


Assessing the sociology of sport: On gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport

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Abstract

On the 50th anniversary of the ISSA and IRSS, a leading sociologist of sport in Germany, Bettina Rulofs, considers scholarly inquiry into gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport. Putting perspective on the increasing awareness of gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport, Rulofs notes early resistance to research on these topics by a number of sport organizations in Germany. It is noted that inquiry in these areas, anchored in feminist advocacy, always had the challenge and opportunity to have research that illuminates harm and facilitates prevention policies. Continuing challenges come for research in illuminating harmful practices in a way that will overcome often entrenched apathy in sport clubs and associations. In the future, research on gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport needs to close important gaps; foremost, evaluation research needs stimulation and there is a companion need internationally for comparative studies. Care in shaping this agenda is needed such that attention to child maltreatment does not dilute continued attention to gender power relation issues, sexual harassment and abuse.

Keywords

child maltreatment, gender studies, sexual harassment, sport policy, violence

Reflections on the background

Gender-based violence and child maltreatment are among the less studied topics in the field of sport. However, the awareness of these issues has increased as critical sociology sheds more light on behavioral aspects that threaten the integrity and societal benefit of sport. Prevalence rates, from the few extensive studies that have been carried

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out, differ greatly in their conceptualization of definitions (Hartill and Lang, 2015: 198). However, based on existing empirical studies, an international review has suggested a prevalence of 14%–73% of sexual harassment and 2%–22% of sexual abuse in sport (Fasting, 2012).

Without going into a long discussion on definitions, this paper uses the concept of “gender-based violence” as a generic term for different forms of violence that are related to a person’s gender and/or sexuality. This includes sexual harassment and abuse as well as “unwelcome conduct related to a person’s gender that has the effect or purpose of offending another person’s dignity” (Chroni et al., 2012: 9).

It was not until the 1990s that this kind of research emerged (Brackenridge, 1994; Lenskyj, 1990), largely inspired by feminist scholars who focused on power relations and male hegemony in sport (Hall, 1993; Hargreaves, 1986; Messner and Sabo, 1990).

Since sexual harassment and gender-based violence in sport had long been taboo, the first sociologists to focus on these topics did not have an easy position to defend (Brackenridge, 1999). In Germany, for example, the first study on violence against girls and women in sport (Klein and Palzkill, 1998) was rejected wholesale by several sport organizations who seemed to fear for their own reputation. The marginalization and disregard of research focusing on gender-based violence led to years of passivity on the part of sport agencies, who went into a state of denial and, as a result, neglected to introduce any appropriate preventative measures.

Whereas research on gender-based violence in sport clearly follows the line of feminist advocacy concerning equal rights of men and women, studies dealing with child maltreatment in sport focus on children’s rights. They criticize the performance-centered nature of modern organized sport that treats children as adults and endangers their health and well-being (Lang and Hartill, 2015: 1). Again, sport organizations were slow to react to this problematization of youth sport and its possible negative outcomes. It does seem, however, that there was a greater readiness to tackle child maltreatment in sport rather than sexual or gender-based violence. This can partly be explained by the general societal acceptance of children’s welfare which had the backing of child protection laws and policies. It might also be due to the fact that child protection offers a much broader scope, allowing the focus not only on sexual violence, but also on emotional and physical abuse, and includes aspects of overtraining, child labor, eating disorders and doping in sport (Brackenridge and Rhind, 2010; Lang and Hartill, 2015).

In certain cultural settings, it seems that introducing the child protection discourse into sport organizations made it possible for discourses on sexual and gender-based violence to sneak in through the back door.

Opportunities and challenges for the sociology of sport

In one of her recent publications, the most reputable author in this field, Celia Brackenridge (with her colleague Daniel Rhind), comes to the conclusion that “no instance of abuse can be divorced from its socio-cultural context (...). (...) sociological approaches to these issues have much to add to the current literature and the policies it informs” (Brackenridge and Rhind, 2014: 333).

The specific strength of the sociological approach lies undoubtedly in its ability to analyze societal and sport-specific conditions that frame gender-based violence and child maltreatment, as well as examine conditions for successful implementation of prevention policies in this field.

In tracing the emergence of violence and abuse within sport, sociological analysis has focused on the socio-cultural background of sport and has flagged up the following aspects: gendered hierarchies, relationships of dependency between coaches and athletes, an intense focus on bodily discipline and success in sport (Brackenridge, 2001; Klein and Palzkill, 1998). Since sport clubs and teams essentially represent a specific, organized social system with particular structures and procedures, sociological research should also focus on the respective frameworks that might foster discrimination, violence and abuse at the institutional level of sport organizations.

In 2010, for example, severe cases of child abuse in German boarding schools and churches came to light. Sociologists in Germany drew attention to the fact that child abuse had taken place for years within some highly respected educational institutions that were characterized by very specific mechanisms, methods and structures (Heitmeyer, 2012: 23). Apparently, these structures created the prerequisites upon which violence and abuse could occur for years without anybody detecting and stopping it. In the case of the boarding school, Odenwaldschule, which is one of Germany's longest-standing role models in the field of reformist education, a significant mix of traditionalism, elitism, permissive educational concepts and strong identification of members with their school "family" seem to have fostered a structure that allowed discrimination and abuse to take place for years (Heitmeyer, 2012).

This and similar cases of abuse underline how important it is to analyze in-depth the socio-cultural contexts of sport institutions in order to gain a better way of assessing the risks for violence and abuse. This approach is one of sport sociology's opportunities as well as one of its future challenges.

A similar approach is useful when looking at possible prevention strategies in sport organizations and structures that support or hinder their implementation. Sport clubs and associations with their long traditions in voluntary work can be largely characterized as apathetic and slow when it comes to change. To "overcome resistance to change" is one of the most difficult tasks in any kind of management of organizational change (Cunningham, 2007: 306ff). This also applies to the introduction and implementation of child protection and anti-discrimination policies in sport organizations.

Drawing on theories of organizational change, Brackenridge et al. (2005) designed a model of "Activation States" to measure shifts in the culture of sport organizations with respect to child protection. By gathering data on the various discourses, knowledge, feelings and actions in sport organizations, the model assigns specific activation states from, for example, "opposed" (overtly critical against initiatives of child protection) to "proactive" (demonstrating full commitment and advocacy) (Brackenridge et al., 2005: 247). Such an approach seems to lead to a deeper understanding of how supportive and repressive conditions affect child protection policies. It makes sense, therefore, for any further research to follow and differentiate the model. It will be applied in a large-scale study, which has been initiated recently to investigate the progress in child protection policies within the numerous German sport organizations.

Outlook and future directions

Looking back on approximately 20 years of research and policy, it can be concluded that important milestones have been reached in the fight against gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport. Research on gender discrimination and child abuse has broken former taboos in sport, causing a respectable number of countries as well as important agencies, such as the IOC and the Council of Europe, to campaign and lobby for improvements (Hartill and Lang, 2015). Yet there are still some gaps to close.

One of the most important tasks will be to generate data on the prevalence of gender-based violence and child maltreatment in sport organizations both at a national and international level (Hartill and Lang, 2015: 198). Sociologically-informed research as described above will need to focus more on the socio-cultural structures that serve to generate conditions for discrimination and abuse as well as to hamper prevention of policy development. What is clearly lacking is evaluation research in general, and this gap should be filled by those countries that have already introduced preventative measures, e.g. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Netherlands, UK and USA. For future development in this field, it seems crucial to evaluate the impact of policy implementation via internationally comparative studies and then to feed those findings back into the existing international networks of researchers, lobbyists and policy makers (e.g. Brunel University, 2014; Lang and Hartill, 2015; Sport respects your rights, n.d.).

Finally, social scientists in this field should carefully weigh up the implications of the respective discourses current in this field. The discourse on child protection is important as part of strengthening children's rights and well-being in sport. It also helps to broaden the path towards dealing with various forms of discrimination and maltreatment against young people. Today, sport organizations seem more at ease addressing this topic. However, coming from the child protection angle may lead to a dilution of research on gender-based power relation issues, sexual harassment and abuse.

In the future, precise sociological analysis will have to show to what extent the gender-based discourse is relevant for researching and explaining the formation of discrimination and maltreatment in sport.

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