Sport Policy Research from the Margins: An Ethnographer’s Account of Utilizing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to Research a Sensitive and Taboo Athlete Welfare Topic when a Moral Panic Erupts

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A main function of sport managers is the creation and implementation of policy. For the area of Athlete Welfare, there is no comprehensive bullying, harassment, abuse, initiation, and hazing policy within sport. Rather, sport managers typically have both bullying, harassment and abuse policy as well as initiation and hazing policy in their attempt to regulate, or be perceived as regulating, the conduct of athletes, coaches, officials and administrators. Empirical research of two differing groups of academics - those who study bullying, harassment and abuse; those who study initiation and hazing - has been instrumental in informing these two sport policy areas.

Research on sport harassment and abuse has been led by female researchers (Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby & Leahy, 2010; see also Brackenridge, 2001; Fasting, 2005; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000) from various countries (i.e., UK, Norway, and Canada) who possess a subjectivist episteme. They have utilized survey methods to collect primarily quantitative data from self-identified victims in order to advocate for effective sport policies, procedures, and processes. In comparison, sport initiation and hazing research has predominately been led by female Americans (Hoover, 1999; see also Allen & Madden, 2008; Campo, Poulos & Sipple, 2005; McGlone, 2010; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder & Brewer, 2007; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009) possessing an objectivistic episteme utilizing survey methods to collect largely quantitative data from athletes as well as non-athletes. These researchers typically identify appropriate and inappropriate initiation practices and how many athletes are a hazed victim. Although both harassment and abuse researchers and initiation and hazing researchers have conducted research that is utilized by sport managers to construct sport policy, there has been a lack of constructionist ‘policy research’ by either group.

Houlihan (2005) asserts that sport policy should be constructed utilizing information collected from actors who represent all relevant organizational cultures and cultural perspectives. Sport policy requires culturally informed data that is collected and analyzed by policy researchers utilizing a Sport Advocacy Coalition Framework (Houlihan, 2005). The constructionist based Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) conceived by Sabatier (2007) to deal with policy issues that possess numerous actors (e.g., athletes, coaches, sport administrators of various organizations within the sport delivery system, and academics) with multiple interests (e.g., personal, organizational, societal), perceptions (e.g., cultural perspective, moral perspective) and preferences (e.g., type of knowledge – objective, subjective and constructive) (Sabatier, 2007).

An Athlete Welfare (bullying, hazing, harassment and abuse) policy research study, with a focus on socially constructing the phenomenon of British university sport initiations (positive and negative components), utilizing the Sport ACF and an ethnographic methodology was undertaken by a Canadian male researcher. To research British university sport initiations, about which little knowledge exists of either their cultural function or its institutional context (British university sport), as a foreigner meant constructing and utilizing a research design and approach that could successfully facilitate exploring the relatively unknown for the purpose of generating policy recommendations reflective of multiple organizational cultural perspectives. The initial methods for this planned two year study consisted of participant observation of British university student athletes and semi-structured interviews with British university athletes, coaches and administrators as well as British sport administrators of national governing bodies; there was no focus to conduct interviews with a victim of hazing or abuse. This research path constructs the researcher as an informed policy broker that possesses useable policy knowledge.

This paper is a self-confessional ethnographic account of the five years of data collection that transpired, specifically the adjustments to the methods that occurred due to the heightened external organizational resistance that was encountered after a moral panic regarding university sport hazing occurred in British society. An evaluation in utilizing a Sport ACF ethnographic methodology to study Athlete Welfare, notably for policy to regulate the social practices of British university athlete-students, is provided. The two main criterion of the evaluation examines the
degree of research methods flexibility afforded by the methodology and the thickness of the data that was collected. This presentation will provide sport management professionals and scholars with an understanding of utilizing the Sport ACF, the benefits of conducting ethnographic policy research and the difficulties in collecting data on a sensitive and taboo topic when a moral panic erupts.

References


