Male Athletes' Violence Against Women: A Critical Assessment of the Athletic Affiliation, Violence Against Women Debate

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How can we use what we know about male athletes’ violence against women to reduce the frequency of this crime? The current sociological debate on whether male athletes commit more violence against women compared to those who do not participate in organized sport is unproductive and simplistic. Theoretical constructs such as "athletic affiliation" and "rape culture" are too broad to capture the unique dynamics of athletes' violence. Similarly, "violence against women" is also too broad. A typology of violence against women is needed to deconstruct which aspects of athletic life contribute to this physical abuse. The author discusses the intersection between male athletes' lives and precipitating factors that may facilitate their violence against women; he suggests reframing the debate in terms of Messerschmidt's (1993) theory of men's crime, which incorporates power relations and social structures while allowing for variations among situationally distinct men.

Possibly no social issue in sport has received more media attention in the 1990s than male athletes' violence against women. Every month another male athlete is accused of this crime. Journalists covering the latest incident remind readers of other athletes whose names have become synonymous with violence against women, such as Mike Tyson (boxing), O.J. Simpson (football), Will Cordero (baseball), Lamar Parrish (basketball), John Daly (golf), Jose Conseco (baseball), Lawrence Phillips (football), and Bobby Cox (baseball). From such lists, many journalists conclude that, compared to men in the general population, male athletes are more likely to be violent toward women.

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The media discourse has shaped the public perception of athletes’ violence. In a recent Internet poll by Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN), 51% of the 1,019 respondents considered athletes to be involved in crimes against women more often than the general population. Only 10% thought this population was less likely to be involved in such crimes (ESPN, 1996).

Clearly, recent media coverage has further defined this issue as a social problem requiring our attention (Blumer, 1971). The logic of the media, however, is suspect. We could also generate a list of actors, politicians, or schoolteachers who have battered women, and make similar claims about these occupations and this type of violence.

But is sociological research anymore illuminating than what we read in the mainstream press? What do we really know about male athletes and violence against women? Like the media, sport sociologists are addressing the issue. In this paper, I review the current sociological literature on the relationship between male athletes and violence against women, beginning with early attempts to theorize male athletes’ violence against women, followed by a review of the empirical research that attempts to validate these theoretical pieces, concluding with a brief discussion of the limitations of this research. I also examine some of the more recent research that focuses on the precipitating factors associated with violence against women and sport participation.

This article is based on the assumption that violence against women is primarily about power and control—men’s desire to retain power over women, and in some cases, their will to demonstrate this control to other men. In this respect athletes’ violence against women is no different than that exhibited by nonathletes (Kane & Disch, 1993). Given the extent to which women feel threatened by men’s violence, it is assumed here that violence against women is a social issue—a product of a society that supports male domination and violence. We cannot disassociate men’s violence against women from aspects of masculinity, nor can we discuss masculinity without addressing men’s use of sport to construct and maintain masculine identities (Bryson, 1987; Glassner, 1988; Messner, 1988, 1990). Given the primary concern of this essay, masculinity will be a subtheme throughout. However, the driving question here is, How can we use what we know about male athletes’ violence against women to reduce the frequency of this crime?

The “Rape Culture” Explanation

Much of early sociological writing on athletes and violence against women combines the personal experiences of athletes and the notion of rape cultures—a term coined by anthropologist Peggy Sanday (1981). In her study of rape in tribal communities, Sanday found that the frequency of rape varies substantially between societies. Cultures that display a high level of tolerance for violence, male dominance, and sexual segregation have the highest frequency of rape. These cultures lack the social constraints that discourage sexual aggression or contain social arrangements that encourage it. More recently, Sanday (1990) employed rape culture to explain gang rape within certain college fraternities.

Throughout this essay, athlete’s violence against women refers to the occurrence of this crime among males involved in organized sport.
Sociologists argue that the subculture of sport teams can be a rape culture. Sport is widely acknowledged as the most visible cultural display of a masculine culture (Kidd, 1990). Athletes\(^2\) are admired for their strength, speed, and stamina; they are also praised for their intelligence, will, and courage. In the masculine status hierarchy, athletes (particularly those in contact sports) reside close to the pinnacle because their endeavors require them to combine many of these highly regarded masculine attributes. Through sport, as it is often presented to young people, boys are encouraged to ignore pain (No pain, no gain), hurt others (Let’s see how tough these guys really are), and separate themselves from women (Stop throwing like a girl). Coaches and parents argue that sport prepares boys for an adult world (Fine, 1987) that rewards men for dominating others (That’s why you get paid the big bucks), hiding their fears (Never let them know that you’re sweating), and distinguishing themselves from women (He’s a man’s man).

Popular discourse about sport rarely presents the potentially damaging consequences of a historically masculine culture (Messner, 1992). Sport sociologists argue that one of the consequences of the hyper-masculine, violent world of athletics may be increased violence against women (Coakley, 1997; Nelson, 1994; Sabo & Runfola, 1980). The social world that prepares boys to be successful in masculine culture also encourages them to be violent.

Many of our most popular sports [are] predicated on the successful utilization of violence, that is, these are activities in which the human body is routinely turned into a weapon to be used against other bodies resulting in pain, serious injury or death. (Messner, 1990, p. 205)

Victory and success are associated with this physical domination. Rewarded routinized violence blends with a highly sex-segregated and male-dominant culture in which weakness and femininity are despised. Taken in full, athletic teams are breeding grounds for rape (Warshaw, 1988).

Accounts of rape cases, such as Bernard Lefkowitz’s (1997) detailed examination of the Glen Ridge rape case and Tim Curry’s (1996) research into a university athletic team’s subculture, support the contention that some athletic contexts are rape cultures. Lefkowitz and Curry examined different age groups, but the cases are strikingly similar. Both groups of perpetrators were highly segregated athletes who condoned voyeurism, pornography, excessive drinking, vandalism, and hostility toward women. Both groups enjoyed high status in their communities as a result of their sport affiliation and exploited their status to gain sexual favors or coerce women into sex. In the end, both groups selected women who seemed particularly vulnerable: a retarded girl in the former case and an elderly homeless woman in the latter.

Implicit in the rape culture hypothesis that connects sport, masculinity, and violence against women is an outline of prevention and intervention programs—the wholesale transformation of the construction of masculinity within the male sport world. The most common approach to reducing athletes’ violence against women focuses on “raising the consciousness” of male athletes (Katz, 1997). It is assumed that athletes who are receiving a pro-feminist message, particularly one delivered by a high-status athlete, may be less tolerant of violence and harassment directed toward women.

\(^2\)Unless otherwise noted, athlete refers to male athlete.
Testing the Rape Culture Hypothesis: The Empirical Research

While sociologists hypothesized that athletes were more likely than nonathletes to be violent toward women, empirical research did not support or refute this claim until the 1990s, when researchers began testing this contention. To a certain extent empirical research does support the idea that the sport world is a rape culture. For example, Fritner and Rubinson’s (1993) analysis of 925 undergraduate women indicated that athletes were disproportionately represented in reports of sexual assault, abuse, and intimidation. Crosset, Ptaeck, McDonald, and Benedict (1996) found that female athletes were significantly overrepresented in reports of sexual assault and battery to judicial affairs offices at 10 large universities.

Koss and Gaines (1993) collected self-reported data from students and found a low but statistically significant relationship between athletic participation and sexual aggression on a large university campus after controlling for alcohol. In Boeringer’s (1996) study, self-reported data from 477 men (77 of them athletes) indicated a higher percentage of athletes than nonathletes using verbal coercion (60 and 53%, respectively), drugs or alcohol (28 and 21%, respectively), or force (15 and 8%, respectively) to coerce women into sexual encounters. Though these findings are directional, differences were not statistically significant. Athletes demonstrated a significant difference from nonathletes regarding whether they would force a woman to do something sexual if they could be assured of immunity. Athletes expressed a disproportionately greater willingness to use force to coerce a woman into a sexual act.

Using face-to-face interviews, Bloom and Smith (1996) found some support for an association between the culture of hockey and approval of violence off the ice. This study sampled house and select players (n = 604) and nonplayers (n = 153). Those at the highest levels (select players) were less likely to disapprove of violence than house players and nonplayers. Select players were also more likely to be violent in other sports. These two findings were statistically significant. Although violence directed at women was not tested, this study supports the notion that training for violence carries over into other areas of life.

In contrast, other findings suggest that athletes are no more violent toward women than nonathletes. For example, Crosset et al. (1995) found no significant difference between athletes and nonathletes in reports of violence to campus police. Schwartz and Nogrady (1996) found no significant difference between college athletes and nonaffiliated students on several variables associated with sexual assault. In no study of athletes’ violence toward women have male athletes self-reported violence against women at a statistically significant higher rate than nonathletes (Boeringer, 1996; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996).

The conclusions from quantitative research are limited. The research, driven by early theoretical understandings of men’s violence, is best regarded as the incipient attempt to understand male athletes’ violence against women. This research does not clarify whether athletic participation contributes to the likelihood that athletes will be violent toward women. It does suggest, however, that athletic participation is associated with other behaviors related to violence against women, such as rape-supportive beliefs, overrepresentation of athletes in official reports, and women’s self-reports of violence. The mixed results of the early empirical research should push researchers to question some of the assumptions about the relationship among sport, masculinity, and violence against women. A more nuanced theory of men’s violence and some multifactorial analyses are needed.
Critique of the Rape Culture Hypothesis

*From the Social World of Sport to Team Cultures*

Peggy Sanday (1996) is critical of the way some have employed her concept of rape culture to organizations. In her own research on fraternities she is careful to note that rape culture denotes a few specific fraternities, not fraternities in general. Assuming that all fraternities are responsible for the violence against women “is unwarranted unless we can show that the same templates for behavior are present in all fraternities” (Sanday, 1996, p. 193) and, by extension, all teams and levels of sport. Sport teams are not “culturally homogeneous.”

The inconclusive results of the quantitative research may be a product of using sport subculture and rape culture too broadly. Results of these studies may be the product of variations among teams or sports. For example, Bloom and Smith (1996) found that select hockey players and nonplayers were less violent in their families than house players. Koss and Gaines (1993) found the association between athletes and sexual assault to be most pronounced among revenue-generating sports. Crosset et al. (1995, 1996) found that contact sports (football, hockey, and basketball) accounted for a majority of reported assaults. Michael Welch’s (1997) review of 100 media reports of alleged NFL perpetrators of violence against women reveals that running backs and receivers were overrepresented. These findings suggest variations in the experiences of athletes among sports, levels within a sport, and sport organizations.

*Athletic affiliation* may be too broad to be useful in explaining male athlete violence against women. Perhaps early quantitative researchers have not found athletic affiliation to be a significant predictor of sexual assault because they have cast too wide a net. Research designs have not accounted for the possibility that men have varying sport experience. The research has not accounted for the differences among teams, sports, and levels within a sport; these differences may be more significant than the similarities.

Koss and Cleveland (1996) questioned the utility of attempts to demonstrate the link between athletic affiliation and sexual aggression:

> Even if future data support the hypothesis that individuals belonging to fraternities and sports teams, compared with unaffiliated men, have higher levels of sexually assaultive beliefs and behaviors, the findings would not explain where these beliefs and behaviors come from. (p. 186)

Other intervening variables may be far more predictive of violence against women than athletic affiliation. We might be better off exploring how sport affiliation is linked, for example, to alcohol consumption (Kantor & Straus, 1987), number of sexual partners (Malamuth, 1986), or association with others who have been violent toward women (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1995)—all of which are associated with violence against women.

*A Typology of Violence Against Women*

Koss and Cleveland (1996, pp. 182–183) suggested that researchers interested in the ties between athletic affiliation and violence against women would be wise to account for the “various guises” of violence against women. Ward et al. (1991) identified four types of college rape, each with its own set of characteristics
and precipitating factors”: stranger, party, acquaintance, and date. The processes and dynamics most often associated with date rape, for example, are different than those of party or stranger rape. Similarly, the typical patterns associated with party rape shift depending on the perpetrator and victim’s prior relationship (Ward et al., 1991). Other researchers distinguish between types of battering. For example, Mahoney (1990) argued that we need to distinguish between domestic violence and what she calls “separation assault.” Domestic violence is a means of controlling an entrapped woman; separation assault is an attempt to avenge or punish an independent one.

Distinguishing among the various types of violent crimes against women enables sociologists to simultaneously narrow their research questions and broaden their theory. For example, consider Boeringer’s (1996) findings that, compared to fraternity members, athletes are more likely to use force to coerce women into unwanted sex. Research on fraternity-affiliated perpetrators indicates that they tend to employ drugs and alcohol in party settings to force sex. Hence, the likelihood that a larger percentage of athletes appear willing to use force may not be associated, for example, with date rape but may be linked with incidents of acquaintance rape (Ward et al., 1991). The differences in tactics combined with differences in the victim’s previous knowledge of the perpetrator may subsequently affect reporting rates. Koss and Cleveland (1993) speculated that women victimized by force are more likely to report an assault than those who have been verbally coerced or plied with alcohol or drugs. Athletes’ use of forceful tactics may account for the higher report rate of athletes as perpetrators (Crosset et al., 1996) without significant differences in the self-report data. The discussion above suggests that researchers need to consider differences in tactics used by perpetrators of violence against women and how particular team dynamics constrain or enable those behaviors. Earlier attempts to explain athletes’ violence against women as a product of the hyper-masculine sport world overstates and simplifies the relationship between sport and athletes’ violence against women (Benedict, 1997).

**Toward New Understandings of Sport and Violence Against Women**

The general direction of the current debate has been whether male athletes commit more violence against women compared to men who do not participate in organized sport. Arguing about whether athletes are more or less violent than nonathletes is an overly simplistic approach to understanding the issues. Moreover, this argument detracts from the fact that the violence is being perpetrated at all.

Productive discussions and research questions should center on why some positions, teams, sports, or programs are prone to committing specific types of violence against women. Researchers need to explore how team members, coaches, or people associated with a team promote behavior that encourages this crime or how some programs allow potential rapists or batterers to feel comfortable (Boeringer, 1996). Theories that simply employ sport affiliation or a reified conception of masculinity to explain all the forms of violence against women fail to capture the dynamics of rape-prone organizations.

Recent conceptualizations of men’s violence against women offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between these crimes and masculinity, which can subsequently inform our understanding of athletes’ criminal behavior. In the balance of this essay I review some of the more recent research avenues into
men's violence against women—ones that suggest additional ways of deterring these crimes.

*Alcohol Consumption.* Alcohol consumption is associated with violence against women. While many incidents of violence occur in the absence of alcohol and many people drink without engaging in violent behavior, the association between the two is quite high, particularly for those who perpetrate the violence (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). Male alcohol consumption, particularly binge drinking, is associated with marital violence. This finding cuts across all ethnic groups and social classes (Kantor, 1993). So although alcohol consumption is not a cause of violence against women, social scientists theorize that it has a complex role in men's violence against women. Alcohol consumption, particularly drinking to get drunk, may impair reasoning and communication that would otherwise mitigate against some types of rape and battery. Drinking may be a part of some men's premeditated strategy to coerce women into unwanted sex or to be violent; it may also be a convenient and socially accepted means by which men can distance themselves from their violence.

Missing from the current discussion of athletes and violence against women is any discussion of drinking. There is a strong association between drinking and sport. In a Harvard School of Public Health survey of 17,251 students, athletes were most likely to self-report binge drinking. Athletes drink, get drunk, and drink to get drunk at a higher rate than nonathletes (Naughton, 1996).

*Head Injuries.* Another aspect of sport that may contribute to men's violence is the encouraged disregard for men's bodies in contact sports. Head injuries, like alcohol abuse, impair judgment and are associated with violence toward women. The jarring of the brain, which produces concussions, may damage the frontal regions of the brain and impair one's ability to control impulses. Substantial evidence suggests that the brain abnormalities caused by head injury are associated with aggression (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). Not surprisingly, researchers have discovered that batterers are more likely to have sustained moderate or severe head injuries than nonbatterers (Rosenbaum & Hoge, 1989; Rosenbaum et al., 1994). In Rosenbaum et al.'s study, a history of significant head injury increased the chances of marital violence sixfold. Sport related injuries were the third most likely type of head injury, behind car accidents and falls; most occurred before age 16.

Many researchers believe that the impaired reasoning or impulse control caused by head injury that is associated with violence against women may subsequently interact with more predictive developmental and environmental variables. Like alcohol consumption, head injury is not the direct cause of violence against women; however, it may be tied to the occurrence of this crime.

*Social Learning/Socialization.* Another approach is exploring the ways men are taught to be violent in society. Research suggests that, compared to nonaggressive men, sexually aggressive males more often endorse a set of attitudes that condone rape (Malamuth, 1986; Malamuth, Linz, Hearn, Barnes, & Acker, 1995; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). Men who believe that women enjoy violence or that violence is a legitimate means of controlling them are more likely to commit violent acts against women (Crowell & Burgess, 1996).

Does sport teach violence? In athletics, pain is part of the daily social practices. Placing one's body at risk to impede or hurt others is not a natural act. Athletes must learn to "mix it up"—to view victory as more important than personal
safety (Sabó, 1994). The biographies of athletes who come to understand the rewards of being mean suggest that these individuals learn from coaches and peers to be violent. In the Acknowledgments section of Tim Green’s (1996) collection of essays on life in the NFL, he thanked George O’Leary for teaching him to “bring the dark side . . . to every down of football.” In her (1995) account of a girls’ high school basketball season, Madeline Blais detailed how one otherwise caring coach systematically taught aggressive play. Working with a particularly sweet and demure player, the coach renamed the player, thereby enabling her to disassociate herself from her aggression and play the game in the persona of her “evil twin.”

If we train athletes to be violent through sport, this training invariably affects the way they think and act off the field. Some athletes readily admit that violent sport influences their off-field behavior (Coakley, 1997). Training for sport, in the context of an already patriarchal society, may also be training men to be violent toward women. There is possibly no more vivid portrayal of the connection between violent athletic training and off-field violence than Elwood Reid’s (1997) recounting of his collegiate football career. In his brief article he off-handedly describes party rapes, brutal assaults, and self-inflicted abuse: “In the world of Big Ten football, you feast on inflicting pain—on and off the field. You do it because you can . . . because it’s what’s expected of you” (Reid, 1997, p. 361).

Do men who learn to enjoy pain project that enjoyment onto others? Are the ways coaches advocate violent physical domination and promote masculinity supportive of rape attitudes? Examples abound of coaches employing images of castration and femininity to chastise athletes. In the conclusion of their study indicating that athletic affiliation to be a slight predictor of violence against women, Koss and Gaines (1993) suggested that we pay attention to what coaches say to their athletes, alluding to the possibility that coaches’ comments and counsel might contribute to an athlete’s hostility toward women.

The difficulty of this approach and other socialization/social learning models is proving causal connection or assessing the relative impact of sport participation. Blaming something as broad as social environment fails to capture the complexity of the phenomenon and downplays the subjectivity of actors. Clearly, numerous male athletes are being trained in contact sports by coaches who are openly hostile to women but choose not to be violent off the field.

**Peer Support.** Paying attention to what coaches say probably accounts for only a small part of sport’s influence on athletes’ violence toward women. A growing number of researchers are suggesting that we also pay attention to the informal world of athletes. In a study of dating violence on college campuses in Canada, DeKeseredy and Kelly (1995) found that peer support of abuse and social ties with abusive peers are predictors of violence against women. Schwartz and Nogrady (1996) argued that the type of affiliation (e.g., fraternity, sport team) is far less significant than members’ attitudes about and expressed practice of violence. The more peer support for violence against women, the more likely a member of that group will commit these crimes.

If peer support for violence against women is a causal influence, how might teammates interact to communicate this support? Harvey’s (1996) research, based on data obtained while he worked as manager of a men’s college volleyball team, offers us clues. Harvey observed that the team had surrounded a shy team member whom he calls Bashful: “The guys were being very supportive, smiling and giving encouragement. Bashful was looking down at the floor smiling and appearing to
psyche himself up to do something. Then out of nowhere, Bashful began to yell misogynistic obscenities” (p. 140). Harvey noted the anger in Bashful’s face: “When it was all over, the team cheered, slapped his hand and congratulated him. Bashful seemed proud of his accomplishment.”

Such episodes are common in sport: Older, more experienced team leaders urge younger players to engage in risk-taking behavior. On one level, these incidents can be fairly benign attempts by older athletes to help younger participants become “men,” more competitive, or both. But on some more fundamental level, these actions are team rituals— attempts to establish and maintain team norms. In some cases, as in the example above, they are not benign at all. Here the episode supports the team norm of open hostility toward women.

Harvey’s (1996) study, along with other recent descriptive works (Curry, 1996; Lefkowitz, 1997; Reid, 1997), offer researchers and practitioners a window into the cultural and interpersonal dynamics of a team that openly expresses support for violence against women and shows how resistance to these team norms is systematically discouraged.

Institutional Support. Another line of inquiry related to peer support explores the support received by athlete perpetrators after women report a violation. Institutional support for alleged perpetrators often blames women and fails to hold athletes responsible for their actions. No case demonstrates this better than the University of Nebraska’s handling of the Lawrence Phillips case. Phillips, who brutally beat an ex-girlfriend (separation assault), was temporarily suspended from play. University officials argued that severing relations with Phillips would be detrimental to the young man in this time of need. The charges against Phillips were dropped, and he returned to action in time to play in Nebraska’s bowl game. He was subsequently drafted to play in the NFL and faced no significant or lasting repercussions for his brutalization of a fellow student-athlete.

The university’s support for Phillips’s victim was not as generous (Moran, 1996). Kate McKewan, a member of the varsity basketball team, lost her athletic scholarship and was cut from the team as a result of her poor performance following the brutal beating. In the wake of public outcry, the university offered her a nonathletic scholarship. She left the university. Jeff Benedict (1997) investigated several cases of athlete violence against women; in case after case, he detailed how university and professional teams fail to hold violent athletes accountable for their criminal behavior and actively work to silence their victims.

The inability of institutions to hold athletes accountable also extends to the court system. As Benedict and Klein (1997) found, the high-status sport world cuts two ways when athletes are charged with violence against women. First, they are seemingly brought to trial more frequently than nonathletes. Benedict and Klein (1997) speculated that prosecutors feel public pressure to prosecute public figures such as athletes to demonstrate that they do not receive special treatment. But athletes bring more resources (financial and otherwise) into the judicial process and are better able than nonathletes to escape punishment for their crimes against women. The impediments to prosecuting athletes who perpetrate violence against women, real or imagined, may contribute to the likelihood that an athlete will commit this sort of crime.

Crime as a Way of “Doing Masculinity.” Quite possibly the most promising approach may be one charted by criminologist James Messerschmidt. Pulling key concepts from West and Zimmerman (1987; “doing gender”), Giddens (1976;
“structuration”), and Connell (1987; “hegemonic masculinity”), Messerschmidt (1993) views men’s violence as situationally structured actions that are resources for doing gender. From this perspective masculinity is not something one is, but something one does. Men do masculinity—pulling from an array of options in response to particular situations. For Messerschmidt, criminal behavior, including violence against women, is one resource for doing masculinity.

For most men, acts of violence against women are not situationally appropriate, but for some athletes they may be “expected” (Reid, 1997). Star athletes, whose mediated images represent an idealized masculinity, and lesser male athletes, by association, enjoy elevated status within the masculine status hierarchy. Athletes can garner considerable access to resources for demonstrating masculinity. Within some subworlds of sport, crimes against women (both the act and the recounting of it) may be a demonstration of masculinity.

Messerschmidt’s conceptualization of crime is not unlike those of sport, which is generally understood as a resource through which men do gender (Crosset al., 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and a means by which they define themselves in contrast to women (Connell, 1995; Kane 1995; Lorber, 1994). Sporting prowess is understood as symbolic proof of men’s socially constructed “natural” superiority over women (Connell, 1995; Kane & Snyder, 1989). At the same time, sport is contested terrain (Messner, 1988). In the last 3 decades women have gained increasing access to sport and, through it, challenged ideological justifications for men’s domination. Thus, sport is a cultural resource for maintaining and resisting hegemonic masculinity (Birrell & Theberge, 1994; Foley, 1990; Messner, 1988; Rowe, 1998).

The benefit of Messerschmidt’s (1993) theory of men’s crime and more recent theories of men’s sport is that they incorporate power relations (race, class, and sexuality) and social structures while allowing for variations among distinct men. The ways men construct masculinity are situationally specific. The same man may participate in a variety of masculinities depending on the context: team, classroom, or peer group (Messerschmidt, 1993). An athlete who contributes to hostile banter about women in the locker room may denounce such behavior in other men to defend women in a public setting. Although seemingly hypocritical, the athlete is making situationally specific consistent choices to demonstrate his place in the masculine hierarchy.

In sport, where the distinctions between men are so clearly delineated, few male athletes actually achieve top honors, yet each depends on the current masculine hegemony for whatever special status and power he enjoys. This formulation anticipates variations in resources, tactics, and the types of acts between and by male athletes. Factors that increase the likelihood that an athlete will perpetrate a crime against a woman may also vary depending on his class, race, team culture, sport culture, and level of sport. Nonetheless, Messerschmidt (1993) recognized: “There are patterned ways masculinity is enacted and represented” (p. 83), which sustain masculine hegemony.

One major benefit of this approach is the ability to incorporate other research approaches. For example, alcohol consumption cannot be separated from the party setting (situationally structured behavior), nor can it be separated from doing masculinity. Some parties are staged to decrease communication and increase the participants’ capacity to be violent toward women (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Curry, 1996). The physical layout of party spaces, loud music, and drinking
to get drunk increase the opportunity for men to assault women (or other men) while limiting their risk of being caught or reported. Hard drinking, expressions and acts of hostility toward women, and the physical structure of parties also contribute to some men’s sense of masculine identity. The locker room and the insular social world of athletics create a safe space for the retelling and voyeuristic admiration of masculine accomplishments (Curry, 1996).

**Conclusion**

To date, intervention programs have either stressed punitive measures (threats) or normative changes (consciousness raising) to decrease male athlete’s violence against women. Such an approach emphasizes individual choice. I argue here that it may also be fruitful to view male athletes’ assaults on women as structurally encouraged or as a situationally appropriate means to constructing and maintaining one’s place in masculine hierarchy. Viewing athletes’ violence against women this way directs our attention to the perpetrators’ capacity to commit a crime within a social context. That is, some athletes might lack some social constraints that other men feel. At the same time they might feel encouraged to perpetrate violence against women, given their power within the masculine hierarchy, how masculinity is constructed, and the extent of support received from other men. In addition, the consequences of some behaviors associated with athletic life and masculinity (e.g., drinking or head injury) may have physiological affects that further increase the likelihood that an athlete will be violent toward women.

We need not lose sight of the fact that crimes against women are provoked by men’s desire to control females, to view this violence as structurally encouraged or a situationally appropriate means of doing masculinity. Intervention programs should continue to address men’s hostile attitudes toward women, expose male privilege, and inform men of the potential consequences of their beliefs and actions. We should see attempts to shape the structures of athletes’ lives and raise their consciousness as related interventions. Changes in the structural features of men’s lives have the potential to change how men think; normative approaches can change how they act. Thus, effective interventions should address the structural features of athletes’ lives in addition to consciousness raising and increased punitive measures.

Such a project would address several factors simultaneously. Given the research outlined above, institutions could work to influence behavior of athletes (e.g., binge drinking), coaches (e.g., expressions of physical domination), and administrators (e.g., formulate policies whereby violent athletes are held accountable for their actions), which will subsequently change the male athlete’s situation. In addition to the more conventional education programs, schools and teams should discourage the construction of unsafe parties and make other options available. Again, the goal would be to transform the situation. Some schools have already limited the housing of scholarship athletes to on-campus mixed dorms, thus promoting integration with the larger community and discouraging isolated team cultures. In short, by transforming the structures of athletes’ lives we can reduce the opportunities for male athletes to commit crimes against women.

This will not be an easy task. In their zeal to protect women from such violence, administrators must be careful not to trample individual athlete’s rights. Further, attempts to reshape the structure of athletes’ lives that change how these
MALE ATHLETES’ VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

individuals construct their masculinity will most likely be resisted. The simple and most obvious prevention measures, such as efforts to reduce alcohol abuse, may feel threatening to some athletes’ masculinity. Alcohol consumption, particularly beer and hard liquor, is a resource through which men do gender. In some circles, the ability to drink hard and then perform well athletically is the ultimate demonstration of manliness (Foley, 1990). Drinking, physical disregard of the body, expressions of hostility toward women, and the physical structure of parties all contribute to some men’s sense of masculine identity. Therefore, some men who may never be physically violent toward women are likely to resist these efforts.

We can find solace in knowing that not all activities or qualities associated with the construction of masculine identity must be dismantled to reduce violence against women. As Connell (1992) notes, efforts to challenge hegemonic masculinity must call on the very “qualities hegemonic masculinity exalts—toughness, endurance, determination and the like” (p. 182). If implemented correctly, intervention strategies to reduce male athletes’ violence against women will embrace the same qualities necessary to becoming an excellent athlete.

References


