Examining the Institutionalization of Sexual Abuse Within U.S. University Athletic Departments

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Over the past decade, reports of abuse in sport have gained increased attention within the mainstream media and from scholars (e.g., Hartill, 2013; Jacobs, Smits, & Knoppers, 2015; Kavanagh, Brown, & Jones, 2017; Owton & Sparks, 2017). Particularly, reports exposed numerous instances of sexual abuse that had perpetuated for years and sometimes decades within the athletic programs at three major U.S. universities (i.e., Baylor University, Penn State University, and Michigan State University). In these cases, it seems that sexual abuse had become institutionalized within the athletic departments, universities, and broader communities. That is, sexual abuse was a “taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that [gave] meaning to social exchange and thus [enabled] self-reproducing social order” (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, pp. 4-5). Previous research within sport has largely focused on the experiences (Brackenridge, 1997, 2001; Kerr & Stirling, 2012), psychological impacts (Stirling & Kerr, 2013), and coping mechanisms (Concepcion & Ebbeck, 2005; Hinkle Smith & Stellino, 2007; Kavanagh et al., 2017) of the abused. However, the manner in which abuse and other forms of corruption have become institutionalized within sport organizations and contexts has received minimal attention within the sport management literature. Indeed, institutional structures may underpin and support organizational wrongdoing (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Palmer, 2017).

The focus of this research was to understand how abuse becomes institutionalized and perpetuated within sport organizations to the point where perpetrators are allowed to continue their predatory behavior without meaningful intervention. We drew upon the tenets of institutional theory and, specifically, institutional work to examine how institutions are built, modified, and maintained (Hampel, Lawrence, & Tracey, 2017; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) as means for developing a theoretical understanding of how abuse persists within organizational structures. Using an extended case study approach, we examined the sexual abuse scandals at Penn State University, Michigan State University, and Baylor University. We compiled secondary data from numerous internal (university produced) and external (media coverage and books) sources. Data were analyzed following the recommendations of Gioia et al. (2012) wherein we identified first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions within our data. Our findings revealed that institutional structures had been created to shield the perpetrators from accountability for their deviant actions. The institutional work entailed obscured reporting and investigations, the creation of internal discipline structures, and the valorization of institutional leaders and internal structures. The institutional structures were legitimized and maintained via stakeholder collusion, victim silencing, and the assumed legitimacy of institutional leaders. The created structures seemed to be aimed at protecting the commercial interests of the universities. Whereas previous research of sexual abuse in sport has suggested that weak institutions make prevention of abuse difficult (Parent & Demers, 2011), our research shows institutional structures shielding perpetrators were strong. Our findings offer insight into the root causes of abuse and other forms of corruption in sport.