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Gender relations and sexual exploitation in sport



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# Gender relations and sexual exploitation in sport

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# Gender relations and sexual exploitation in sport

## Abstract

My early publications were on aspects of gender relations in sport [Refs. 18, 17 & 16], reflecting my interests as a feminist teacher and activist. I continued to publish with colleagues in the broad field of gender relations in sport and leisure, in particular using feminist perspectives to inform analyses of leadership and coaching [Refs. 14, 8, 6 & 2]. Understanding of the processes of sex discrimination in sporting organisations led me to examine further the conceptually linked issues of harassment and abuse in sport, at a time when there was virtually no literature on this [Ref.15]. This first international refereed article on the subject was a literature review, and preceded my entry into fieldwork. Since the late 1980s I have pioneered the development of theoretical models of risk for sexual exploitation in sport, using both qualitative research with former abused athletes, and quantitative and policy research with sports personnel and national governing bodies [Refs. 10 & 11]. Throughout this work, I have adopted a multidisciplinary approach, drawing together material from sociology, psychology, philosophy, gender and sport studies, clinical and reflexive perspectives [Ref.7]. I was the first researcher to put forward a set of risk factors for sexual exploitation in sport, based on inductive research [Ref. 12], and also proposed an original model of a sex offending cycle in sport [Ref. 12, summarised in Ref. 4]. I conducted the first ever study of parents' role in protecting children from abuse in sport [Ref. 9]. I have researched the child protection policy process in the voluntary and public sectors and have used this to inform professional development work for Sport England, sports coach UK/NCF and the Council of Europe [Refs. 3, 5 & 13]. My book [Ref. 1] is a synthesis of all my previous research, representing a state-of-the-art review of theory, policy and practice in the fields of child abuse and protection in sport. Ch. 7 proposes an original Contingency Model of Sexual Exploitation, based on multiple case analysis, which should enable sport organisations to develop more effective risk management strategies.

# Gender relations and sexual exploitation in sport

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## Critical appraisal

### 1.0 Introduction

This critical appraisal reviews the intellectual contribution of the portfolio submissions. It begins with a short theoretical and historical contextualisation of the research programme and then gives a statement of the aims of the programme. A description of the programme's contents indicates how they belong to two related but distinct strands of work. The first strand - gender relations in sport and leisure - offers a broad platform on which the second strand - sexual exploitation in sport and leisure – develops. A discussion of methodological issues draws attention to some of the epistemological tensions that characterise the research. This is followed by an analysis of the components of the research programme. The appraisal illustrates how my intellectual ideas were informed by and impacted upon my participation in sport as a performer, coach and administrator. It assesses the degree to which the research programme makes an original contribution to knowledge. The appraisal concludes with a summary of limitations of the work and an assessment of whether the aims of the research programme have been achieved.

### 2.0 Historical and theoretical context

In the 1970s, before second wave feminism had impacted on the study of sport from social science perspectives, *categorical* research on women in sport was the dominant approach, whereby men and women were treated as inevitably separate biological

categories. The deterministic distinction between women and men on the grounds of these assumed biological differences led to separate, and generally inferior, sport experiences for women. My own early training in the human and natural sciences - psychology, sociology, biology and an undergraduate dissertation on the psychobiology of aggression – equipped me to accept rather uncritically the dominant academic perspectives on the female athlete experience. The preoccupation with psychology of research on women in sport in the 1970s was politically unhelpful since it merely accentuated a deficit model of women's performance, that is one where women's performances are compared unfavourably with the male standard.

Many female athletes seized upon Susan Bem's (1975) concept of psychological androgyny as it appeared to resolve their so-called role conflict (whereby someone who is a 'real' athlete i.e. male, cannot simultaneously be a 'real' woman i.e. female). Her notion that femininity and masculinity could be combined in the androgynous person provided female athletes with an 'excuse' for their athleticism. Relief was short lived, however, as androgyny soon became appropriated by homophobes who linked it with lesbianism in sport. Critics of men's control of sport began to map the relative positions of women and men by recording, for example, how many women occupied different positions in sport and how much media coverage, prize money or attention they received (see, for example, the work of Acosta and Carpenter, 1988). This *distributive* approach to women in sport provided useful evidence of structural inequalities and did, at least, broaden the theoretical debate away from individual attributes towards social and political forces. It also underpinned liberal gender politics and helped to move forward the 'equal opportunities' agenda in local, if not national, government.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as feminist perspectives developed and began to influence sport studies, feminist scholarship and activism in sport and leisure became more radical. The UK Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) was formed in 1984-5 as a separatist pressure group for women's sport, some ten years after its sister organisation in the United States. The WSF brought together women academics, leisure managers, journalists and sports administrators who shared concerns about sex discrimination in sport.

At about the same time, liberal notions of 'equal opportunities' were being challenged by academic feminist scholarship (for example, Spender, 1981; Barrett, 1980; Gilligan, 1982; MacKinnon, 1982) and there was a fairly rapid diversification of feminist perspectives. It was to be almost another decade, however, before feminist sport studies in the UK acknowledged this diversification (Scruton, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994) and it is arguable even now whether perspectives such as post-colonial feminism or post-modernism have been fully embraced by sport scholars. Researchers such as Hargreaves (2001) and Hall (1996, 1997) have built on *relational* feminist perspectives in their work on leisure and sport but I would argue that these theoretical advances have yet to make an impact on practice in most sport and leisure organisations. The question arises, then, whether contemporary feminist scholarship in sport and leisure is true to its historical commitment to praxis.

### **3.0 Aims of the research programme**

The aims of this research programme derive from my experience as a scholar/practitioner in sport and my political commitment to feminist praxis. They are:

1. To explain gender relations in sport and leisure
2. To transform gender relations in sport and leisure

Each of these aims has been addressed through a number of separate projects and publications, with their own associated objectives, over the past twenty years.

### **4.0 Description of the research programme**

The publications on which this submission is based demonstrate two related but distinct strands of work. The first strand - gender relations in sport and leisure (References 2, 6, 8, 14, 16, 17 and 18) - offers a broad platform on which the second strand - sexual exploitation in sport and leisure (References 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 15) – has developed.

The papers reflect a mix of empirical and conceptual work, with some contributions to theoretical development. Those submissions incorporating original empirical data are References 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 16, 17 and 18. Papers that develop conceptual models or theoretical ideas are References 1, 2, 3, 6, 10, 11 and 12.

The data and theoretical models that underpin the submissions originate from a range of sources. These include: personal scholarship (References 1, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15); specific research collaborations with colleagues in the UK and overseas (References 3, 10, 13, 14, 16 and 18); student dissertations and research degrees that I have supervised (References 2, 5, 6, and 17); and a contract research project with colleagues from the Leisure and Sport Research Unit at the University of Gloucestershire (formerly Cheltenham and Gloucester College of HE) (Reference 8).

## **5.0 Some methodological issues**

The research programme includes a range of different research techniques. These include: content analysis (e.g. Reference 18), unstructured and semi-structured interviews (e.g. References 2, 6, and 11), ethnographic observations (e.g. Reference 16), surveys (e.g. References 5 and 9), discourse analysis (Reference 1) and focus groups (e.g. References 8 and 9). My academic origins in the natural sciences have clearly influenced my selection of social research methods and led to what might be considered fairly conventional choices and deductive approaches to data collection. I have, however, attempted to triangulate methods wherever possible and to step back from the research from time to time to consider alternative paradigms. Only recently, in seeking to address issues of positionality (Reference 8) and moral relativism (in Reference 1), have I attempted to confront post-structural challenges to 'truth' and knowledge and to account for the process of 'othering' in my own work (see Reference 1, pp. 126, 148-152 and 240-241). Much of my work on sexual exploitation is open to the criticism that it is blind to gender-power relations because, in using interview data to build explanatory models and risk assessment tools, it adopts the

epistemological and methodological preferences of psychology. Reference 1 expounds a defence of multi-disciplinarity and moral absolutism in research on sexual exploitation in sport.

## **6.0 Analysis of the research programme**

The *categorical* approach to research on women in sport, described earlier, is reflected in Reference 17, which examines women's psychological anxieties about their physical competence. These anxieties are clearly exacerbated by structural inequalities, however. Reference 18 is, therefore, an attempt to shift the debate about the female athlete away from psychological constructs towards structural analysis. This paper describes the organisational representation and status of women in British sport from 1960 to 1980. In organisational terms, and by today's standards of organisational theory, the paper is largely descriptive and under-theorised, typifying the first stage of conventional Scientific Method. Research in sport studies was in its infancy at the time this work was conducted but has developed in sophistication over the past two decades. The paper also reflects the liberal feminist climate of the time in which *distributive* research approaches to women in sport were adopted. Despite its somewhat descriptive style, it proved important, however, as it signalled the start of social rather than individual and psychological enquiries in this area.

The submissions on women's leisure experiences and women in leisure management developed from my involvement as an advisor to the first major SSRC/Sports Council grant for research into women's leisure, awarded to Eileen Green and Diana

Woodward in the early 1980s. References 17, 16, 14 and 8 are products of this strand of my research. Reference 16, a short paper, was an attempt to bring a gender perspective to the diversification of leisure products in the mid-1980s. Reference 14 contextualises and theorises women's leisure since World War II and provides several cases studies of women's sport.

Reference 8 is based on the findings of a multi-method gender equity audit of the membership of the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM). The gender analysis reveals that, despite considerable advances in gender representation in British industry since the first comparable ILAM study (Bacon, 1991), young women in leisure management employment continue to face difficulties in both structural and cultural aspects of their careers.

Reference 2 shows how Ann Witz's (1992) model of occupational closure, originally developed to explain sex segregation in medicine, can be successfully applied to the voluntary sector and, specifically, to the experiences of women sports coaches. The structural and the cultural aspects of the sport experience are also analysed in

Reference 6. This unique, longitudinal study of sexuality in a field hockey team uses a combination of Loy and McElvogue's (1970) concept of 'organisational turnover', Donnelly's (1975) concept of 'organisational half-life' and Hearn's (1989) concept of 'organisation sexuality' to trace and explain the shifting patterns of dominance and subservience as the proportion of lesbians in the team gradually increased.

Leisure provided a broad context for my earlier work on gender relations but became a subsidiary interest in the last decade as my research interest in sexual exploitation in

sport developed. All my subsequent interventions in policy and practice were based on problematising the management and development of sport and, in particular, coach-athlete relations. In this work I examine cognate literatures, such as criminology and social work research, in order to shed light on research questions in sport.

My interest in sexual abuse in sport emerged logically from my earlier research on sex discrimination. I argue in several of the submitted publications, and more fully in the book (Reference 1, Chapter 3), that sexual discrimination, harassment and abuse are parts of the same continuum of sexual exploitation. Once I began to read literature on sexual abuse it became quickly apparent that there was no sport research on this in the UK and almost none elsewhere. Notable exceptions were Todd Crosset's (1985 and 1986) pioneering research in the USA on abusive relationships in swimming and Helen Lenskij's work for Sport Canada on sexual harassment (1992a and b).

Reference 15 derives from a review of literature on intra- and extra-familial sexual abuse outside sport and the application of this work to sport contexts. This paper proved a turning point in my own research and provided a series of research questions that informed subsequent empirical studies, including those reported in References 9 and 11.

My early research on sexually exploitative coach-athlete relationships in sport drew logically on my previous training and teaching in social psychology. It was clear, however, that sociological and organisational issues were also important so I set out a stakeholder map which became a *de facto* research agenda. I researched historical



constructions of childhood and organisational aspects of sexual abuse in sport through an examination of dominant discourses, partly reported in Reference 13 and in Chapter 2 of Reference 1. Reference 13 summarises some of my emerging ideas about child abuse and protection in sport and describes an educational agenda and action plan for child protection in sport organisations.

I collected survey data from a series of UK-wide professional development workshops on child protection in sport in order to conduct a training needs analysis, reported in Reference 5. This material was used by the NCF (now sports coach UK) to inform their child protection training strategy.

References 12 (a book chapter) and References 4 and 11 (journal articles) synthesise the theoretical models and risk factors for sexual abuse in sport that emerged from a series of inductive interviews with abused athletes. I began these interviews in late 1993 after taking part in a BBC television programme called 'The Secrets of the Coach' which was part of the *On The Line* series. I had prepared for this by working with Broadcasting Support Services and writing a set of guidance notes for a post-programme helpline. Callers were invited to volunteer to be interviewed and the snowball process thus began. The risk factor analysis that resulted from these interviews was used to brief colleagues at The Netherlands Olympic Committee prior to their own research project on sexual abuse in Dutch sport. Reference 3 presents a temporal and developmental model of abuse in sport, based on the Dutch results. It combines my own and Marianne Cense's data on risk factors with David Finkelhor's (1984 and 1986) classic four-factor model of sexual abuse that has been the cornerstone of child abuse research in the wider society.

Sandra Kirby and Lorraine Greaves in Canada conducted the world's first prevalence study of sexual abuse and harassment in sport, from 1995-6. This provided statistical support for many of the ideas that I had developed through my own conceptual and qualitative research. Dr Kirby and I worked together on Reference 10, in which we present a potential diagnostic tool for predicting risk of sexual abuse in different sports. Dr Kirby's own doctoral research on the concept of 'sport age' (independent of chronological age) is here integrated with my ideas on peaking in sport and relative risk of sexual abuse, generating the concept of the 'stage of imminent achievement'. This is the phase just below the individual's peak performance level where we hypothesise that vulnerability to the grooming process in sexual abuse (whereby a potential victim is prepared for abuse by the perpetrator) is at its most intense.

One key stakeholder group for child protection in sport is parents/carers. Reference 9 reports findings from a study of 186 parents/carers of elite young female athletes. To my knowledge this is the only such study so far undertaken. It reveals low levels of awareness and concern by parents about child protection in sport and theorises parental involvement, or lack of involvement, in children's sport. This research has since been used to inform policy and for developing professional development workshops, for example by the NSPCC/Sport England Child Protection in Sport Unit, sports coach UK and for sport psychologists in European and British sport science (FEPSAC and BASES).

During the early to mid 1990s I struggled through a number of personal and political difficulties with my research. My continued advocacy of gender equity and, by then,

children's rights in sport, elicited denial from some senior sports administrators and hostility from others. I began to draw on the contemporary sociological tradition of reflexivity in an attempt to make sense of this, both as a coping mechanism and also in order to situate myself within the research process in ways that I had not previously done. Reference 7 began as an informal presentation to a workshop of the British Sociological Association's Sport Sociology Group in Brighton, which I developed into a paper presented at the 1998 annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport in Las Vegas. The paper was further developed before eventually being published in December 1999.

Reference 1, the book, comprises a synthesis of almost all the research on sexual exploitation. In some cases, the research papers are located very clearly in this text; for example Chapter 8 is a reworked and slightly extended version of Reference 7. In other respects, the book develops ideas that are previously unpublished. Chapter 7, for example, puts forward a completely new theoretical Contingency Model for analysing sexual exploitation in sport that both builds upon Finkelhor's previous work and is also a radical departure from it.

## **7.0 Original contribution to knowledge in the field of sport studies**

This research programme makes several original contributions to knowledge. It integrates several different disciplines to inform both the theory and the practice of child protection in sport. The theorisations of sexual abuse and risk factor analysis reported here have been used by many national and international governing bodies of sport in the development of their child protection policies and strategies. The work on

predatory coaching styles and grooming practices in sport, which indicate very different models of grooming than those described outside sport, has given impetus to the transformation of coach education in this country. The analysis of abuse cultures in sport organisations, developed in several of the submissions, has been taken up by researchers outside the field of sport, for example in probation, sex offender treatment and clinical services, to help enhance under-developed research perspectives on institutional abuse (Wolfe *et al.* in press).

## **8.0 Limitations and conclusions**

My research on sexual exploitation in sport is built on a strong commitment to feminist politics, pedagogy and methodology and to the use of research for political transformation. The papers submitted here report empirical data from the experiences and activities of a wide range of stakeholders in this issue, including athletes themselves, sports development officers, parents/carers and sport administrators. My own multiple identity as a researcher, professional educator, advocate and policymaker in sport has ensured that my research has been grounded in practice yet simultaneously tested against scholarly standards. I consider this to be the hallmark of applied interdisciplinary research. The programme might also be judged as failing to meet the level of rigour associated with any *single* contributory discipline and, perhaps, expecting too much change, too soon, from sport practitioners.

My first aim, of explaining gender relations in sport and leisure, has been rather easier to meet than the second. If my second research aim, of transforming gender relations in sport, has been achieved it has not been through overt feminist activism but through

the Trojan horse of research on child abuse and protection. It is these themes that have had the most impact on gender relations in British sport in recent years and these themes that are likely to continue to impact positively on them in the future. Post-modern critics of feminist advocacy, who argue that no more 'grand' social equality projects are possible, might well take note of the effects of child abuse research in sport, for there is now tangible evidence of the success of the feminist transformative project in this context.

There are clear limitations in my publications profile and intellectual work, not least my reluctance to engage with post-modern theory, post-feminism and the fast-growing literature on the body and sexuality. I have made several pragmatic decisions about the direction of my research programme. For example, I have taken pains to 'start where sport is' because I recognise that senior members of sport organisations are slow to change, hesitant to employ research and scared of feminist advocacy. I have deliberately researched across a wide front - in policy, theory, coaching practice and so on - because the field was open and I considered that someone needed to plug the gaps, at least temporarily. I recognise, however, that it is not possible to develop or sustain rigorous, theoretically informed research in so many different areas and my future challenge will be to let go some areas of original work in order to focus more deeply on others. In this regard, I consider that both risk assessment and cultural change aspects of sexual exploitation are two continuing priorities.

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