

Cultural Normalization of Risk?: Exploring Brain Injury in the National Football League using Sociocultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The NFL's history includes the organization's fight against numerous lawsuits alleging excessive risk of brain injury to current and former players. A billion-dollar legal settlement by the NFL in 2022 illustrates the issue's gravity. **PURPOSE:** We aimed to understand why, culturally, the NFL has 'failed' to avert serious harm alleged by the lawsuits, given the lawsuits' magnitude and the known brain-injury risks of playing tackle football. **METHODS:** The NFL's rhetoric towards safety concerns and recommendations for injury prevention were examined vis-a-vis qualitative analysis of its organizational and media practices. This study was through one undergraduate end-of-term project focused on sport, media, and American popular culture (April to June 2023). Media and cultural artifacts from the NFL and from investigations of players' experiences were examined: ie, (1) documentaries (eg, the 2017 film, *League of Denial*); (2) news reports; and (3) NFL press conferences and press release material. Results were described and analyzed using sociological theories to study the interrelationships between macro and micro social life (eg, hegemony theory, conflict theory). **RESULTS:** NFL personnel and putative experts promoted misinformation about brain injury risk (eg, pamphlets claiming players are not at serious risk of brain injury). Simultaneously, recurrent media practices, via glorified rhetoric, normalized over-conformity to a predominant sport ethic (eg, sacrifice physically, always strive to be better or risk being replaced). These combined factors made it easy for athletes to downplay (or superficially consider) personal risks to their well-being. These trends corresponded with several sociological concepts (eg, false consciousness, hegemonic power). **CONCLUSION:** Organizational and media practices by, or endorsed by, the NFL culturally downplay or obscure the risk of brain deterioration from playing popularized forms of tackle football. Organizational and media practices by the NFL and others are a way to monetize conformity to a risky sport ethic. These efforts overshadow actual brain injury risk, raising numerous ethical issues that impact the work of sport and exercise science professionals involved in tackle football. Future research into different vantage points and roles in sport is warranted.

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