Unrealistic Expectations and Future Status Coercion in Minor League Baseball Players’ Future-Oriented Labor

Christopher M. McLeod,1 Nola Agha,2 N. David Pifer,3 and Tarlan Chahardovali4

1Department of Sport Management, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA; 2Sport Management Program, College of Arts and Sciences, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA; 3Department of Sport Management, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA; 4Department of Sport and Entertainment Management, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

This study examines minor league baseball players’ future-oriented labor by interviewing 44 baseball players and collecting data on 8,000 minor league baseball players’ careers. Minor league baseball players’ expectations of reaching Major League Baseball impacted how they evaluated their work in the present, leading them to tolerate unfair pay and working conditions. We show that players’ expectations of reaching Major League Baseball were moderately unrealistic, partly due to managerial practices encouraging unrealistic expectations. This study contributes to labor research by showing that future-oriented labor ideology is based on unrealistic expectations that employers can promote to create opportunities for future status coercion.

Minor league baseball is the athlete development system for Major League Baseball (MLB) teams, which operates in the United States and the Dominican Republic. Minor league baseball players enter the system hoping to reach MLB, but they must play in and generate revenues for minor league franchises to advance. Only 24% of fielders and 13% of pitchers will play at the major league level for a single game (Pifer et al., 2020). Minor league baseball has also been the subject of many controversies around athletes’ working conditions (Broshius, 2013; Hayhurst, 2012, 2014; McDowell, 2018). Most players earn less than the U.S. poverty threshold (Fagan, 2021). In 2014, athletes challenged low pay by filing a class action lawsuit against MLB teams, accusing the league of violating minimum wage and overtime laws (Senn, 2015). MLB preempted the lawsuit by successfully lobbying Congress to pass the Save America’s Pastime Act, which exempted MLB from the Fair Labor Standards Act’s minimum wage and overtime requirements (Blum, 2018). At the same time, the 20 most valuable minor league baseball franchises increased their value by 35% between 2013 and 2016, and the average MLB franchise increased its value by 243% between 2012 and 2022 (Gough, 2022; Klebnikov, 2016).

Although minor league baseball is a unique context, baseball players share many experiences with other workers in neoliberal capitalism. More and more people are doing unpaid or underpaid work in the present based on the hope or expectation that their work will pay off in the future. For example, researchers have illustrated how interns tolerate unfair work practices because they expect their internship will help them secure dream jobs (Hawzen & King-Cruelty Prof., 2020). In the context of minor league baseball, former player Dirk Hayhurst (2014) described baseball as a “cruel profession,” “that justifies its cruelty by offering a golden carrot so valuable and coveted that young men will put their blinders on and drudge after it until they get their teeth on it or get put down trying” (para. 8). Sociologists have sought to understand these trends by developing future-oriented theories of labor such as venture labor (Neff, 2012), hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), and aspirational labor (Duffy, 2016, 2017). Future-oriented theories of labor carry an implicit critique of neoliberalism and its underpinning philosophy of human capital investment (Brown, 2015; Feher, 2009; Holborow, 2012; Rottenberg, 2017) by illuminating how future-oriented ideologies motivate surplus-producing work under cruel working conditions.

This study aims to interrogate future-oriented labor in minor league baseball by understanding the ideologies that motivate and enable control over workers. In addition to contributing to the work of Burawoy (1979) and Mears (2015) who raised the question of why workers consent to their own exploitation, this study makes two contributions to the literature on future-oriented labor. First, we compare minor league baseball players’ expectations to predictions created by machine learning algorithms trained on the careers of over 8,000 players to show that the expectations that underpin their future-oriented labor are unrealistic. In doing so, we critique human capital investment reasoning from within the ideological apparatus it sets for itself, which, according to Feher (2009), is a necessary strategy for creating an opposition worthy of neoliberalism. Second, building on Hatton’s (2020) research on status coercion, we show how actors within the minor league baseball workplace encourage athletes’ unrealistic expectations in ways that expand coaches’ and managers’ opportunities to exercise future status coercion. These contributions help us understand the work of many athletes outside the minor leagues and nonathletes who labor for the future under neoliberal capitalism.

Literature Review

Neoliberal Ideology and Human Capital Investment

Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). Other scholars have emphasized that neoliberalism is also a “political
Critiquing the reasoning behind human capital investment, Neff (2012) argued that the overall effect of venture labor was to shift risks from start-up businesses onto their workers.

Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) defined hope labor as “un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow” (p. 9). Drawing on interviews with SB Nation sports bloggers and Yelp consumer reviewers, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) argued that hope labor was normalized through neoliberal ideologies, specifically the notion that hope labor is an investment that pays off for those who merit reward. Although Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) could not determine whether hope labor pays off for individual workers in the end, they concluded that it was a viable coping strategy given the uncertainties of the labor market. Like venture labor, hope labor shifts costs and risks from organizations to workers. However, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) distinguished hope labor from venture labor by arguing that hope labor is an engagement with a future that is uncertain and beyond control, whereas venture labor involves calculated risks.

Duffy (2016, 2017) identified aspirational labor in her interview-based study of female fashion bloggers and social media producers. Aspirational labor “is a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated idea of getting paid to do what you love” (Duffy, 2017, p. 48). Like venture labor, aspirational laborers expected they would one day be compensated for their productivity. Duffy (2017) demonstrated that aspirational laborers understand the challenges of working online: They approached media creation strategically, purposefully, and with aspirations for career success, but they were disadvantaged by unfair reward structures. Duffy (2016) also argued that aspirational labor is highly gendered as it often involves aspirational consumption of status objects to signal membership in a class, which Duffy (2016) perceived as a traditionally gendered activity. Although Duffy (2016) noted that a few aspirational laborers might eventually meet their goals, she maintained that individual success obscures the “problematic construction of gender and intersectionalities with class” that pervade aspirational labor activities (Duffy, 2016, p. 443).

Sociologists of sport have also utilized future-oriented labor theories to study athletes. Evers (2018) used aspirational labor in an interview-based study of the digital labor of free surfers. McLeod et al. (2022) used aspirational labor and hope labor to explain the findings of a secondary data analysis of esports prize earnings. They found that inequality in the esports labor market is growing over time as top prizes for a select few gamers encourage others to enter the industry, despite stagnant median earnings for the majority. In an interview study of women professional softball and soccer players and their managers, Chahardovali and McLeod (2022) used future-oriented labor theories to explain the phenomenon of “inspirational labor,” where women athletes are expected to perform additional labor to market and promote their sports. Like future-oriented laborers, inspirational laborers evaluate their work based on how it is expected to pay off in the future, with the difference that inspirational laborers focus on how their work is expected to pay off for other people, particularly young women and girls (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022).

Overall, future-oriented theories of labor have revealed a pervasive ideology that motivates work under neoliberal capitalism (Duffy, 2016; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Future-oriented theories of labor also offer a critique of human capital theory by foregrounding work rather than investment as the fundamental feature of late capitalist relations of production (Neff, 2012). In this way,
future-oriented theories of labor have shown how human capital ideologies maintain productive labor relations under conditions of growing precarity and alienation. However, we take this critique one step further by arguing that, in addition to manufacturing consent for general surplus-producing work (Burawoy, 1979; Mears, 2015), human capital investment ideology also falls short of its promise to workers—the promise that work today will pay off in the future. In other words, we argue that the optimism of human capital investment ideology is doubly cruel (in Berlant’s, 2011, sense) because it motivates present alienating work and fails to meet future expectations. In doing so, we draw inspiration from Feher (2009), who argued that opposition to neoliberalism should challenge human capital ideology from within the reasoning it sets for itself. Indeed, human capital investment is a seductive ideology because it is based on a partial truth—some people do succeed—and in the context of baseball, some minor league baseball players do reach MLB. We believe much can be gained by interrogating this partial truth and showing how false expectations operate as a mechanism of future-oriented labor ideology.

The critique offered in this study is different from other research on future-oriented labor because, so far, researchers have primarily used interview methods in their analysis. Although interviews are well suited for understanding how people engage with future-oriented ideologies, they are less suited for answering the question posed by Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) and Duffy (2016, 2017), “does [future-oriented] labour pay off?” (Duffy, 2016, p. 454). Thus, we use data on minor league baseball players’ careers to ask whether workers’ subjective future expectations are realistic. If not, what are the consequences of future-oriented laborers having unrealistic expectations? These questions are essential for critiquing future-oriented labor practices and the ideologies that sustain them.

Unrealistic Expectations and Status Coercion

Unrealistic expectations also raise questions about how employers might manipulate athletes’ expectations to take advantage of future-oriented labor ideologies. Hatton’s (2020) work on status coercion in the context of prisoners, welfare workers, graduate students, and college athletes is illustrative in this regard. According to Hatton (2020), status coercion exists when bosses (including coaches) use punitive power derived from their ability to discharge workers from a special status “and thereby deprive them of the rights, privileges, and future opportunities that such status confers” (p. 13). Status coercion is different from economic coercion and physical coercion in that employers take advantage of power over workers’ social position rather than their income or body. For example, PhD advisors have power over graduate students’ status because they can withdraw scholarships, hinder graduation, stall publications, and write damming letters of recommendation (Hatton, 2020).

Interestingly, Hatton’s (2020) analysis suggests that much status coercion arises from bosses’ control over future status or the future opportunities that status might provide. For example, Hatton (2020) described two students whose advisors exercised power by controlling “their future employment” as scientists (p. 69). Hatton (2020) also described a former football player who argued that coaches “sell a dream” to recruit and exploit athletes (p. 72). One implication of Hatton’s (2020) analysis is that bosses might also be able to extend their power over athletes and other workers by manipulating expectations so that future status and future opportunities appear more likely, more pressing, and, thereby, more vulnerable to coercion than they really are. A consequence of this theorization is that future-oriented ideologies might have made it possible for employers to coerce workers by promising a future status that does not exist and was not even intended to exist. Thus, given the prevalence of future-oriented work ideologies in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, it is critical to understand how expectations might be manipulated to enhance employers’ punitive power in the workplace.

Methodology

This study is part of an ongoing project in minor league baseball. From 2018 to 2022, we interviewed 44 prospective, current, and former minor league baseball players and collected data on >8,000 minor league baseball players’ careers (see McLeod et al., 2021; McLeod & Nola, 2023; Pifer et al., 2020). Of special interest for this study, we conducted interviews with 21 current minor league baseball players where we elicited their expectations of making it to MLB. We compared these players’ expectations with predictions created by machine learning algorithms trained on 8,134 player-careers to determine whether their expectations were realistic or unrealistic. In doing so, we attempted to interrogate players’ future-oriented expectations from a critical realist standpoint (Bhaskar, 1986; Wynn & Williams, 2012, p. 794).

Interviews

We draw on interviews with a total of 44 baseball players. We first interviewed five college players who had expectations of being drafted and playing in the minor leagues and five retired players. Interview guides for college players focused on their aspirations and expectations. Interview guides for retired players centered on their minor league experiences and eventual retirement with a focus on reflecting critically on working conditions in minor league baseball. Next, we interviewed 21 players using the career tree approach including interview questions on aspirations, expectations, retirement, and working conditions. Finally, we conducted 13 interviews with current minor league baseball players focusing on issues related to pay and development, which we had identified as critical to understanding future-oriented labor.

Career Tree Predictions

Career trees are templates for examining the expected trajectory of a person’s career that require participants to identify critical events in their career progression and assign subjective probabilities to those events (McLeod et al., 2021). During our interviews, 21 players were asked to build career trees (McLeod et al., 2021). Players were instructed to use a career tree to “estimate the likelihood of progressing through the minors over the next 3 years.” The minor leagues consist of levels (e.g., Rookie, Single-A, Double-A, and Triple-A) that players attempt to progress through until they are released, quit, or have a chance to play in MLB. A blank career template was created for participants that included each of the levels over the next 3 years. Participants also read a concise, one-page instruction sheet for completing the trees before the interview to prepare their thoughts. The interviewer elaborated on the instructions during the interview session and reminded participants of the key points of the career tree-building process.

Before conducting interviews, we collected participants’ demographic information, minor league performance statistics,
and past career information. We used this information and C5.0 machine learning algorithms to create predictions customized to each player about their likelihood of advancing to MLB. We developed and validated the C5.0 classification models in another study using data collected from The Baseball Cube (thebaseballcube.com) for all players selected from 2003 to 2011 in the MLB First-Year Player Draft (Pifer et al., 2020). C5.0 extracts informative patterns from data and attempts to categorize cases in predetermined classifications using any number of associated variables (Kuhn & Johnson, 2013). Specifically, the models produced a set of probabilities related to the players’ likelihoods of reaching each classification in the minor league system based on their past performance and other information, such as their draft round, position, and handedness. The classifications included MLB, or any given level in the minor leagues, such as Short-season, Long-season A, Double-A, and Triple-A. In addition, we included classifications for players who were out of the minor league system due to being dropped, injured, or quitting.

### Analysis

All the interviews were analyzed using a coding procedure consistent with critical realist tenets. Critical realism starts with explicating events, which Wynn and Williams (2012) defined as “identify[ing] and abstract[ing] the events being studied, usually from experiences, as a foundation for understanding what really happened in the underlying phenomena” (p. 796, emphasis in original). Specifically, we first coded the interviews using first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2012), which are concepts that retain participants’ vocabulary and view of the world. Second, we organized first-order concepts into second-order concepts, which collect participants’ experiences into abstract categories. Second-order concepts served as the “events” that are analyzed by critical realism to infer underlying mechanisms.

We also analyzed athletes’ expectations and our machine learning predictions. We took the overall probability of being in the MLB in the next one, two, and three seasons from the players’ trees and from our C5.0 trees. Finally, the C5.0 probabilities were subtracted from the players’ expectations to determine whether players underestimated or overestimated their chances with respect to each variable. For example, if the player’s tree estimated a 35% chance of making it to MLB in the next 3 years while our model estimated a 10% chance, the player received an error score of 25%, representing that he overestimated his chances by 25%. Consistent with the critical realist tenet of triangulation and multimethods (Wynn & Williams, 2012), we used these quantitative events alongside our first- and second-order coding to analyze minor league baseball players’ future-oriented labor.

### Findings

In this section, we offer an account of minor league baseball players’ future-oriented labor. Minor league baseball players are motivated by their subjective expectations of reaching MLB, and they only persist in the minor leagues because of such expectations. Moreover, players’ expectations cause them to tolerate and, occasionally, celebrate unjust working conditions, while acquiescing to managerial control. Notably, players’ expectations are unrealistic when compared with best available information. Moreover, unrealistic expectations are created and maintained by workplace practices, including a lack of information from management.

### Future-Oriented Labor in Minor League Baseball

All our participants were playing in the minor leagues with hopes and aspirations of reaching MLB and, therefore, were future-oriented laborers. Moreover, minor league baseball players had specific, measurable expectations of playing in MLB, in addition to abstract, nonrepresentational hopes and dreams. These expectations were why players persisted in the face of challenging working conditions.

For example, we asked players whether they would continue to play in the minor leagues if they knew they would not make it to MLB. One player replied, “Hell no” (Double-A 2). Another elaborated:

I wouldn’t [keep playing] to be honest. No. I mean, … it’s just a waste of time. If you’re not going to make it, why would you keep trying when you can do something better with your life? (Short-A 1)

It is sometimes thought that players would continue to play in the minor leagues because they love baseball and enjoy playing. However, players had more complicated views of baseball in the minor leagues. For example, one player explained why he would not play in the minor leagues if he learned that he did not have a chance of reaching MLB:

No because the structure of [the minor leagues] … at that point, you’d be playing for enjoyment and the structure of it is not the most conducive to enjoyment. If I knew that I would never have a career in baseball, but I still wanted to play baseball, then I would just go play [in an adult league]. (Rookie 1)

Therefore, a key characteristic of minor league baseball players’ future-oriented labor is that their expectations of making it to MLB in the future were part of the reason they persisted in the present. More troublingly, minor league baseball players’ expectations of the future changed the way they evaluated fairness and justice in the present. Overall, it should be noted that players astutely and critically evaluated their working conditions in minor league baseball. Players knew that they were paid less than the minimum wage and that the housing conditions for many players were intolerable. They also knew that they needed to forgo healthy food and sacrifice opportunities to be with loved ones, earn money, and create a career. However, they also viewed these problems in the context of their expectations for the future. For example, one described the work conditions in minor league baseball like this:

I would definitely change the lower levels of the minor leagues if I could, definitely making the food better I would say, getting paid a little more. The pay is pretty bad at the lower levels. Then again, like I said, it’s in the long run, you have to look at the long run. You have to say, “Oh it’s going to be worth it down the road two, three, four years,” or however long it takes you. (Triple-A 1)

In a common refrain in our interviews, this player described unfair pay and substandard work conditions but then explained that players need to “look at the long run” of making it to the Majors. Another player said:

Obviously, the pay is extremely low. But I feel like that’s just a reward, getting to the higher level of Major League Baseball.
So I feel like, yeah, it’s a struggle at the bottom. But once you get to the top, you know you deserve all that. But being quite honest, I don’t really have a problem with the wage right now, because it just makes you work that much harder. (Rookie 2)

Not only does this player tolerate poor pay because of his future expectations, he recasts it as a motivational tool that “makes you work that much harder.” Therefore, minor league baseball players’ expectations of reaching MLB in the future changed how they evaluated the conditions of their work in the present by reframing poor working conditions and low pay as being “worth it” in the long run.

Minor league baseball players’ expectations had material consequences for their work lives. First, as already noted, they joined the minor league system and persisted for longer than they would have if their expectations were reduced. For example, players tended to think about their quitting decision by saying: “I think about it, [but] I’m so close to being in the big leagues. It’s no time to turn around now” (Triple-A 6). Our interviews with retired players suggested that they finally decided to quit when they lost expectations of making it to MLB. For example, one retired player explained his decision to quit like this:

I just kind of saw the reality, I didn’t think that I was good enough to make it. I could have played two or three more years in the minors or something like that, but I wasn’t good enough to make it. (Retired 1)

In this case, the players’ expectations of making it to MLB decreased to zero which means he was no longer a future-oriented laborer. He notes that he could have played for 2 or 3 more years, but, as the following quote shows, minor league baseball was not worth it for him without the possibility of making it to the Majors in the future:

I had a good degree. I graduated and I had some offers to go to work and I just got . . . I think being on the road for that long and not making much money, I could kind of see the end of the tunnel for myself and my career. It was a grind for me to stay healthy and it just wasn’t enough money. (Retired 1)

When he no longer had a future orientation to his baseball labor, it became clear that minor league baseball was not worth it, especially given his alternatives.

It should be noted that this retired player had good opportunities outside of minor league baseball that allowed him to quit confidently. Other players did not have the same opportunities. For example, some players from Latin America perceived fewer alternatives outside of baseball, which is consistent with sociological research arguing that MLB teams exploit players recruited from Latin America, who often come from relatively disadvantaged economic backgrounds (Klein, 1989; Regalado, 2000). For example, we spoke with one player from Columbia who was recently released from his team and did not know what to do. He said, “since I lost my job, I’ve lost a lot’ and that, because his family needs financial support, “I had to come to the United States to experiment, to look for another life here” (Retired 5). There were also variations in the level of education attained by players before they joined the minor leagues, which influenced their prospects outside of baseball.

In addition to persisting in the minor league system, players tacitly accepted pay that they knew was unfair. Consider, for example, the following player’s comments:

I played for [Affiliate A] and [Affiliate B] in consecutive years. I think they both averaged around four or five thousand fans a game. [Franchise B], for example, had 70 home games that year. If they’re selling a minimum of five thousand tickets at $20 a pop and parking on top of that, they’re making bank and I’m making $40 that day. Are you out of your mind? Stuff like that goes through my head. (Long-A 4)

This player could clearly see how his labor is being exploited by his MLB team and its affiliates. It appears that he is poised to quit or protest. However, he went on to say, “As long as there’s the chance, we’ll be fired up about it and able to justify the amount of time we put in with the lack of financial compensation that we get back” (Long-A 4), which suggests that he is willing to overlook the injustice of his employment circumstances because of his long-term expectations of reaching the Majors.

Players were also able to reflect on how their expectations of reaching MLB influenced their decisions. For example, a retired player reflected:

We were [calculating our wage rate] one year in the locker room and . . . One of the guys did all the math and it came out to something like $2.12 an hour or something like that . . . . That’s not enough to eat properly. That’s not enough to train properly. It’s not enough to really do anything. But because you’re there and you have the jersey and you have the opportunity . . . You feel like you’re getting closer and you’re on your way, when really that may not be the case. So yeah, I definitely think the dream and the opportunity get in the way of [criticizing work conditions]. (Retired 4)

It appears that future-oriented labor led this player to endure wages of $2.12 an hour, even though he was cognizant of the inadequacy of those wages. Nevertheless, while players talk to each other about their work conditions, they felt stifled when they considered confronting management:

You feel stifled in part because you know that you’re being evaluated for everything you do. So if you’re to complain about something, that is a mark against you. You know, if you’re to say, “I wish we had X or Y,” “I wish we had better food,” or “I wish our travel was a little better,” that’s a mark against you. (Long-A 1)

This player elaborated that the reason he avoids “marks” against him is that he is trying to fulfill his aspirations of making it to the MLB, emphasizing management’s control over his potential advancement:

What I’m trying to do, is move up. And in order to move up, you have to have the people above you have your back. You can’t put yourself in this kind of adversarial stance. You have to be 100% obedient to those above you. (Long-A 1)

Overall, this player’s perspective is consistent with Hatton’s (2020) concept of status coercion, although it is notable that he feels controlled by his superiors’ power over future expected statuses. Or, as another player explained, players’ dreams can be held hostage: “[Your] dreams are kind of like, Oh. You want this shit? You got to drag your fucking whole life to actually, maybe get there. “So it feels like your dreams are being held hostage” (Short-A 8). Thus, players’ expectations of reaching MLB had material effects on their work life and working conditions by changing their
evaluations of economic justice and, via status coercion, prohibiting actions to rectify perceived injustices.

Unrealistic Expectations

We have shown that minor league baseball players have expectations of reaching MLB and that these expectations change how they view their work which also has consequences for their work lives and decisions. However, our account is plagued by a difficulty encountered by all future-oriented labor researchers—perhaps these players have a material chance of reaching the MLB and that their future-oriented labor is a sacrifice in the present for a gain in the future. Therefore, we must evaluate players’ expectations alongside other evidence of reality.

Table 1 illustrates players’ expectations of reaching the MLB in the next three seasons and compares these expectations with base rates of how many minor league players who were drafted between 2003 and 2011 actually reached the MLB. Overall, players overestimated their chances of reaching the MLB in 3 years, by approximately 16%–19%. This means the players interviewed for this study appear to be unrealistic because they overestimate their chances of reaching MLB when compared with the careers of other players.

Nevertheless, it is possible that the players we interviewed were better than average and that they had higher chances of reaching MLB than the typical player. Thus, Figure 1 compares players’ expectations to personalized predictions created by our C5.0 machine learning algorithms. These algorithms account for the fact that some players have a better chance of making it than others. The black bars in Figure 1 show the proportion of players who overestimated the probability of making it to MLB each year compared with our predictions, while the gray bars indicate the proportion of players who underestimated or accurately predicted their probability of making it to MLB in different seasons.

Figure 1 shows that about 90% of players were realistic about their chances of reaching MLB in one season—meaning that most players correctly recognized that they had very low chances of reaching MLB next year. However, players were more unrealistic when looking further into the future, with more players overestimating their chances of making it to MLB in Seasons 2 and 3. Across each of the predictions, the players who overestimated their chances did so by approximately 20%.

Overall, we interpret Figure 1 as showing that minor league baseball players’ future-oriented labor is unrealistic because it is based on expectations of the future that are not consistent with the best predictions we can make with existing data. Whereas, some studies of future-oriented labor have discovered orientations toward the future that are fantastical in the sense that they are based on ungrounded or extremely low probability events (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013), minor league baseball players in this study were almost entirely realistic about the short-term future and were only modestly unrealistic about the long-term future. This means that minor league baseball players overestimated their chances of success, but they were not delusional. Finally, it should be noted that we did not identify any differences between players’ MLB expectations based on class or race. However, other researchers

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Note. MLB = Major League Baseball.

aAuthors’ calculations based on 8,134 players drafted and signed between 2003 and 2011.

Figure 1 — Participants’ expectations of reaching MLB versus C5.0 predictions. MLB = Major League Baseball.
have argued that Black high school and college athletes are more likely to have unrealistic expectations compared with White athletes (Lee, 1983; Sailes, 1998).

Note that those few who reach MLB will still face exploitation; only their exploitation will be based on surplus value production rather than the production of present work without future reward. For instance, Krautmann et al. (2009) demonstrated that MLB players who are not yet eligible for arbitration or free agency are paid an average of 19% of the revenues they generate for teams (using a very conservative assumption that unrestricted free agents experience zero wage exploitation). Krautmann et al.’s (2009) research suggests that early-career MLB players produce around 81% of their labor value as surplus for teams each year. Bradbury (2021) also found that MLB players’ share of total league revenues fell from 57% in the early 2000s to 44% in 2015, which mirrors a general trend toward falling income shares to labor in the U.S. economy. Therefore, our analysis should not be taken as showing that some players who reach the MLB will avoid exploitation or be redeemed for their exploitation in the minors. On the contrary, our analysis shows that unrealistic expectations are part of a future-oriented ideology that motivates and structures work in the present. Future-oriented work in baseball will not be remediated as players expect. It exists on top of the wage exploitation experienced by baseball players as part of a surplus-producing industry.

How Unrealistic Expectations Are Constructed in Minor League Baseball

Having shown that minor league baseball players are unrealistic about reaching MLB, this section focuses on how unrealistic expectations of the future were constructed in the baseball workplace. A full account of what causes minor league baseball players to overestimate their chances of reaching MLB would require a longitudinal analysis of players’ development, including the influences of parents and coaches in high school and college. It is also important to keep in mind that future-oriented labor is tied to broader discourses of neoliberalism that promote individual responsibility and personal investment (Allen, 2019; Duffy, 2016, 2017; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). However, noting these important avenues for future research, we limit our scope to how actors within minor league baseball promoted unrealistic expectations.

Our participants explained that agents, scouts, team managers, and coaches rarely committed to honest evaluations of where players stood, or their real chances of reaching MLB. For example, one player said, “I think there is a chance that I start in Double A this year and then move up to Triple A. It’s very difficult to say, because they really don’t tell us anything about where we’re going or what’s going to happen” (Double-A 3). A consequence of this organizational behavior is that players rarely received information about their chances that might help them create accurate expectations about their future. For example, a 7-year minor leaguer said, “It’s like I just want to know. Everybody does. You just want to know. I want to know, what is my ability to play? Can I actually play at this level, or am I just getting strung along?” (Triple-A 2). He had been in the minors for 7 years and still did not know whether he was being “strung along.”

In addition, players often equated the lack of communication from management with not having control over their careers:

... all I can do is just daily what I need to get done for that day... throwing, lifting, recovery, eating well... and that’s all in my control. Everything else... management, how they want to move guys up, down, trade... is completely out of my control. (Short-A 5)

Some players also believed that management deliberately kept players in the dark to preserve the system:

... they’re filling rosters just to build around their own prospects. Owners and front office people have been quoted saying that the rest of the guys in the draft are pretty much worthless and they’re just to build a team around guys... The vast majority of us are like cattle, you know? (Rookie 1)

The structural critique offered by this player was not shared by all the players, but there were some respondents who felt the same way (i.e., one retired player who described himself as “a piece of meat”). In addition to leaving players in the dark about their status and chances which contributed to players developing unrealistic expectations, managerial actors in the baseball system also seemed to encourage unrealistic expectations. Players themselves believed that it was necessary to be optimistic and confident (McLeod et al., 2021), which encouraged unrealistically high expectations. For example, one player said, “Especially in a game like baseball. You’re not going to succeed if you’re not confident” (Long-A 1).

The importance of confidence is so central to the culture of baseball, and perhaps sports in general, that players were unable to identify where their beliefs came from. However, it appears as though managerial actors are working to confirm and encourage these beliefs. For example, sport psychologists seemed to encourage a level of confidence that might be considered unrealistic:

The [MLB Franchise] have a sports psychologist, great guy. He and I have worked together before. I worked with one in college for about two weeks. Not much, but yeah, I mean, it has helped me kind of just know that everything you’re doing, you have to do with 100% conviction, regardless of whether you actually believe that it’s worth having 100% conviction in. (Long-A 1)

Research in sport psychology also seems to conform to the idea that confidence and optimism are necessary for high-performing athletes (e.g., Grove & Heard, 1997; Nicholls et al., 2008). However, sport psychologists have not considered how confidence and optimism might be related to the unrealistic expectations that make future-oriented laborers prone to exploitation.

A player reflected on “the first time in my entire career when I had ever been given a real straight answer” (Retired 4). While playing in an independent league (not affiliated with MLB) near the end of his career, he was called by a team manager, saying they wanted him in a Double-A lineup the next night. The player said to the manager,

I’m registered for classes. I’m looking to go back to school and graduate. I’m playing really well in [This City]. We have a chance to win a championship. Am I going out there with a real opportunity to advance in the organization or am I just filling a gap for ten days while people are hurt? (Retired 4)

The manager explained to the player that the team had two prospects on the injury list and wanted to use him as a replacement until the others were healthy, after which he was not needed. This player, armed with information about his real chances—which were nonexistent—declined the invitation, finished his degree, and won the championship. Most players, however, maintained high
expectations because actors in the minor league either directly encouraged those expectations or indirectly promoted them by withholding important information that could otherwise dissuade players from persisting in the minor leagues.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to interrogate future-oriented labor in minor league baseball. Our interviews show that minor league baseball players are motivated by their expectations of reaching MLB, these expectations have material consequences for players’ work lives and decision making, and most players’ expectations are moderately unrealistic when compared with the best available information. Finally, we illustrate how unrealistic expectations are constructed in the baseball workplace. These findings advance theories of future-oriented labor in the following ways.

First, our study raises a critique of human capital investment reasoning by showing how unrealistic expectations motivate future-oriented work. The rationale of human capital investment is one of the most critical ideas innervating neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015; Feher, 2009; Foucault, 2008; Holborow, 2012; Rottenberg, 2017). Human capital theory explains how people can invest in themselves to secure future returns (Becker, 1994). Human capital theory encourages individual responsibility, shifts risks from employers onto employees, and obscures structural changes in the workplace, such as growing precarity and job polarization (Brown, 2015; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Rottenberg, 2017). Although it is possible to critique human capital theory from the outside (such as by illustrating how it valorizes human beings and conceals class conflict), Feher (2009) argued that a more effective challenge to neoliberalism would critique human capital theory from the inside and on its own terms. Here, we have shown that minor league baseball players’ expectations are unrealistic and, therefore, fall short of the promises made by human capital investment reasoning and neoliberal ideology more generally.

Other researchers have studied nonrepresentational hopes, dreams, and aspirations, which cannot be evaluated as realistic or unrealistic (Alacovska, 2019; Cook & Cuervo, 2019; Duffy, 2016, 2017; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Consequently, it has been unclear whether future-oriented labor is simply another tool for motivating surplus-producing work or whether it is doubly cruel by promising rewards that will not eventuate. Our study answers this question by showing that players’ expectations are unrealistic which means players’ future-oriented labor will not pay off for them as they expect it will. Thus, future-oriented ideologies are more than just the latest strategy for capitalists to motivate surplus-producing work. They also introduce additional opportunities for surplus production that leverage an unrealistically optimistic future to take advantage of the present.

At the same time, minor league baseball players are not delusional about the future. They overestimate their chances of reaching MLB by a moderate amount. And they are quite realistic about their chances of reaching MLB within 1 year. These findings contrast with accounts of hope labor, where scholars noted that workers hope for achievements that are unreasonable to expect and far beyond their control (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). Researchers studying hope laborers might also find moderately unrealistic future orientations if they asked about participants’ expectations rather than hopes. Therefore, although the concept of hope has been critical for studying future-oriented labor, expectations are essential for advancing theory.

Our focus on expectations reveals how unrealistic expectations shaped players’ work lives and decisions. Players persisted, tacitly accepted pay they knew was unfair, and avoided speaking out because they expected to reach MLB. These findings are consistent with other research showing how future orientations change the way workers engage with their present circumstances (Duffy, 2016, 2017; Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013; Neff, 2012). These findings also add to the growing research in sport showing how athletes’ work is future-oriented (Allison, 2021; Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022). Most athletes in the sport industry are future-oriented laborers. Therefore, future-oriented labor practices are a critical site for research and intervention for sport sociologists and other critical scholars.

Our approach might also be productively used to study athletes in revenue-generating college sports. Many college athletes are motivated by expectations of reaching the Major Leagues (Sailes, 2017), and coaches and other administrators sometimes take advantage of these expectations (Hatton, 2020). Based on our study, scholar-activists working to raise critical consciousness and create change in college sports might benefit from helping athletes create realistic expectations. Specifically, if unrealistic expectations promote persistence and acquiescence, then realistic expectations might encourage labor-based resistance.

In addition, our study illustrates how unrealistic expectations are maintained within the minor league baseball system. Managers, coaches, scouts, and psychologists rarely give players an honest assessment of where they stand. Consequently, players, who are socialized to believe that optimism and confidence are necessary for success, maintain high expectations (McLeod et al., 2021). MLB teams and minor league affiliates have an obligation to share information with players when they ask for it. We also encourage sport psychology researchers to critically reflect on how mental skills training might promote unrealistic expectations that sustain injustices in athlete labor markets.

Unrealistic expectations are particularly worrying because actors can manipulate them to expand the scope for future status coercion. Here, our study contributes to Hatton’s (2020) theorization. Although Hatton (2020) noted that bosses often coerce workers by controlling future opportunities, our study shows how workers’ expectations of future opportunities can be unrealistically manipulated. Thus, our study reveals how bosses can create unrealistic expectations that, in turn, create more power for status coercion. This theorization is likely to apply to other future-oriented laborers. For example, interns may be subject to extensive control in the workplace because they overestimate the likelihood of their internship leading to a dream job. In addition, we wonder whether the PhD supervisors in Hatton’s study artificially inflated their students’ expectations of earning tenure-track jobs to have more control over them in the laboratory.

Future research must examine opportunities for agency and resistance within future-oriented labor. In September 2022, more than half of minor leaguers turned in union authorization cards signaling their acceptance to join the bargaining unit represented by the MLB Players’ Association, marking a historic change in the labor relations for professional baseball. Is unionization a way of resisting future-oriented ideologies? Or can the roots of collective action be found within minor league baseball players’ future-oriented work? Based on our interviews (conducted before September 2022), we believe that, although players’ expectations of reaching MLB promoted persistence and acquiescence, their desire to improve as baseball players served as a resource for organizers.
when players recognized that poor pay and working conditions thwarted their development. Therefore, future researchers should interrogate the role of future-oriented workplaces and practices as a potential source of resistance. Researchers might also draw inspiration from Feher (2009, p. 31) who argued that resistance to neoliberalism can be found in “competition over the conditions and modalities of the valorizing of human capital”—a critique that takes human capital investment seriously as we have attempted here.

Conclusions

This study contributes to research on work under neoliberal capitalism, where people are increasingly expected to work in the present for possible rewards in the future. This study shows how future orientations affect the material conditions of work in minor league baseball, creating opportunities for exploitation, coercion, and acquiescence. Sociologists in other fields might follow our lead by measuring expectations and comparing them with actual material outcomes to understand better how employers manipulate unrealistic expectations to encourage and control future-oriented workers.

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References


