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# Assessing the Sociology of Sport: On Sexual Harassment and Abuse. From Research to Policy

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By

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## Reflections

Sociology of sport as a field of inquiry had existed for many years before any study on sexual harassment and abuse in sport took place. This happened in the early 1990s, when media coverage of sexual harassment and abuse were brought to prominence by a number of high profile scandals involving Olympic and other elite level coaches (Brackenridge and Fasting, 2002).

The first article in the *International Review for Sociology of Sport* (IRSS) was published in 1990 by H.H. Lenskyj; 'Power and play: gender and sexuality issues in sport and physical activity.' But many sport sociologists with a feminist perspective laid the groundwork for understanding sexual exploitation in sport by studying group cultures and showing how these could facilitate sexual harassment and also lead to sexual violence (e.g. Crosset 1986; Curry 1991).

There is a marked variety of approaches to the subject, both theoretical and methodological. Amongst this variety there is some common ground, however. This common ground lies in feminist politics and advocacy.

The field or the area itself has used, and is still using, many different concepts with slightly different meanings. But central in most definitions of *gender, sexual harassment and abuse* (GSHA) is that the behaviour experienced is unwanted or threatening, troublesome, insulting or offensive and an abuse of power. The motivation behind GSHA is predominantly power – the perpetrator having or wanting to have control over another individual. The studies of sexual exploitation, sexual assault, sexual harassment and gender based violence have

prompted changes in both policy and practices. The concepts mentioned above have often been used as umbrella concepts, covering different forms of harm and maltreatment (such as for example gender harassment, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, hazing, sexualized bullying, etc.). When sexual harassment and abuse are defined broadly, a database search shows that since 1990 167 peer-reviewed articles have been published in this area, and only 13 of these have been in IRSS. These relatively few publications over the last 24 years indicate that sexual harassment and abuse has not been a dominating field in our journal, but compared with the two articles published by *The Sociology of Sport Journal*, we are the best in the class. Sport sociology or sport sociology related journals however published 41 articles compared to 15 in psychology of sport and only 5 in sport management journals. These statistics reveal that compared to other sport sciences, sport sociology can be said to dominate the field of publications on GSHA in sport. But these numbers also reveal that GSHA is an under researched area.

The few studies in the field report that the prevalence of sexual harassment (which sometimes includes abuse) in sport varies between 19 and 92%, and the prevalence of sexual abuse between 2 and 49%. Sexual harassment seems to occur in all sports (Fasting et al., 2004), and the likelihood of being harassed also seems to increase with the performance level (Fasting et al., 2010). Most of the published work on sexual harassment in sport has focused on men's harassment of women – particularly that involving male coaches and female athletes. Recently, however, more studies have been published concerning the abuse of boys (Hartill, 2009), and some later studies have found that male peers harass and abuse more often than male coaches (Elendu and Umeakuka, 2011; Fasting et al., 2014).

As mentioned, much of the earlier work had a feminist perspective, which implies that the authors committed themselves to the task of using research to develop changes in policy and practice. As will be shown, in spite of the relatively little knowledge or evidence based

data, the findings from the relatively few empirical studies in the field seem to have had major policy implications.

## **Challenges**

There have been, and still are, many challenges in doing research on GSHA in sport. In 1999 Celia Brackenridge wrote an IRSS article titled 'Managing Myself. Investigator Survival in Sensitive Research.' Here she noted the difficulties with getting grants and discusses her management of herself in managing to carry through interviews with abuse survivors. But even when one has the resources to pursue a study there are large problems in getting access to the athletes, perpetrators, boardrooms, sport organizations etc. Because of the sensitivity of the area, there are sometimes also unexpected stressors related to the research itself. In writing about her experiences Brackenridge (1999) gave the following examples: 'personal insults, attempted blackmail from an international coach, a threat of legal action from a national sport organization, hate mail and crank phone calls following a television appearance; media harassment and misrepresentation by journalists wanting access to my data on individuals'(p 403).

Other challenges are related to moral and ethical dilemmas. When and where is it legitimate to do data gathering, and with whom--the victims, perpetrators or the organisations? And what about the results that are revealed by a study? 'Never tell', i. e. 'never reveal your data sources' can be challenging when one has information about cases that belong in the penal court system. One way to avoid this is to gather data from other sources like media reports and criminal court cases (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Fasting et al., 2013).

As mentioned above the definitions of the different concepts in this area vary. Accordingly the measurement also varies. The few quantitative studies on sexual harassment and abuse in sport are therefore difficult to compare due to such differences. Additionally underreporting/non-response, ethics and consent, validity and reliability make studies difficult to compare (Timmermann 2005). This also partly explains the huge variation in prevalence rates presented earlier.

### **Future directions. From research to policy to research**

As with doping, after years of denial, organisations seemed gradually to start changing their attitudes towards the existence of GSHA in sport. In spite of relatively few empirical studies, major organizations like the IOC and UNICEF (2010) took action. IOC invited the few researchers in the area to present their findings at a meeting in Lausanne in 2006. The outcome of this meeting was a consensus statement on sexual harassment and abuse, published in 2007. The statement ends with the following recommendations to all sport organisations:

1. Develop policies and procedures for the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse;
2. Monitor the implementation of these policies and procedures;
3. Evaluate the impact of these policies in identifying and reducing sexual harassment and abuse;
4. Develop an education and training program on sexual harassment and abuse in their sport(s);
5. Promote and exemplify equitable, respectful and ethical leadership
6. Foster strong partnerships with parents/carers in the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse; and
7. Promote and support scientific research on these issues.

As more sport organisations nationally and internationally developed policy protection plans, IOC developed educational programs on the athletes' right to safe sport via an interactive online platform. The latest was launched in 2012. I had the pleasure of being member of a small working group that developed these tools, and we used and implemented in the program the knowledge we had from our own and others' research.

Other examples on policy development are the concrete suggested actions in a recent report about *Gender Equality in Sport Proposal for Strategic Actions 2014-2020* from the European Commission, (EC 2014). In arguing for the need for policy and protection development, the empirical studies from the sociology of sport have often been referenced. But, in many countries worldwide, sexual harassment and abuse in sport is still ignored as an important issue, and there is both a denial of the issue and a lack of evidence based knowledge. In some countries this is used as an argument against the development of protection policies. Many politicians in and outside the world of sport want figures and numbers, which is particularly difficult when studying sensitive areas like the prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse.

There is a lack of systematic knowledge about the impact of the policies and action plans that have been developed in different countries. This concerns the influence of the work of IOC and others. Sociology of sport should in the future focus on projects that monitor and evaluate policy initiatives that have been developed over the last 10 years, but at the same time there are still huge gaps in the knowledge we already have, particularly in relation to the harassment and abuse of boys and men, about female perpetrators and about transgender harassment, homophobia, bullying and hazing.

When the first articles in this area were published in the nineties there were also some ground breaking articles about feminism and sport (e.g. Hall 1988; Hargreaves 1990). One critique of the research done so far in the area of GSHA is that, except for a couple of articles,

there has been a lack of theory development. What I would like to see in the future would therefore be more development of why sexual harassment and abuse occur in sport along with evidence based knowledge about how it can be prevented. The use and development of sport feminist theories in combination with theories about power could perhaps contribute to this.

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