of an indirect measure, which is capable of assessing stereotypical views while limiting the impact of social desirability bias (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Finally, although the data presented here suggest that some barriers may be in the process of being broken down, there is much still to be done. As Thomas, Good, and Gross (2015) conclude, we as fans, coaches, scouts, directors, and pundits must do more to recognize when stereotypes are being perpetuated and attempt to fairly evaluate players on their individual merits. Within the present manuscript, we have taken a valuable first step in highlighting the disparities within English football and hope that this will allow others to move forward and begin the process of testing the phenomena we have discussed.

**Perspective**

Discrimination, be it in the form of self-stacking or racial stratification, would still appear to be prevalent within English football. For example, the findings presented here demonstrate that as skin pigmentation decreases, so does the likelihood that players will operate in the positions of goalkeeper, central midfield, and attacking midfield. Despite vast differences in available resources within the four English professional leagues, skin tone x playing position variance remained relatively stable. Although the empirical evidence of the cause of this phenomenon is unavailable, factors such as the media, lack of role models, and persistent notions of social Darwinism are thought to play a role. Resolving such discrimination is not without challenge and research can support this effort through identifying the mechanisms and situations where the processes described within this manuscript are activated. Although difficult, this
challenge should be met as with such understanding players, may eventually be evaluated with
clearer eyes and afforded equal opportunities to develop.
Disclosure statement

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Contributions

Conception or design of the work – JM / FG / TM
Data collection – TM
Data analysis and interpretation FG / JM
Drafting the article – JM / CI / FG / TM
Critical revision of the article – CI
Final approval of the version to be published – JM / FG / CI / TM
Reference list


<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Appearances</th>
<th>Primary Position</th>
<th>Skin Tone</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>28.96</td>
<td>36.98</td>
<td>5.92</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Median</strong></td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode</strong></td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Standard deviation</strong></td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>41.20</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>4.93</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Minimum</strong></td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maximum</strong></td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>223.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard error</strong></td>
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<td>0.0437</td>
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<td><strong>Skewness</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Kurtosis</strong></td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.25</td>
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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics
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<th>Primary Position</th>
<th>Skin Tone</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Goalkeeper</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Right fullback</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Left fullback</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Central Defender</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Right Midfield</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Left Midfield</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Central Midfield</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Defensive Midfield</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Attacking Midfield</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Striker</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2. Contingency table of the distribution on Skin Tone and Playing Position in Professional English Football.
Table 3. Tukey HSD post hoc analyses of between position mean differences in skin tone. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001
Figure 1. One-way ANOVA (F(9, 4505) = 31.10, p < .001, partial $\omega^2 = .06$)
Figure 2. Two-way between groups ANOVA ($F(27, 4480) = 1.04$, $p = .41$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$).