POLITICAL ECONOMY AND TEAM OWNERSHIP: A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE AND ITS OWNERSHIP GROUPS

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examined the character and social structure of team ownership groups in the National Football League (NFL) and how they shape the function of the NFL and/as a broader political economy. Drawing from bricolage as a form of research, the collective case study design (Stake, 2005) was employed to investigate the NFL and its ownership groups to better understand the political economy which shapes – and is shaped by – the NFL. Analyzing a variety of content from sources including the NFL, official team websites, news articles, legal cases, media interviews, online databases, and empirical social science, data were coded into themes and discussed in terms of NFL owners as a collective unit. As empowered through the structure of the NFL, ownership themes included the following: (a) overrepresentation of elite white men, (b) intergenerational transfer of wealth, (c) nepotism, (d) inter-institutional representation, (e) political and economic network, and (f) philanthropy. The interrelation of these themes points to the centrality of NFL ownership within a broader political and economic network that (re)produces the politics of elite-white-male dominance in the United States (see Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Implications for sport management research and practice are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

LIBERATION STUDIES IN SPORT MANAGEMENT

The social and behavioral sciences can generally be characterized as having two axiomatic features that shape the epistemic structures of a variety of academic disciplines: (1) those which are substantially shaped by (white- and male-driven) market forces (see, for example, Newman, 2014), and (2) liberation studies (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015). In *Liberation Sociology*, the latter of these two features is defined "by its usefulness to those who are oppressed and struggling for their liberation" (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015, p. 2). The thrust of liberation sociology is to do more than research the social world; the point is to push the social world toward the expansion of human rights, participatory democracy, and social justice (Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015). This dissertation is rooted in and draws inspiration from the rich legacy of liberation sociology for the explicit purpose of producing emancipatory knowledge in the field of sport management.

Several sport management scholars have made arguments for critical and innovative approaches to studying sport and sport organizations that more directly accent the social impact of the sport industry (see Amis and Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005; Knoppers, 2015; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Singer, 2005a; Slack and Parent, 2006; Zeigler, 2007). For example, Wendy Frisby (2005) positioned critical social science (CSS) perspectives as a useful tool for comprehensively assessing sport organizations, contending CSS "provides a provocative, politically, and morally illuminating way of examining the nature and consequences of various modes of human organizing" (p. 8). Taking to this task of conducting CSS in the field of sport management, other

scholars have pointed to the social structure of sport in both research and practice. Singer (2005a) problematized the white racial structure of sport organizations and argued for critical race theory (CRT) as a "set of basic insights, perspectives, and methods that could help sport management scholars identify, analyze, and change those structural and cultural aspects of sport that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of various sport organizations" (p. 471). Similarly, arguing for the utility of a poststructural feminist framework, Shaw and Frisby (2006) discussed how "policies to address structural barriers appear to be the vehicle of choice to promote gender equity for contemporary sport management researchers" (p. 489). As one of the first canonical uses of intersectionality (see Collins & Bilge, 2016; Collins, 1999) in sport management research, Walker and Melton (2015) explored the intersection of race, gender, and sexual orientation to illuminate women's experiences working in intercollegiate sports.

This dissertation adds to the critical work from these scholars while also drawing upon a larger history of liberation-focused research in social science (see Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015). As such, the study presented here investigates the political economy of the National Football League (NFL) to better understand how the character and social structure of NFL ownership groups shape the function of the League and/as a political economy. With the NFL being the most widely consumed sport league in the United States (US), it is critical for sport management scholars to develop understandings of how the League functions within broader society.

Political Economy

According to Sage (2000), the term *political economy* broadly refers to the inherently political nature of economic activity. Gondwe (1992) characterized political economic analysis as the "study of people in the social process of producing and distributing the means of their own

reproduction, in a given social environment or geographical domain, under rules promulgated and enforced by a political state" (p. 12). From this perspective, economic and sociopolitical issues are intertwined and interdependent, necessitating that these domains be analyzed in conjunction with one another (Sage, 2000). "Moreover," as Sage (2000) stated, "political economic analyses typically go beyond issues of efficiency to address basic moral issues of social justice, equity and the public good" (p. 261). Therefore, with the current emphasis on producing emancipatory knowledge in the field of sport management, political economy serves as useful and adequate concept to further contextualize the operation of the NFL and its ownership groups.

Sage (2000) outlined three primary approaches to political economy analysis: classical political economy, neoclassical economics, and radical political economy. Classical political economy is characterized by Adam Smith's early philosophy on capitalism, which would later be warped to support contemporary neoliberal politics (Sage, 2000; Werhane, 2000). Neoclassical economics sought to move away from the political foundation of economic analysis, opting instead for a more fragmented, "scientific" approach to economics. Radical political economy is generally characterized by a Marxian approach where contemporary capitalism is viewed as subverting the interests of a (theoretically) democratic society. Few studies in the field of sport management have explicitly analyzed the political economy of sport (see Rottenberg, 1956; Shilbury, 2012; Soucie & Doherty, 1996 as some of the few exceptions). However, there is a larger gap in sport management literature regarding political economy analyses that adopt the radical approach with the explicit goal of producing liberation-focused research. Reflective of broader neoliberal trends in the field of sport management (Newman, 2014), liberation studies in general have predominantly been professionalized in the topical domains of diversity and

inclusion, with occasional researches that are categorized here as being social justice-oriented. In other words, mainstream research on – and the practice of – diversity and inclusion remains substantially shaped by market forces while social justice-oriented research is often relegated to a second-class research status lying on the margins (see, for example, Frisby, 2005; Parks, 1992; Slack, 1996). This dissertation explicitly breaks away from the professionalization of liberation sociology and instead pulls from radical political economy analysis to further explore the potential for conducting liberation studies in the field of sport management.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

In recent years, the topics of diversity, inclusion, and social justice have garnered an increasing amount of attention from sport management scholars. In the book, *Diversity and Inclusion in Sport Organizations: A Multilevel Perspective*, sport management scholar George Cunningham (2019) outlined six factors that have led to increased interest in diversity and inclusion in the field of sport management. These developments include: (a) changing demographics, (b) changes in the nature of work, (c) legal mandates, (d) social pressures, (e) negatives effects associated with exclusionary practices, and (f) the organizational value of diversity and inclusion (Cunningham, 2019). However, in response to the professional construction of diversity and inclusion in both sport and non-sport organizations, many scholars have argued that the organizational and managerial practice of diversity and inclusion obstructs progressive change toward social justice (Embrick, Collins, & Dodson, 2018; Weems, Garner, Oshiro, & Singer, 2017). The professionalization of diversity and inclusion often allows organizations and their top managers to adopt seemingly progressive policies while avoiding structural changes altogether.

Drawing from more of the social justice orientation, scholars have added to this growing body of research by further exploring the degree(s) to which oppression is embedded in sporting organizations (Anderson, 2009; Carter-Francique & Flowers, 2013; Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016; Cunningham, 2003; Fink, 2016; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Singer, 2005a); how sport organizational practices impact various populations (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Shaw, 2006; Singer, 2008; Singer, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2010); how different groups understand and navigate sporting environments (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Carter-Francique, Hart, & Steward, 2013; Singer, 2005b; Walker & Melton, 2015); how some groups actively seek to make progressive change in and through sport organizations (Chalip, 1997; Cunningham, 2008, 2015; Green, 2008; Singer & Cunningham, 2018); and the uniqueness of sport itself as a site for resistance and persistence (Cunningham et al., 2019)

However, missing from the recent bourgeoning sport management research on issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice has been a sustained focus on the top managers who essentially create and maintain organizational cultures of similarity (see Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999) based on exclusionary and unjust practices. That is, much of the research conducted on diversity, inclusion, and social justice in sport management has failed to consistently problematize and analyze sport's white male elite (Weems et al., 2017). While some progress has been made for white women and women and men of color within sport organizations, white-male organizational elites remain a central problem in maintaining systems of inequality (see Feagin & Ducey, 2017; Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989). For example, research by organizational theorist Joan Acker (2012) emphasized the following:

> More white women and more women and men from non-white categories have found places in middle management and the profession in both private and public sectors.

> However, white men are still clearly the dominant category in the top positions in almost all organizations. (p. 221)

Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to add to this general body of work in the field of sport management by focusing on team owners as central organizational actors in and through the NFL. Further exploring the social and political economy of NFL ownership groups – which are overwhelmingly white and male – can provide significant insight into the function of the NFL as sport team owners often hold unique positions of power and authority in broader society (Flint & Eitzen, 1987).

Organizations and Top Managers

As management scholar Barry Staw (1991) noted, "if we probe the organizational action, we will find an individual decision maker behind the scene… Organizational actions can therefore be individual behavior under the cloak of a larger, more impersonal entity" (p. 807). Because of this influential role of top decision-makers, organizations themselves often take on the characteristics of their internal elite. Miller and Dröge (1986) demonstrated how needs for achievement of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) can be a significant predictor of organizational formalization, integration, and centralization. Thus, Staw (1991) suggested that management scholars could add to organization theory literature by examining "key organizational decision makers, such as the CEO and the set of top executives in a firm" (p. 812). These top decision-makers shape organizational culture (O'Reilly, Caldwell, & Chatman, 1991) and behavioral dispositions (Staw, 1991) ipso facto operating as central organizational actors.

However, despite the centrality of top managers in shaping organizational structure, culture, and behavior, little research in the field of sport management has focused on the political economy of sport ownership and how this impacts sport organizations. There has been some

discussion of sport owners in the academic fields of sociology and communications (e.g., Flint & Eizen, 1987; Harvey, Law, & Cantelon, 2001; Law, Harvey, & Kemp, 2002), as well as in the writing of some prominent, critical journalists (e.g., Zirin, 2018). However, sport management scholars have yet to reflexively address this topic in and through the study of sport organizations. Therefore, the current study aims to take a step in this direction by investigating the political economy of the NFL, its ownership groups, and the intersections thereof. To investigate these issues, I draw from various critical social science (CSS) perspectives to contextualize and better understand the social, political, and economic realities of owning an NFL franchise. According to Flint and Eitzen (1987), a central political aspect of any pursuit of profit in a capitalist economy is ownership. *Ownership* is conceptualized here as referring to "a full range of economic relations, from entrepreneurial freedom of operation to the refined security of monopoly capitalism; from the independent pursuit of self-interest to the control of market exigencies by an interlocking corporate directorate" (Flint & Eitzen, 1987, p. 18).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The current research seeks to bridge the gap between CSS perspectives on power, intersectionality, and ownership, and research that seeks to better understand the political economy of sport. Building this understanding can not only help scholars better understand the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *how* of sport ownership but also how these realities (re)produce and are substantiated by social systems of domination. To investigate this issue, I primarily draw from the sociological framework of the elite-white-male dominance system (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Accordingly, the primary research question for the study is as follows: How does the character and social structure of NFL ownership relate to the elite-white-male dominance system? Secondary research questions include: (a) how do owners and their networks shape the

political economy of the NFL; and (b) what is the function of the NFL within the larger political economy?

Answering these research questions is significant for the field of sport management as Slack and Parent (2006) have noted that *all* organizations are political, yet "Few studies in sport management have specifically examined sport organizations as systems of political activity" (p. 12). The authors also discussed how researchers in the field of sport management have largely failed to account for sport organizations as instruments of domination (Slack & Parent, 2006). However, as informed by the framework of the elite-white-male dominance system (Feagin & Ducey, 2017), the question of political domination then becomes: Whose domination is taking place through sport organizations, and how? Whose political activity is advanced through the routine functioning of sport leagues such as the NFL? This dissertation addresses both of these concerns by examining how elite factions of predominantly white men actively use the NFL as a medium to further particular political agendas along with the role(s) that the NFL plays in contributing to political and economic domination.

FRAMEWORK

Three frameworks are used in conjunction with one another to investigate the political economy of NFL ownership: (1) character and social structure (Mills & Gerth, 1953); (2) the elite-white-male dominance system (Feagin & Ducey, 2017); and (3) interlocking directorates (Allen, 1978; Dooley, 1969). Each of these are discussed below along with how they may help to better understand the NFL and its ownership groups.

Character and Social Structure

In *Character and Social Structure*, C. Wright Mills and Hans Gerth (1953) presented an integrated perspective for understanding individual people as biosocial beings who operate

within and are simultaneously shaped by particular social contexts. As defined by the authors, *character structure* refers to "the relatively stabilized integration of the organism's psychic structure linked with the social roles of the person" (p. 22). Thus, character structure is rooted in the idea of an individual as a biological organism while understanding that individuals are also shaped by a combination of social roles made available to them through a larger social context (Mills & Gerth, 1953). Roles that individuals play as persons constitute the foundational unit of institutions; and institutions constitute the basic unit which Mills and Gerth (1953) use to conceptualize *social structure*. Though they acknowledged that social structure is more than the interrelations of institutions, the authors argued that institutions at least make up the basic framework of social structure (Mills & Gerth, 1953).

The term *institutional order* refers to all institutions within a social structure that serve the same teleological function (Mills & Gerth, 1953). Mills and Gerth (1953) delineated five institutional orders that comprise social structure in the Western world: the political order, economic order, military order, kinship order, and religious order. Within each institutional order are various institutions (e.g., religious institutions grouped together are referred to as the religious order). These institutional orders then interlink to form particular social structures. Yet, while the authors offered typological constructions of five distinct institutional orders, they pointed to how modern social structures have become more "integrated, and… interlinked under more total control" (Mills & Gerth, 1953, p. 27). Using these and other concepts as building blocks, social structure is then defined as being:

> … composed of institutional orders and spheres. The precise weight which each institutional order and sphere has with reference to every other order and sphere, and the

> ways in which they are related with one another – these determine the unity and the composition of a social structure. (p. 30-31)

Emphasizing the potentially dynamic nature of social structures, Mills and Gerth (1953) discussed how other institutional orders may need to be defined or further elaborated upon to more accurately reflect a given context. Although character structure and social structure are presented as seemingly distinct but connected concepts by the authors' model, Mills and Gerth (1953) further stressed the interrelated nature of character and social structure, arguing for an integrated understanding; for "the psychology of institutions and the sociology of persons… For… if we are to understand the single human being, we must develop a general view of institutions and social structures" (p. 165). Political economy is enmeshed within these orders and structures, while also offering a perspective accenting the distinct functions of social structure in contemporary capitalist society. Moreover, research suggests that individuals play unique roles within each order (Stinchcombe, 1997); specifically, as social structure both shapes and is shaped by character structure (Mills & Gerth, 1953).

Simultaneously understanding the social structure of a context and the various institutional orders, Mills and Gerth (1953) discussed how individual persons are shaped or formed by these structures, which ultimately modify external conduct as well as inner life (p. 173). Institutions select or reject individuals through formal and informal recruitment, explicitly training or socializing individuals as instituted roles are internalized, and co-constructing the psychic structure of an individual. This process is mediated by the symbol spheres of each intersecting institutional order which provide cues for individuals in socially defined situations.

The current study makes use of this framework by emphasizing the importance of NFL ownership groups as being comprised of individuals who operate within a broader social

structure. However, as understood by Mills and Gerth (1953), this framework needs to be further enmeshed within a particular context to draw out its usefulness. Thus, I also draw from the framework of the elite-white-male dominance system to situate the study as taking place within a particular social and political context.

Elite-White-Male Dominance System

To a substantial degree, the *elite-white-male dominance system* (Feagin & Ducey, 2017) can be conceptualized as an extension of the work by Mills and Gerth (1953). This framework explicitly contextualizes a more general discussion of character and social structure by focusing on the power elite (see Mills, 1965); emphasizing the specific functions of three main social systems deliberately created by and for this ruling elite over the course of centuries in the US: systemic sexism (including heterosexism), systemic racism, and systemic classism (capitalism). Although classism and capitalism are not necessarily synonyms, the two terms are used interchangeably here as capitalism is the primary system through which systemic capitalism operates in the US (Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

Building the foundation for the elite-white-male dominance system framework, Feagin and Ducey (2017) discuss the centrality of these "hierarchical, oligarchical, and constantly intertwined systems" (p. 9) in the history of European colonialism and imperialism. The authors linked these intertwining hierarchical systems to the ancient Greek notion of the Great Chain of Being, whereby there were gods, or God in the case of Christianity, and varying levels of inferior groups with each group being superior to the group(s) below it. This particular perspective, with white men at the top of the hierarchy just below God, was "an integral part of English and other European men's sexist, elitist-class, and Eurocentric framing of the world as they invaded the lands of indigenous people in North America and Africa" (p. 10). Over time, white men of status

in (Western) European societies substantially shaped the development of society's institutions as the institutions created by Europeans came to reflect these same hierarchical structures – ultimately buttressing the power and influence of the white male elite. Moreover, the framework emphasizes the intersection of the race-, class-, and gender-based systems of oppression and how these systems codetermine and co-reproduce one another. For instance, Feagin and Ducey stated the following: "within the modern capitalistic system important economic systems are often significantly determined and defined by the intersecting impacts of the sexist and racist subsystems" (p. 12). In other words, the class, gender, and race systems in the US and beyond coalesce to form a single system designed to unjustly enrich white male elites.

Feagin and Ducey (2017) also outlined a developing conceptualization of systemic sexism, which they defined as "well-institutionalized societal patterns of subordinate and dominant social positions and role, respectively, for women and men in a male-dominated hierarchical society" (p. 19). Key tenets of systemic sexism outlined by Feagin and Ducey included discriminatory practices toward women by men, the power and privileges ascribed to men within the dominant gender hierarchy, the institutionalized social reproduction of gender inequalities, and the male sexist frame that rationalizes and sustains the everyday oppression of women. Specifically, the authors discussed the European roots of this sexist system, and how the "Founding Fathers" effectively founded a nation based on the racial and gender assumptions of an elite class of White men. The development of white masculinity took on an explicitly racialized and nationalist framing, particularly throughout the 1800s in which a new, White Protestant-defined standard of masculinity became the societal norm. In addition, the authors detailed the development of both systemic classism and systemic racism in the US that were foundationally built upon the theft of Native American lands and the labor of enslaved

Africans/African Americans. As both racism and classism became institutionalized in the new American capitalist system, elite white men and their acolytes were able to manufacture a system in which they generated, shaped, and/or controlled the institutions that significantly shaped the lives of millions of others around the world.

A central construct in the elite-white-male dominance system is that of *oligopolistic capitalism*. Contemporary capitalism, Feagin and Ducey (2017) argued,

> …is aggressively oligopolistic – that is, dominated in most of its major economic sectors by relatively few large firms… [It] is mostly white-male-controlled at the top, a reality that has routinely made a significant difference in how its capitalistic operations are also racialized and masculinized. (p. 144)

As perhaps one of the primary contradictions of free-market ideologies and the deregulation of capital markets, neoliberalism in practice *fuels* the oligopolistic power of a small number of transnational corporations "in ever-expanding neocolonial and economic-concentration efforts" (p. 145). As a global-imperial form of capitalism focused on the consolidation of power, this oligopoly is dominated by mostly white men whose power status is dependent upon the three main subsystems of oppression (sexism, racism, capitalism). Thus, the imperial goals of this group involves the exportation and imposition of these systems of oppression on a global scale. To do so, however, requires an extensive network with global influence within major political and economic institutions. Accordingly, Feagin and Ducey noted that "this international network usually operates effectively because most of the world's major economic actors are well 'networked and successfully hooked into… a structured framework in interlocking financial and governmental (including supra-national) institutions'" (p. 146). Subsequently, a key task for

scholars in understanding the political economy of elite white men in the U.S. and beyond is to investigate network structures, dynamics, and functions with a focus on their power implications.

In addition to elite networks of white men and their neocolonial aims, Feagin and Ducey noted the importance of *acolytes* in both the operation of the broader system and its persistence. Given that elite white men cannot be everywhere at once, nor do they conduct themselves in a manner in which they are the most visible actors, the white male elite depend on acolytes to carry out their missions. Acolytes tend to occupy a social rank just below the ruling elite. Though there are modest numbers of white women and men and women of color comprising this group, scholars suggest that they "can only move into the mostly lower reaches of the elite by means of power white male sponsors who provide them access to critical educational and other social networks" (p. 186). Thus, the societal power of elite white men tends to depend upon the continued operation of acolytes who work together with the ruling elite through specific organizations, positions, operations, and resources. Overall, these networked organizations are

> …power bases due to the information and material resources their leaders control, along with the ability leaders have to hire and fire underlings, form alliances with other organizational leaders, and many other prerogatives… the specialists in managing, coordinating, and obtaining outside resources have the power advantage from the start. (Domhoff, 2007, p. 3-4)

As such, research investigating the elite-white-male dominance system must seek to uncover what organizations play central roles in the production and maintenance of societal power, who are the key actors within these organizations, and what the mechanisms are through which this process is accomplished (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). In the current research project, I draw from this framework to empirically explore the organization of the NFL, to investigate the role this

organization plays in empowering its internal elite, to probe a broader political and economic network, and to explore the role of the NFL in engendering the political and economic domination of a mostly white male capitalistic elite.

Interlocking Directorates

As a complementary framework to the concepts of oligopoly capitalism and the revolving door, *interlocking directorates* are characterized by an individual being affiliated with one organization while sitting on the board of directors of another (Allen, 1978; Dooley, 1969; Mintz & Schwartz, 1981; Mizruchi, 1996; Palmer, 2002). According to Mills (1965), the term "interlocking directorate" is more than a phrase or idea:

> …it points to a solid feature of the facts of business life, and to a sociological anchor of the community of interest, the unification of outlooks and policy that prevails among the propertied class… As a minimum inference, it must be said that such arrangements permit an interchange of views in a convenient and more or less formal way among those who share the interests of the corporate rich. (p. 123)

Much of the research in this area has pointed to the capital implications of interlocks, specifically because of the central roles played by banking and insurance institutions (Dooley, 1969; Mariolis, 1975, 1983; Mizruchi, 1996). However, while corporations do have capital interest in gaining financial assets through interlocking with other key individuals and firms, the reasons for forming interlocks and their actual functions are more than financial in nature (Mintz & Schwartz, 1981; Mizruchi, 1996). For example, a study by Burris (2005) found that social ties formed via common membership of corporate board contributed more to political cohesion than did purely economic interest. Further exploring these political implications, Burris (2005) not only emphasized how corporate elites interact with and through interlocks but also how this

directly results in political praxis, actively shaping a given political landscape. Drawing from data on campaign contributions and network analysis methods, Burris (2005) empirically demonstrated how interlocking directorates facilitate political cohesion and behavior for corporate elites. Thus, research in this vein should examine the firm as well as "the ties among individual corporate elites and the consequences of those ties for political action" (Burris, 2005, p. 253). While research on sport owners and interlocking directorates has found seemingly contradictory evidence (Flint & Eitzen, 1987), there is a need to further explore the applicability of the concept in today's context. Therefore, this study further investigates both the relevancy of political and economic interlocks in relation to the NFL as a league and NFL ownership groups.

The next chapter provides an overview of relevant theoretical and empirical research addressing the character structure of sport owners, NFL team ownership and governance, and sport-based network studies more broadly. Building this foundation helps situate the current research within the field of sport management by addressing key gaps in understanding the social, political, and economic realities of sport ownership. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methods that were employed in this study. Specifically, the study draws from the bricolage design to carry out a collective case study on the NFL and its ownership groups. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of this study in terms of themes relating to NFL ownership groups. Chapters 5-7 further discuss the meaning of these findings as contextualized within the political economy of the NFL, a mediated NFL and the production of legitimacy, and the (re)production of elite-white-male dominance in and through the NFL. Lastly, chapter 8 discusses implications for research and practice in the field of sport management.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, a literature review is provided in relation to key concepts emanating from the research questions. Namely, I overview literature on the character structure of sport owners, the politics of sport ownership and league governance with an emphasis on the NFL, and the overlapping areas of sport-based networks, governance, and oligopolism. Doing so situates the current study within an interdisciplinary body of research while also seeking to add to these discussions by drawing from the sociological framework outlined by Feagin and Ducey (2017).

THE CHARACTER STRUCTURE OF SPORT OWNERS

A dearth of literature exists addressing the character structure of sport owners. In *Character and Social Structure,* Mills and Gerth (1953) defined *character structure* as "the relatively stabilized integration of the organism's psychic structure linked with the social roles of the person" (Mills & Gerth, 1953, p. 22). Character structure is similar to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which was defined by Kitchin and Howe (2013) as the "unconscious process where wider culture is imbibed and embodied in individuals, and as a result informs their actions" (p. 128). However, for the purposes of the review here I elect to use the term "character structure" as it is a more accessible linguistic device for understanding the character of sport owners and how this is inter-linked with social systems.

As two exceptions to the lack of research examining sport owners in general, Flint and Eitzen's (1987) investigation of the character of sport owners and Brower's (1977) analysis of mainly professional football team owners each provide piercing takes on the interrelated nature of team ownership, power, and ideology. For example, in Flint and Eizen's (1987) examination

of 141 professional sports team owners in football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and soccer from 1982-1984 the found that team owners demonstrated a uniquely "entrepreneurial character uncommon in regulated monopoly capitalism" (p. 19). Their research found that 68% of owners' corporate holdings lied in communications (media/television), oil production, or real estate/land development, all of which the authors categorized as entrepreneurial capitalist investments (Flint & Eitzen, 1987).

Moreover, research has shown that sport owners occupy unique positions in the reproduction of social relations through the political economy of sport (Flint & Eitzen, 1987). For example, Brower (1977) found that owners embodied a paternalistic form of social organization in relation to the players on their teams: "Strong feelings of paternalism reside in some owners; they look upon their players as does a father upon his children" (p. 85). However, this orientation of sport owners went well beyond a father-son relationship; for example, when owners get angry at players who are not "grateful" for their (owners') benefactorship (Brower, 1977, p. 86).

Further interrogating the problematic nature of owner-paternalism, Brower (1977) highlighted the case of Dick Gordon, a black All-Pro wide receiver who had issues with the Chicago Bears and their former (white male) owner, George Halas. According to the Associated Press in 1971 Gordon described the Bears organization as "an antiquated establishment… incapable of dealing with the modern, liberated player, of understanding his thinking. [The players] are treated like serfs" (as cited in Brower, 1977, p. 87). Responding to Gordon's remarks, Halas stated the following:

> … [Gordon] knows what his problems were and how much more serious they would have been if I had not given him a lift.

> He knows he could have done nothing himself in any of those troubled areas and he knows that he has yet to acknowledge what I did or to express even a simple "thank you." (as cited in Brower, 1977, p. 87)

Thus, Halas embodied both a hierarchical and paternalistic form of social organization and expressed his personal frustration toward Gordon. Also evident at the intersection of these interrelated forms of Halas' character structure was a certain arrogance; a sense of entitlement to being positively viewed as the benefactor, despite Gordon noting that players were treated like serfs by Halas.

Another example provided by Brower (1977) was that of (white male) Art Modell, the former Cleveland Browns owner. It was reported at the time that Modell had told Walter Beach, a black cornerback who had been reading Elijah Muhammad's *Message to a Black Man*, "Why, I've done more for the colored than the colored do for themselves" (as cited in Brower, 1977, p. 87). This example clearly demonstrated a racialized form of paternalism by Modell, one extended to all blacks as a racial group rather than to any individual player. As Brower (1977) noted, "Paternalistic owners may feel virtuous about helping players by giving them employment and high salaries in comparison to most occupations. However, their attempted care and control of players and their steering of the entire league operation have racist consequences" (p. 87). Thus, research on sport team owners characterizes ownership as being entrepreneurially capitalist, paternal, and racialized.

Despite these alarming instances shedding light on the character structure of NFL team owners in the 1970s and 1980s, there is a lack of research in the field of sport management that investigates the extent to which these individuals embody social positions of domination today and how this impacts the operation of the NFL as a collective venture by team owners. Thus, a

primary purpose of the current study is to further explore the character structure of NFL owners in relation to broader social systems (e.g., race, gender, class), and to understand the structure and function of the NFL and/as a political economy. Doing so, however, requires an overview of the governance structure of the NFL as it has been organized by and for team owners over the course of many decades.

OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE OF THE NFL

Although team owners and their character structures function at the core of the NFL, it is important to review the NFL as the organizational tool through which team owners are empowered. Thus, in this section I provide an overview of the formation of the League, its internal structure and functions, and how the organization relates to ownership as an active process. The NFL, originally named the American Professional Football Association (APFA), was first formed in 1920 in Canton, Ohio. The first meeting, held on August 20, 1920 at Ralph Hay's Hupmobile dealership, consisted of (all-white male) representatives from four Ohio League teams: Ralph Hay and Jim Thorpe of the Canton Bulldogs; Jimmy O'Donnell and Stanley Cofall of the Cleveland Tigers; Carl Storck of the Dayton Triangles; and Frank Nied and Art Ranney of the Akron Pros. At this initial meeting, the representatives explored ways to bring order to the professional football scene in the US, discussing various issues related to player agency, salaries, and the control thereof (Crippen, 2009).

On September 17, 1920, a second meeting was held by the same group along with representatives from other professional teams including Leo Lyons of the Rochester Jeffersons; Doc Young of the Hammond Pros; Walter Flanigan of the Rock Island Independents; Earl Ball of the Muncie Flyers; George Halas and Morgan O'Brien of the Decatur Staleys; and Chris O'Brien of the Chicago Cardinals. League leadership was assigned at this second meeting with

Jim Thorpe being elected as the president of the APFA, Stanley Cofall as the vice-president, and Art Ranney as the secretary-treasurer. Following the inaugural APFA season, the league reorganized with Joe Carr named as president and Carl Storck named as secretary-treasurer. According to the NFL's website, Carr then moved the Association's headquarters to Columbus, drafted a league constitution and by-laws, gave teams territorial rights, restricted player movements, developed membership criteria for the franchises, and issued standings for the first time so the APFA would have a clear champion (NFL, 2018a). The name of the APFA was later changed to the National Football League in 1922.

Over the course of the first few decades of the NFL's operation, League teams were fairly unstable. Many franchises joined the League and many failed, particularly with the advent of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Of the original charter members, only the Decatur Staleys and the Chicago Cardinals are still in operation today (now known as the Chicago Bears and Arizona Cardinals respectively). Throughout the turbulence of the NFL's early years, the franchises that survived were able to amass significant power through political and economic means, eventually drawing criticisms as being monopolistic organizations (Neale, 1964; Topkis, 1948). When Pete Rozelle took over as Commissioner in 1959, the NFL made concerted efforts to stabilize as a professional sport league. One of Rozelle's first major acts as Commissioner was to install the revenue sharing structure, in which teams would share gate and television revenues (Mason, 1997). The new structure helped stabilize small-market teams; and while large-market teams briefly lost out on television revenue, this allowed the NFL to begin collectively negotiating its television deals as opposed to teams negotiating individually.

In 1961, Rozelle negotiated an exclusive deal to broadcast NFL games with CBS worth $9.3 million (Sandomir, 1996). However, given the collusive nature of the deal the NFL and CBS had struck, a federal court ruled that the contract violated antitrust laws (Shea, 2015). In the wake of this decision, Rozelle and the NFL quickly lobbied Congress members resulting in the passing of the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 – an Act that exempted professional sport leagues from violating antitrust laws when negotiating radio and television broadcasting rights (Anderson, 1994; Sports Broadcasting Act, 2000). Prior to 1963, NFL teams were in charge of licensing their intellectual property and marketing trademarked items; however, this changed in 1963 with the formation of National Football League Properties which then enabled pooled licensing and marketing (*American Needle, Inc. v. NFL et al.*, 2010). This stabilization and consolidation of the NFL would be further advanced in 1966 when Congress approved the NFL's merger with the American Football League, granting the League more protection from antitrust laws (Sandomir, 2010). In 1966, the NFL was designated as a Section 501(c)6 organization when the definition of non-profit, trade associations in the Internal Revenue Code was modified to include "professional football leagues" in its definition (Dosh, 2013; Internal Revenue Service, 2006; Kang, 2014; Williams, 2016). According to Easterbrook's (2013) article in *The Atlantic*, the NFL was formally granted "permission to function as a monopoly: the 1966 law was effectively a license for the NFL owners to print money" (para. 16). For decades to follow, the NFL would operate under this classification of a non-profit, trade association as it continued to grow as an organization.

In the 1980s, the NFL was further accused of violating antitrust laws. In 1980, Al Davis of the Oakland Raiders filed a federal antitrust suit against the NFL, *Los Angeles Memorial*

Coliseum Commission v. NFL et al. (1980a), because Davis had been blocked from moving the franchise to the city of Los Angeles. The District Court ruled that the NFL was in violation of the Sherman Act (*Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission v. NFL et al.*, 1980a). The NFL appealed this ruling and the decision was reversed (*Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission v. NFL et al.*, 1980b). After a series of appeals, Al Davis and the Raiders were able to move to Los Angeles in 1982 (Asher & Shapiro, 1982). In 1986, the United States Football League (USFL) won an antitrust case against the NFL in *US Football League et al. v. NFL et al.* ("*USFL*") (1986). When the USFL's owner of the Washington Generals (Donald J. Trump) was prevented from purchasing an NFL franchise, the owner filed the antitrust suit against the NFL. The court found that the NFL violated antitrust law and exercised monopoly power (*US Football League et al. v. NFL et al.*, 1986). However, the jury could not distinguish actual losses incurred by Donald Trump or the USFL, and the USFL were awarded a total of $1 in damages (this award was tripled to a total of $3 under anti-trust laws). The USFL filed an appeal seeking injunctive relief and more in damages, but the decision of the District Court was affirmed (*US Football League et al. v. NFL et al.*, 1988).

Following the antitrust suits of the 1980s – which did little to structurally impact the operation of the NFL – the League continued to grow in popularity. Maintaining its non-profit status, revenue swelled with the increasing value of television broadcasting. However, as revenue increased and the league continued to grow, so too did its public criticisms as a non-profit organization (Adams & Brock, 1997; Kahn, 2000; Wamsley, 2002). In 2015, after 73 years of tax-exempt status, the NFL officially dropped its status as a non-profit organization amid the increasing scrutiny (Dosh, 2013; Williams, 2016). Referred to as a "distraction" by

Commissioner Roger Goodell, the owners of the NFL decided to formally incorporate the League office (Schrotenboer, 2015).

Now, as an incorporated organization which has historically functioned as a trade association, the two primary functions of the NFL (as a structured organization) relate to financial solvency for League members and impacting public policy (e.g., see Watson, 2002). However, differing from other trade associations generally tasked with representing the interests of members within the same industry, the purpose of the NFL is: "To promote and foster the primary business of League members, each member being an owner of a professional football club location in the United States" (NFL Constitution & Bylaws, 2006). As such, the NFL has historically been unique as a trade association in the multiplicity of political and economic interests of League members; which is rarely confined to the individual football club which they own. Accordingly, further exploration of League membership and governance is warranted to understand how this impacts the function of the NFL as a whole. In other words, it is important to understand who is granted a seat at the proverbial table, what their motives are, and what benefits they derive from membership within the League.

Membership in and within the NFL is restricted. Any person or entity seeking to become a member of the NFL "must be approved by the affirmative vote of no less than three-fourths of the members. A three-fourths majority is also required to transfer a membership to another entity" (Lentze, 1995, p. 68), thus creating an exclusive organization relative to the roles of trade associations across other industries (this rule is later referred to as the ¾ rule). There are two substantial sources of authority within the NFL stemming from its Executive Committee and the Commissioner. The Executive Committee includes a representative from each franchise,

generally the owner or another top executive from the club. The Executive Committee has its power granted to it by the Constitution of the NFL and it acts by affirmative vote of no less than three-fourths. The Commissioner of the NFL is present at each of the Executive Committee's meetings. Elected by the owners, the Commissioner of the NFL holds disciplinary power, the authority to preside over dispute resolution, and decision-making authority (which includes the authority to appoint other officers and committees).

Much literature on the governance structure of the NFL has emphasized the unique position of power and authority held by the Commissioner once elected. For example, though many liken the role of the Commissioner to that of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Lentze (1995) teased out the nuanced nature of the Commissioner's position that makes it unique. While the CEO of a corporation is generally subject to the control of a board of directors, the Commissioner does not answer to League owners once elected. As Lentze (1995) noted,

> …the Commissioner acts as an employee of the league, but is not under the control and supervision of own employer. Therefore the employed Commissioner represents an almost autonomous authority within the internal structure of the league, uncontrolled by its principal owners. (p. 72)

This "almost autonomous authority" granted to the Commissioner gives this individual unique organizational power, such as through the "best interests" clause (Mondelli, 2017; Parlow, 2009). As a principal investigator, prosecutor, and adjudicator, the Commissioner has the authority to oversee and influence any decision related to the welfare of the League (Cole, 2015; Renicker, 2015). This includes the power to influence, or even to punish, franchise owners (Parlow, 2009). For example, the Commissioner can fine owners if they engage in behaviors deemed detrimental to the League (Lee & McFarlin, 2016; Lentze, 1995). He can also influence how owners go

about approving admission into the league by a new member or the transfer of membership. Moreover, as the locus of control within the NFL, "the Commissioner interprets and establishes policy and procedure with respect to the league provisions" (Lentze, 1995, p. 74). While there are questions as to why team owners would willingly subject themselves to the power of the (elected) Commissioner (Mondelli, 2017), the likely reason for doing so is that the role of the Commissioner, as an "impartial" authority, prevents judicial interference with league affairs (Lentze, 1995; Parlow, 2009). Additionally, Lentze (1995) opined that the power of the Commissioner was ultimately necessary to protect "other participants from the owners' monopoly power," especially as the League moved toward corporate ownership (p. 80).

Understanding the trend toward the corporatization of professional sport, Lentze (1995) weighed the pros and cons of the traditional Commissioner model versus a pure corporate model along with what these two organizational forms might mean to the owners. In the traditional model, the Commissioner held significant power as an "impartial" authority – though this was not without confliction. While the Commissioner of the NFL was historically tasked with maintaining the integrity of the League (Parlow, 2009), Lentze (1995) contended that there existed "at least a strong conflict of interest for the Commissioner" (p. 81). For example, the Commissioner had a direct interest in "not offending a bloc of owners in order to protect his own job security and to avoid dismissal by the offended owners" (p. 81). Thus, he had a vested interest in staying in the good favor of League owners to ensure his re-election. From the owners' perspective, this traditional Commissioner fulfilled two essential functions: (1) providing due process for internal activities and preventing judicial interference; and (2) through his decision-making power, the Commissioner drastically reduced the direct accountability of franchise owners.

In outlining a pure corporate model, Lentze (1995) discussed how the owners would act more so as a board of directors with the exclusive power to manage league affairs. Ultimately, this model would grant the owners more power and authority as it related to the League, with the Commissioner or CEO acting "under direct control and general supervision of the owners" (p. 84). Additionally, the corporate model would grant owners the power to deliberate over policy decisions without fear of reprisal from the Commissioner because in the corporate organizational form, the board's decision is final. Subsequently, putting this decision-making power in the hands of the owners would increase efficiency and accountability. However, while owner accountability would increase, there are significant drawbacks. Namely, whereas the traditional Commissioner model provided an authority figure to balance the interests of various stakeholders (e.g., owners, sponsors, players, and fans), a pure corporate model does not provide such a system. Thus, given the cultural significance of a sport like professional football in the U.S., the increase in organizational efficiency and accountability could potentially come at the expense of the public upon which the sport depends (Lentze, 1995).

Given the unique history and structure of the NFL, some scholars have sought to better understand the structure and function of the League in relation to its owners. For example, sport management scholar Daniel Mason (1997) drew from agency theory to investigate how owners sometimes acted opportunistically to the detriment of the League as a whole, as well as what mechanisms might serve to dissuade such opportunism (e.g., the revenue sharing structure). However, according to Atkinson and colleagues (1988) who also drew from agency theory to investigate NFL owners, owners do not act as pure profit maximizers; rather, NFL owners generally seek to maximize utility "in both profit and the private, nonmonetary benefits" (p. 41). These sentiments have been echoed by various scholars across academic disciplines (Bergh,

1995; Brower, 1977; Quirk & El Hodiri, 1974). With the limitations of agency theory as a framework for understanding organizations (see Perrow, 2014), a broader scope of analysis is helpful in further investigating what "nonmonetary" factors influence NFL owners.

Though it has been empirically shown that there are varying motives of NFL owners extending beyond profit-maximization solely within the League, few scholars have investigated the social and political power afforded to sport owners. As one of the few exceptions to this, Brower (1977) suggested the legitimizing aspects of sport "proves useful to the power elite since athletics in general, and major professional team sports in particular, are pivotal in their impact on the ideology of the society in which they are embedded" (p. 79). Particularly, Brower (1977) emphasized elites' commitment to the ideology of sport's neutrality as a social and political commitment:

> The *people in charge* generate consensus for support of their institution by keeping the "inappropriate matters" – e.g., race and politics – out of it. The problem with so restricted a view and its smooth strategy is that no place is left in which to confront the "inappropriate" issues. *To close off these topics is a political act*, the purpose of which is to prevent any kind of correction from ever taking place. It is accomplished by inferring that the only place for a consideration of such issues is in Congress, not in schools, hospital, or football clubs. This political act is a technique which maintains the aura of neutrality and thereby induces the public to believe that football is one American institution that affords everybody an equal chance. The cover for silence is the neutrality argument: political reform does not belong in football. (p. 97, italics added for emphasis)

Considering the long history of political activism in and through sport to impact society (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1994; Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriquez, 2017; Edwards, 1969; Kuhn, 2015;

Nauright & Wiggins, 2014), the commitment to the "neutrality" of professional football – and subsequently, the social and political status quo – is indeed a political act; one in which team owners and other societal elites have a vested interest. Thus, it is not only important to understand the character structure of owners, and the powers and privileges afforded to them through team ownership, but to investigate their broader network (i.e., the "power elite") to understand the significance of team ownership in contemporary society.

As various stakeholders with capital interests in a league such as the NFL seek to take advantage of its cultural prominence for economic, social, political, and psychological reasons, team owners act as the controlling group through which the production of the NFL takes place. Thus, spanning a broader network of stakeholders, the owners of the NFL work together to control the product of professional football. Speaking to the owners' benefits through this oligopolistic form of governance, Brower (1977) stated the following: "This modified socialistic, and collusive, arrangement insures higher profits for a larger proportion of owners than would a strictly capitalistic arrangement" (p. 83). Because of this arrangement, it is important to investigate how the governance structure of the NFL is representative of and dominated by this uniquely collusive network. Thus, in addition to the character structure of team owners and the league structure of the NFL, I survey literature on sporting networks, governance, and oligopolism to further explore these ownership-based networks. Moreover, this review adequately situates the current study within a growing body of research on social networks and the influence thereof by focusing on the role(s) of elite networks in and through sport.

SPORT NETWORKS, GOVERNANCE, AND OLIGOPOLISM

As an earlier formation of network studies in the field of management, Tichy, Tushman, and Fombrun (1979) explored the utility of social network analysis to better understand and

make more explicit "the web of direct and indirect relationships between organizations" (p. 507). Arguing that network analysis is an underutilized lens for conceptualizing, analyzing, and understanding organizations, the authors postulated six research agendas for network studies on organizations: interorganizational relationships; organizations and their boundaries; career patterns and succession; organization change; design configuration; and power and political processes. *Interorganizational relationships* (IORs) referred to how organization/management scholars could examine the "wide-reaching external networks linking organizations" (p. 516) and how they systematically interlock. The research agenda of *organizations and their boundaries* was concerned with both boundary permeability and boundary-spanning networks. *Career patterns and succession* was conceptualized in relation to the complexity of roles and functions of networks in career mobility. In relation to *organization change*, Tichy and colleagues (1979) argued that "Network analysis provides (a) diagnostic tools for the planning of change, (b) tools for measuring the impact of change efforts, and (c) a set of explanatory variables for how change agents affect organizations" (p. 516). Their formulation of *design configuration* sought to address the significance of emergent networks which canonical uses of contingency theories had overlooked in relation to various design configurations. Lastly, in seeking to address power and political processes, the authors pulled from previous literature to suggest the following: "The study of *organizations and leadership behavior from a political perspective* is more amenable to systematic analysis based on a network perspective" (p. 516, italics added for emphasis). The current research emphasizes Tichy and colleagues' (1979) final point by examining the politics of elite sport-based networks and the behaviors/actions of structurally important leaders within these networks. In the decades following this formation of network methods/analysis, various scholars have analyzed organizational and managerial networks from different angles.

In the field of sport management, a network-based focus on IORs has drawn attention from various scholars (e.g., see Cousens & Slack, 1996). For example, Thibault and Harvey (1997) investigated the extent to which IORs influenced Canada's sport delivery system in the midst of significant economic changes. The authors found that while interorganizational linkages assisted in the sharing of resources and coordination of work-related activities, they also brought with them new challenges such as power struggles, loss of autonomy, asymmetrical relationships, and conflicting loyalties. Expanding their scope to look at ten different Canadian cities, Frisby, Thibault, and Kikulis (2004) investigated the nature of "under-management" in leisure service departments in their attempts to juggle the complex nature of IORs, concluding that a lack of structured guidelines, insufficient training, and poor coordination all negatively impacted the success of these IORs.

Katherine Babiak has also contributed significantly to this area of network studies in sport management through her focus on sport-centered IORs. In 2003, Babiak conducted a case study of a Canadian national sport center in which she explored "the dynamics, challenges, and complexities encountered in the establishment, management, and evaluation of multiple interorganizational relationships among a nonprofit organization and its partners in the government, nonprofit, and private sectors" (p. 1). Her qualitative exploration uncovered several dynamics inherent to these IORs including but not limited to interdependence, environmental and organizational conditions, existing networks, power imbalances, political/control aspects, and partnership management structures. Babiak (2007) would later investigate determinant factors that led to the formation of IORs in an effort to better understand this phenomenon and provide organizations with tools to help better manage their IORs. In this study, Babiak found that legitimacy, stability, reciprocity, and efficiency were all important factors in determining

whether or not IORs developed. Further adding to this research line, Babiak and Thibault (2009) investigated the challenges of managing multiple relationships across public, non-profit, and private sectors. Participants in their study pointed to a multitude of challenges in managing IORs such as "mounting tensions, resource exchange issues, managerial challenges such as negotiation and communication breakdowns, and the assignment of roles and responsibilities for actionable results" (p. 137). Thus, these findings suggested that while there are many benefits to establishing IORs, there are also significant challenges that sport organizations must navigate.

Drawing from more of an institutional perspective in the field of management, Jones, Hesterly, and Borgatti (1997) introduced a general theory of network governance as a way to better conceptualize and analyze exchange conditions and the social mechanisms thereof. Network governance can be broadly defined as "coordination characterized by informal social systems rather than by bureaucratic structures within firms and formal contractual relationships between them" (p. 911). Upon theoretically connecting the previously disjointed theories of transaction-cost economics (TCE) and social network theory, the authors advanced a definition of their own as a foundation for their contribution to the literature on network governance. "Network governance," stated Jones and colleagues (1997),

> involves a select, persistent, and structured set of autonomous firms (as well as nonprofit agencies) engaged in creating products or service based on implicit and open-ended contracts to adapt to environmental contingencies and to coordinate and safeguard exchanges. These contracts are socially – not legally – binding. (p. 914)

Ultimately, the authors contended that organizations dependent upon network forms of governance rely "more heavily on social coordination and control… than on authority or legal recourse" (p. 916). Identifying key social mechanisms based on network embeddedness, the

authors suggested that future research should seek to identify and analyze other important social mechanisms that influence network governance processes. In doing so, five potential research agendas moving forward were proposed: (1) investigating macrocultures and their content/development; (2) examining the interaction of social mechanisms; (3) optimal size(s) for effective network governance; (4) power and thence the exercise of within the network; and (5) determining whether networks are a results of efficiency processes or managerial trends and institutional processes.

Relevant to the current discussion are the first, second, and fourth research agendas relating to macrocultures, interacting social mechanisms, and power. In discussing the research line addressing macrocultures, the authors argued that a key task for organizational scholars is to identify "the processes of socialization and institutionalization and whether these vary across networks in different domains" (p. 935). Relating to power and its exercise, Jones and colleagues (1997) noted that "Any discussion of social structure raises questions of how such structures facilitate or constrain the exploitation of power" (p. 936). While this conceptualization of network governance informs the current research project, research on network governance in general is not without critique.

Stemming from the field of political science, Grix and Phillpots (2011) provided an empirical counter-example that pushed back against ideal-typical conceptualizations of network governance within the broader political economy in the United Kingdom (UK). Focusing on the sport policy sector, the authors uncovered a paradoxical form of network governance that appeared normal on the surface, but was in reality comprised of several underlying hierarchical structures – a phenomenon which the authors termed "asymmetrical network governance" (p. 4). Whereas many scholars investigating the phenomenon of network governance have suggested

that multi-agency governance was a democratizing process, Grix and Phillpots (2011) found that this result of democratization did not apply to the sports policy sector. Instead, the authors' examination revealed hierarchical forms of partnerships built upon resource dependency and asymmetrical network governance between "policy makers" and "policy takers" (p. 10). Thus, the authors concluded that future research seeking to understand *why* the sports sector adhered to this asymmetrical form of network governance should examine cases in "a variety of structural, institutional and historically different contexts" (p. 15). Therefore, to further investigate this phenomenon in the context of the US, I draw from research coming from the field of sociology in an effort to better understand structural and institutional aspects.

Sociological and communications research on sport and sport organizations has found empirical evidence of oligopolistic behavior in a globalizing context. Research conducted by Harvey and colleagues (2001) and Law and colleagues (2002) points toward an extensive oligopolistic system in and through professional sport franchises. For example, Harvey and colleagues (2001) conducted a collective case study of 120 North American major professional sport franchises to assess the degree to which these organizations were connected to media/entertainment conglomerates. Noting a trend that "Ownership of sports franchises is becoming increasingly important to the competitive strategies of media interests as they compete for control of delivery infrastructure and media market share" (p. 454), the authors found empirical evidence supporting the alleged increasing control of these franchises by complex media/entertainment conglomerates. Thus, Harvey and colleagues discussed several implications of the "global 'oligopolisation' of media/entertainment" (p. 455) in sport, such as the potential of an upcoming financial "bubble" due to the rising costs of sport franchises – which may, in turn, impoverish smaller market franchises. In addition to significant socio-economic shifts, the

authors suggested that this process could change the ways in which sport is produced and consumed by fans. Noting that an increasing number of sport leagues and events may shift to more exclusive, "pay per view" forms of programming, the authors suggested that this process "would reduce the range of sport programming available to low income consumers and, on the other side, concentrate the sponsorship dollars in these premiere events, which in turn will reduce accessibility" (p. 455). Thus, the results of their study has significant implications for the social and economic factors of elite sport networks as well as how those networks can impact sport and sport fans throughout North America.

Expanding their scope to a more transnational context, Law and colleagues (2002) analyzed the corporate structures of six major media/entertainment conglomerates (Disney, News Corp, AOL-Time Warner, Viacom, Bertelsmann AG, and Vivendi-Universal). Drawing from Alger's (1998) five dimensions of understanding and comparing conglomerate structures in relation to oligopolistic competition in the media sector (i.e., horizontal integration, vertical integration, product and service extension, geographic market extension, and industrial-media conglomerate structure forming organizational inter-relations), Law and colleagues (2002) found that these companies, often portrayed as separate and competing entities, are comprised of various overlapping departments that both compete and cooperate with other organizations within the conglomerate:

> What is emerging from our analysis is a picture of distinct, but tangled and differently constructed supply chains within which sport is implicated as an element of cultural information that gets combined with other icons to accelerate and proliferate its flow from source to consumption. In this sense, conglomerates can be viewed as reasonably distinct supply chains in their own right, the functioning of which depends not only on

> the integrity of the links, but also the relationships between chains that compete in some sections and cooperate in others. (p. 298)

While these findings on a globalizing sport oligopoly are provocative in and of themselves, the authors called for more "structured investigation into the impact of such concentration of media properties" (p. 300). Though this investigative call was more than fifteen years ago, a dearth of literature persists in relation to empirically examining the politics of sporting oligopolies.

Overall, while significant advances have been made in sport-management-based network studies in recent decades, much of this research has been exploratory and confined to specific research settings (e.g., Canada, Norway, public/non-profit sport organizations). Subsequently, there is a need to empirically expand this important research domain not only in contexts other than those previously studied, but also in ways that may challenge or go against mainstream epistemological approaches (Ferkins, Shilbury, & O'Boyle, 2018; Quatman & Chelladurai, 2008). To fill this gap in the literature, I draw from the elite-white-male dominance system framework as outlined by Feagin and Ducey (2017). Missing from even the critical analyses put forth by Harvey, Law, and others was an explicit focus on the character structure of the owners who operate through the oligopolistic form of organization and how this relates to broader social systems. This character and social structure of sport ownership is central to sporting oligopolies as it routinely shapes the ways in which policies and practices are also racialized and masculinized (see Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Therefore, drawing from Feagin and Ducey (2017) serves to further extend the current body of research – both within and beyond the field of sport management – that investigates sport ownership, governance, and oligopolism.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In the context of conducting liberation sociology (see Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015), creative developments in research designs and methods are not only applicable; they are often necessary for producing emancipatory research. For example, Alfonso Gonzales' (2013) formulation of a neo-Gramscian approach to theory and methods provides insight into how essential these developments are when studying political or economic elites. "Neo-Gramscian theory," said Gonzales, "with its focus on power and resistance, requires methods that capture both these dynamics" (p. 177). While established methodologies can be useful, Gonzales noted the limitation of some of these approaches when addressing elite actors, because "elite actors most often make their political decisions behind closed doors and because they have the power to determine to whom they grant interviews" (p. 177). Creative innovations in methodology are thus necessary at times to adequately address and counter elite white men through the social science analysis. Through actively seeking out these creative innovations in the current study, it is intended that this articulation contributes to a larger conversation in the field of sport management regarding the power and potential of critical qualitative research (e.g., see Shaw & Hoeber, 2016; Singer et al., 2019). To answer calls for further development in the use of qualitative methods in sport management, I turn to the domain of art from which I draw upon the research design of bricolage.

BRICOLAGE

The bricolage approach to research constitutes a multimodal form of scholarship (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999; Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Lincoln, 2001). The concept of a bricolage form of

research stems from the writings of Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) referring to the bricoleur as a jack-of-all-trades who makes use of whatever tools are available to accomplish a particular task (Kincheloe, 2001). Since then, qualitative scholars have drawn from Levi-Strauss's (1966) extensive discussion to conceptualize a bricolage form of research, broadly defined as "a critical, multiperspectival, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach to inquiry," with an emphasis on the notions of eclecticity, emergent design, flexibility, and plurality (Rogers, 2012, p. 1). Since its initial conceptualization as a form of critical qualitative research, much work has been done in the further development of the bricolage design (Kincheloe, 2005; Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, & Monzó, 2017; Rogers, 2012).

Though partially responsible for its initial conceptualization, further developments of bricolage have continued to emphasize its utility in the context of liberation-based, social science research. For example, in their advancement of bricolage research, Kincheloe and colleagues (2017) showed how this approach can effectively be conceptualized as both a critical pedagogy and "an emancipatory research construct" (p. 244). Concurring on both accounts, Bush and Silk's (2010) formation of physical pedagogic bricolage (PPB) argued that the employment of PBB in and through sport studies "challenges the practices imposed under neoliberal ideology… one that is characterised by a multiperspectival process and a socially and culturally responsive, communitarian, justice-oriented agenda" (p. 561). Thus, in line with these postulations, the bricolage design is an appropriate design to be utilized as a social-justice-oriented form of research in the sport context – and more specifically, to address the proposed research questions.

In an earlier development of bricolage, Kincheloe (2005) delineated five core dimensions: methodological, theoretical, interpretive, political, and narrative bricolage. *Methodological bricolage* can be characterized as the employment of

> numerous data-gathering strategies from the interviewing techniques of ethnography, historical research methods, discursive and rhetorical analysis of language, semiotic analysis of signs, phenomenological analysis of consciousness and intersubjectivity, psychoanalytical methods, and Pinarian currere (Pinar, 1994) to textual analysis of documents. (p. 335)

In this sense, bricolage is both interdisciplinary and multi-methodological. Given its embrace of eclecticism, however, bricolage scholars have noted that the design is by no means bound by these methods, nor are they necessarily to be pre-defined in the research process. As Kincheloe and others (2017) noted, "Always respecting the demands of the task as hand, the bricolage, as conceptualized here, resists its placement in concrete as it promotes its elasticity" (p. 245). Marking a key ontological break from more conventional forms of research, this orientation provides methodological flexibility in the construction of social science knowledge (Kincheloe, 2005).

Theoretical bricolage is described as drawing from a wide array of social theoretical positions such as critical constructivism, feminism, Marxism, postmodernism, queer theory, and more "to situate and determine the purposes, meanings, and uses of the research act" (p. 335). Thus, built upon paradigmatic assumptions that there are no objective social truths, theoretical bricolage involves drawing from a multitude of orientations to better contextualize and understand how one's use of theory intersects with the political processes of conducting social science research.

Interpretive bricolage, as outlined by Kincheloe,

> deploys a range of interpretive strategies that emerge from a detailed awareness of the field of hermeneutics and the ability to use the hermeneutic circle. In this context,

> bricoleurs work to discern their location in the web of reality in relation to intersecting axes of personal history, autobiography, race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, geographical place, and numerous other dynamics. These various perspectives are used to discern the role of self in the interpretive process. This process is combined with different perspectives offered by people located in diverse locations in the web to widen the hermeneutical circle and to appreciate the diversity of perspectives on a particular topic. These perspectives or interpretations are viewed in relation to one another and in relation to larger social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and educational structures as well as the social theoretical positions previously referenced. In this way the complexity and multidimensionality of the interpretive process is comprehended by the bricoleur. (p. 335)

In other words, interpretive bricolage is concerned with the researcher's positionality not only in relation to a specific research project, but in relation to a broader research context and how the self plays a role in the process of knowledge construction. Particularly emphasized here is the notion of *hermeneutics*. As a central point of emphasis in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) break from the positivist tradition of conducting social science, the hermeneutic process accentuates the unique positionality of researchers in relation to a complex social world, how one navigates that social world, and the knowledge obtained through said navigation. In other words, as human beings we have imperfect knowledge which is always changing in relation to contextual realities such that new knowledge gleaned in the research process can impact the direction of research projects. Thus, bricolage embraces this form of interpretivism noting that a wide array of structures impact the way(s) in which critical social scientists navigate the research process.

Political bricolage refers to the inherently political nature of all research. "No science, no mode of production," argued Kincheloe (2005), "is free from the inscriptions of power" (p. 335). Thus, bricoleurs aim to develop an acute awareness of how power intersects with data collected and the knowledge produced therein. For instance, Kincheloe argued that bricoleurs attempt to understand the differential effects of ideological power, hegemonic power, regulatory power, coercive power, and many other forms of power on the research product. An explicit focus of developing these understandings is an attempt on the researcher's part to find "ways oppressive power can be resisted" (p. 336). As such, bricoleurs embrace a liberative orientation, making bricolage an appropriate form of research for doing liberation sociology.

Lastly, *narrative bricolage* involves an understanding of how the production of knowledge is shaped by the particular narratives to which an inquiry is privy. According to Kincheloe (2005),

> The bricoleur's knowledge of the frequently unconscious narrative formula at work in the representation of the research allows a greater degree of insight into the forces that shape the nature of knowledge production. Thus, more complex and sophisticated research emerges from the bricolage. (p. 336)

In this sense, not only does the bricoleur develop an understanding of how these narratives play into the construction of knowledge, but this understanding results in a more robust research product. To varying degrees and at different stages, bricolage embodies these five dimensions outlined by Kincheloe (2005). Accordingly, the research presented here embraces all five dimensions in its design.

METHODS

The collective case study method as outlined by Stake (2005) is employed in order to glean insight about the mechanics of the network in question. Collective case studies are similar to single case studies, except that in this instance multiple cases are jointly studied to investigate a single phenomenon. These individual cases generally manifest some characteristic and can ultimately lead to "better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2005, p. 446). As a collective case study, the research presented is both intrinsic and instrumental. Stake characterized *intrinsic case studies* as studies in which the researcher seeks to better understand one particular case; a study of intrinsic interest to the researcher. *Instrumental case studies*, however, are employed "to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else" (p. 445). This case study is intrinsic in the sense that the politics of NFL owners are of interest to the researcher; especially in relation to further investigating the degree to which these owners shape the League's structure and function. The study is also instrumental in that it is explicitly outlined in relation to the elite-white-male dominance system to further explore the political economy of the NFL. Therefore, the study has potential to contribute to broader studies on issues relating to power and the intersectional politics of domination by a predominantly white male elite. The commingling of these two approaches, in conjunction with the collective case study approach, is appropriate for the current study as Stake (2005) noted there is "no hard-and-fast line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental, but rather a zone of combined purpose" (p. 445). Accordingly, I draw from the intersection of these approaches to explicate the extent to which each one provides valuable insight on the function of the NFL in a socially complex world.

Within this collective case study, the primary method that lends itself to the study is content analysis – in addition to other methods that lend themselves to the apprehension of ready-made data (e.g., critical interpretivist approaches). Content analysis can be defined as "a family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). Emanating from a naturalistic paradigm (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), Hsieh and Shannon (2005) outlined three distinct approaches to conducting content analyses: conventional, directed and summative. The authors defined *conventional content analysis* as generally being used to describe some phenomenon, particularly when theory or empirical research on the topic are limited. The objective of *directed content analysis* is "to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (p. 1281), whereas existing theory and research guides research questions and data collection/analysis processes. Lastly, *summative content analysis* is more directly associated with the usage of specific terms, and "starts with identifying and quantifying certain words or content in text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of the words or content" (p. 1283). In the context of the current study, I primarily draw from Hsieh and Shannon's conceptualization of conventional and directed content analysis. The research draws from the directed approach as Feagin and Ducey's (2017) outlining of the elite-white-male dominance system contributes significantly to the overall direction of the study, as embodied by its positioning in the main research question. The analysis will be conventional in that the data gathered is analyzed in relation to the phenomenon of elite-white-male oligopoly capitalism which, while having some theoretical backing in the field of sociology, remains unexplored in the field of sport management.

Case Sample

The cases examined were pulled directly from the 32 ownership groups of NFL franchises, extending to direct institutional connections (e.g., politics, finance, technology, energy, transportation, education, etc.) to highlight an inter-institutional network (or networks) through the NFL as a focal organization. The individual group members were initially pulled from each individual team's official website and then expanded as needed during the collection/analysis process. In addition to the 32 ownership groups, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell will also be examined. This inclusion decision was based on the relevant literature emphasizing the scope of influence of the Commissioner within the NFL structure (Lentze, 1995). Overall, these cases provide a sufficient cross-section of a powerful soupçon of mostly white men empowered by and through the structure of the NFL.

Data Collection

Data were collected in relation to a broader oligarchic structure and how the critical research put forth by Feagin and Ducey (2017) speaks to such data. As Stake (2005) outlined in his discussion on case studies, the type of data sought out generally includes (a) the nature of the case, especially its activity and functioning; (b) historical background; (c) physical setting; (d) economic, political, legal, aesthetic, and other contexts; (e) other cases through which this case is recognized; and (f) informants through whom the case can be known. In this process, information is gleaned from sources including but not limited to official NFL websites and online content, news articles, media interviews, online business assessments, and empirical social science research. Background information on ownership groups is compiled to derive how and why these individuals got to where they are, their capital networks, and other pertinent information related to their social and political functions as NFL owners. This is an effective way

to begin exploring the extensiveness of elite networks of predominantly white men and the social, economic, and political institutions that help to form such networks (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Furthermore, this approach has been shown to be an effective method for investigating the character of sport owners and how the production of certain social relations are incorporated into the political economy (Flint & Eizten, 1987). Data were collected until saturation was reached (see Fusch & Ness, 2015), then organized and written into narrative format to corroborate the analysis process through which several key themes emerge through the process of *thematic analysis* (Van Manen, 1944).

Data Analysis

There are two potential methods for analyzing data in a study of this structure. The first method is outlined in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) discussion of naturalistic inquiry. The other applicable analysis process is Van Manen's (1944) conceptualization of thematic analysis. Based on the nature of the data collected and the variety of forms in which it was presented, the process of thematic analysis was applied in this study. Van Manen's (1944) conceptualization of thematic analysis is characterized by three specific processes: uncovering thematic aspects in lifeworld descriptions, isolating thematic statements, and composing linguistic transformations. In relation to the *uncovering of lifeworld descriptions*, Van Manen (1944) stated the following:

> no conceptual formulation or a single statement can possibly capture the full mystery of this experience. So a phenomenological theme is much less a singular statement (concept or category) than an actual description of the structure of a lived experience. As such, a so-called thematic phrase does not do justice to the fullness of the life of a phenomenon. A thematic phrase only serves to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, an aspect of the phenomenon. (p. 60)

In this sense, I attempt to draw themes from the content analyzed in a way that alludes to the various elements of the character structures of NFL ownership groups. As such, my intention is not to capture the lived experiences of these owners *per se* but to draw out descriptive categories that apply to multiple actors within the confines of the collective case study and the proposed research questions.

In discussing the *isolation of thematic statements*, Van Manen (1944) offered two approaches to doing so: the highlighting approach and the line-by-line approach. The former refers to the ability to read a text and ascertain what the essential or revealing aspects are, and the latter refers to a closer analysis of what each "line" of information has to offer. Though the author differentiated between the two approaches, he argued that they should both be used if possible, ultimately enabling the researcher to triangulate their analyses "by capturing in singular statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes" (Van Manen, 1944, p. 61).

In relation to the *composing of linguistic transformations*, Van Manen (1944) discussed how it is in the interest of conducting trustworthy research to deliberate over the ontological implications of language such that the researcher captures the essence of a chosen theme. In this sense, a reflection on the researcher's own subjectivities is warranted as well as the contextual limitations of where and when data is originally gathered. The implications of language are reflected upon in the context of producing emancipatory work, as embodied by the research design more broadly. Throughout thematic analysis, data were triangulated with other sources (e.g., online materials, databases, media interviews) to ensure the consistency of interpretation. For the purposes of this study, triangulation is defined as "a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation"

(Stake, 2005, p. 454). Thus, conflicting data were considered and reconciled throughout the collection and analysis processes to ensure academic rigor.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, themes emanating from the collective case study are discussed in terms of NFL ownership groups as a collective unit. The themes that emerged include the following: (a) overrepresentation of elite white men; (b) intergenerational transfer of wealth; (c) nepotism; (d) inter-institutional representation; (e) political and economic networks; and (f) philanthropy. However, before discussing these themes it is important to note unique case-related aspects stemming from the data collection and analysis process. There were some major developments relating to NFL ownership that have taken place since the outset of this study. Namely, four events that directly impacted the structure of NFL ownership were (1) the death of Seattle Seahawks owner Paul Allen; (2) the death of Houston Texans owner Robert McNair; (3) the death of New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson; and (4) the sale of the Carolina Panthers from Jerry Richardson to David Tepper for $2.275 billion amid sexual and racial harassment allegations (Newton, 2018b; Reyes, 2018). Thus, four franchises witnessed transfers of control during the processes of data collection and analysis. These, as well as the unique ownership structure of the Green Bay Packers, are briefly overviewed here before discussing the themes of NFL ownership groups.

The four franchises that changed ownership are important to note here because they demonstrate NFL ownership as an *active* process through which significant social, political, and economic power is conferred and transferred. However, this active process is not indicative of the "free enterprise" ideologies often espoused by elites; rather, the opposite is true. Because the NFL owners collectively have significant control over the process of ownership transfer (i.e., the

¾ rule), these instances present opportunities to either extend current relations or further consolidate power. In the case of the Seattle Seahawks, it was widely reported that other owners were deliberating over whether they wanted Paul Allen's sister, Jody Allen, to retain ownership of the Seahawks franchise or if they wanted sell it – which, according to sportswriter and NFL analyst Ian Rapoport, Jody is set to eventually divest the Seahawks as the executor of Paul's estate (Lewis, 2018; Schlosser, 2018; Vrentas, 2018). Speculated buyers for the Seahawks franchise include Steve Ballmer (former Microsoft CEO and owner of the Los Angeles Clippers) and Jeff Bezos (founder and CEO of Amazon). Jerry Jones has stated the following about the latter: "Someone like that. I'd carry him piggyback to get him to the NFL" (as quoted in Vrentas, 2018, para. 6). In the case of the Houston Texans, control over the organization is being passed to Robert McNair's son, D. Cal McNair, while Robert's wife, Janice, maintains ownership stake (McClain, 2018). Gayle Benson is succeeding her late husband, Tom Benson, as the owner of the New Orleans Saints (and the New Orleans Pelicans) (New Orleans Saints, 2019). Lastly, the sale of the Carolina Panthers from Jerry Richardson to David Tepper kept ownership in-house as far as NFL ownership. Tepper was previously a minority owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and was unanimously approved to purchase the franchise by the other owners (Associated Press, 2018a; Newton, 2018b; Reed, 2018). These four developments, in relation to the themes expounded upon below, demonstrate active components of NFL ownership.

In addition to the transfers of ownership and/or control, there was one franchise in the study that differed from the others in terms of its ownership structure. The Green Bay Packers are the only NFL franchise that is publicly owned. This public form of ownership was grandfathered in during the 1980s when the League formally eliminated the right to public ownership (Birren, 2004). Subsequently, the board of directors of the Packers organization is the

group that functions in place of the owner(s). While this form of ownership is unique compared to the other 31 franchises, the Packers are still governed like many, more traditional corporations. In fact, the use of a larger-bodied board of directors (over 40 members; Green Bay Packers, 2019) to govern the Packers franchise further opens up its governance structure (and by affiliation, the League as a whole) to being more deeply embedded within an interlocking directorate. In the case of the Packers organizations, a seven-member executive committee runs the organization, as elected from among the board. This committee "directs corporate management, approves major capital expenditures, establishes broad policy and monitors management's performance in conducting the business and affairs of the corporation" (Green Bay Packers, 2019, para. 3). Currently, Mark H. Murphy acts as the elected President and Chief Executive Officer of the organization, representing the team at ownership meetings and other NFL functions (Green Bay Packers, 2019). These unique, individual case-related aspects were considered and integrated into the analysis of NFL ownership groups.

OVERREPRESENTATION OF ELITE WHITE MEN

Among ownership groups, *elite white men* are significantly overrepresented. According to the 2018 Racial and Gender Report Card conducted by Lapchick and colleagues (2019), there are currently 2 majority owners of color (Shahid Khan and Kim Pegula) and 6 principal owners who are women (Kim Pegula, Martha Ford, Janice McNair, Gayle Benson, Marie DeBartolo York, and Jody Allen). Kim Pegula is listed twice here because she is an Asian-American woman. All 6 women who currently have principal ownership were either named co-owner through a parent, spouse, or sibling, or they have (temporarily) maintained ownership of the franchise following the death of father, spouse, or sibling. This is not to diminish the role of these women with ownership status; however, they often have little influence within the

collusive structure of the NFL because of the ¾ rule or are removed from team operations altogether. Thus, these numbers are currently inflated and make the NFL seem less exclusive than it really is at the ownership level. Even after assuming an ownership role, some of these franchises are still expected to be passed down to a white-male heir (e.g., the grooming of William Clay Ford, Jr. to succeed Martha Ford) (see Howard, 2015). Apart from these few exceptions, the NFL is largely owned and managed by elite white men. However, this does not necessarily mean that this group of mostly white men is monolithic per se. Rather, this elite group of predominantly white men is multi-ethnic, interreligious, and they politically range anywhere from liberal to conservative.

According to Feagin and Ducey (2017), a key aspect of the white male elite is what is referred to as *multi-ethnic whiteness*. This multi-ethnic whiteness is built on an understanding of the complex social and historical processes that subsumed certain ethnic groups into being categorized as "white." Thus, multi-ethnic whiteness at the elite level includes, but is not limited to, Irish, Anglos, Italians, Jews, and Germans (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Indeed, these multi-ethnic facets of whiteness are reflected among NFL ownership: a multi-ethnic, and even interreligious, group with ascribed whiteness. Some examples include Pat Bowlen of the Denver Broncos being a Catholic white male (Dyrud, 2017); the Rooney family of the Pittsburgh Steelers are also Catholic, but of Irish descent (Hoffmann, 2018); Robert Kraft of the New England Patriots is a Jewish, white male (Heller, 2019); Stephen Bisciotti of the Baltimore Ravens is Italian-American (Palmer, 2018); and Robert McNair of the Houston Texans was often described as being a devout Christian (Solomon, 2018).

Politically, ownership groups engage at different levels for different reasons. There is not necessarily unanimous commitment to a particular political agenda. As noted by Feagin and

Ducey (2017), "There are conflicts within the top rank of the ruling elite that are revealed in major institutions, and especially in such realms as politics and corporate competitions" (p. 15). For example, owners such as Jerry Jones, Jimmy Haslam, and Robert McNair have almost exclusively supported conservative Republican politicians; owners such as Paul Allen and Robert Kraft (New England Patriots) support more moderate politicians (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018b). However, while there are factions within the elite group, "there is nearly unanimous commitment to maintaining the top status of elite white men in the country's gender, racial, and class hierarchies and thus in the overarching elite-white-male dominance system" (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 15). Accordingly, near-unanimous commitment to a system that unjustly enriches white men of status is reflected within the NFL as a political system. Although there are individual political disagreements, the NFL's Political Action Committee (PAC), Gridiron-PAC, represents the interests of all owners and serves to contribute to political causes across the nation in the name of each owner. These issues are discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

The Apex of Intersectionality

Of central importance to this theme relating to the overrepresentation of elite white men is how and why this matters within the political economy of the NFL. As such, the overrepresentation of these men is about more than imbalanced demographical representation. NFL ownership groups, and the white male elites within this group more specifically, have unique character structures shaped by the roles they play within broader social systems (see Mills & Gerth, 1953). Positioned at the apex of intersectional systems of domination, the psychic structure (i.e., framing) and resultant behaviors of these elites reproduces colonial politics (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Extending Feagin's (2013) concept of the white racial frame in the context of sport, Ben Carrington (2010) offered the *white colonial frame* as a conceptual tool to

understand how the colonizer's model of the world (see Blaut, 2012) shapes sport as a colonial institution. It is this psychic structure stemming from the white male elite that serves as the foundation for the colonial stratification of the United States (see Curry, 2015, 2017), as well as the political economy of the NFL. Examples of how this plays out through the behaviors of NFL owners are discussed below.

Perhaps one of the most visible examples of NFL owners perpetuating white racist views has been Daniel Snyder's adamant defense of the "Redskins" name in the midst of continued scrutiny, citing the name as a term of honor, respect, and heritage (Brady, 2013b; Burke, 2013). When asked by *USA Today* if he would ever consider changing the name of the team, Snyder responded with: "We'll never change the name. It's that simple. NEVER – you can use caps" (as quoted in Brady, 2013a, para. 4). As one of the most valuable sports franchises in the world (O'Halloran, 2018), Snyder's commitment to the Redskins *brand* demonstrates the interlocking nature of white racism and capitalism (Fenelon, 2016).

Another example that briefly received media attention was Robert McNair's statement during a private meeting about players protesting to raise awareness of police violence and systemic oppression. In a 2017 meeting among owners plus one allowed adviser, McNair commented on the protests: "We can't have the inmates running the prison" (as quoted in Wickersham & Van Natta, 2017, para. 35). According to the initial report, the statement stunned some in the room, including Troy Vincent to whom McNair later apologized (Wickersham & Van Natta, 2017). Once this statement was publicized, McNair made attempts to alter the meaning of his statement (Brinson, 2018); however, his racial gaffe had already shed too much light on his views about players. Research from Jane Hill (2009) explains racist gaffes as being indicative of a larger, metalinguistic discourse of white racism. Indeed, these "gaffes" are more

than mistakes. They are ideological objects representative of internal systems designed to protect the white self and reproduce racial domination (Hill, 2009).

Another case stems from the recent owner of the Carolina Panthers, Jerry Richardson. At least four former Panthers employees received substantial monetary settlements due to inappropriate workplace conduct and harassment by Richardson – which included both sexist and racist behaviors (Newton 2018a; Wertheim & Bernstein, 2017). In a personal statement to the NFL from one of the (unnamed) victims of Richardson's sexual harassment, the following was stated:

> Throughout the many years I was sexually harassed by Jerry Richardson, I always believed that there was no one above him, no one whom I could tell, without repercussions, what was happening to me. (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018c, para. 16)

She would later go on to directly address Richardson in her statement:

> I didn't know what to do when you started leaving me suggestive handwritten notes, insisting that I reply and then destroy the note. I didn't know what to do when you summoned me to your personal office, instructed me to sit in the chair across from you, pulled my chair towards you so you could sandwich my legs, which you proceeded to rub, between yours. I didn't know what to do when you called me to your stadium suite in the middle of the week so you could take off my shoes, place my legs in your lap and rub their entire length, from toes to crotch. I didn't know what to do when you asked me to turn around so you could see how my jeans looked. I didn't know what to do when you brushed my breasts to put my seat belt around me in the front seat of your car. I didn't know what to do when you put your hands on my mouth, for me to kiss them. I didn't know what to do when you asked me uncomfortable, sexually charged questions…

> I didn't know what to do. So, I did what you told me to do. (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018c, para. 32-33)

The woman also provided handwritten notes addressed to her from Richardson – to which his attorneys and the Panthers franchise did not respond – including direct instructions of how she was to visually present herself along with other sexually suggestive commentary (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018c). The severity of these issues was further compounded by the statements from McNair and Jones stating that she "misunderstood" Richardson's "joking" comments and that the NFL needs more men like Richardson (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018c; Newton, 2018a; Polacek, 2018).

Recently, it was also reported that Robert Kraft was among those named in the ongoing investigation of a Jupiter, Florida spa and its connection with a trafficking and prostitution ring (Belson, 2019; Chang, 2019; Quinn, 2019; Zamost, 2019). In this investigation, Kraft has been charged with two misdemeanor counts of first-degree solicitation of prostitution, of which video evidence has been confirmed by prosecutors (Andrew, 2019; Zamost, Kliot, & Fortis, 2019). Kraft has since reportedly filed a motion to suppress evidence; specifically, the video evidence (Quinn, 2019). While it is not in the scope of this dissertation to speculate on the outcome of this investigation for Kraft, nor the spa and its noted ties to Donald Trump (Goggin, 2019), it *is* within the scope of this dissertation to understand Kraft's alleged involvement as being indicative of his character structure. Although virtually all men routinely operate out of a *male sexist frame* (Feagin & Ducey, 2017), elite men white play unique roles because of their social positioning as the apex of intersectionality. In other words, their sexist framing along with the power and arrogance to act on sexist impulses with little recourse reinforces (white) patriarchal norms and structures (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). In the case of Kraft, his actions are about more

than individual deviance. As noted by Dave Aronberg, the State Attorney of Palm Beach County, "This is not about lonely old men or victimless crime. This is about enabling a network of criminals to traffic women into our country for forced labor and sex" (as quoted in Belson, Mather, & Mazzei, 2019, para. 9). Thus, the behaviors of these men actively reproduce a political economy based on colonial stratification.

There is a particular disposition for NFL ownership in relation to both the character structure of individual owners as well as the social structure in which they are embedded. While not *all* of the owners' actions are as explicit as the actions of others, they are equally bound to the system in which they operate. Giddens' (1984) work on routinization may help clarify this particular phenomenon. Giddens (1984) argued that routine, as being "psychologically linked to the minimizing of unconscious sources of anxiety, is the predominant form of day-to-day social activity… in the enactment of routines agents sustain a sense of ontological security" (p. 12). In other words, routine behavior stabilizes individuals' perception that their world is real (Wallace & Wolf, 2006). Thus, owners have a "generalized motivational commitment" (Giddens, 1984, p. 64) to maintaining routine behaviors, and subsequently, their own security within the NFL. Often times, these behavioral routines violate codes of ethics that would otherwise be viewed as illegitimate. Yet, for many NFL owners their unique framing and subsequent behaviors are routinized, and thus, make up an essential part of the structure of team ownership. Chapters 6 and 7 further expound upon these issues to connect the character structure of NFL ownership (behaviors included) to the (re)production of social structures within a larger political economy.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF WEALTH

The second theme emanating from the data is that of an *intergenerational transfer of wealth*. As one of the major dimensions of systemic racism (see Feagin, 2006), the

intergenerational transfer of wealth refers to the "intertemporal inheritance of resources, power, and privileges" (p. 37) among whites, and especially among white elites. Further developing this concept, Feagin (2006) outlined four circles through which this "intergenerational transmission of economic, cultural, and social assets" (p. 37) takes place: (a) family (monetary, cultural/educational, social networking capital); (b) community (segregated family and friendship networks); (c) institutional (supportive economic, political, military, legal, educational, and religious institutions); and (d) societal (envelops and protects major institutions with white-oriented culture). In the context of NFL ownership, this unjust and intergenerational transfer of resources is essential to the current status of individual owners.

For instance, some current owners inherited their respective franchises outright. Bill Bidwill inherited the Arizona Cardinals from his father (Weinfuss, 2015). While an undergraduate at Georgetown University, he was named as a vice president of the Cardinals organization which was then owned by Charles Bidwill, Sr., inheriting the team upon his father's passing (Weinfuss, 2015). Virginia McCaskey inherited the Chicago Bears from her father, Bears founder George Halas (Harris & Hopkins, 2013; Pompei, 2016); George McCaskey, Virginia's son, currently serves as Chairman of the team (Chicago Bears, 2019). Mike Brown inherited the Cincinnati Bengals from his father, Bengals founder Paul Brown (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018b). However, not all current owners inherited their franchises from a family member. Rather, some owners acquired resources from outside the context of sport and entered into the NFL on their own accord.

For example, Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys joined his father's company, Modern Security Life Insurance Co., as the Executive Vice President upon graduating from college (*Springfield Leader*, 1966). After failing to purchase the San Diego Chargers franchise from

Barron Hilton on more than one occasion in the late-1960s (Horn, 2017), Jones began exploring other entrepreneurial activities which would ultimately lead him to form Jones Oil and Land Lease at age 25 (McFarlane, 2014). Due to the resources afforded to him through his father's company Jones sought to buy an NFL franchise before ever entering into the oil field on his own accord. Moreover, he was able to enter into the oil field and start his own company *because* of these resources transferred to him.

Dan Snyder of the Washington Redskins is often considered to be one of the "self-made" owners in the League (Washington Redskins, 2019). In 1988, roughly 2 years after dropping out of the University of Maryland (ESPN, 2000) Snyder used money from his sister and their father to co-found Snyder Communications LP, a marketing firm (Jaffe, 2006). By 1993, the company had expanded into a variety of markets bringing in $9 million in revenue that year (Jaffe, 2006). In 1996, Snyder (age 32) took his company public becoming the youngest CEO ever at the time for a firm listed to the New York Stock Exchange (Muoio, 1997). Throughout Snyder's early business ventures, which included a few failed attempts before Snyder Communications LP took off, he had consistent financial support from Mortimer Zuckerman and Fred Drasner (Jaffe, 2006; Perl, 2002; Schwartzman, 2001). Owing the two money for his earlier failed attempts, Snyder gave them stock in his new publicly traded company, which was ultimately valued at being worth over $500 million (Jaffe, 2006). As a wealthy businessman, media proprietor, and active political participant himself, Mortimer Zuckerman was appointed by George W. Bush to the Honorary Delegation to accompany him to Jerusalem for the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel in May of 2008 (Office of the Press Secretary, 2008). Fred Drasner is also a wealthy business man (the former CEO of several media companies) and a former part-owner of the Redskins with Snyder. Speaking on Drasner, Snyder has stated that he uses Drasner as a

sounding board and has tremendous respect for his business acumen (Schwartzman, 2001). According to Schwartzman (2001), Drasner was instrumental in selling the Redskins stadium's naming rights Fred Smith of FredEx. Smith, of course, is also now a minority owner of the franchise (Washington Redskins, 2019). Therefore, although Snyder is often positioned as a "self-made man," he had substantial social, economic, and political support from these benefactors even throughout his failed business ventures, ultimately vaulting him to the position which he occupies today.

Consider also the resources afforded to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. Roger is the son of former U.S. Representative and Senator Charles Ellsworth Goodell Jr. (Lynn, 1987). He has four brothers, including Tim Goodell who, according to Bloomberg (2019), is the Senior Vice President at Hess Corporation. Roger also has a cousin, Andrew Goodell, who was elected to the New York State Assembly in 2010 according to *The New York Times* (2017). Goodell is now married to former Fox News anchor, Jane Skinner (Schefter, 2006). Jane's father, Samuel Skinner, was the White House Chief of Staff and Secretary of Transportation for George H. W. Bush. As a politician, Skinner was dubbed the "Master of Disaster" in Washington D.C. because of the way he handled the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, the Eastern airlines strike, a national railroad strike, Federal responses to hurricanes and earthquakes, and other natural disasters (Gaines, 1997; Garcia, 2017). Following Bush's loss to Bill Clinton in the 1992 Presidential election, Skinner became the president of Commonwealth Edison Co. and its parent company, Unicom Corp. (Gaines, 1997).

Goodell occupied many positions on his journey up the NFL hierarchy after first joining the League in 1982 as an administrative intern (Delevingne, 2014). He interned with the New York Jets in 1983; returned to the league office in 1984 as an assistant in the public relations

department; was appointed in 1987 by Commissioner Pete Rozelle to be an assistant to the president of the American Football Conference, Lamar Hunt; served in various senior executive roles under Rozelle's successor, Paul Tagliabue; and was appointed executive vice president and chief operating officer of the NFL in 2001 (Bloomberg, 2006; IMDB, 2019; NPR, 2006; *The New York Times*, 2006). In 2006, Goodell was appointed by NFL owners to be the eighth Commissioner of the League (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2019). However, it is unlikely that Goodell's speedy ascent up the NFL ladder would have taken place had he not been born into substantial political, economic, and social capital. Moreover, his familial resources further cemented his candidacy as the new Commissioner of the League in 2006 – the year in which Jeb Bush was also urged by some NFL owners to become Commissioner of the League (Hohmann, 2015).

While these represent just a few cases, the overwhelming majority of NFL owners received similar support in terms of inheritance, social networking, educational resources, political access, and/or other institutional support. The only "outlier" for this theme was Shahid Khan. Khan, the first ethnic minority owner in the history of the NFL, migrated to the United States from Pakistan in 1966. At just 16 years old, he arrived on his own with only $500 to his name (CBS, 2012). He worked several menial jobs while attending the University of Illinois and around the time of his graduation, Khan went to work for Flex-N-Gate (auto parts manufacturer) where he eventually engineered a one-piece truck bumper revolutionizing the manufacturing process (Crain Communications, 2017). In 1980, Khan purchased Flex-N-Gate outright (Sanjai, Jie, & Lippert, 2016). In a 2012 Forbes article, Khan was referred to as the new face of the NFL and the American dream (Solomon, 2012). Much of the narrative surrounding Khan refers to his "passion for the American dream" (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2019, para. 12) or being a rags to riches

American story (Ganguli, 2011), a convenient ideological axiom afforded by the only owner who migrated from outside of the US. Since accomplishing his "dream," Khan has fit well into the economic structure of the NFL, particularly in relation to globalization efforts (discussed in more detail in chapter 7).

NEPOTISM

Although intimately related to the previous theme, the theme of *nepotism* is distinct as it relates directly to the actions of current owners and the way they run their respective franchises. Keleş, Özkan, and Bezirci (2011) defined nepotism as "an individual's attainment of recruitment, promotion, provision of more favorable working conditions and similar gains irrespective of their knowledge, abilities, skills, educational level, and experience but owing to their kinship ties" (p. 10). Many scholars have argued that nepotism in general reproduces issues related to sexism (Wold & Wennerás, 2001) and ethnocentrism (Mutlu, 2000; Vanhanen, 1999). Thus, in organizational contexts this unjust enrichment of family members reproduces power and power relations within a political economy.

Among NFL franchises, it is not uncommon for owners to designate top executive positions to close family members. Although this is how several owners obtained their current franchises to begin with, it is also an active practice in the NFL. For example, while Bill Bidwill is the majority owner of the Arizona Cardinals, his son (Michael Bidwill) runs much of the organization as the teams' president (*Sports Illustrated*, 2018b). As the previous owner of the Carolina Panthers, Jerry Richardson granted minority ownership stakes to his children (Newton, 2015). Virginia McCaskey's sons, Michael and George, have played integral roles in the operation of the Bears franchise. In fact, all four individuals who have held the position of Chairman in the history of the Bears organization have come from the Halas/McCaskey family

(Chicago Bears, 2019). Currently, five members of the McCaskey family now sit on the Bears' board of directors (Forbes, 2018). Katie Blackburn, the daughter Cincinnati Bengals owner Mike Brown, serves as the team's Executive Vice President and is set to inherit the franchise along with her husband, Troy Brown, who currently serves as Vice President (Curnutte, 2000; *Sports Illustrated*, 2018b).

According to the official website of the Cowboys (Dallas Cowboys, 2018), the executive board of the Cowboys is comprised of Jerry Jones' three children: Stephen Jones (Chief Operating Officer/Executive Vice President/Director of Player Personnel), Charlotte Jones Anderson (Executive Vice President/Chief Brand Officer), and Jerry Jones, Jr. (Executive Vice President/Chief Sales and Marketing Officer). Serving as Vice Chairs of the Detroit Lions franchise are Martha Ford's four children: Martha Ford Morse, Sheila Ford Hamp, William Clay Ford, Jr. (also the Executive Chairman of Ford Motor Company), and Elizabeth Ford Kontulis (Detroit Lions, 2018). While Martha is currently the principal owner of the Lions franchise, all four children hold smaller shares of the team (Shea, 2014).

Shahid Khan's son, Tony Khan, currently serves as the Senior Vice President of Football Technology and Analytics for the Jaguars (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2019). In addition to his responsibilities with the Jaguars, he is also a co-owner of Fulham FC (owned by Shahid) and was named as Fulham's Vice Chairman and Director of Football Operations on February 23, 2017 (Fulham FC, 2019; Jacksonville Jaguars, 2019). This is in addition to his service as General Manager and Sporting Director of the club (Fulham FC, 2019).

Overall, this organizational form of nepotism was a major theme throughout NFL franchises and keeps significant economic, cultural, and political power in the hands of individual elite families. Further, this nepotic orientation was mirrored across institutions in

which owners were/are embedded. Accordingly, the next theme discussed deals with the inter-institutional nature of NFL ownership groups.

INTER-INSTUTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Another theme emanating from the data is the *inter-institutional representation* among NFL ownership groups. This theme concurs with Flint and Eitzen's (1987) finding that a significant block of sport team owners emerge from the economic sectors of "communications, transportation, real estate and land development, or oil production" (p. 19), while further extending their findings in relation to today's NFL. Current NFL owners represent and have extensive connections within and beyond the following industries: sport, politics, education, energy/oil and gas, automobile, financial management, transportation/distribution, real estate/land development, technology, and media/entertainment. For the purposes of this theme, I focus strictly on the backgrounds of the owners themselves and the industries from which they emerged and/or currently operate within. This institutional representation provides significant resources for the operation of the NFL today, and facilitates an oligopolistic form of capitalism in and through the League (see Figure 2 for a limited representation of NFL ownership and the institutions in which they are embedded). Although it is important to note that the themes of inter-institutional representation and political and economic network are interrelated in practice, I discuss these separately to disentangle their nuances. In reality, however, the two are interdependent and corroborate one another.

Figure 1 Inter-Institutional Representation of NFL Ownership

Many NFL owners also own franchises across various sport leagues. For example, Paul Allen (late owner of the Seattle Seahawks) was also the majority owner of the Portland Trailblazers (NBA) in addition to being part-owner of the Seattle Sounder FC (MLS) (NBA, 2018). Through their organization, Pegula Sports, and Entertainment, Terry and Kim Pegula of the Bills own and operate a variety of sport teams including the Buffalo Sabres of the National

Hockey League (NHL), the Buffalo Bandits of the National Lacrosse League (NLL), the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League (AHL), and the Buffalo Beauts of the National Women's Hockey League (NWHL) (Schram, 2017). Stan Kroenke (Los Angeles Rams) and assets which he controls also own the Denver Nuggets (NBA), Colorado Avalanche (NHL), Colorado Rapids (MLS), and Colorado Mammoth (NLL) (Wagoner, 2018). Moreover, Kroenke is 1 of 3 NFL owners who has control over an English Premier League franchise; Arsenal in the case of Kroenke, Manchester United for the Glazer family, and Fulham for Khan (Wagoner, 2018). Arthur Blank of the Atlanta Falcons has ownership stake in Atlanta United FC (MLS) and the Georgia Force of the Arena Football League (AFL) (Atlanta United FC, 2019; Hammock, 2008). Cross-sport ownership is likely a strategic outcome of the resources available to sport owners (e.g., facilities, labor, marketing firms, and management), which help to provide competitive advantages within the sport industry (see Oliver, 1997).

The technology industry is also represented among NFL ownership. Although having recently passed away, Paul Allen had emerged from the technology industry as the co-founder of Microsoft. While he officially "resigned" from Microsoft in 2000, he stayed on as a senior strategy advisor to the Microsoft board of directors and owned roughly 100 million shares of stock in the company at the time of his death (Microsoft, 2000; Oster & Bass, 2018). According to the NFL Commissioner, Goodell "personally valued Paul's advice on subjects ranging from collective bargaining to *bringing technology to our game*. Our league is better for Paul Allen having been a part of it" (as quoted by Henderson, 2018, para. 8, italics added for emphasis). Allen played a key role in, and had been a primary beneficiary of, the corporate partnership between Microsoft and the NFL. The Microsoft Surface was named as the official laptop of the NFL and can frequently be seen on the sidelines during games (Microsoft, 2019), while the Xbox

One was named as the official gaming console of the NFL (Sando, 2013). This extensive partnership with Microsoft is a primary reason why former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer is on the NFL's shortlist to take over the Seahawks franchise (Lewis, 2018).

Denise DeBartolo York of the San Francisco 49ers significantly represents the real estate and land development industries. Her representation stems from both her current work as well as the work of her father and brother, Edward DeBartolo Sr. and Edward DeBartolo Jr. Edward DeBartolo Sr. founded the Edward J. DeBartolo Corporation following World War II (WWII), becoming a pioneer in the post-WWII growth of suburban areas (Bryant, 1994). Specifically, DeBartolo amassed wealth by building shopping plazas and malls, but continued to operate broadly in the areas of real estate, construction, and land development until his son took over upon his passing (Fitzpatrick & Lindeman, 2001). Having amassed significant wealth, DeBartolo Sr. purchased the San Francisco 49ers via his corporation in 1977 while naming his son as owner and president of the organization (Hartlaub, 2016; Koppett, 1977). As one of the nation's top contractors, DeBartolo Sr. owned 10% of all US shopping malls by the mid-1980s, and this number continued to grow until in his death in 1994 (Associated Press, 1994; Crawford, 1986; Scardino, 1986). Denise DeBartolo York eventually gained sole ownership of the 49ers franchise along with their family's corporation from her brother in 2000 after the fallout of *United States v. Edwards, et al.*, (2002) in which Edward DeBartolo Jr. pled guilty to a felony charge of failing to report on his involvement in a racketeering case (Dietz & Arceneaux, 1998).

When it comes to building materials, Arthur Blank of the Atlanta Falcons co-founded Home Depot (Atlanta Falcons, 2019). Although Blank retired from Home Depot in 2001 (Terhune, 2001), the Atlanta-based company continued to have an extensive corporate partnership with the NFL (*Sports Business Daily*, 2007). Today, however, Lowe's (commonly

viewed as a competitor for Home Depot) has now usurped Home Depot as a leading home-improvement partner of the NFL (Pasquarelli, 2019). This may seem counter-intuitive to Blank having been the co-founder of Home Depot, yet there is more to the story. Namely, Marvin Ellison, a former executive at Home Depot (Northrup, 2015), is now the CEO at Lowe's (Novy-Williams, 2019). While this type of interlock speaks more directly to the next theme, it stems from Blank having previously been on the board at Home Depot. Thus, his personal resources within this industry continue to play a significant role in facilitating corporate partnerships in and through the NFL.

The late Robert McNair (and his son, Cal) and Jerry Jones both emerged out of the energy/oil and gas industry. McNair founded Cogen Technologies (energy cogeneration) in the early 1980s and hired Cal as one of his first employees (Ganguli, 2012; Poole, 2001). In the late 1990s, McNair sold three of his power plants to Enron for roughly $1.4 billion while keeping two other plants (Poole, 2001). McNair's connections in the energy industry were central in building the Texans partnerships with Reliant and NRG (Poole, 2001; Robertson, 2018). However, the impact of these energy companies extended beyond the Texans franchise. For example, an editorial publication for the *Houston Chronicle* (2018) was titled "McNair gave us football, and civic energy." McNair having emerged from the energy industry is seen as having a much larger impact on the city of Houston and its surrounding area. Although Jones generated significant wealth by working for his father's insurance company, his work in oil and gas is what propelled him to NFL ownership. In the 1970s, Jones founded Jones Oil and Land Lease and roughly a decade later he founded Arkoma Production Co. (Joseph, 2018). Jones is still actively involved in the oil field, having recently invested $75 million in Comstock Resources (Joseph,

2018). According to Crowley, Porter, and Collins (2018), Jones now owns roughly 84% of the company.

Complementary to the energy industry, the transportation/distribution industries are also represented by NFL ownership. For example, Jimmy Haslam of the Cleveland Browns owns Pilot Flying J, the largest operator of travel centers in North America (Pilot Flying J, 2019). Frederick Smith of the Redskins owns FedEx, a multinational delivery service (FedEx, 2019). With the Redskins franchise playing their games at FedExField and FedEx being the official delivery service of the NFL, Smith has played a key role in, and been a primary beneficiary of, these corporate partnerships. Because of the nature of transportation and distribution, these companies and their owners depend heavily upon relationship built with oil and gas companies.

These examples represent only a portion of the inter-institutional representation among owners; this representation is significant for the function of the NFL as well as oligopoly capitalism more broadly. For example, the NFL has extensive corporate partnerships with Ford, FedEx, Home Depot/Lowe's, and Microsoft – all companies affiliated with the business ventures of NFL owners. For the NFL, and its ownership groups as having interests beyond the NFL, the collective of top corporations within various industries facilitates capital exchanges. Similar to the function of interlocking directorates in general – and in some cases directly reflective of an existing interlock – this collection provides baseline resources for elite factions of corporations run substantially by white men. At the core of this are the interests of the individual ownership groups. And while their own capital interests are not the *only* interests empowered in and through the NFL, they serve as the lasting core to which other major corporations attach themselves. In other words, the inter-institutional representation of ownership groups and the League in general serve as the enzyme through which the production of political economy takes place.

Subsequently, the following theme is characterized by the political and economic network of NFL owners that extends beyond their own personal resources and helps to better understand this enzymatic function.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC NETWORK

Related to the previous theme is the extensive political and economic network in which ownership groups are embedded that extend beyond the NFL. While many owners have allegiances to particular organizations in which they have ownership/governance stakes, the network as a whole transcends these boundaries. This network is significant in the context of the overall functioning of the elite-white-male dominance system "because most of the world's major economic actors are well 'networked and successfully hooked into… a structured framework in interlocking financial and governmental (including supra-national) institutions'" (Feagin & Ducey, p. 146). NFL ownership groups have direct access to political and economic resources that make them a force to be reckoned with beyond the sport product that is produced on the field. Therefore, this theme emphasizes the political and economic relationships of NFL owners to better understand the broader network(s) to which they are tied and how these relate to the political economy of the League.

Although reaching beyond state and national boundaries, the *extensive political network* of NFL owners eventually collapses in the NFL. For example, in the bid-rigging case *United States v. Climatemp, Inc.* (1979), former Colts owner Bob Irsay was represented by former U.S. Attorney Samuel Skinner (Swift, 1986). Skinner is the father of former Fox News anchor, Jane Skinner, and the father-in-law of the current NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell (Rosenthal, 2017). Skinner was appointed to be US Attorney during Gerald Ford's tenure as President and, during the Presidency of George H. W. Bush, also served as the White House Chief of Staff and

US Secretary of Transportation (Swift, 1986; Rosenthal, 2017). Further adding to the collapsing of these NFL-political relationships, George H. W. Bush consider Robert McNair his "good friend" (as quoted by the Associated Press, 2018b, para. 3), and Bush was usually in attendance at Texans home games. The son of George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, was a fraternity brother of Redskins minority owner Frederick Smith while they attended Yale – at which the two were also members of the Skull and Bones secret society along with John Kerry (Robbins, 2002; Sora, 2003).

The political relationship with the Bush family continued for Smith through his support of former Florida Governor, Jeb Bush (Bloomberg, 2018). Further adding to this interconnection, Jeb Bush has stated that in 2006 – during the Presidency of his brother – he considered becoming Commissioner of the NFL (Hohmann, 2015). In fact, Jeb had told reporters that he had met with Patrick Rooney, the brother of the Steelers owner Dan Rooney, to discuss the job. Jeb had this to say about the opportunity to become NFL Commissioner:

> I was encouraged to consider it… There were owners that asked me about it, and it was nine months prior to ending my tenure as governor [of Florida]. And to be honest with you… I could never have imagined abandoning that job. (as quoted in Hohmann, 2015, para. 7)

During Jeb's 2016 campaign to win the Republican Presidential nomination, Woody Johnson of the Jets served as his campaign's finance chairman before eventually endorsing Donald J. Trump (Borger, 2017). These examples, while striking in and of themselves, were just the beginning.

For some ownership groups, the political network included direct family members along with other elite politicians. According to *Sports Illustrated* (2018b), Virginia McCaskey of the Bears ownership family donated to Andrew McKenna's bid for Senator in 2003-2004. Important

here is that McKenna is the son of Andrew McKenna Sr., a minority owner of the Bears franchise (*Sports Illustrated,* 2018b). In 2010, Jimmy Haslam of the Browns was the Tennessee statewide finance chair for his brother, Republican Governor Bill Haslam (Cleveland Browns, 2018). In May of 2017, Dee Haslam, Jimmy Haslam's partner, was appointed by Jeb Bush to Excel*in*Ed's Board of Directors (Cleveland Browns, 2018). Indeed, the Haslams are well-connected with Republication politicians in general, not just with Jimmy's brother and Jeb Bush. According to Knox News (2016), the Haslams hosted a luncheon during the 2016 presidential campaign that included:

> …the nation's Republican governors and large donors to the Republican Governors Association at their large home on Lake Erie east of Cleveland. Twenty governors attended, including Gov. [Bill] Haslam and [Mike] Pence, who pledged that 'federalism' would be a hallmark of a Trump administration… (para. 12)

As a family, the Haslams supported Trump throughout his presidential campaign and subsequent inauguration. For example, Pilot Travel Centers (Jimmy's company) donated $300,000 to Trump's inaugural committee; whereas Jimmy personally gave $100,000 and Dee donated $100,000 (Collins, 2017).

Many other NFL ownership groups also have personal and/or professional relationships Trump, unrelated to *USFL*. For instance, Robert Kraft of the Patriots has described his relationship with Trump as being "very close" as they've shared a friendship for more than two decades (DeCosta-Klipa, 2019). In 2017, Kraft stated the following: "Loyalty is important to me, and [Trump] has been a wonderful friend" (as quoted in Belson & Shpigel, 2017, para. 23). Moreover, Kraft's relationship with Trump has gone both ways with Trump continuously supporting the Patriots franchise, even mobilizing the success of the Patriots and the iconic

image of Tom Brady to his political advantage (Kusz, 2017; Weems & Kusz, 2019). Washington's ownership group also has a working relationship with Trump. Just days after the election of Trump to the office of the President, Frederick Smith met with him to discuss issues related to international free-trade (Risher, 2016).

Moving beyond relationships with politicians, many owners have had the opportunity to personally serve in important public positions. During George W. Bush's Presidency, it was speculated that he would appoint Frederick Smith – his fraternity brother and fellow Bonesman – to be his Secretary of Defense (Dao & Schmitt, 2000; Przybyszewski, 2000; US China Business Association, 2019). Acknowledging this possibility at the time, US Senator Bill Frist stated the following: "I think [Frederick Smith would] make a fine Secretary of Defense" (as quoted in Przybyszewski, 2000, para. 2). Although Smith ultimately declined the offer, other owners have assumed public office. Noted for his significant political impacts on the state of Pennsylvania, Dan Rooney was appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as the United States Ambassador to Ireland from 2009-2012 (*The Irish Times*, 2017). Upon his passing is 2017, Rooney's funeral was attended by many political and economic elites, including both Barack Obama and John Kerry (Sanserino & Carswell, 2017). In January of 2017, Woody Johnson was nominated by President Donald Trump to become the United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Borger, 2017). In the context of the elite-white-male dominance system, this phenomenon is indicative of the revolving door – which serves to consolidate political and economic power as top executives amass millions of dollars through particular laws and regulations imposed or dismantled while in office (Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

Other political relationships more directly highlight the impact that NFL owners can have on public policy. To illustrate this, Shahid Khan of the Jaguars has occupied a central role in the

NFL's London expansion efforts (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2019). Through his professional relationship and friendship with the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, the two are actively working to bring an NFL franchise to the city of London (Khan, 2018) – for which the Jaguars are considered the frontrunners. This move would involve privatizing Wembley Stadium and subsequently selling the stadium to Khan (DiRocco, 2018). Thus, Khan's relationship with the London mayor is essential to facilitating the necessary public (and private) support to make this move happen. In all, these political relationships play an essential function within the operation of the NFL, NFL expansion efforts, and international corporate efforts more broadly. For example, just days after the election of Donald Trump to the office of the President, Fred Smith met with Trump to discuss issues related to international free-trade (Risher, 2016). While it is a stretch to say that the NFL played a role in this meeting, the fact that Smith was able to have this meeting has implications for the political economy in which the NFL operates. Not only do these relationships shape the political economy of the NFL, but they further extend the NFL's influence in shaping public policy more broadly. These issues are discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Owners also have significant *economic ties* that extend beyond their "personal" economic interests due to the nature of interlocking directorates and extensive corporate partnerships. For example, joining the McCaskeys on the Bears board of directors is Andy McKenna, a chairman from McDonald's, and Patrick Ryan, an American billionaire who has generated most of his wealth in the insurance industry (Forbes, 2018). Further adding to the NFL's interlock, Marvin Ellison (the former executive of Home Depot and current CEO of Lowe's) also serves on the governance board at FedEx (FedEx, 2018). An important partnership for the NFL, both financially and structurally, has been with global media conglomerates (Harvey et al., 2001; Law

et al., 2002). For example, the NFL currently has substantial broadcasting partnerships with CBS (Littleton, 2019), NBC (Karp, 2017), ESPN (McCarthy, 2019), and Fox (Schad & Perez, 2018), as well as DirecTV and Verizon (Statista, 2019). By itself, ESPN's deal with the NFL to broadcast Monday Night Football games is worth a reported $15.2 billion over 10 years (McCarthy, 2019). However, as political economy analysis shows, to view these corporate partnerships in terms of dollar amounts is a limited perspective on the function of capitalism as a sociopolitical institution. Thus, the significance of these political and economic networks for the NFL are further discussed and contextualized in chapters 5-7.

PHILANTHROPY

One hundred percent of official team websites extolled the *philanthropic* virtues of their ownership groups. For example, the official website for the Washington Redskins (2019) described Dan Snyder as being "one of the Washington area's most prominent community leaders and philanthropists" and the charity foundation he created mobilizes organizational assets and corporate partners to impact youth development in the region. His philanthropy work is so extensive that it "has even transcended American borders" (Washington Redskins, 2019, para. 5). The website also discussed the philanthropic activity of the rest of the ownership group including Robert Rothman, Dwight C. Schar, and Fred Smith. Jeffrey Lurie of the Philadelphia Eagles is described as being "a thoughtful and compassionate philanthropist" (Philadephia Eagles, 2019, para. 8). According to the Los Angeles Rams (2019) website, philanthropic activities in the greater Los Angeles area will be essential to the mission of the team under Kroenke's leadership. While the emphasis on philanthropy was of significant focus for team websites, this theme extends well beyond individual team narratives. In fact, among the (sporting) mass media, philanthropy occupied a central focus in the narratives of sport owners.

Some owners opted to personally discuss their own philanthropic efforts in the media. When asked what he hope his legacy would be, Robert Kraft responded stating:

> That I love this community. What we do as a family and what our life is about is building bridges, bringing people together… Then, the unique opportunity of what it allows you to do philanthropically… and how our charitable foundation can also do that… That no one ever loved the community more. In the end, that would sum it up. And our actions speak as loud as our words. (as quoted in Reiss, 2019, para. 22-23)

Whether or not his philanthropic activities speak "as loud as" his alleged involvement with the prostitution and trafficking ring in Jupiter, Florida (see McCann, 2019), however, is difficult to tell.

The philanthropy theme was also explicit in the remembrance of the three owners who passed away during the conducting of this study. For example, roughly half of an article from ESPN's Sarah Barshop (2018) on the passing of Robert McNair focused on his philanthropic work, whether that was referencing the Texans official statement on losing its "Chief Executive Officer and philanthropist" or outlining his donations to universities such as Baylor, Rice, and South Carolina. The same is also true in relation to the passing of Paul Allen (Leight & Kreps, 2018). A separate article from ESPN's Brady Henderson (2018) similarly emphasized the philanthropic efforts of Allen as a man for the people. According to a statement by Roger Goodell on the passing of Tom Benson, "he was a generous and caring philanthropist" (as quoted in Perez, 2018, para. 6). The re-presentations of the life of these sport owners and business moguls as philanthropists appears as if the NFL and the (sporting) media who depend upon the political economy of the League have a vested interest in reassuring the legitimacy of its ownership, both in life and in passing.

The findings of this study, when viewed through the lens of the elite-white-male dominance system, point to the *illegitimacy* of owner-philanthropy. The mostly white-male owners of the NFL are not philanthropic in the abstract sense; but rather, they are individuals with particular worldviews, political agendas, and other capital interests. Throughout mediated narratives surrounding the philanthropic activity of NFL owners, these depictions rarely – if ever – contextualize these individuals as also donating millions of dollars to political campaigns, benefitting from substantial tax cuts due to their donations, or other critically important information that might serve to delegitimize the otherwise *virtuous acts* of this white-male elite (Feagin, 2013; Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

Education

A significant portion of NFL ownership groups' philanthropic efforts have taken place through institutions of higher education. This form for philanthropy is key because the political economy of universities often depends upon these substantial donations from private elites (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). In exchange for their donations, elites are often able to sit on or directly form advisory committees for the purpose of vetting "proper" candidates for academic programs that promote "political economy and free enterprise" (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 82; Hundley, 2011). Wealthy white donors "run their charitable foundations with the purpose of greatly shaping teaching and research in higher education" (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 82). A significant practical outcome of this method of pedagogical manipulation is control over the labor force, both present and future. For example, not only did the University of Washington's Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science and Engineering grant Paul Allen the ability to shape academic programs, it also created a pipeline of talented workers for Microsoft in the greater Seattle area.

Consider also the efforts of Robert McNair. In return for McNair donating significant funds to Baylor, Rice, and South Carolina, his imprint was memorialized at these universities. Since 1994, McNair sat on the Board of Trustees for the Baylor College of Medicine; and in 2007 funding from McNair's foundation established the McNair Medical Institute "with the intention of recruiting talented scientists and physician-scientists from around the world to the Texas Medical Center" (Baylor College of Medicine, 2019, para. 5). Robert and Janice McNair had this to say about the Institute: "We just think perhaps that this will provide some additional impetus to move along discoveries… we are looking forward to producing many medical advances and discoveries…" (as quoted in Baylor College of Medicine, 2019, para. 7). At Rice University, McNair also served on the Board of Trustees and was a major benefactor to the Jones Graduate School of Business as well as the Baker Institute for Public Policy (Ramapriyan, 2018). His son, Cal McNair currently serves on the Council of Overseers at the Jones Graduate School of Business (Ramapriyan, 2018). The McNairs's donations to the Baker Institute for Public Policy resulted in the establishment of the Janice and Robert McNair Chair in Public Policy. According to Edward Djerejian, the current occupant of this position, "[Robert] was truly instrumental in shaping the institute into what it is today" (as quoted in Ramapriyan, 2018, para. 8). At the University of South Carolina, Robert McNair's benefactorship led to the creation of the McNair Scholars program which "provides scholarships to attract the most talented out-of-state students in the nation" as well as the McNair Institute for Entrepreneurism and Free Enterprise (Pastides, 2018). While Allen and McNair represent just two examples, many NFL owners are able to actively shape the political economy of institutions of higher education. Thus, their sociopolitical impact extends well beyond the League.

Philanthro-Capitalism

The concept of *philantro-capitalism* is also helpful in understanding the philanthropic efforts of ownership groups. Feagin and Ducey's (2017) discussion of philanthro-capitalism emphasizes how this form of philanthropy is essential to elite-white-male dominance. Philanthro-capitalism "involves mostly white-elite-sponsored nonprofit foundations that apply the 'business logic of profit-making institutions to philanthropic activities'" (Feagin & Ducey, 2017, p. 237). These enormous foundations provide elite capitalists with important tax write-offs in the process of assisting in the effort to shape national and international social policy (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). The irony of the NFL's philanthropy is perhaps most visible in the hundreds of millions of dollars that local tax-payers often pay to help fund the very stadiums which local fans will then pay to enter (Goodman, 2002). Indeed, this imperial form of philanthropy enables the elite to circumvent the democratic process, whereby their seemingly altruistic actions "frequently exclude alternative health and welfare possibilities and concentrate supposedly philanthropic decisions in elite-controlled hands without substantial local democratic input and decision-making" (Feagin & Ducey, 2017; p. 238). Thus, philanthro-capitalism plays essential material and ideological roles in reproducing elite-white-male dominance. As such, the over-emphasis on philanthropy in the mass media when discussing NFL owners is more than dubious; it actively serves to buttress the power and control of this group while publicly legitimizing them as being "for the people." This processes of legitimization through a mediated NFL (ownership) are further discussed in chapter 7.

CHAPTER V

THE NFL AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM

In the following three chapters, I discuss the findings of the collective case study in relation to the political economy of the NFL. Specifically, the themes relating to NFL ownership are contextualized to better understand the structure and function of the League in contemporary society. In doing so, I draw from two primary perspectives for examining sport organizations outlined by Slack and Parent (2006): (a) organizations as political systems; and (b) organizations as instruments of domination.

According to Slack and Parent (2006), few studies in the field of sport management have examined sport organizations explicitly as systems of political activity. With some exceptions (e.g., Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Stern, 1979), most of the research in this area has emphasized how the political struggles of various groups have manifested in and through sport (Cunningham et al., 2019; Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989; Kidd, 1988; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Sack & Kidd, 1985). However, there remains a need to further understand sport organizations themselves as systems of political activity, not just contexts in which political struggles take place. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the *NFL as a political system* through which ownership groups exert public influence.

In relation to the second perspective discussed by Slack and Parent (2006),

> …organizations are seen as instruments designed to benefit the interests of a privileged few at the expense of the masses… organizations (or more accurately their dominant coalitions) are seen as exploiting their workers, their host communities, and often the environment, for their own ends. (p. 12)

While sport management researchers largely avoid this perspective for a myriad of reasons (e.g., sources of funding, job security, and pressures for publication in particular journals), it is just as essential for understanding sport organizations as are other, more mainstream approaches (Slack & Parent, 2006). Existing research that does explore sport organizations as instruments of domination generally comes from outside the field of sport management (e.g., sociology of sport and critical journalism). For example, several scholars have examined domination in professional and intercollegiate athletics (Huizenga, 1994; Manley & Friend, 1992; Telander, 1989); governmental exploitation for the purposes of promoting particular ideologies or policies (Harvey & Proulx, 1988; Kidd, 1988; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990); and how class-, race-, and gender-based exploitation operate in sport organizations (Cashmore, 2005; Gruneau, 1983; Whitson & Macintosh, 1989). Therefore, to bring this discussion to the field of sport management and to better understand the insights gleaned from such a perspective, the NFL is contextualized *as a system of domination* through which an elite faction of predominantly white men consolidate, augment, and legitimize power. The remainder of this chapter focuses specifically on the political implications of the NFL and its ownership groups while chapters six and seven emphasize more heavily the dominative aspects of the NFL.

POLITICS OF THE NFL (OWNERSHIP)

As embodied by the theme of political and economic network, NFL owners are embedded within a nationally and internationally significant political network. Accordingly, this section addresses the ways in which organizations and individuals impact public policy to better understand the NFL as a political system. The ability for organizations to do so is first addressed before emphasizing the political action of NFL owners, both as individuals as well as a collective empowered through the organizational structure of the NFL. Structured as a for-profit, trade

association, one of the primary functions of the League has historically been to impact public policy on behalf of its constituents. Therefore, this section further explores the degree(s) to which the NFL functions for political purposes.

There are various methods organizations and their top managers use to engage as political entities. For example, Weidenbaum (1980) argued that "public policy is no longer a 'spectator sport'" (p. 10) for corporate managers. In fact, Weidenbaum's (1980) focus on breaking away from the notion of public policy as a spectator sport came directly from the CEO of General Electric (GE) who used those exact words in a meeting with other company officials. Noting different approaches to how businesses can engage with public politics (e.g., reactionary, anticipatory, active), the author argued that it is in corporations' best interest to be as politically active as possible on multiple fronts:

> Some business firms are making more extensive use of the many existing channels of communication that are already available to them in efforts to raise the public awareness of political issues that affect the future of the business community. These channels, which may currently be devoted to more traditional or operational messages, reach a wide variety of "publics": employee newspapers, company magazines, and reports to shareholders; materials sent to customers, suppliers, and retired personnel; bulletin boards and posters on company premises; and employee training and management development programs.
>
> It is in the active approach – *business involvement in the public arena* – that the greatest potential for improving business-government relations may lie. The role that company government relations offices, *trade associations*, and business executives can

play in this arena needs to be rethought in a more positive light. (Weidenbaum, 1980, p. 52, italics added for emphasis)

Thus, Weidenbaum's (1980) "strategic" approach to the corporate navigation of public policy involved a profusion of ways in which organizations and top managers can actively influence public thought and action while circumventing the democratic process.

As another example of how corporations can circumvent the democratic-legal process to influence attitudes, actions, and norms, Dobbin and Kelly (2007) provided an empirical example that drew from an institutional perspective on organizations. In their examination of how organizations sought to address sexual harassment problems throughout the late 20th century, the authors argued that the professional construction of *grievance procedures* and *training programs* effectively paved the way for organizations to avoid facing legal backlash to sexual harassment via the formation of new institutional norms (Dobbin & Kelly, 2007). Bureaucratizing grievance processes and simultaneously circumventing the legal system put a substantial amount of power in the hands of corporate executives that, before the professional fabrication of sensitivity training programs, was in the hands of the public:

> As the formal organization has absorbed more and more of social life, jurisdictional disputes between professional groups increasingly play out before executives rather than public officials. Professions win jurisdiction not through state licensure, but by popularizing the management practices they favor. (Dobbin & Kelly, 2007, p. 1204)

In the popularizing of certain management practices, the authors discussed how these programs subsequently became the legal standard to which all other organizations operating within the institutional field had to adhere. Thus, professionals, professional associations, and corporate

executives play key roles in shaping public policy and organizational structure by implementing and popularizing emergent managerial practices (Dobbin & Kelly, 2007).

Further exploring how corporations "play politics," legal scholar Jill Fisch (2005) conducted a case study on FedEx – the company owned by Washington minority owner Fred Smith. Noting that corporate scholars often overlook non-market factors and political scholars often overlook the intersection of politics and corporate business strategy, Fisch's (2005) case study demonstrated that "firm competition takes place both in the marketplace and in the political arena; the dynamics of one environment affect the other" (Fisch, 2005, p. 1558). Specifically, FedEx's corporate strategy depended upon the deregulation of the air cargo industry. However, "although FedEx has generally sought broad-based reforms that benefit the entire express carrier industry, each piece of legislation provided particularized benefits to FedEx" (Fisch, 2005, p. 1568). Thus, through their "political capital" (p. 1570) – achieved through years of campaign funding, advertising, lobbying, and other forms of political activity – FedEx gained a competitive advantage over their industry peers. Fisch's (2005) study is significant because it demonstrated the *necessity* for – and perhaps the *normality* of – major corporations shaping public policy in local, regional, national, and transnational contexts.

Impacting public policy has been a central function of sporting institutions (Johnson & Frey, 1985). Indeed, Sage (2000) argued that "the major means by which the state has protected the investments of professional team owners and has advanced capital accumulation have been the courts and Congressional legislation" (p. 266). However, in the case of the NFL, the political engagement of ownership groups is not limited to their own private ventures outside of the League – as was the case with Smith and FedEx outlined by Fisch (2005). Rather, owners also collectively engage politically in and through the organized structure of the NFL. In addition to

many ownership groups having personal relationships to political elites at various levels they are also financially active, having substantial influence on who gets into public office and the development of policies the those offices deliberate. For instance, 9 of the 32 majority owners collectively contributed over $7.5 million to Donald Trump's inaugural committee (Berkowitz, 2017). Out of the $107 million total that was raised by Trump's inaugural committee, $61 million was associated with vendors (McCann, 2018). This means that of the $46 million raised by non-vendors for Trump's inaugural committee, over 16% of that total was paid for by 9 NFL majority owners; namely, Jimmy Haslam, Jerry Jones, Robert McNair, Shahid Khan, Stan Kroenke, Robert Kraft, Woody Johnson, Edward Glazer, and Daniel Snyder.

As organized through the structure of the League, NFL ownership also operates through its political action committee (PAC), Gridiron-PAC. According to official financial data from the Federal Election Commission, team owners, as well as family members and other invested groups, actively donate money to Gridiron-PAC which then, in turn, distributes those funds among political candidates. Contribution data for Gridiron-PAC in 2016 shows that individual donors donating more than $200 each contributed a total of $1,411,130 to the PAC; $625,250 was distributed among federal candidates in the House of Representatives and the Senate (Center for Responsive Politics, n.d.). This form of political activity through PACs is essential to elite-white-male dominance at the national and international levels (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Given the long history of the unique treatment of professional sport organizations by the legislative branch of the United States, the NFL's political involvement has material outcomes for structuring the elite sport industry and beyond. Further adding to this emphasis, the ability to shape political landscapes is a staple of how interlocking directorates function (Burris, 2005). Thus, it is important not only to understand the NFL as a political system with significant

influence over policy development but also to understand the function of the NFL itself as a political system.

The NFL's politics, however, are not unilateral in the sense *they* impact public policy. It is also a reality that the US political system depends heavily upon the strategic operation of the NFL. Consider the ways in which the US government interwove itself with the NFL following the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11). The designation of Super Bowl XXXVI in 2002 as a National Security Special Event (NSSE) and the representation of 5 former US presidents at the game marked a key change in the formal relationship between the government and the NFL (Weems, 2015). Designating this Super Bowl as a NSSE is significant because it meant that the Secret Service, FBI, and other federal, state, and local agencies officially took over the security detail for the Super Bowl, while at the same time local police were actively armed with anti-terror gear with the stipulation of using the gear provided to them (Schimmel, 2011). Since 2002, every Super Bowl has been designated as a NSSE and has had significant impact on domestic militarization as the Super Bowl is held in a different city each year (Schimmel, 2011, 2012). With the surge of post-9/11 white cultural nationalism (Kusz, 2007) and superpatriotism (Parenti, 2004), the cultural politics of the NFL provided an opportunity to push NFL fans toward becoming what Schimmel (2017) referred to as citizen soldiers. The federal government capitalized on this opportunity through extensive advertising of the military, nationalistic pre-game displays (including the addition of having teams on the field for the national anthem), selective tellings and re-tellings of US history, and the creation of the NFL's Salute to Service campaign (Becker, 2018; Mangold & Goehring, 2018; Niles, 2017; Ward, 2015; Willingham, 2017). US political institutions value the NFL as a political system. Therefore, sport management scholars should look to further understand how this impacts the function of the NFL.

CONCLUSION

As a preeminent sociocultural institution in the US, the NFL as a political system has significant ramifications for local, regional, national, and international politics. This system depends heavily upon the character and social structure of ownership groups as it is through their interests and worldviews the political economy of the NFL is structured. Because of the structuration of this political economy, the NFL plays a key role within the elite-white-male dominance system, both domestically and globally. Although some critical sport scholars have argued that sport "is peripheral to the survival of a state political system" (Frey & Eitzen, 1991, p. 512), I disagree. Rather, because media outlets play central roles in the sociocultural function of sport I argue that sport leagues like the NFL are *essential* survival of the state (as a function of elite-white-male dominance). Therefore, to further draw out the importance of a mediated NFL, it is necessary to discuss the role of media in producing legitimacy (Herman & Chomsky, 2010) – especially in and through the institutional context of sport (Corrigan, 2014; Dart, 2014; Jhally, 1984, 1989; McChesney, 1989; Wenner, 1998). Therefore, the following chapter contextualizes the role of (sporting) media in legitimizing the political economy of the NFL, and of elite-white-male oligopolism more broadly.

CHAPTER VI

THE MEDIATED NFL AND LEGITIMACY

The operation of the NFL as a political economy depends heavily upon the corroboration of the media to publicly propagate and liquidate its economic, political, and ideological axioms (Jhally, 1984, 1989; Wenner, 2002). Therefore, I extend the discussion of the NFL and/as political economy by exploring the role of a mediated League. According to Corrigan (2014), the political economy of the media is:

> …a theoretical perspective that seeks to understand the inter-relationships of wealth, power, and the media and cultural systems in society – including sports and sport media. While much of media and communication studies focuses on textual representation and reception, political economists situate those processes in relation to broader political, economic, and socio-cultural structures of power, particularly class struggle. (p. 43)

With a grounded understanding of the NFL as a political system, the sporting media is positioned here as an essential aspect through which NFL ownership groups and their interests are empowered.

Team owners themselves are well-versed in the political arts of media. For example, referring to his father's difficulty with the media, Jim Irsay of the Colts stated that his father "had a tough time dealing with the media and he didn't know what it was like to be in the public eye" (as quoted in Bogen, 2007, para. 30). Intrinsic to Irsay's statement is an understanding of the media as having a primary role in shaping, at the very least, the personal politics of public relations for elite white men in sport. Similarly, Stan Kroenke has been referred to as "Silent Stan" for his general avoidance of the media (Wagoner, 2018, para. 14). In fact, several owners

have demonstrated some variation of a strategic approach to their interactions with the (sporting) press, with many electing to avoid public exposure in general. Former Cardinals quarterback Carson Palmer attributed much of the Cardinals recent success to the owners of the franchise, Bill Bidwill: "It's easy to say it's the head coach or the GM. It's the owner. And you would never know it. He doesn't want to be here when the media's here" (quoted in Farmer, 2014, para. 18). Stemming from Carson's statement about Bidwill is a central emphasis on the organizational influence of team owners as well as their (non)navigation of the media. Bisciotti of the Ravens similarly avoids the media; however, he has been more explicit in doing so with intention. In a 2006 release of the Baltimore Ravens Fan & Media Guide, Bisciotti alluded to how he prefers to keep a low profile: "I have no interest in notoriety, and wouldn't mind being the least-known owner in the NFL" (Baltimore Ravens, 2006, p. 5). Certainly, there are benefits and detriments to both engaging and avoiding the media for NFL owners.

The focus of this chapter, however, is not necessarily on how the owners do or do not navigate the media *as individuals*. Rather, this chapter emphasizes how the collective venture of the NFL navigates, shapes, and is shaped by the broader political economy in which it operates. In other words, this chapter revolves around answering two primary questions: (1) what are the sociopolitical impacts of the mediated NFL; and (2) what role does the strategic manipulation of sporting media play within the politics of elite-white-male dominance? The chapter moves toward answering both of these questions by further exploring theoretical and empirical research on media and sport within and beyond the field of sport management.

Specifically, it is emphasized here how the NFL engages in communicative action (see Habermas, 1984; Wallace & Wolf, 1999) in an effort to produce legitimacy. *Legitimacy* in this context is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are

desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). While legitimacy has long played a prominent role in organizational studies, Mizruchi (1996) argued that scholars examining interlocking directorates have paid little attention to the concept. Legitimacy, however, serves as a cornerstone in the formation of many interlocks (Mizruchi, 1996). Therefore, this chapter further explores how legitimacy is manufactured in and through a mediated NFL, as well as how this legitimacy relates to oligopolism more broadly.

THE MEDIATED NFL

Elite manipulation of the sport context constitutes one of the more understudied topical areas in the academic field of sport management. Though many in the field of sociology of sport have examined the uniquely political manipulation of sport, sport events, and sport media (e.g., see Coakley, 2015b, 2017; Jackson, 2015; Jhally, 1984, 1989, 2006), there remains a fundamental need to address these issues in sport management research. Moreover, there is a significant need for detailing and analyzing the global networks of elites who wield political and institutional power and the roles that sport organizations play in legitimation processes (Coakley, 2015b; Law et al., 2002). Contextualizing NFL ownership, however, requires a more interdisciplinary lens if one is to examine the extent to which the "old boys' network" dominates a larger political economy. For example, in 1999 News Corporation offered the following statement on the far-reaching capabilities of the media conglomerate:

> Around the World, Around the Clock. . . . Virtually every minute of the day, in every time zone on the planet, people are watching, reading and interacting with our products. We're reaching people from the moment they wake up until they fall asleep. We give them their morning weather and traffic reports through our television outlets around the

> world. We enlighten and entertain them with such newspapers as *The New York Post* and *The Times* as they have breakfast, or take the train to work. We update their stock prices and give them the world's biggest news stories every day through such news channels as FOX or Sky News. When they shop for groceries after work, they use our SmartSource coupons to cut their family's food bill. And when they get home in the evening, we're there to entertain them with compelling first-run entertainment on FOX or the day's biggest game on our broadcast, satellite and cable networks. Or the best movies from Twentieth Century Fox Film if they want to see a first run movie. Before going to bed, we give them the latest news, and then they can crawl into bed with one of our best-selling novels from HarperCollins. (as quoted in Law et al., 2002, p. 279)

According to Rupert Murdoch, the owner of News Corp, "sport, with a particular emphasis on football, has been his 'battering ram' to establish the competitive success of his media properties" (as quoted in Law et al., 2002, p. 284). However, in addition to understanding the "who" and the "what" in relation to elites' use of professional football to politically calibrate local, regional, national, and transnational publics, scholars must develop an understanding of the organizational mechanisms through which these processes take places. Accordingly, for the rest of this discussion I turn to the fields of philosophy, sociology, communications, and political science in an effort to better understand how elite politics shape, in varying ways, different publics in and through the mediated sport context.

Social and linguistic philosophy provides much insight into the communicative functions of political calibration. Through an extensive examination of history, politics, and bureaucratic legitimacy, social theorist Jürgen Habermas was often concerned with the integral role that communication played in the production of legitimacy – legitimacy in this context being defined

as "*a political order's worthiness to be recognized*" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 177, italics in original). Noting the inherent contradictions of modern capitalist ideology – the disappearance of competitive capitalism due to the rise of oligopolistic firms and the re-emergence of the state as a central actor in liberal capitalism's development – Habermas turned his attention to the political dynamics of communicative action. Habermas's theory of communicative action can be summarized as a belief that "It is through the action of communicating… that society actually operates and evolves; this process is encompassed and structured by the actors' lifeworlds" (Wallace & Wolf, 1999, p. 181). Therefore, in the context of the NFL, the character structure of NFL owners and their navigation of a broader political economy is essential for contextualizing the function of a mediated NFL.

As contextualized within societies with asymmetrical power relations where oligopolistic groups constrain democratic-public discourse (Habermas 1991), Habermas's theory of communicative action takes on a lugubrious tone. For example, although communicative action emphasizes mutual understanding and the co-construction of reality between parties, Habermas (1991) also noted the dissolution of (rational) public opinion due to the communicative imbalance caused by the rise of late capitalism. In the context of the modernized capitalist-state, "public" communication took on a more disproportionate political function favoring those with the means to shape public discourse at-large (e.g., media conglomerates). Thus, economic elites with access to media outlets gained significant power during the rise of late capitalism. Therefore, the power of NFL ownership groups depends heavily upon the political economy of the mass media (and vice versa).

Mass Media and the NFL

Further exploring the political economy of the mass media, Herman and Chomsky (2010) outlined what they referred to as *the propaganda model*. This model "explains the broad sweep of the mainstream media's behavior and performance by their corporate character and integration into the political economy of the dominant economic system" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. xii). The specific principles, or "filters," of the propaganda model include the following: (a) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (b) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (c) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by primary sources and agents of power; (d) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (e) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism.

In relation to the first filter, Herman and Chomsky (2010) argued that the *processes of corporate consolidation* that took place over the course of the 20th century resulted in a considerably more market-oriented media environment in which cross-ownership and control by non-media companies has "[opened] the door to the unrestrained commercial use of the airwaves" (p. 8). Through this process, the corporatization of the mass media brought controlling groups "into close relationships with the mainstream of the corporate community through boards of directors and social links" (p. 8). Thus, new oligopolistic groups were born with increasingly consolidated media outlets to be used for the dissemination of news products. This consolidation trend was mirrored in the sport industry; and specifically, in the structure of NFL ownership groups (see Harvey et al., 2001; Law et al., 2002).

The burgeoning of *advertising practices* has also had a significant influence on both the development of media-oriented organizations and final news products produced by these

companies. “With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The advertisers’ choices influence media prosperity and survival” (Herman & Chomsky, 2010; p. 14). Thus, as the need for advertising revenue increased exponentially in recent decades, the need to survive as a capitalistic organization was greatly shaped by these advertisers:

> The power of advertisers over television programming stems from the simple fact that they buy and pay for the programs – they are the “patrons” who provide the media subsidy. As such, the media compete for their patronage, developing specialized staff to solicit advertisers and necessarily having to explain how their programs serve advertisers’ needs. The choices of these patrons greatly affect the welfare of the media, and the patrons become what William Evan calls “normative reference organizations,” whose requirements and demands the media must accommodate if they are to succeed. (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 16)

Accordingly, resulting mediated products have increasingly trended toward programs which do not interfere with consumption processes (or perhaps more accurately *endorse* consumption processes). As several scholars have shown, this process was mirrored in and through the sport industry (Jackson, 2015; Jackson & Andrews, 2004; Jhally, 1984, 1989; Sage, 1990; Wenner, 1989)

As corporations, *media conglomerates are dependent upon steady and reliable flows of raw news materials*. Thus, not being a financially feasible task to deploy reporters everywhere at once, media outlets often enter partnerships with other large, bureaucratic organizations (government or business) to ensure a steady flow of content. For example, Herman and Chomsky (2010) noted the following:

> The Pentagon… has a public-information service that involves many thousands of employees, spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year and dwarfing not only the public-information resources of any dissenting individual or group but the *aggregate* of such groups" (p. 19, italics in original).

In the sport context, these governmental organizations play a central role producing content for and sponsoring mediated sport events (Jhally, 1984, 1989). Ultimately, large bureaucracies such as governmental organizations and corporations "*subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 22, italics in original).

According to Herman and Chomsky (2010), *"flak"* refers to negative responses to media programs or statements:

> It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action. It may be organized centrally or locally, or it may consist of the entirely independent actions of individuals. (p. 26)

Flak can threaten social and political legitimacy, as well as often being a costly burden to take on for organizations. Flak can act as a deterrent and is directly and indirectly related to power (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Powerful groups and individuals can also "work on the media indirectly by complaining to their own constituencies (stockholder, employees) about the media, by generating institutional advertising that does the same, and by funding right-wing monitoring or think-tank operations designed to attack the media" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 26). Given the entrenchment of consolidation processes, groups with the ability to "produce" flak often "reinforce the command of political authority in its news-management activities" (p. 28). Thus,

institutions upon whom media conglomerates are dependent (e.g., sport) have disproportionate political power and influence in the dissemination of "worthy" news. This particular point by Herman and Chomsky (2010) is perhaps more pronounced now than ever before with the deployment of the phrase "fake news" by Donald Trump and others as a mechanism for delegitimizing any information that threatens neoliberal political power (see Allcott & Gentzkow; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018)

The final filter of the mass media discussed by Herman and Chomsky (2010) is the ideology of *anticommunism as a control mechanism*. Anticommunist sentiments have largely been driven by the elite because communism as the "ultimate evil" threatened the "root of [property owners'] class position and superior status" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 29). The over-publicization of the abuses of Communist states contributed significantly to the elevation of communism as a point of reference in Western politics and ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). Given the nebulous nature of the communist ideology in the Western political scene, however, it became a weapon to "mobilize the populace against an enemy, and… against anybody advocating policies that threaten property interests or support accommodation with Communist states and radicalism" (p. 29). Subsequently, the anticommunist trope in Western politics helps "fragment the left and labor movements and serves as a political-control mechanism" (p. 29). Ultimately, the political framing of an undefined communism allows the mass media to control narratives in terms of a dichotomized presentation of complex realities in which there is "our side," the *good* side, and the "other side," the side who threatens the very foundations of "our side." In the context of capitalist politics – as embodied by cultural structure of elite sporting institutions (Jhally, 2006) – this filter has proven to be particularly effective and

is intimately related to the current use of anti-socialism as a control mechanism (e.g., see Congressman Mo Brook's proposed anti-socialism resolution; Brooks, 2019).

Building onto this important work from Herman and Chomsky (2010), Jason Stanley (2015) further unpacked the mechanisms through which propaganda works. Stanley's (2015) contribution to the critical body of literature on propaganda has been significant, especially in the areas of language and (political) ideology. In a liberal democracy, Stanley (2015) argued that language functions as a mechanism of social control. Built upon the semantics and pragmatics of linguistics, Stanley (2015) offered two applicable models of propaganda in a liberal democracy: the content model and the expressive model. The *content model of propaganda* states that "one kind of paradigmatic propaganda in a liberal democracy would have a normal at-issue content that seems reasonable, and would also have a not-at-issue content that is not reasonable" (Stanley, 2015, p. 140). Stanley (2015) elaborated on this point by offering the following in relation to the content model of propaganda:

> For example, if someone utters in a political speech in the United States, "There are Jews among us," it expresses a perfectly ordinary at-issue content, one that is in fact true. There are Jews in the United States. But it equally clearly conveys the not-at-issue content that Jews are the enemy, by suggesting that Jews are enemy invaders distinct from the "us" of the polity. (p. 140)

This content model can be applied to the extensive media coverage of NFL players who decided to kneel in peaceful protest of police brutality and systemic oppression (e.g., Bannister, 2018). NFL players protesting would be considered normal at-issue content while simultaneously implying deviance from the status quo of passive acceptance.

The *expressive model of propaganda* contends that "propaganda in a liberal democracy would have a normal at-issue content that seems reasonable, and would also have a not-at-issue effect that would decrease empathy for a group" (Stanley, 2015, p. 140). This differential outcome is because words often have direct, not-at-issue, emotional effects. In the context of racist language, for example, Hill (2009) noted the importance of "indexicality" (p. 41) - a linguistic-cognitive function where seemingly harmless words depend upon contextually based inferences to convey racist meanings. Thus, as evident in the linguistic functions of white racism, subordinating speech "only works when it is employed by one of the dominant groups in society against a negatively privileged group" (Stanley, 2015, p. 146). From a political perspective, this type of speech is used strategically by media outlets to *frame* propaganda as a way to influence the (un)conscious construction of "major" political topics such as welfare or healthcare (Stanley, 2015). This expressive model can also be applied to the demagogical declarations of protesting athletes by various NFL team owners as well as the president of the United States (for further discussion on these issues, see Weems et al., 2017; Oshiro & Weems, 2019).

Though these strategies are employed on a macro-scale in an attempt to control and constrain publics, Stanley (2015) noted how they are dependent upon the existence of broader ideological frames that (mis)inform belief systems:

> Since whether or not discourse is propagandistic depends upon flawed ideological belief, the practical possibility of deliberative ideals ultimately rests upon our capacity to be sensitive to the effects of flawed ideologies on our own belief system. (p. 176)

Diverging from David Hume's psychological meditation on flawed ideological beliefs, Stanley (2015) elaborated on what he called "flawed social structures" (p. 179) and their roles in the production of ideologies and inequalities more broadly. Certain beliefs have proven to be

resilient to change precisely because they are connected to *social practices* and have *epistemic flaws* (Stanley, 2015, p. 180). In other words, social inequality builds flawed beliefs while simultaneously comprising the system of knowledge surrounding the flawed beliefs (e.g., see Singer, 2005 for a discussion on epistemological racism and the field of sport management). Thus, to change flawed beliefs, one must address the social structures of inequality:

> Just as a belief can be *ideological* in virtue of structural features of society that inhibit its revision, so too can an ideology be *flawed*, because of flawed structural features of society that inhibit the rational revision of preexisting false belief, to preserve a desirable situation for a privileged group… Structural features of a society are not merely the *cause* of flawed ideology; they also may *constitute* it (p. 199-200, italics in original).

Therefore, it is important for sport management scholars to further unpack the flawed social structure of the NFL and how this structure (re)articulates flawed ideological beliefs and mis-interpretations of the field.

Further elaborating on this topic, Stanley (2015) discussed two different kinds of flawed ideologies: ideologies generally belonging to those with control of resources and the ideological beliefs that those without control of resources tend to develop. In a society structured by systems of inequality, the imposition of elite ideologies can negatively influence the development of proletariat ideologies such that the flawed ideologies of the oppressed "*prevent them from recognizing their own oppression*, or, with less commitment, *prevent them from acting so as to alleviate their oppression*" (p. 231, italics in original). Accordingly, this is why some philosophers have argued that the schooling system of a state is a prime example of an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2006) – institutions functioning as socializing tools of the elite with the purpose of maintaining social systems of inequality to a substantial degree. In this

sense, the NFL can be contextualized as a structurally flawed institution which functions to maintain systems of inequality upon which its ownership groups heavily depend.

Ultimately, the theoretical and empirical research by Herman and Chomsky (2010) and Stanley (2015) on propaganda points to the centrality of concepts such as eliteness, social systems of inequality, mass media, language, and ideology as tools that significantly shape the political, economic, social, and cultural institutions of a society. At the intersection of all of these institutions is sport and the (sporting) mass media. As argued by Harvey, Law, and colleagues (2001, 2002), the institution of sport – and specifically the NFL – serves as a centralizing medium through which power is consolidated in the hands of oligopolistic groups, (political and economic) control is increasingly transferred to these groups, and public legitimacy is manufactured and ideologically substantiated. Therefore, a mass-mediated NFL consolidates power in the hands its ownership groups while serving to legitimate the political economy of the League and elite-white-male oligopolism more broadly.

New Media and the NFL

The distinction between "new" and "old" media is a contested topic across disciplines (Corrigan, 2014). However, there are some central characteristics that can help to conceptualize the possibilities brought forth by new technologies in mediated contexts. For example, the digital and interactive nature of new media help distinguish these forms from more traditional media relying on analog formats and unilateral relationships (Corrigan, 2014; Rideout & Reddick, 2001). Another aspect of new media outlets that distinguishes them from the traditional media format is that sport audiences have transitioned from consumption to simultaneous consumption *and production* (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006). In recent years sport management scholars have further explored how organizations can optimize this process (e.g., Dees, 2011; Mahan, 2011).

However, this new form of production (i.e., consumer-labor) is increasingly being incorporated into the commercial structure of the sports-media-complex (Corrigan, 2014). For example, by incorporating NFL fans on social media into the production of a Super Bowl commercial, Ann Mukherjee of Frito-Lay's stated the following: "The No. 1 benefit to something like this is that your consumers actually become your billboards… They're the ones who become the ambassadors, who talk about the integrity of the brand" (as quoted in Blair, 2013, para. 9). Therefore, new media outlets have provided more direct avenues for including fans in the production-consumption process while simultaneously exploiting fans' consumption-production as a form of labor (Dart, 2014).

Still, it should be emphasized that new media has provided opportunities for deconstruction broadly (see Derrida, 1997), and social movement more directly (Edwards, 2016). With the potential to destabilize control over the discursive structure of the public sphere, new media outlets in general have the potential to contribute to more democratic discussion in the sport context (Bruce & Hardin, 2014; Butterworth, 2014; Corrigan, 2014).

However, as the mediums through which sporting products are distributed to the public transform, some sport scholars have emphasized how "new media are reproducing many of the issues found in mainstream media and society" (Dart, 2014, p. 536). A critical approach to understanding new (sporting) media is important for the field of sport management as comprehensive reviews on this area of research have suggested that scholars generally adopt a service-dominant logic focused on cultivating relationships among and between brands and consumers (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Therefore, to build a more comprehensive understanding of new media in sport I draw upon critical approaches to adequately explore sport as a political system and as an instrument of domination.

According to Dart (2014), "the logical expression of the neoliberal market economy is manifesting itself in athletes, sports clubs, sports organizations and sports-related corporations rapid adoption and exploitation of new media technology and the increased commodification of the sporting experience" (p. 540). As perhaps the most visible example of the commodification of the sporting experience – and most representative of the political economy of sport – advertising is central to the production of a mediated NFL. Therefore, the following section further explores the function of advertising in and through a mediated NFL. Specifically, the concern here is the social and political impact of advertising in relation to the NFL as an organization, its ownership, and other vested political and economic groups.

SPORT, ADVERTISING, AND THE NFL

A significant portion of NFL broadcasts are dedicated to advertisers/sponsors. On average, NFL broadcasts only have roughly 11 minutes of live action play (Biderman, 2010). A significant portion of the remaining time left in NFL broadcasts is spent on advertising and/or highlighting sponsorship, whether this is done explicitly through commercials and special segments or implicitly through televising the general sportscape (see Wakefield, Blodgett, & Sloan, 1996). This combined with the increased pressure by corporations to continue to commercialize sport broadcasts led Real and Mechikoff (1992) to posit the following:

> The commercialization of sport through advertiser and sponsor financing ensure that the fan's viewing experience itself will be commercialized, with players and products inseparably associated. The sports themselves are presented as commodities, and the fan becomes not merely a spectator but a consumer feeding on this heavily promoted and virtually omnipresent diet of mass-mediated sports. (p. 330)

Still, advertising and sponsorship bring in a significant amount revenue for the NFL, and for elite sport organizations broadly (Gratton & Solberg, 2007; Mason, 1999). A 2012 study by Nielsen found that TV advertisers spent 23% of their total budgets on reaching audiences through sports events (Corrigan, 2014). Indeed, many have argued that this is an essential function of contemporary sport events (Gordon, 2014; Mason, 1999; Real & Mechikoff, 1992). But the question of "*why sport?*" remains a compelling topic in the field of sport management.

The viscerality of sport and sporting products has been of particular interest in the area of sport marketing, where many scholars and practitioners have sought to conceptualize sport's affective components so as to better understand, manage, and optimize consumption processes (e.g., Grohs & Reisinger, 2005; Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006; McDonald, 1991; Meenaghan, 1991, 2001). Specifically, the research domains of sponsorship and advertising through sport have drawn significant attention from sport scholars in relation to sport-consumer affect (e.g., Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2013; Cornwell & Humphreys, 2013; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Kim & Kaplanidou, 2014; Pyun & James, 2011; Pyun, Kwon, Chon, & Han, 2012). Advertising through sport, as conceptualized here, constitutes a "general concept representing any type of advertising (e.g., television or radio commercials, online pop-ups and magazine ads) that uses elements of sport, such as athletes, teams, images of sporting events and sporting venues" (Pyun et al., 2012, p. 43-44). This broad conceptualization of advertising is significant because whereas consumer attitudes towards advertisements in general have become increasingly negative, scholars have proposed that sport serves as a medium through which negative attitudes about advertising may be mitigated: "While it may not be suitable for all products sport does offer a viable platform for many organizations to consider as they strive to elicit positive attitudes toward particular products" (Pyun & James, 2011, p. 39).

Meenaghan's (2001) conceptualization of the image transfer model seeks to further delineate the processes of how positive attitudes can be transferred over to a sponsoring organization. In addition to examining the cognitive processes of image transfer, Meenaghan (1991) offered a similar perspective as Pyun and James (2011) arguing that sport provides a medium through which sponsorship activities may be *legitimized*. However, from a liberation sociology perspective, it is this very notion of the use of sport as a medium for legitimizing sponsorship – or the transferring of legitimacy to a sponsoring/advertising organization – that warrants further deliberation. What are the social and political impacts of this overall transfer of sport-based affinity? What does this mean in the context of the NFL as a political economy? Although there is much research in the field of sport management that has explored this topic in relation to better understanding consumption processes, there is a significant gap when it comes to understanding the sociopolitical impacts the over-management of sport's "pervasive" nature can have, not just on sport consumers but on society more broadly (Newman, 2014). However, research on sport from outside the field of sport management can help to fill this gap.

In the field of sociology Jay Coakley's (2015a) concept of the Great Sport Myth (GSM) is essential for understanding how and why a mostly white-male elite seeks to manipulate public opinion through a mediated NFL. The GSM refers to the mystique of sport as problematized through three popular beliefs that stymie critical public dialogue: (1) sport is inherently pure and good; (2) the purity and goodness of sport is *transferred* to those who play or consume it; and (3) sport inevitably leads to individual and community development. To varying degrees, these interwoven myths about sport lead to evangelistic beliefs in the institution itself; thus, reproducing the notion that sport is legitimate as it is and there is no need to study or analyze sport critically (Coakley, 2015a). Consequently, sport has long served as a political mechanism

through which colonial politics are disseminated and legitimated (Carrington. 2010; Coakley, 2015a), though this process is not without resistance (see Edwards, 1969, 2016). However, Coakley's (2015a) analysis could benefit from further deliberation regarding the mechanics of the GSM. *Why* – aside from the abstract notion of ideological (re)production – does sport serve as such an effective medium through which legitimacy is conferred? What makes sport an effective myth-making site? Existing research on the politics of viscerality may be able to build a more complete picture as to why affect makes sport such a politically unique context.

In a keynote address given at Duke University, Achille Mbembe (2016) discussed the visceral nature of colonialism in his revisitation of the life, work, and philosophy of Frantz Fanon. Despite conventional perspectives that often disentangle the macro-world from the micro-world, Mbembe (2016) made the argument that Fanon's "macro" work on anti-colonial politics was, in fact, one and the same as his "micro" work as a psychiatrist and philosopher of being; the primary connection between the two "worlds" being that the lived experience of colonialism penetrates the body and becomes, quite literally, a *felt* reality that represses the true self. This connection between the two worlds has been echoed by European scholar, Samo Tomšič (2015). In *The Capitalist Unconscious,* Tomšič (2015) demonstrated how the philosophies of Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan addressed the same phenomenon in principal. Whereas Marx was primarily concerned with the material impacts of capitalism on a macro-economic scale, Lacan adopted a psychoanalytic (i.e., micro) approach to navigating his way through the viscerality of capitalistic structures. Ultimately, the connecting of these philosophies shows how macro structures *directly* influence the existential struggle over what it means to be human within a colonial/capitalist context – and how macro structures are subsequently rationalized and legitimized through the

reciprocal effects of manipulating the (un)conscious. These works further support Stanley's (2015) thesis on the power of flawed social structures.

Because of these connections between the macro and micro worlds, Mbembe (2016) argued that emotional sites become the primary domains through which the politics of colonialism are communicated to various publics. Thus, corroborated by the GSM, sport becomes the wings upon which colonialism spreads (Carrington, 2010). Ultimately, colonial diffusion through sport penetrates the conscience of the public in ways that many traditional forms of mass communication cannot. Stated differently, elite sport organizations serve to legitimize colonial enterprise by capitalizing on the sport fan experience. The sport fan experience, as a form of "deep play" (Geertz, 1973), "does not exist in a social or institutional vacuum. Media technology and commercial advertising serve as constraints that shape the aspects of the mythic experience of… major spectator sports" (Real & Mechikoff, 1992, p. 323). Indeed, for advertisers the interactive nature of new media actually creates opportunities to impose brands on the process of users' consumption of sporting media (Corrigan, 2012, 2014; Meân, 2011). However, because these points help to understand the function of advertising in/and a mediated NFL, further exploration is required. That is, the concept of advertising is too often offered as an abstraction.

Demystifying Advertising in the NFL

Advertising is a broad term. While it is useful in understanding the intent of corporations in a mediated context, discussions about advertising often remove essential actors from the equation. Therefore, this section briefly addresses the demystification of advertising in and through a mediated NFL.

NFL advertising does not happen in a vacuum; nor are its advertisers disembodied capitalists with little-to-no stake in the political economy of the NFL. As the analysis present in this study demonstrated, several of the owners' personal ventures are represented as advertisers or sponsors within the League. However, it is not only the direct political and economic interests of NFL ownership groups that are enriched through the operation of the League; rather, the body of political and economic interests of ownership groups and broader connections are empowered. The League functions not only to legitimize social structure within the confines of the NFL, but as a legitimizing agent for other owner-affiliated corporations including but not limited to FedEx (Fred Smith), Home Depot/Lowe's (Arthur Blank), Microsoft (Paul Allen), and Ford/Bridgestone (Martha Ford). These owner-affiliated companies serve as the capitalistic core through which unaffiliated corporations attach themselves, facilitating broader capitalist transactions beyond the NFL. Because Flint and Eitzen's (1987) examination of sport team ownership failed to account for this aspect – perhaps due to league policy changes and the increased commercialization of the NFL since the 1980s – further deliberation over the oligopolistic realities of contemporary NFL advertising/sponsorship is warranted.

The political economy of the NFL is most often emphasized in sport management as a "brand" (Oriard, 2010). In mediated contexts, however, brands serve as neatly packaged cultural products that emanate from political economies (Nauright, 2004). They are representative of the context from which they stem. As such, advertisers understand the implications of partnering with other brands and capitalizing of brand synergies (Wolfe et al., 2005). In other words, the brand of the NFL is valued by advertising companies; its political economy is empowered by advertising companies. Resources are poured into the NFL – which functions as a political system and an instrument of domination through the character structure of the League's

ownership groups – in exchange for market access, financial returns, and legitimacy. But these advertising companies are not abstractions. Because the character and social structure of the NFL and its ownership groups are dependent upon elite-white-male dominance, advertisers necessarily corroborate these political functions. Thus, the overall function of the NFL, *because of its political economy*, serves as a political and economic enzyme for buttressing the power of a white male capitalistic elite. The production and circulation of legitimacy in and through a mediated NFL marks it as an ideal vehicle for the production and consolidation of power. Advertisers are not blind to this; they depend heavily upon this sociopolitical reality and the capital resources afforded by the NFL's interlock:

> Well-positioned and powerful people foster and prey on that faith [in sport] as they use the [Great Sport Myth] to camouflage personal interests related to projects in which sport is presented as a tool for solving problems and contributing to individual and collective development. It's as if ruling elites had read Gramsci and concluded that sport, more than other civil institutions today, appeals to popular tastes in ways that make people gullible and subject to political manipulation and control. (Coakley, 2015a, p. 403)

Thus, a mediated NFL takes on a uniquely political function in the production of legitimacy for elite politics. Implications for the (re)production of social relations because of this function are further discussed in chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

> An examination of contemporary professional sport clearly demonstrates the need to employ a materialist political economy analysis to allow for the historicity of capitalism to be fully contextualized and properly identify where power, control and real interests lay. As Phillips and Hutchins (2003) have noted, the concept of political economy allows

> for a greater understanding of power relationships under capitalism and generates the fundamental question of "*who owns and controls the means and relations of economic production and political power?*" (Dart, 2014, p. 540-541, italics in original)

In 2006, Jim Irsay told the *Indianapolis Business Journal* the following: "I look at myself as a steward. And a good owner always keeps the fans at heart. We want this [the Colts] to be a vehicle that pulls this community together" (as quoted in *Sports Illustrated*, 2018c, para. 6). As "stewards" of the community, an examination of what social structures are produced and reproduced by the NFL oligopoly is warranted. Given the political functions of the NFL (both as a structured organization and a mediated entity), it is important to understand how the stewardship of NFL owners is connected to larger systems. Therefore, chapter 7 discusses the significance of this "fundamental" question in relation to the main subsystems of the elite-white-male dominance system. Specifically, the chapter further explores the implications of who owners are (i.e., character structure) and how their personal and collective actions relate to broader social systems (i.e., social structure). Together, these constitute a fundamental aspect of the political economy of the NFL.

CHAPTER VII

ELITE-WHITE-MALE DOMINANCE AND THE NFL: LEGITIMACY AND SOCIAL (RE)PRODUCTION

Professional sport in the US provides opportunities to impose a sense of sodality through an assemblage of cultural values that often has little to do with the people upon whom these values are imposed (Nauright, 2004). Through the routine operation and mediation of the NFL, these values are normalized and legitimized. At the center of this operation are NFL ownership groups whose character structure reproduces its political economy. The rules of personal behavior among ownership groups is essential because "those types of rules which are of most significance for social theory are locked in the reproduction of institutionalized practices" (Giddens, 1984, p. 22). Thus, the *material* effects of NFL ownership and the mediated NFL actively reproduce social, political, and economic systems of domination. Because the Eurocentric nature of competitive sport buttresses a Eurocentric structure of being (Real & Mechikoff, 1992), systemic forms of oppression are (re)constructed through sporting practices (Carrington, 2010). Thus, the political economy of the NFL – through which team ownership groups are collectively empowered – actively serves both the ideological and capital interests of a predominantly white-male oligopoly. Not only are NFL owners embedded within a broader political and economic network, but the strategic function of the NFL serves to legitimize oligopolism in and beyond the US. Accordingly, this chapter returns to the foundational argument of the elite-white-male dominance system (Feagin & Ducey, 2017) to show how the character and social structure of NFL ownership (re)produce political and economic domination

on a broader scale (i.e., the NFL functioning as an instrument of domination; Slack & Parent, 2006).

The chapter accomplishes this task by outlining the socially (re)productive nature of the NFL and its ownership groups; particularly in relation to the three main sub-systems of the elite-white-male dominance system. Indeed, sport is an essential institution for producing and reproducing power relations and ideological practices upon which (white-male) capitalist ownership necessarily depends (Flint & Eitzen, 1987). Thus, following a discussion on how each sub-system of the elite-white-male dominance system is (re)produced, I examine the systemic reproduction at-large supported by the oligopolistic nature of the League. The implications of this active form of domination are also discussed with reference to a globalized/globalizing NFL. The chapter closes by summarizing the overall argument of this research as contextualized within the discussion of chapters 5-7. Chapter 8 will then discuss implications for sport management research and practice based on these conclusions.

SOCIAL (RE)PRODUCTION

According for Flint and Eitzen (1987), there is "a beneficial outcome of sports to self-interested owners in the reproduction of social relations that are already to their advantage" (p. 24). Owners do not necessarily need to explicitly express their own world views on social relations as these views result from the practice of the NFL's relations of production (Flint & Eitzen, 1987). Therefore, the classed, raced, and gendered dimensions of the NFL's political economy are discussed here. However, while classism, racism, and sexism are discussed as separate systems (due in part to the fragmented nature of academia), it is important to re-articulate that these systems coalesce to form a single system in the US with differential outcomes for various groups. Therefore, after discussing the role of NFL ownership groups in

reproducing "each" system, I close with a brief discussion on intersectionality to emphasize that the NFL does not operate in a social vacuum; rather, the NFL actively (re)produces the system of elite-white-male dominance as a whole.

Neo-Marxists tend to use the concept of *social reproduction* with an emphasis on class relations, whereas personal subsistence is mediated by wages and the private ownership of production. This mediation is a consequence of a specific, historically determined, capitalist relationship between production and the social reproduction of the laboring classes (Picchio, 1992). While the ideologies of individuality and meritocracy underpin contemporary capitalism, Akom (2008) argued that this overemphasis on "Ameritocracy" (p. 207) in Marxist analyses of social reproduction significantly masks intersectional forms of oppression and serves to reproduce systemic racism by ignoring the social structure of the US. Centralizing racial analysis, Feagin (2006) used the concept of social reproduction to provide a comprehensive assessment of five typological circles through which systemic racism is reproduced: social context, family circle, community circle, institutional circle, and the societal circle (p. 37). The social context is characterized as small-group contexts whereby individuals are socialized and transmit resources amongst one another. The family circle largely refers to the transmission of monetary, cultural/educational, and social networking capital. A community circle creates and supports (racially) segregated family and friendship networks. The institutional circle refers to the support provided by economic, political, military, legal, educational, and religious institutions. And lastly, the societal circle envelops and protects major institutions with a white-oriented culture. All of these circles collapse in on one another and contribute to the social reproduction of systemic racism in the United States (Feagin, 2006).

According to Laslett and Brenner (1989), feminist scholars have used social reproduction to refer to "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally" (p. 382). More recently, feminist uses of the concept have reflected:

> …the increasingly privatised forms of social provisioning and risk that characterise the neoliberal moment in the global political economy. In other words, the everyday activities of maintaining life and reproducing the next generation are increasingly being realised through the unpaid and paid resources of (largely) women as states withdraw from public provisioning, with the result that capitalist market relations increasingly infiltrate social reproduction. (Bakker, 2007, p. 541)

Thus, feminist scholars have both critiqued and extended Marxist uses of social reproduction to more adequately challenge neoliberalism (Ferguson, 2008; Humphries & Rubery, 1984; Laslett & Brenner, 1989; Luxton & Bezanson, 2006). In the context of the current discussion, sentiments from each of these perspectives are integrated to grasp the social reproduction of intersecting systems; systemic classism (capitalism), systemic racism, and systemic sexism (including heterosexism).

According to Nauright's (2004) analysis of the globalizing sport industry, "it is clear that the international organization and presentation of sport serves the interests of global, national and local elites – the cosmopolitans" (p. 1334). The issue here, however, is not that sport serves to further the interests of this elite; rather, who comprises this elite and what social, political, and economic factors are (re)produced by the organized structuration on these elites? As the analysis presented in the current study has shown, this question of character structure and its connection to social structure *matters* as a mostly white male elite rule in and through the NFL. The brand of

the NFL serves as the vanguard through which this ruling takes places. McKay's (1995) analysis of the political economy of sport found that the liberal positioning of elite sporting brands often masked "class, sexual, and racial inequalities at both the local and global levels" (p. 192). Therefore, further analysis is warranted to better understand the (re)production of elite-white-male politics in and through the NFL. For the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the (re)production of class, racial, and sexual politics through the medium of the NFL. Operating at the confluence of these systemic forms of oppression are the elites who actively shape and maintain their (re)production. As such, it is critically important to centralize the character and social structure of NFL ownership in any discussion regarding oppression as a lived reality and the NFL.

Capitalism

> Using the concept of political economy to review the first wave research on professional sport and new media suggests that emerging media technologies do not present a threat to the conventions of the neoliberal marketplace, but rather adds to the commodification of professional sport and helps ensure it remains whole capitalist in nature. (Dart, 2014, p. 541)

The dominant mode of producing mediated sport products – as characterized by an increasing complicity between media conglomerates and the state – tends to forswear democratic participation in favor of maintaining and safeguarding neoliberal capitalist structures (Bellamy & McChesney, 2011; Dart, 2014). A significant component to the ongoing legitimization of this process has been the public relations (PR) efforts of the NFL.

In her discussion of the legitimizing effects of sport-based PR, L'Etang (2006) defined the corporatized aspects of sport as being comprised of "the policy, practices and

communications of corporates producing sports goods and services; companies that sponsor sporting events; sport used as business networking and 'PR'; organisations that use sport to foster corporate culture" (p. 392). As many transnational corporations have faced resistance to globalization processes, sport organizations have been forced to strategically engage with PR to manage various aspects relating to their reputation, relationships, ethics, corporate identity and culture, community relations, and more (Jackson, 2015). Noting a broader impact of the corporate-sport model, L'Etang (2006) argued that corporations and sponsoring organizations have "commercial resources that *produce structural power* beyond the sports world" while also providing an arena to "*facilitate and cement business networks* through the provision of opportunities to 'play' together" (p. 392, italics added for emphasis). Thus, in this context, PR practices in and through the NFL serve to legitimize the structural components of capital networks.

However, it is more than just PR practices that actively reproduce the politics of capitalism. These relations are also foundationally produced by the onto-teleological structure of the NFL. In other words, the League *exists* for the purpose of (re)producing these relations. According to Dart (2014), "the logical expression of the neoliberal market economy is manifesting itself in athletes, sports clubs, sports organizations and sports-related corporations (*sic*) rapid adoption and exploitation of new media technology and the increased commodification of the sporting experience" (p. 540). Thus, the commodification of the NFL product is representative of the expression of a larger political economy that further cements systemic classism. This process is both material (in the sense of producing social structures) and ideological. In a Foucauldian sense, neoliberal politics attempt to render the social domain economic and to reduce state-based systems in favor of "personal responsibility" and "self-care"

(Markula, 2014; Lemke, 2001, p. 203) – a key ideological axiom of the NFL, and of the institution of sport more broadly (Carrington, 2010). Stated differently: "Team owners' practices perpetuate their advantages with the benefit of both a false meritocratic consciousness and an ideological sports opiate that maintains cultural traditions, and as such these provide valuable security for their capitalist pursuits" (Flint & Eitzen, 1987, p. 24; Hoch, 1972). Thus, the NFL as a sporting space serves as an ideal arena for the ideological reproduction of capitalism in the 21st century.

This process is further compounded by the oligopolistic functions of the NFL. While the concept of interlocking directorates is helpful in making sense of these functions, there are key differentiations making the NFL's collusive structure unique that must be considered. While the NFL and its ownership groups are embedded within a larger political and economic interlock, owners are distinct in the sense that they own or have ownership stake in their own involvements with the interlock. Owners do not necessarily represent firms in the abstract sense, but have direct interest in the resources and opportunities afforded to interlocks, helping to facilitate the (re)production of elite-white-male dominance. While the Green Bay Packers are an exception to this idea of individual-corporate ownership, as an organization they are perhaps the most heavily interlocked – at least on a local and/or regional level – given the expansive reach of their board. Therefore, while the concept of interlocking directorates helps to make sense of certain elements of NFL ownership, the concept itself may also be further extended by drawing upon distinctive aspects of sport organizational ownership. Still, insights can be gleaned by further understanding the function(s) of interlocking directorates in facilitating capitalist reproduction.

Early research on interlocking directorates noted the importance of location in facilitating oligopolistic activity (Dooley, 1969, p. 319). Important here is Dooley's (1969) analysis of the

top fifteen cities for interlocking directorates, eleven of which currently host NFL teams (Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, New York, Houston, Dallas, and Boston). This locality is likely a key function of the interlock(s) affiliated with NFL ownership groups. Past research on sport owners has found that "Their businesses, for the most part, are local rather than national. Thus their social and business ties are more likely to be local" (Flint & Eitzen, 1987, p. 20). The nature of interlocks necessitates managers' consideration of local communities not only in terms of economic growth but also in terms of social and political development (Dooley, 1969). While this dissertation emphasizes the social and political aspects of the NFL's involvement within a broader system, more research is needed to further unpack the effect(s) this has on various localities. Yet, while the importance of access to these local markets and political resources cannot be overstated, it must also be stressed that the NFL and its ownership groups have significantly globalized in the last few decades, blurring the boundaries between the local and the (inter)national.

Previous research has shown that sport team owners are not necessarily interlocked to the same degree as other top corporate executives (Flint & Eitzen, 1987). However, this does not mean that their external corporate relationships are any less effective. Rather, the opposite might be true according to Granovetter's (1973) research addressing the importance of weak network ties in facilitating information and resources. Interlocks in general should "be interpreted as a general resource that facilitates (through any of a number of equivalent channels) the flow of communication, monitoring of events, or projection of influence across the larger corporate network" (Burris, p. 252). This is important for understanding the NFL's role within a systemically classist context because "athletic labor processes produce and reproduce the material practices that create ideas about the sports experience – ideas that are consistent and

constitutive parts of the dominant ideology (Flint & Eitzen, 1987, p. 23). Moreover, owners themselves do not necessarily have to pursue interlocks in their non-sport businesses (Flint & Eitzen, 1987); rather, the unique function of a mediated NFL in legitimizing a larger political economy centralizes the NFL as an oligopolistic system onto which others connect to garner such legitimacy (i.e., the NFL as enzyme). Still, it is important to further explore other dimensions of this political economy not highlighted by Marxian analysis.

Racism

At this point, the ways in which the NFL and its ownership groups responded to peaceful player protests of systemic racism must be addressed. For example, despite the pageantry of having expressed "solidarity" with players in the wake of Trump's reference to players by telling owners to "get that son of a bitch off the field right now" (as quoted in Graham, 2017), owners and ownership groups have been overwhelmingly against the athletes engaging in protests since Kaepernick and Reid first knelt in 2016. For example, Eric Reid (2018) recently provided more insight into the actual views of owners on player protests throughout this process:

> Y'all remember that players-owners meeting in New York City? So we were brought in under the premise that the NFL wanted to use their resources to help the black community. We established within the first five minutes of that meeting that we weren't there to negotiate an end to the protest. After about an hour and a half of talking, Bob McNair says, "I think the elephant in the room is *this protesting*." Terry Pegula follows up with "Yeah, I've already *lost two sponsors* for my hockey team. We need to put a Band-Aid on this, and *we need a black figure-head to do it*."… [Jeffrey] Lurie says, "*We can do more for the black community* than you could ever imagine with our resources."

> Bob McNair then says, "Yeah, just make sure you tell your *comrades* to stop that protesting business." (1:45-2:38, italics added for emphasis)

As suggested by Reid's comments about the fixation of several owners over bringing an end to the protests, the hypocritical performance of owners on what was named "Choose-your-side Sunday" has only been matched by their disdain for substantively dealing with any of the critical issues brought forth by Kaepernick, Reid, and others (Oshiro & Weems, 2019). Moreover, the statement by Terry Pegula referencing the loss of sponsors further points to the interdependent nature of capitalism and systemic racism, as well as the unique positioning of elite white men in maintaining these systems.

Overall, this type of performance by owners was indicative of what Picca and Feagin (2007) referred to as two-faced racism. *Two-faced racism* discusses the nuanced nature of whites' frontstage and backstage racism: "Much of the overt expression of blatantly racist thought, emotions, interpretations, and inclinations has gone backstage – that is, into private settings where whites find themselves among other whites" (Picca & Feagin, 2007, p. x). Thus, the frontstage/backstage framework is employed to "examine the significantly divergent racial performances by white Americans in public (multiracial) and private (all-white) arenas" (p. x). Exposed by Eric Reid, the approach taken by McNair, Pegula, Lurie, and other NFL owners in the backstage had little to do with their frontstage act of supporting players in the fight against systemic oppression. Rather, the opposite is true. Owners fervently sought to develop new policy designed specifically to control and/or rout player protests. On these attempts, Oshiro and Weems (2019) stated the following:

> Not only did the development of new policies and programs aim to rein in athletes fighting for social justice, but the dependency of sport media outlets (e.g., ESPN, Fox,

> CBS) upon the NFL as a political economy further veiled the voices of athletes using these mediums to speak out against injustice. This strategic silencing of athlete protests had a collateral effect of shaping and constraining public discourse surrounding the fourth wave of athlete activism. (para. 7)

Thus, while this backstage/frontstage performance more explicitly relates to the character structure of NFL ownership, these actions actively served to reproduce the racial economy of the NFL.

The NFL is more firmly rooted in the racial politics of capitalism, however. For example, in understanding the business of the NFL as a labor market laboratory (Kahn, 2000), it becomes clear that the substantially white-run League is heavily dependent upon the labor of black athletes (see Rhoden, 2010) – likely a foundational reason why NFL ownership has no legitimate interest in addressing systemic racism. However, this racial disparity extends beyond the athletes on the field. Take the 2002 implementation of the Rooney Rule for example – which was designed so that NFL teams had to interview at least one minority candidate during the hiring process for head coaching vacancies (Collins, 2007). Although on the surface this rule appears progressive in that it sought to address racist practices in the hiring process, there are several problems with it. Perhaps the most telling of these problems, however, is that the rule is not necessarily designed for people of color or women. Kwame Ture's (formerly Stokely Carmichael) 1966 speech on Black Power can further shed light on what is meant here.

Discussing the object of US civil rights legislation in the 1960s, Ture stated the following:

> I maintain that every civil rights bill in this country was passed for white people, not for black people. For example, I am black. I know that. I also know that while I am black I

> am a human being. Therefore I have the right to go into any public place. White people don't know that. Every time I tried to go into a public place they stopped me. So some boys had to write a bill to tell that white man, "He's a human being; don't stop him." That bill was for the white man, not for me. I knew I could vote all the time and that it wasn't a privilege but my right. Every time I tried I was shot, killed or jailed, beaten or economically deprived. So somebody had to write a bill to tell white people, "When a black man comes to vote, don't bother him." That bill was for white people. I know I can live anyplace I want to live. It is white people across this country who are incapable of allowing me to live where I want. You need a civil rights bill, not me. (Carmichael, 1966, para. 5)

In this sense, the Rooney Rule was not passed *for* racial or gender minorities; the rule was passed *for* white executives (Weems et al., 2017). It was implemented as a road block to curtail the actively racist hiring practices in the NFL that had been going on since the formation of the League. Moreover, although the rule *only* applies to the head coaching position out of the plethora of other jobs available, the NFL and sporting media more broadly have celebrated the "progressive" rule as leading the way in the push for diversity and inclusion in elite sport organizations (NFL, 2018). This PR side of this form of corporate social responsibility serves to consolidate and reproduce power relations (Banerjee, 2008), particularly in a neoliberal sporting context (Weems et al., 2017). Accordingly, it can also be stated that these explicitly racialized functions of the NFL – most visibly manifested in the owner-player dichotomy – actively serve to (re)produce systemic racism at-large.

Sexism

The institution of sport has also been central in the reproduction of systemic sexism. The NFL in particular has held a more-than-dubious role in the glorification of the masculine while simultaneously marginalizing women by placing them in expressive, supporting roles, ideological production, and/or relegating women's sports to a secondary status (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Hall, 1988; Kidd, 2013; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Messner, 1988, 2010; Sage, 1990). As a result, "Sport has been… largely a 'male preserve' supported by institutional practices of discrimination against women" (Frey & Eitzen, 1991, p. 516). While it is not in the scope of this dissertation to comprehensively detail the role of the NFL in US gender politics, the role of NFL ownership groups in reproducing this overarching, gendered political economy *is* emphasized. Specifically, I focus on how the character structure of NFL ownership manifests personally and professionally to directly shape these practices.

According to the 2018 Racial and Gender Report Card conducted by Richard Lapchick and colleagues (2019), the NFL was given a grade of "C" for its gender hiring practices with women being "seriously under-represented in significant decision-making positions at the team level" (Lapchick et al., 2019, p. 1). However, hiring practices do not tell the full story. Take Acker's (1990) critique of the over-emphasis on putting bodies into an existing structure, for example. It is not enough to "include" people into a pre-existing structure founded on the assumptions of a white male elite. Real progress does not come until these previously (and currently, in the case of the NFL and women) excluded "others" are included in the formation of equitable structures, policies, and practices that impact daily life. In other words, even *if* the NFL made legitimate efforts to hire more women, the core structure of the League is not being

changed. This point if key because it is this gendered organizational structure (see Acker, 1990) that defines the NFL and/as a gendered political economy.

Historically, the NFL has functioned as a systemically sexist political economy. This is perhaps most visible in the labor of NFL cheerleaders and its devaluation by the NFL (Harke, 2015). Despite the fact that being an NFL cheerleader requires the commitment of a full-time job, cheerleaders are not adequately compensated for this labor. For example, legal research has pointed to the failure of the NFL to compensate cheerleaders for practices and outside appearances – of which there are many (McGee, 2016). Because of this, cheerleaders have sought to unionize and fight the NFL for better wages (Harke, 2015; Neal, 2018; Pilon, 2017). However, it is not just the on-field cheerleaders that contribute to these sexist practices.

Many teams also have what are referred to as "alternative" cheerleaders, who are hired models in the stands "whose primary task is to charm spectators at the game" (Macur, 2018, para. 5). Noted teams that use these alternative cheerleaders include the Texans, Patriots, Saints, and Redskins (Macur, 2018). However, the use of these cheerleaders extends further. For example, the Reskins "ambassadors" as they are called are used to promote executive suite sales (Macur, 2018). This venture by the team went well beyond promotional material, however. Dennis Greene, the former president of business operations for the Redskins was forced to resign after his involvement with exploiting this group of women surfaced (Carroll, 2018; Kolur, 2018). In 2013, Greene invited the Redskins cheerleaders on a trip to Costa Rica with other (all-male) sponsors and suite holders, where the women were allegedly required to partake in a topless photo shoot and chosen to be personal escorts (Kolur, 2018). Furthermore, it was reported that the Redskins cheerleaders were used for entertainment at what has been described as an "unapologetically sexist" event in Washington D.C. (Roberts, 2018). At an annual fight night

event, white male elites from all around the D.C. area gathered to indulge themselves in a night of debauchery. According to D.C. Boxing Commissioner Jeff Gildenhorn, the event was "a boxing fan's dream and a married man's fantasy" (as quoted in Roberts, 2018, para. 8). Another attendee stated it more bluntly: "It's so great *because it's sexist*" (as quoted in Roberts, 2018, para. 9, italics added for emphasis). At the center of this event was the exploitation of the Redskins cheerleaders, both as sexualized objects for the enjoyment of these male elites as well as an exploited labor force in general.

The political economy of the NFL is one that actively reinforces the supremacy of a white male elite, both as an ideology as well as a social and political practice. This patriarchal production is predicated on a heteronormative center that characterizes systemic sexism. The NFL goes beyond the hyper-masculine, heterosexist ideology embodied by professional football. For example, according to Katherine Driessen (2015) of the *Houston Chronicle,* Robert McNair donated $10,000 in efforts to repeal Houston's LGBT-inclusive human rights ordinance (see also Browning, 2015). Acts like these structurally reproduce heterosexism as a substantive component of systemic sexism. Thus, the political economy of the NFL serves to buttress these structurations as guided by the character structures of NFL ownership groups.

SYSTEMIC (RE)PRODUCTION AND THE NFL

The social reproduction of the political economy of the NFL actively serves to fortify broader systems of dominance. This reproduction is fueled by the character structure of NFL ownership groups and the broad-spanning networks. Embodying an enzymatic function, the NFL and its ownership groups are deeply embedded in the politics of intersectional domination. Therefore, this section briefly address the NFL's reproduction of capitalism, systemic racism,

and systemic sexism to understand how the League impacts elite-white-male dominance on both a national and international scale.

Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and Elite-White-Male Dominance

Several works have pointed toward how neoliberal practices co-determine systemic forms of classism, racism, and sexism (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Ferguson, 2008). For example, Omi and Winant (2014) argued that the class politics of neoliberalism are effectively a "racial project" (p.211):

> Neoliberalism was at its core a racial project as much as a capitalist accumulation project. Its central racial component was colorblind racial ideology. The hegemony of neoliberal economics is matched and underwritten by the racial hegemony of colorblindness. (p. 211).

While Omi and Winant laid out a persuasive argument for neoliberalism as a racial project in their book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Collins and Bilge (2016) demonstrated how neoliberalism disproportionately effects women of color on a global scale. In discussing the effects of neoliberalism on social protests, for example, Collins and Bilge (2016) noted the development of the "police state" (p. 138) as a response to social and political unrest. In the development of the police state as a response to these movements, Collins and Bilge pointed to several empirical examples that demonstrated how "the coercive turn taken by neoliberal states has fallen heavily on populations who are disadvantaged by race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, and migration status" (p. 150). Thus, it is imperative to understand how intersecting social systems are (re)produced as commingled forces. As a Eurocentric and hyper-masculine organization, the NFL serves as a primary institution for the social reproduction of intersectional politics. Therefore, as the NFL has continued its globalization efforts in recent

years, it is imperative to understand how the neoliberal politics of NFL owners are exported through the structure of the League.

Globalized NFL

In recent years, the NFL has continued its efforts to globalize as a brand. This has been most typified by the reoccurrence of games being held outside of the US in places such as Mexico City and London (Bravo, Lee, & García-Gonzalez, 2016; Scott, 2017). Due to the inter-institutional nature of NFL ownership groups and the broader political and economic connections, the political economy of the NFL has local, national, and transnational implications. For example, in 2016 Shahid Khan committed to a $95 million investment to bring Flex-N-Gate to the city of Detroit to supply Ford Motor Co., due in large part to his personal connection with Ford's Executive Chairman Bill Ford (Snavely, 2016). Moreover, Khan's international business connections via the auto industry have provided access to other international markets (e.g., Canada, France, Spain, Germany, Argentina, and Japan) that were perhaps unavailable to NFL owners otherwise (Jacksonville Jaguars, 2019; Sanjai, Jie, & Lippert, 2016). Through individuals such as Khan other NFL ownership groups have direct access to a global market.

The global implications of NFL ownership groups extend beyond purely economic interests, however. Many owners also have significant interests in global politics. For example, several owners (e.g., Robert Kraft and Jim Irsay) substantially support the state of Israel to the point where they make efforts to privately and publicly support Israel. For example, Kraft has stated that his company, International Forest Products, produced the materials used to package the Patriot missile (Information Cradle, 2019) – which had been used extensively by the US military in their occupation of the Middle East (Ahronheim, 2018; Bahgat, 2006). Given the central role the NFL played in the domestic politics of the War on Terror (Fischer, 2014; King,

2008), the international interests of owners like Kraft warrant concern. At large, the globalization of the NFL depends upon the exportation of the politics of elite-white-male dominance. Future research should further examine the global implications of this political-economic positioning and how these effect the colonial aims of the NFL in the context of a globalizing League.

CONCLUSION

In sum, ownership groups of the NFL occupy a central position for elite-white-male oligopolism within the United States. As the controlling body of the NFL, ownership groups collectively function to facilitate the active process of intersectional domination. Specifically, through the NFL as a political system and the mass-mediated NFL, the politics of elite-white-male domination are (re)produced. In relation to the system of capitalism, the NFL functions as a medium through which economic power is consolidated, normalized, and legitimized. As billionaire capitalists whose socioeconomic statuses depend heavily upon the colonial stratification the American society, NFL ownership groups and associated political and economic elites have significant capital interest in shaping, maintaining, and validating the cultural, ideological, and material production of the NFL. This colonial stratification is significantly racialized and gendered, actively reproducing the politics of social structures outlined in *Elite White Men Ruling* (Feagin & Ducey, 2017).

CHAPTER VIII

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The NFL and its ownership groups occupy unique positions in the politics of elite-white-male domination. As empowered through the organizational structure of the NFL, this study uncovered several themes associated with team ownership: (a) overrepresentation of elite white men, (b) intergenerational transfer of wealth, (c) nepotism, (d) inter-institutional representation among ownership groups, (e) political and economic network, and (f) philanthropy. The interrelation of these themes point to the centrality of NFL ownership within a broader political economy that serves to (re)produce elite-white-male dominance (see Feagin & Ducey, 2017). While the field of sport management has been largely complicit in the overall neoliberalization of the field (Newman, 2014), the understanding of the NFL and its ownership groups presented in this study provides scholars and practitioners with a set of options moving forward. Adopting a realism approach to neoliberal organizational trends, McChesney and Nichols (2016) argued the following:

> This is reality. But it is not a reality that discredits utopian dreams or confirms dystopian cynicism. Rather, it is a reality that demands that Americans adjust their thinking about democracy… It is pointless to be against progress. The point is to shape progress, not as customers or consumers, not as clicks to be counted or employees struggling to synch ourselves into automated workplaces, but as citizens engaged in a democratic process of organizing a new economy that reflects our values and our needs. (p. 8)

Following McChesney and Nichols (2016), this chapter outlines theoretical and practical implications for the field of sport management, and of sport studies more broadly.

While I outline implications for the field emanating from the current study, it should be emphasized that all research is limited to an extent (Price & Murnan, 2004; Shipman, 2014). For example, one limitation to conducting case studies that researchers often encounter is that there is too much data for easy analysis (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). While thematic saturation was reached in relation to the established frameworks key decisions were made regarding, first and foremost, what counts as data in the context of the study (see Denzin & Giardina, 2015). Secondly, there were other avenues that could have been explored to create a more comprehensive analysis of sport team ownership (e.g., financial impacts of oligopolistic activity); however, not all of these avenues readily applied to the focus of the study. Therefore, future studies on sport team ownership should continue explicating the multitude of facets that shape team ownership and league structure.

Another limitation of this study is that I did not necessarily focus on the extant resistance to NFL ownership groups, and to the political economy of the NFL more broadly. Domination of any form does not take place without resistance (Feagin & Ducey, 2017). Indeed, the exercise of power is a dialectic process (DeMaria, 1983), especially in the context of complex organizations (Benson, 1977; Mumby, 1988; Zeitz, 1980). Thus, while I briefly touched on instances of resistance to further elucidate the role(s) of team owners, a more sustained analysis of resistance and its many forms is warranted. While these are noteworthy limitations, the study was simultaneously strengthened by this overall approach. For example, case studies help scholars (a) understand complex inter-relationships, (b) explore the unexpected and unusual, (c) identify key processes that take place within relationships, and (d) facilitate rich conceptual and theoretical development (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). Therefore, it is with this understanding that I discuss implications for the field of sport management.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

There are several implications for both the study and practice of sport management that stem from this collective case study. These implications include, but certainly are not limited to, the following: (a) diversity, inclusion, and social justice in sport organizations, (b) ownership in sports, (c) critical qualitative research, (d) and resistance in, through, and to the NFL. Each of these implications are discussed in more detail below with the explicit aim of producing emancipatory research (see Feagin, Vera, & Ducey, 2015).

Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Justice

As this study relates to the bourgeoning topics of diversity, inclusion, and social justice in sport management research, three new avenues are proposed: (1) the application of political economy analysis to issues of diversity and inclusion; (2) a realism perspective on sport organizational structure; and (3) a sustained focus on the sport industry's elite and how they actively maintain organizational cultures of similarity (see Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Weems et al., 2017). Each of these avenues can assist in the production of more legitimate social justice work in the field of sport management.

It is, first and foremost, argued here that sport management scholarship on diversity and inclusion can benefit significantly from further analysis of the political economy of professional sport. Despite the (white-male) capitalist foundation of professional sporting institutions in the US (Sage, 2000), sport management scholars have yet to draw from extensive – and interdisciplinary – research on political economies to better understand contemporary issues of diversity and inclusion in sport. As demonstrated by the research presented where, contextualizing sport organizations not as disembodied economic entities but as political systems (see Slack & Parent, 2006) deeply embedded within a larger political economy, the scope of

analysis is widened and issues that otherwise go unexamined are illuminated. Thus, sport management scholars in this area of research should continue to draw from political-economic analysis to better understand a variety of issues including but not limited to labor relations, racial exploitation, and sexism, as well as how all of these intersect within sport organizations.

Secondly, scholars should develop realist perspectives of sport organizational structures. As Weems and colleagues (2017) have noted, sport organizations do not function as naturally occurring, disembodied enigmas. Rather, these organizations are actively structured (by predominantly white men) with raced, gendered, and classed substructures (Acker, 1990, 2012; Feagin & Ducey, 2017; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Therefore, one avenue for sport management scholars in the area of diversity, inclusion, and social justice is to move beyond discussions of bias and prejudice to instead interrogate the structural features of sport organizations to better understand the social structure of sporting oppressions.

Operating at the center of organizational structuration are the top managers who actively shape and maintain organizational norms (Acker, 2012; Stinchcombe, 1997). According to Feagin, "Sport is one of those key institutions created, maintained, and run by the elite white male" (as cited in Weems & Singer, 2017, p. 285). This statement was evident throughout the current study. Therefore, future research in the field of sport management should consistently analyze how and why sport's white male elite and their acolytes relate to organizational structures, cultures, policies, and practices. Doing so could prove to be an invaluable contribution to the body of work on diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

In addition to these new avenues for sport management research, scholars should continue to reflect on various applications of *diversity without management* (Weems et al., 2017,

p. 905). In a provocative article published to *Journal of Sport Management*, Newman (2014) argued the following:

> Rather than seek to *better manage* gender or racial diversity… in sport, we should instead seek to give our teaching and research over to – to *be made by* – the very corporeal pluralities and potentialities we have too often sought to regulate or classify in the name of industry. (p. 612, italics in original)

Thus, in a reconstruction of popular diversity "management" practices in sport (e.g., see Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999), Weems and colleagues (2017) suggested diversity without management as a way to "re-imagine the ways in which we study, teach, and practice diversity" (p. 905). This orientation seeks to place historically marginalized groups (including needs, experiences, and knowledges) at the center of organizational decision-making, the development of policy, and organizational structure (Weems et al., 2017). For example, employees could be brought in for focus groups to better understand how sport organizations should respond to their needs. Professional athletes could be involved, and even centered, in the development of organizational policy. Adopting a proactive approach to accomplishing these tasks rather than a reactive approach (see Fink & Pastore, 1999; Cunningham, 2019) can help sport organizations avoid breakdowns in communication. Further application of the diversity-without-management concept could be useful in pushing sport organizations toward being more diverse, inclusive, and socially just spaces.

Sport Ownership

Related to the idea that sport researchers should continue to analyze sport's elite to better understand how they shape organizational structure and function, sport management scholars should continue to investigate the phenomenon of sport ownership. For example, many of the

individuals examined in this study are also owners of franchises in different sports, or even different regions altogether. This should serve as springboard to begin investigating other sport leagues (e.g., NBA, MLB, MLS, NHL) as both separate and connected entities. Doing so would yield implications for various aspects of organizational studies including resource dependence theory (Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Pfeffer, 1987), (neo)institutional perspectives (Washington & Patterson, 2011; Yang & Konrad, 2011), embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1996, 1997), and organizational studies of power (Perrow, 2014).

As this study serves as a foundation for further analysis, scholars should also look to begin building theory around the concept of sport ownership. While there are similarities with other forms of corporate ownership, the sport industry has potentially distinctive aspects such as the "owning" of human beings as a form of capital. For instance, Chalip's (2006, 2015) reflections on sport management as a discipline point to a variety of distinctive elements of sport including health, salubrious socialization, economic development, community development, and national pride. With the largely unacknowledged root of managerial studies and practices in the institution of slavery (Cooke, 2003), scholars could look to build upon critical works in sport such as *The New Plantation: Black Athletes, College Sports, and Predominantly White NCAA Institutions* (Hawkins, 2013) and *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (Rhoden, 2010) to further explore the (non-)distinctness of sport ownership. Moreover, there are significant differences for how sport team owners are taxed as opposed to more traditional forms of ownership (Flint & Eitzen, 1987). These differential factors present opportunities to build theory in the field of sport management that demonstrates a legitimate concern for the social (Newman, 2014; Zeigler, 2007).

Critical Qualitative Research

Recently, a group of sport management scholars revisited the state of qualitative inquiry in the field of sport management (Singer et al., 2019). Although several key issues were discussed in the authors' narrative approach to addressing qualitative inquiry, one theme emanating from their discussion was the field's general de-emphasis on and mis-conceptions about the power and potential of qualitative research. Although qualitative research methods are gaining traction in sport management, this study shows how qualitative methods can help to explore complex topics while also allowing for deeper interrogation of the issues at-hand. Moreover, the bricolage approach to the collective case study used here presents a unique design to further explore creative uses in qualitative methodologies (see Hoeber & Shaw, 2017; Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Therefore, the methodological implications warrant further deliberation.

As the field of sport management (and beyond) continues to neoliberalize (Newman, 2014), qualitative research has an essential role to play in moving beyond the atomized – and often suffocating – nature of post/positivism (Denzin & Giardina, 2015). For example, Cannella and Lincoln (2015) argued that the saturation of neoliberal logics in research and practice could actually "provide prospects for critical actions that would counter and even deterritorialize neoliberalism" (p. 60). Thus, sport management scholars can draw from critical qualitative research methods to produce more emancipatory work (Weems et al., 2017), especially in resisting elite-white-male oligopolism.

Resistance in and through the NFL

Moving forward, this research also yields implications for the study and practice of resistance in, through, and to the NFL. Sport serves as a unique site where resistance to social

injustices takes place, hegemonic structures are challenged, and otherwise marginalized voices have the potential to be heard (see Cooper, Macaulay, & Rodriguez, 2017; Cunningham et al., 2019; Edwards, 1969, 2016). According to Cunningham and colleagues (2019), largely missing from scholarly analysis of sporting resistance(s) has been "a discussion of how, why and under what conditions these activities take place" (p. 5). Despite the central position of the NFL of its ownership groups in the politics of domination there have also been various forms of resistance to this process, both historically and contemporaneously. Therefore, sport management researchers should look to further build upon the current research by including these resistances along with how sporting processes are subsequently impacted.

Some scholars have already taken steps in this direction. For example, in the edited book *Critical Race Theory: Black Athletics Sporting Experiences in the United States*, Singer and colleagues (2017) outlined theoretical tools (i.e., critical race theory and systemic racism theory) that can be used to contextualize and make sense of sporting resistance as both an active process and a lived experience. Seeking to disseminate critical research through other mediums, some scholar-activists have chosen to actively participate in sporting resistances in outlets such as the *The Nation* (e.g., Zirin, 2018, 2019) or *Racism Review* (e.g., Oshiro & Weems, 2019; Weems & Atzmon, 2018; Weems & Kusz, 2019; Weems, Oshiro, & Singer, 2017). Thus, the research presented here can further serve as a foundation for NFL-resistance work at both the scholarly and activist levels.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this dissertation examined NFL ownership groups and the role(s) they play in shaping and maintaining the political economy of the NFL. The research found that the NFL

plays a substantive role in the politics of elite-white-male dominance in the US and beyond. Accordingly, this research argues that the character and social structure of NFL ownership *matters*, and the ways in which individual owners navigate a broader political economy shape the structure and function of the NFL as an organization. Although some might argue that nothing can be done about who owns NFL franchises and how they choose to run their respective organizations, this dissertation explicitly rejects that sentiment. By beginning from a position of deeper understanding about the NFL and its ownership groups, scholars, practitioners, and activists are both empowered and encouraged to exercise their own agency as politicking bodies. In doing so, these groups can be more readily prepared to engage in a public form of liberation sociology. In other words, the political economy of the NFL can be reshaped to more accurately reflect the vision of a democratic future.

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