

**Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting—Thursday, April 7, 2010**

**Author Meets Critic: “Black Men Can’t Shoot” by Scott Brooks**

Thank you. It’s a pleasure to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts on Black Men Can’t Shoot by Scott Brooks. For those of you who haven’t yet read the book, Black Men Can’t Shoot provides an ethnographic account of the lives of two young black men—Ray and Jermaine—as they work to become “known” as great ball players, and the implications of their doing so for their life chances. The book is based on field research Professor Brooks conducted in Philadelphia, as a coach, mentor and friend, over a four-year period. It is a clearly written, accessible and compelling sociological story about social networks, opportunity structures, and the setbacks and successes that characterize adolescence, perhaps especially urban adolescence. BMCS is a very good book.

But before I go any further, I’d like to offer a couple of points of disclosure. First, I should say that Scott and I came to Philadelphia for the same reason: to study basketball. He arrived in the city in 2000. I began my studies in 1993, as a Division 1 basketball player for St. Joseph’s University, a program with a rich basketball tradition on both the men’s and women’s side. Like the young men in Scott’s book, I was recruited out of high school, received visits from college coaches, then “offers” and eventually picked a school that had a good academic reputation and well-respected sports tradition. Like Jermaine, I shied away from one school because it was “too white.” I also turned down opportunities to attend schools with better academic reputations—like Princeton and the University of Michigan—because their basketball teams weren’t very good. All

of this made sense to me as an eighteen year old whose parents did not graduate from college and whose primary objective was to use the game I loved to leave the town I grew up in. As I read BMCS, I found myself drifting back to my own adolescence and the inordinate number of hours I spent on basketball courts. In chapter one of the book, which introduces the reader to Jermaine and Ray, Jermaine explains why basketball matters to him: “I wanna go to school, get my degree, do something with my life.” That was my dream too.

I realized my dream, and the dream that a network of others, including older men with formal and informal basketball pedigrees, the boys on the corner, high school coaches, AAU coaches, and others, had for me: I earned a basketball scholarship to college. During my senior year I helped lead the team to a historic 26-5 record. We ended the season as conference champs, we advanced to the second round of the big dance—the NCAA championships—and most importantly, as Scott knows, we were Big 5 champs, beating LaSalle, Temple, Villanova, and Penn to capture bragging rights in the city. It was difficult to break away from the team upon graduation, to imagine life without the set of relationships developed over the course of four years. I dealt with the difficult transition by returning to the women’s basketball coaching staff for two years, before leaving to attend graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania in 2000, when Scott arrived in Philly.

A second point of disclosure: Scott and I are friends. Our friendship began in the urban ethnography course he writes about in the beginning pages of BMCS. We both studied under Elijah Anderson at Penn and learned, I think, a good deal from one another as we moved up the ranks in our program and eventually went on to take positions in the

UC system in 2004. I have wonderful memories of spending time in our small offices on the first floor of McNeil, sharing stories about what we were learning in the field. It was hard then to imagine then that one day our conversations would find their way into books—good books—his and my own. It is with great pride then, and with some intimate understanding of the social world that Scott worked to represent in his book, that I take on the role of critic. I'll begin by highlighting what I see as the strengths of the book. I'll offer my account of what I think the book is really about. I'll conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of the choices Scott made in developing this representation of the social world—a world he came to know well as a field researcher and friend.

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As I said in the beginning, Black Men Can't Shoot is a sensitive and richly detailed account of the lives of two young men from South Philly. It is important to read the book with an understanding of its intention—what it is, and is not—and Scott makes this clear early on. He writes:

The book traces the career of known basketball players in Philadelphia... The book is not about hoop dreams or whether or not sports improve black men's mobility at the macro level. It is concerned with what young black men in Philly do to go from being good players to great players (and college prospects) and the impact of this work on their local status and social position" (xi).

Explaining how young men move from being seen as good basketball players to being known as great, and the consequences of these distinctions, is a significant contribution of the book. His dissection of this process—and it is a process—challenges popular beliefs about the “natural” athletic ability of black men, and shifts our attention to how

patterns of interaction structure opportunity and determine access to resources that are necessary for success and social mobility. The book is not just about the lives of these two young men. It is also about the social actors who surround them—many of whom are deeply invested in whether or not these young guys succeed or fail. Not all of these actors are altruistic, and Brooks’ analysis highlights how the commercialization and commodification of the black male athlete shapes the tastes and desires of aspiring hoop stars, as well as the behavior of the grown men who surround them. Indeed, a particular strength of the book is its illustration of how the people that surround these young men co-construct the public identities of adolescent boys in ways that are consequential for their future success.

Another strength of the book is its empathetic portrayal of urban adolescence. Too much of urban sociology dwells on adolescent pathology and juvenile delinquency; here Brooks spends time on the understudied topic of how adolescents seek, find and develop viable pathways out of troubled neighborhoods. Brooks charts adolescent change over time and through this lens, we see what motivates Ray and Jermaine. They are well aware of the distinctions that organize their social worlds; given the choice between “thug” or “athlete” they do not choose the nihilistic path, but rather the path that reflects the value they place on their lives. In doing so, these young men defy common expectations of urban adolescents. They are risk-takers, but the risks they take are part of a larger survival project; they may fight, but they are not “fighters.” They feel the lure of the street, but they do not become “drug dealers” or “thugs.” Instead, they seek out spaces that provide a sort of protective buffer from the dangers of the street; they latch onto the game not only because of what the game means in the moment, but what it can mean for

their future. Brooks' highlights this point late in the book with a quote from John Edgar Wideman, who used the game to move beyond the Pittsburgh ghetto in which he was raised. The quotation selected by Brooks highlights, as he does throughout the book, the labor, calculation, and commitment that goes into developing a basketball career.

Wideman writes:

If you want more and you're lucky enough, as I was, to choose or be chosen by some sort of game, you may then begin to forge a game plan. If you believe you're in the game, you may be willing to learn the game's ABCs. Learn what it costs to play. Begin making yourself a player.

This is where Brooks focuses our attention throughout the book: the moment when young men start to realize that this game can do something for them. The moment when an adolescent boy looks around at his circumstances and decides, in spite of the many distractions, that he is going to try to be somebody.

This, Brooks suggests, is the real lure of the game for inner city youth and the real payoff. On the surface, we tend to think that basketball is appealing to adolescents, and perhaps especially for young black men, for a number of other reasons. It is true that the court is one of the few places where young black men are allowed to spread out, to take up space, to bump and hit and move without punishment—a freedom they know will be constrained as soon as they step off the court. But that is not the only reason that the game is important. In BMCS basketball moves quickly from being just a game played by mindless black boys who are “naturally” inclined to excel on the court to a space where young men can try on different future selves. We begin to see young men imagining themselves as pros—as professionals.

BMCS also reveals the role that other black men, men with complicated histories of their own, play in the lives of young men like Jermaine and Ray. Men step up as old heads—social fathers, really—to pass along important lessons to aspiring ball players. They encourage young men to make better choices. They are there for the young men when needed. This is not easy work and it takes a toll on men who have some means: shuttling young men to-and-from games, cheering in the stands, “breaking young men down” and then building them back up into ball players, all of this and more is consequential for young men’s life trajectories. The work that men do is also emotionally and psychologically challenging. For as rewarding as it can be to see a young man graduate from high school, the micro-moments that make up that journey can try the most patient of people.

In Chapter 18: Implosion, Brooks offers us a glimpse of the emotional labor that goes into this work when he and Jermaine—“his guy,” the young man he took on as mentor, social father and friend—almost come to blows after a game. Jermaine is, as Scott sees it, immature, and at times his bad choices undermine his hope for a better life as well as Scott’s willingness to invest in him. But over time Jermaine develops, he matures, and we see how the protective buffer offered by the game has allowed Jermaine to reach his dream, which from early on was the same dream that Scott and the old heads held for him, even during times when it appeared to be overshadowed by winning “chips,” rocking the hottest jersey, or getting girls. It is the dream he shared early on in the book: “I wanna go to school, get my degree, do something with my life.” BMCS makes it clear that for many more than we think, this is what the game is about.

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As a book, BMCS is, at times, a bit unconventional. It is divided into 24 short, accessible chapters. Yet, the book develops in complexity, as the young men do, over time. By the time you approach the later chapters, you feel as if you know these young men, and, as Howard Becker notes on the back of the book, you want to know how their story ends. In fact, I found that the later chapters in the book stood out as my favorites. Chapter 16: *Playing Everywhere* for example, when we see the young men move beyond the boundaries of the playground by playing on traveling AAU teams. These teams literally take young men out of the neighborhood and give them a glimpse into another world. They encourage the young men to, as Wideman says, “begin to forge a game plan,” to “learn the game,” to commit to making themselves players.

In Chapter 21: *A Star is Born; Another is Still Waiting* we see Jermaine and Ray’s paths diverge. Again, we are reminded of what the game is really about as Coach Scott tries to “convince him [Jermaine] of his worth to us,” even though he wasn’t the star of the team. Chapter 24: *Being Used* offers a candid and reflective explanation from Chuck on why he continues to do what he does with and for these young men and the league. “Chuck chooses to be used through basketball.” Scott writes. “He says, ‘It’s not being used, if you’re being used. He hopes to be used by kids, to be effective, referred to, and to be called upon to give more help when needed.’” Being used in this way gives Chuck a place in the community too. It is a place that is hard earned. It is a place built on relationships; relationships built over time as boys become men; relationships that endure; relationships that make a community.

In the end, BMCS is not, as Brooks states early on, a macro-level study of the relationship between sports and race, although it certainly contributes to that literature. It

is not a book about the effectiveness of recreational basketball leagues as deterrents for delinquency or violence, although policy makers and funders could certainly learn something from reading the book. Ultimately, it is a sociological study of relationships—social relationships, mentoring relationships, and personal relationships among men. BMCS tells the story of how men help boys to become men in this setting, as other men do in other settings. At times we may cringe at what we see as the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity or the reinforcement of gendered expectations that can be damaging to young men and the women in their lives. Even with these moments, we come to appreciate men like Scott and Chuck as “bridges to other worlds” and the challenges that come along with building bridges. Brooks’ book is important not only for the questions it asks about the young men’s lives, but also for the questions that it encourages us to ask: where else can young black men gain the type of positive benefits and rewards that Jermaine and Ray receive? How can we create settings in which adolescent boys can become targets for positive affirmation and not punitive surveillance by police or school officials? What does success mean for adolescent boys who come of age in tough urban neighborhoods?

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In the end, I think that the book’s most provocative contribution is one that may be overlooked by readers who want the book to be something that it is not. At its heart, the book represents to me a social world in which men care for each other, learn to value each other and even express genuine love and affection for one another. In this way, BMCS is an original contribution to urban sociology and even a bit radical. The significance of this contribution may be difficult to grasp for people who want to read the

book in a different context. This is, I think, part of the problem with Douglass Hartman's recent review of Black Men Can't Shoot in Contemporary Sociology (vol. 39, 2).

Hartmann suggests that Scott's book, is "best understood and assessed" in the context of current literature on race and sport, which makes manifest that "racialization and racism itself results not just from negative stereotyping and active discrimination but from romanticized consumption that depends upon and deepens overarching (and deeply distressing) conceptions of difference." Hartmann accurately observes that the book "highlights the role that key community members (often in unofficial positions) occupy in the construction of elite level youth sport as well as the way in which the entire system is constituted in intergenerational, life course terms." However, he worries that Brooks may be romanticizing the lives of the boys and men in this book. Hartmann takes special issue with Scott's relationship with his key informant, his "old head," Chuck. He writes, "Brooks' extensive depictions of "Coach Chuck" exhibits very little distance from a subject whose attitudes and practices embody much of the authoritarianism, parochialism, and patriarchy that sports scholars and activist have spent careers working against."

Yet, Brooks' detailed description of this social world makes one thing clear: the sports scholars and activists referred to by Hartmann are not the ones who show up each day to work with young men like Jermaine and Ray. Men like Chuck and other old heads are there—they "step up" year after year, for better or for worse. Readers like Hartmann might like a more ideologically-driven critique, one that focuses more heavily on the ball player as "exploited worker" or a book laid more heavily with impenetrable academic jargon, but that is not what this book is about. Further, that is not what makes for good ethnography.

Black Men Can't Shoot is good ethnography. It provides a richly descriptive account of a social world unfamiliar to many. It remains committed to the phenomena under study throughout the book. We learn something new from reading the book. We also learn something from Brooks' approach to collecting data, how he blended his admittedly contradictory and uncommon role as ethnographer and friend (which he describes in detail in a methodological appendix) and his serious commitment to both roles. He paints a portrait of Chuck and, most importantly, of himself that isn't always favorable. He provides an honest account of how his approach to collecting data shaped what he came to know and how he would, in the end, represent it.

The value of his doing so should not be understated. A quote from Howard Becker (from the Foreword to a forthcoming book, Sociologists Backstage, that I co-edited with my colleague Sarah Fenstermaker) is, I think, instructive in light of Hartmann's critique. Becker writes:

Sociologists have forever had a thing about methods, beguiled by the idea that if they just use the right method they will eventually produce "real science," that real thing which has somehow eluded us all these years. But we have been fooled over and over again... And yet sociologists continue to work, to collect data and analyze it, to write articles and books and give papers at scholarly meetings. And some of what they do seems to tell the world things it hadn't known before, even if it doesn't have all the marks of conventional science.

This is, I think, the best way to evaluate ethnography: does it tell the world things it hadn't known before? BMCS certainly does. In the end, it is able to do so because of Scott's ability to improvise while in the field. Becker continues:

The need for improvisation means that sociologists have to rely on their personal resources, dig into what they have learned in their lives outside of school, in order to find ways around and through the thickets of doing science in the midst of real life, which is somehow not behaving the way it ought to so that we can follow the rules of method we've learned.

That's what Scott did in the field, he improvised, becoming ethnographer and friend, and in doing so he tells us something about this social world that we didn't know before. He makes the choice not to shine the spotlight solely on what the sport scholars and activists "work against," but instead on what young men like Jermaine and Ray work for and the relationships that sustain them as they do. As a former player and coach, to me, that's what this book—and the game—is really about.

Thank you.

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