

**[Version 17.1.02]****Editorial****Sexual harassment and abuse in sport – The research context**

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## **Editorial**

### **Sexual harassment and abuse in sport – The research context**

This special issue of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression* draws on the contributions to a Symposium on ‘Sexual Harassment in Sport – Challenges for Sport Psychology in the New Millennium’, held at the Xth Congress of the International Society for Sport Psychology, Skiathos, Greece from May 28<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001. The symposium, which was organised by the authors of this editorial, was intended to move forward the international research agenda on sexual harassment and abuse in sport and to examine professional practice issues for sport psychologists. It was clear from the attendance of over 60 delegates at that symposium that international interest in this subject is growing. Further evidence of this came from the attendance of 26 members states – from Azerbaijan to Sweden - at a Council of Europe seminar on *The Protection of Children, Young People and Women in Sport*, held in Helsinki in September 2001. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to take the work on sport-based sex abuse research to a wider audience, both to increase awareness of sexual abuse in extra-familial settings and to attract critical interest in the sharing of research perspectives between those working inside and outside sport. One of the co-organisers of the Skiathos Symposium (Celia Brackenridge) is a NOTA member and serves on its Research Sub-Committee so it seemed particularly appropriate to approach the *JSA* with a proposal for this special issue. We are delighted that Marcus Erooga and Helen Masson were enthusiastic about the idea and we thank them and the publishers for investing in this issue on sport. We sincerely hope that this marks the start of a long and fruitful exchange of research ideas and expertise between sports researchers and *JSA* readers.

## **The history and theory of sport and its relation to morality**

Conceptualisations of sport vary between cultures and historical eras. According to Summers' (2000) analysis, the nineteenth century origins of contemporary sport were rooted in the same discourses as Christian theology. Personal sacrifice, salvation through pain and suffering, and absolute submission to authority became the hallmarks of the sporting contest and the preparation of the elite athlete. What became known as 'muscular Christianity' in the mid-nineteenth century, archetypally portrayed in the film *Chariots of Fire*, sealed the connection between Christian moral education and athletic endeavour, and was to provide sport with lasting protection from critical analysis. The close association of physical training (later renamed physical education), military fitness and the defence of the nation, led early nineteenth century UK governments to develop national syllabi for schools. These were based on Swedish gymnastics, calisthenics and similar regimes that could be taught to large numbers in relatively small spaces. The nineteenth century English public schools, with their extensive open fields and grounds, were the birthplace of the most modern team games - amateur and professional - including cricket, football, hockey, lacrosse and rugby. Sport was used in both public schools and corrective institutions as part of the disciplinary processes with children that were consonant with the Victorian ideal of 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

The modern Olympic movement, revived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in Paris in 1898, developed in parallel with the codification of team games and by the 1920s international competitions had become established in the sporting calendar. As sport competitions grew in national and international importance, so the development of coaching and sports administration expanded and the Victorian moral discourses

associated with sport were spread throughout the British Empire and beyond. The first voluntary federal body for the co-ordination of amateur sport in the UK was the Central Council for Recreative Physical Training, formed in 1937 (later renamed the Central Council for Physical Recreation, the CCPR) and many other countries also established sport administrations around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first significant government intervention in UK sport came with the establishment of an Advisory Sports Council (issued with a Royal Charter in 1972) to promote sporting opportunities throughout the land at every level from beginner to elite. From the 1960s onwards, commercial and professional elements of sport expanded and, by the start of the new millennium, sport-as-leisure was clearly differentiated from sport-as-business, with the former delivered through a mix of public, voluntary and commercial sector agencies. Sport in schools, however, continued to be justified by moral educational aims, linked to health promotion.

Throughout its historical development over the last two hundred years, there has been a political and ideological preoccupation with the social, physical and moral benefits of sport. For example, theorisation by one hugely influential social historian, the Dutchman Johan Huizinga (1955), dwelt on the links between play and sport, the health-giving and spiritual benefits of sporting activity and on associated notions of freedom and separateness from society. Sport has been repeatedly justified as a vehicle for the moral education of young people and the glorification of nationhood. Until relatively recently, it escaped the critical gaze of either social scientists or politicians and maintained a uniquely fond place in the (mainly male) hearts and minds of the populace.

The advent of critical social theories in sport, from neo-Marxism to feminism, from the late 1960s onwards, brought about a major shift in the way that sport was conceptualised and appraised. The Civil Rights movement in the southern United States in the mid-1960s led directly to the beginnings of feminism in the early 1970s and to a spate of counter-cultural and popular critiques of sport by disillusioned athletes. In books like Jack Scott's (1971) *The Athletic Revolution*, Gary Shaw's (1972) *Meat on the Hoof* and Paul Hoch's (1972) *Rip Off The Big Game* the role of sport as a form of social and ethical anaesthetic was exposed. Neo-Marxist analyses such as Jean-Marie Brohm's (1968) *Sport: A prison of measured time*, Harry Edwards' (1969) *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, and Bero Rigauer's (1978) *Sport und Arbeit* lent academic weight to these popular texts and the privileged and separate status of sport was, at last, eroded. By the last three decades of the twentieth century, a flourishing critical tradition had been established in sport sociology (such as Clarke and Critcher, 1985; Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994; Whannel, 1983; and Gruneau, 1999) that gradually broke down the belief that sport was apolitical and, instead, drew attention to its race, class and sex divisions.

One of the issues that has begun to radicalise sport is sexual exploitation, especially in its most severe manifestation - the sexual abuse of children. Given its historical development, however, and general societal blindness to sexual abuse, it is not surprising that sex offending in sport escaped the attention of academics and policy makers for so long. This issue, above all others, now appears to have galvanised the sport establishment because it both challenges long-held assumptions about the moral goodness of sport and also attempts to empower children through affording them legal and social

rights. In recognising that sport harbours sexually exploitative practices, including the child sexual abuse of athletes by coaches, sport administrators have been forced to confront the need for change and to consider the legal, moral and civil consequences of restricting athletes' opportunities to exercise their rights.

The social movement that has recently engaged with sexual exploitation in sport may simply be a reflection of the shift from an industrial society to a risk society (Beck, 1992). By Beck's analysis, concerns about sexual misconduct in sport are a product of late modernisation, part of the associated fracturing process, signifying that traditional mechanisms of social order are breaking down in the face of social and political pluralism. A more conventional analysis of perceived risks and transgressions (Douglas, 1986), including sexual exploitation in sport, is that these help to reinforce normative behaviours. In other words, by showing alarm about these issues we are simply sharpening the boundary between what is traditionally acceptable and what is not. Foucault's analysis (Thompson, 1998) replaces this kind of functionalist approach with one focussing on the regulation of discourses across many different discursive formations. His approach offers a potentially powerful analysis of the struggle over sexuality in sport. Indeed, because of its explicitly embodied nature, sport probably represents one of the most important sites for working through the struggle of the sexual in late modernity and for reaching better understandings about how sexual moralities are constructed. To that extent, research into sexual abuse in sport may also contribute to wider research and policy debates about sex offending and child protection.

## **Sexual abuse and child protection in sport**

Sexual abuse was recognised as a social problem for society some ten years before it came to the attention of researchers and administrators in sport. The early studies of Kempe and Kempe on child battering (Kempe et al., 1962) led researchers to investigate an aspect of domestic violence that had not previously been named. Child abuse was part of the complex system of taboo subjects that feminists had begun to raise in the 1970s (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). From the mid-1980s onwards, the apparent threat to the traditional family caused by an increase in sexual abuse cases caused a sustained moral panic (Thompson, 1998, p. 106). A similar panic has been evident in sport, with fears of paedophile incursion into clubs and sport organisations distracting attention from the cultural precursors of sex offending inside sport itself. This process, of ‘othering’, has arguably impeded child protection policy development in sport organisations and has allowed some serious offenders to escape detection.

The focus of the early research into sexual exploitation in UK sport was on the development of professional codes of ethics and conduct in the organisations that have some jurisdiction over sports coaches (Brackenridge, 1986, 1987 and 1991). Reactions to this work from some of those agencies were far from welcoming. The various forms of denial expressed were not surprising since they are common defences to any accusation of wrongdoing, especially one concerning the abuse of children. In the case of sport, denial of sexual abuse arises from a characteristic set of beliefs about sport (Brackenridge, 1994):

- that sport is a morally pure category of behaviour
- that fair play is a concept applicable to children/players rather than coaches

- that sport is a site of justifiable male privilege over females
- that, in the main, sport organisations are apolitical and should remain so
- that sexual matters in sport are taboo

Such beliefs have, collectively, inhibited organisational responses to the issue of sexual exploitation in sport at all levels from the International Olympic Committee down to local voluntary sports clubs.

State agencies, especially the police, have always been reluctant to intervene in private (family) spaces (Hanmer et al., 1989) with the result that violence to women has been overlooked but violence to men has drawn attention, prompted intervention and attracted state funds. Sport, however, includes both private *and* public spaces and is a *de facto* family for many athletes (Brackenridge, 2000). Public violence on the field of play is often legitimated through the ideology of ‘boys will be boys’ (Brackenridge, 2001) whereas sexual violence in sport takes place within the private domain of the locker room and other spaces away from public gaze (Kirby and Greaves, 1996). Just as with marital rape, there has been a traditionally high tolerance of sexually exploitative practices, such as locker room sex talk (Curry, 1991 and 1998) and demeaning treatment of women sports journalists (Kane and Disch, 1993), women fans and ‘groupies’ (Robinson, 1998). Suppression of individual autonomy underpins poor practice in elite coaching whereby the coach is afforded expert power over the athlete and controls his or her entire lifestyle (Donnelly, 1997 and 1999; Tomlinson and Yorganci, 1997).

Only since the start of the moral panic over child sexual exploitation in sport, and with the help of pro-feminist accounts by men in sport, have such practices been exposed and public tolerance decreased. When the social problem of sexual exploitation in sport



became associated with ‘paedophile’ abuse and child protection, government officials in the UK, Canada and Australia began to take notice. (It should be stressed, however, that this process has not yet happened in many countries, even those traditionally associated with good records on human rights and gender equity, such as Norway and Sweden.) The *laissez faire* approach of the state in the UK the early- and mid-1990s meant that accountability for addressing sexual exploitation was left to the voluntary sport organisations themselves. Child protection initiatives proliferated rapidly amongst front line sport delivery groups, such as national governing bodies (NGBs) and local government sports development units. There was a policy vacuum, however, at the level of the state. In the UK this was partly because the minister with responsibility for sport defined sexual exploitation as a Home Office and not a ‘sport problem’ (Brackenridge, 2001). After years of upward pressure on government sport authorities by those with little power, such as sports development officers, parents and club officials, a National Child Protection in Sport Task Force was convened by Sport England in 1999. This represented a major breakthrough in the strategic efforts to deal with sexual and other forms of exploitation in sport. It led to a jointly-funded NSPCC/Sport England Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), which began work in January 2001 on implementing the Task Force Action Plan. The CPSU is based at the NSPCC’s National Training Centre in Leicester. It is headed by Steve Boocock, a former probation officer, sex offender treatment specialist and a NOTA member (see his contribution about the CPSU in this volume). As far as we are aware, this is a unique development in world sport and one that should provide a model for other countries to follow in the future.

## **The need for research on sexual exploitation in sport**

Sexual exploitation in sport is one of the most recent additions to the sport research agenda. As described above, sport has frequently been used as a vehicle for both the development of moral and civic virtues, and as a means of building self-esteem. But without research data it is impossible to verify arguments about the relative immunity of sport from the problems of sexual harassment and abuse, or arguments about the value of engaging in sport as a protection against sexual harassment and abuse more generally.

Research on sexual harassment in sport grew out of earlier studies in the *public* settings such as education or the workplace (Gutek, 1985; Stockdale, 1996; Hollway, 1996), where it was problematised as an issue of employment conditions, gender relations (Kanter, 1985) and ‘organisation sexuality’ (Hearn et al., 1989). The literature on sexual harassment in sport has thus tended to take a more organisational approach (Lenskyj, 1992b; Volkwein et al., 1997) than research on sexual abuse in sport. The latter has drawn more extensively from studies of abuse in *private*, family locations (Brackenridge, 2000) and has therefore also incorporated some of the literature from clinical and social work perspectives (Brackenridge, 1997b, 2001; see also Leahy in this issue).

The majority of research on sex abuse outside sport has been conducted on *intra-familial* abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional and neglect, since this is the site of highest incidence (Fisher in Morrison et al., 1994). Gallagher (1999 and 2000) reports that institutional sexual abuse is now a major focus of concern for policy makers, practitioners and the public but it is clear from the literature that comparatively little attention has been paid to this arena. Public concern about ‘stranger danger’, ‘date rape’

and community-based abuse, however, has recently drawn researchers' attention to other areas (Parrot and Bechhofer, 1991; Gonsiorek, 1995; Benedict, 1998). Especially noteworthy in this regard have been several major enquiries into institutional abuse of children in residential homes, boarding schools and special schools (La Fontaine and Morris, 1991; Brannan et al., 1993; Corby et al., 1998). In her earlier article in this journal, Lorraine Green (2001) stressed the importance of taking into consideration structural and discursive factors and not just focussing on the characteristics of individuals or micro-settings in seeking an understanding of abuse in residential care homes. Most recently, David Wolfe (in review) from the University of Western Ontario, together with a group of his colleagues from the London Family Court Clinic in Ontario, has attempted to review all the published work on institutional sex abuse in order to identify any evidence of similarities and differences in these various settings.

Relatively little research has been conducted on *extra-familial* abuse and even less on sexual and other types of abuse in the voluntary or not-for-profit sector, including amateur sport. One reason for pursuing more research on extra-familial abuse is to ascertain whether there are distinctive situational factors associated with abuse, and whether institutional abuse resembles or differs from abuse in the family context. Learning more about contextual and situational factors will be important for treatment regimes too, since many of these currently emphasise individual and pathological parameters. In England, the NSPCC itself focussed mainly on intra-familial abuse until very recently but, through its *Full Stop Campaign*, has now extended its programmes to embrace abuse and abuse prevention in institutional locations.

Within the past ten years a number of research studies have been conducted that have begun to map the extent and nature of sexual harassment and abuse in different sports and at different levels of performance (Kirby and Greaves, 1996; Brackenridge, 1997b; Cense, 1997; Volkwein *et al.*, 1997; Toftegaard, 1998 and 2001; Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot Borgen, 2000). Several theoretical advances have been made in examining the question of whether sport is a distinctive location for these problems (Brackenridge, 1997a and b; Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997; Brackenridge, 2001). These include: risk factors; conceptual models to try to explain the link between harassment, abuse and peaking (optimum age) in sport; models of abuse cycles; and a contingency model that incorporates athlete, sport and context factors (Brackenridge, 2001).

Given the relatively recent history of research in this area, it is not surprising that there is a marked variety of approaches to the subject, both theoretical and methodological. Theoretical perspectives adopted include: feminist and pro-feminist, psychological, constructivist, sociological, medical/health and philosophical/ethical. Variation in methods and measures includes the use of quantitative surveys, tests and scales, qualitative interviews, documentary content analysis, biography and narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. Amongst all this variety there is some common ground, however. This common ground lies in feminist politics and advocacy. In other words, all the researchers engaged in this subject up to now share a common commitment to the transformation of sport through praxis. This commitment means that most of us connect to sport through sporting organisations and agencies of one kind or another and have learned our research skills within sport disciplines (the sociology, history, philosophy or

psychology of sport). We lack connections, however, to those involve in mainstream therapeutic and treatment professions.

The articles in this issue of *JSA* represent a range of different perspectives on the issue and should provide the reader with a state-of-the-art review of the subject. They do not adopt common definitions of sexual abuse or sexual harassment, however, so readers should not expect any resolution of the definitional problems that beset research in this field more generally. There is certainly an emphasis on abuse of power in the research reported here. The particular issues of age and ability to consent are confounded in sport, where age norms do not necessarily match legal boundaries and consent is circumscribed by the authority relations between athletes and their coaches. (For a fuller discussion of definitional issues in sport research see Brackenridge, 2001, pp. 25-43.)

Trisha Leahy's paper is a significant contribution because it is based on the first clinically defined population of sexual abuse survivors in sport, male and female. It is also the first study to demonstrate statistical differences in the risk of sexual abuse between elite and club level. Leahy reports only the quantitative data here: she also interviewed 100 participants in her research, the findings from which interviews have yet to be reported.

Fasting et al.'s article derives from their controlled study of the experiences of sexual harassment among the top 660 female athletes in Norway (Fasting, Brackenridge and Sundgot Borgen, 2000). Part one of this study was a postal questionnaire survey, the results of which are reported in Fasting et al. (in press). The paper in this volume draws on qualitative data from the second, interview phase of the study (n = 25), in which the consequences of sexual harassment for female athlete survivors were explored.

One of the most valuable contributions of sociology to our understanding of sexual exploitation in sport has come from feminist and pro-feminist perspectives on group culture. Sport sociologists such as Nancy Theberge (1987), Helen Lenskyj (1992a and b), Mike Messner (1992), Don Sabo (Messner and Sabo, 1990), Brian Pronger (1990), Todd Crosset (1986), Tim Curry (1991 and 1998) and Jeff Benedict (1997 and 1998) have researched the ways in which sport teams and groups develop and maintain their sub-worlds through over-conformity to particular group norms, sexual politics and belief systems, often with homoerotic content. The dynamics of these sub-worlds facilitate sexual harassment and, in extreme cases, can lead to sexual violence. Sandra Kirby was one of the pioneers in sport research into sexual exploitation, conducting the first major survey on the issue with a group of 1,200 current and recently-retired Canadian Olympians (Kirby and Greaves, 1996; Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky, 2000). Her paper here, with masters degree student Glen Wintrup, explores how social models of initiation practices in the military can inform an analysis of similar initiation and 'hazing' rites in sport teams. Readers should note that, whilst the term 'hazing' is generally associated with North American sport, similar initiation rituals have also been observed in other sporting contexts (Dunning and Sheard, 1979; McKay, 1991).

Studies of sexual exploitation in sport are of most value when they yield comparative data about the issue in sport and non-sport settings. One of the most intensively researched locations for previous work on sexual harassment has been education. Volkwein et al.'s paper is a reworked study of data collected on the perceptions and experiences of sexual harassment amongst a sample of College athletes in the USA (Volkwein et al., 1997). Importantly, this study links the participants'

personal interpretations and definitions of what counts as harassment with their experiences of the effects of such practices on their sporting and scholastic performance.

The role of the perpetrator in sport has received research attention rather later than that of the survivor, perhaps because of the ethical issues associated with gaining access to perpetrators and also because of the feminist commitment described above, to starting with the voice of the survivor. Bringer et al.'s paper is thus a particularly welcome addition to the sport literature. They report a Grounded Theory analysis of part of Bringer's doctoral research data, specifically her focus groups with 'working' coaches in the sport of swimming, examining their views on appropriate and inappropriate sexual relationships between athletes and coaches.

The United Kingdom was the first country to establish a dedicated centre for the protection of child in sport. The Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) was launched in 2001 as a jointly funded initiative of Sport England - the UK government's sport policy arm - and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) – the UK's largest children's charity. In his article, the Director of the CPSU, Steve Boocock, gives a description of the aims and functions of the Unit and explains how it can contribute not only to the eradication of child cruelty in sport but also to child protective services in the community more widely.

Carole Oglesby, from the United States, was one of the founding 'mothers' of feminist physical education and sport psychology. She has also recently completed a second doctorate, in counselling psychology, and is thus uniquely qualified to reflect on the content of this special issue. In her end-piece, Carole offers a summary of the main

themes contained here and draws out the implications for international policy and practice.

Three specialist books on this subject have been published in the past couple of years, by Sandra Kirby, Lorraine Greaves and Olena Hankivsky (2000), Celia Brackenridge (2001) and Karin Volkwein Caplan and Gopal Sankaran (2001). Keith Lyons, sports researcher and coach, reviews all three in his review essay.

At the back of the volume is a list of sport-related web sites and some further reading that might be of use to students, researchers and practitioners interested in sexual exploitation in sport.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Sport has long been adopted by politicians, educators and parents as a suitable vehicle for the development of healthy lifestyles, self-discipline, citizenship and personal morality. It has held a special place in the affections of western industrial societies for its supposed virtues and its potential as a tool of economic and social development. The special status of sport has also protected it from critical scrutiny and meant that social inequalities and other problems, such as sexual harassment and abuse, have all-too-often been ignored or tacitly condoned.

The social problem of sexual exploitation in sport has been constructed differently, at different times, by different stakeholders, with different agendas. It was brought to prominence by media coverage of a number of high profile scandals involving Olympic and other elite level coaches. Since this exposure, there has been widespread panic amongst sport professionals in several countries, and among parents of young athletes, about the need to keep sexually exploitative coaches 'out of sport'



(Brackenridge et al., 2000; Malkin, 1999; Malkin, Johnston and Brackenridge, 2000).

Perpetrators of sexual abuse are depicted as monsters and beasts: othering or scapegoating them in this way is then used to justify overlooking the social conditions which gave rise to their sexual 'deviance' in the first place. Paradoxically, illicit sexual relationships between under-age athletes and authority figures (predominantly heterosexual and perpetrated by male coaches) had been known about and condoned for years before the sexually predatory paedophile became a target for vilification and a cause of moral panic.

Research on institutional sex offending has been much slower to develop than individual, pathological analyses. There is reason to be optimistic that sport research might eventually contribute to wider understanding of institutional abuse. But for that to happen there needs to be a concerted effort by both sport and non-sport researchers to share their work more often and more openly. Thus far, the sport-based researchers in this field have brought a wide variation of approaches to this work. Several of us came from positivist origins (such as Kari Fasting and Celia Brackenridge) or backgrounds in single-disciplines (such as Joy D. Bringer in psychology) and embraced qualitative or constructivist approaches later in our careers. Many of us have developed multidisciplinary approaches to this field (Karin Volkwein Caplan, for example, has a background in history, philosophy and sociology, Fasting has a distinguished record in both sport psychology and sport sociology, and Brackenridge was the first researcher to theorise sexual abuse in sport). As feminists (and pro-feminist men), however, we have almost all committed ourselves to the task of using research to inform changes in policy and practice. Trisha Leahy worked for many years as a senior clinical psychologist at the

Australian Institute of Sport, the seedbed for so many successful Australian athletes. In addition to her doctorate in sport psychology, she also has a masters degree in Asian political economy and has developed a powerful gender critique of clinical practice in sport. Former Olympic rower, sociologist and another feminist activist, Sandra Kirby, has been particularly successful at drawing on research methods and techniques from research on violence to women in her recent studies of sexual abuse and harassment in sport. Because of the variety of backgrounds, this group of researchers in sport has also adopted definitions of sexual abuse and harassment from different countries and academic traditions. None of us is legally qualified yet we recognise the huge variation in international legal statutes on age of consent and sexual crimes and the impact on research findings of using subjective or objective definitions.

Lack of prevalence data on sexual exploitation in sport has certainly impeded policy development in a number of countries, including the UK. But wherever possible, quantitative methods have been combined with qualitative (usually in the form of in-depth interviews) since we are all acutely aware of the limitations of statistical data on this very sensitive subject. Many of us have encountered hostility for daring to suggest that sexual transgressions might be a feature of modern sport and, as a consequence, all of us have struggled to secure research grants. But the evidence base is now so overwhelming that sport administrators and public bodies have had to take action.

No doubt sport researchers share these experiences with their counterparts in other academic and professional fields. It may even be the case that we are *better* placed than other groups to advance our research aims since we are still a relatively small and closely connected group. The contributors to this volume would be delighted to hear from

readers of *JSA* and to foster collaborations with research colleagues and practitioners who share our interests.

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