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**Purity and Danger –  
researching child protection and welfare in youth sport**

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**Abstract**

*Drawing on Mary Douglas' classic social analysis in 'Purity and Danger' (1966) I argue that youth sport is a purity system and that pollution of it, through child abuse, breaches the belief system that still attaches to sport. I explore research attitudes and practices in conventional sport science and, in particular, examine the politics of researching a topic that has low perceived performance value. I suggest that the notion of 'pollution' has potential for understanding not only the denial of child abuse in sport but also its marginal status as a sport science research topic. One solution to this state of affairs is to recast children and young people in sport as 'human beings' first and 'humans doing' second. Some implications of such an approach for a youth sport research agenda are drawn out.*

How are we to define 'youth'? In law in England and Wales, the term 'child' applies to under 18s (and under 16s in Scotland, unless deemed vulnerable in which case under 18). We now operate with an extended concept of childhood or, conversely, something termed in recent youth studies discourses 'emergent adulthood'. It is not easy, therefore, to locate exactly where 'youth' sits between these two. I am using here the legal definition but probably not referring to children much younger than about 8-10years old. So, those entering the long term athlete pathway (Balyi and Hamilton 2003; Stafford and Balyi 2005) fall within my field of interest. Rather than attempting to resolve the age definition question, I will operate with the loose, and perhaps dangerous, assumptions that we all know what 'youth' is and, indeed, that we all know what 'sport' is.

My brief today is to locate child protection and welfare within the youth sport research agenda. I am also using the terms protection and welfare loosely. The label 'safeguarding' is the new buzz term in child welfare and government circles but it is one that I definitely feel requires deconstruction and scepticism from all of us. I have dealt with that debate elsewhere (Brackenridge 2006), however, so will not dwell on it today.

In many ways, I find it impossible to differentiate 'youth sport welfare' from 'youth sport' in general: I cannot conceive of youth sport that is *not* centrally focussed on the welfare and protection of the individual. Sadly, I fear that my view is not shared by many involved youth sport policy development and delivery today. Whether London 2012 casts shadows or sunlight over youth sport initiatives is a point of debate. One of the things I hope to suggest today is that, if we fail to acknowledge the welfare of youth within youth sport, we run the risk not only of turning young people away from sport but also of failing to meet the government's success targets.

My talk is structured in the following way:

first, I will examine welfare and child protection (WCP) in youth sport in relation to Mary Douglas' (1966) notions of purity and danger, part of her cultural theory of risk; here I shall argue that youth sport is a purity system, bolstered by WCP;

secondly, turning to research on abuse in youth sport, I will argue that the current marginal status of WCP research arises because child abuse is perceived to threaten the purity system that is youth sport; next, drawing largely on Ken Roberts' work on youth research more widely, I will discuss research agendas associated with youth sport and propose that, *because* we define youth sport as a purity system, we have failed to situate it within the broader life transitions of young people; and, finally, and briefly, I will identify some of the more difficult and interesting methodological issues that I have faced in researching youth sport and consider the implications of this for a youth sport research agenda that casts young people in sport as humans first and athletes second.

### **Youth sport as a purity system**

I should begin with apologies to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose phrase 'purity and danger' I have pinched for my title. Douglas wrote a landmark book of this name in 1966 in which she explored the concept of cleanliness as a universal theme across cultures. Before I continue, however, here are some provisos: first, I am not an anthropologist and am blissfully ignorant of subsequent critiques of Douglas that may have undermined her ideas – although the preface to her 2002 edition sets out some of her own self-confessed limitations of her argument. Secondly, despite my general passion for ethics and admiration of ethicists, I am not, and never will be, one myself. Thirdly, contemporary social theorists of risk have probably got there before me!

I cannot, therefore, pretend to grasp the niceties of Douglas' arguments, especially her detailed critique of Frazer's and others' accounts of myth, ritual, religion and social theory but I do want to consider, in a very general way, how the ideas associated with the clean, unclean, the pure and the impure, might help us to understand a little better the response of both sport administrators and researchers to the issues of child abuse in sport. I do not claim a comprehensive understanding of Douglas' theory of risk and, at this point, my interpretations of it here are no more than explorations.

I want to use this approach by Douglas to explore, in a microcosmic way, why it is that child abuse and prevention in sport, and in sport science, has had such a lukewarm reception. I also think it may be possible to use Douglas' concepts to test out a future research agenda for child welfare in sport.

In *Purity and Danger* (1966) Douglas used the tools of anthropology and sociology to give us a "new explanation of why people behave as they do" (back jacket, 200 Routledge Classics edition). The essence of her analysis, rooted in analysis of religious beliefs and far flung exotic cultures, is that notions of pollution and taboo act as invisible boundaries to our collective behaviour. Her approach is as pertinent for secular as for sacred societies. I have always found her argument persuasive but I not aware that it has been used before to explain responses to child abuse in sport.

Traditional Huizingian (1939) interpretations of sport have defined it as essentially pure, free and separate from real life. Now, whilst social theory has long since demolished the notion of sport as apolitical, I would argue that it still resides as such, and quite strongly so, within the collective psyche. *Youth* sport has the added psychological attraction of innocence and joy associated with child's play. Within youth sport as a 'purity system', danger is represented by any kind of rule breaking that violates the ethical and psychological sanctity of the practice. It distinguishes behaviour that is allowable from that which is not. There is also a hierarchy of 'dirt' [dirt = "matter out of place" Douglas]. Whereas doping, cheating and player violence (all forms of dirt under Douglas' analysis) are all violations by adult players, arguably for their own benefit, sexual abuse of children in sport punctures the innocence of the practice in ways that are deemed shocking and hardly believable (the worst kind of dirt?).

Under this view, child protection (policies, procedures, training workshops, codes of practice, Criminal Record Bureau checks and so on) is a part of the purity infrastructure – a way of reinforcing the boundaries and buffering the borders of impurity. Child abuse in youth sport thus represents danger (pollution) and child welfare represents safety (purity). These conceptions of purity and pollution are expressed through symbolic language:

- the discourse of purity = safe, safeguarded, supervised, protected, welfare, care
- the discourse of pollution = risk, danger, threat, system failure, abuse, exploitation, harassment, evil, wrongdoing.

Youth sport as a purity system is linked to other systems by scientific investigation – health and hygiene (the physical activity and wellbeing agenda), longevity (the lifelong participation agenda), citizenship (the social inclusion agenda) and conformity (the community safety agenda).

Purity - the absence of pollution - thus effectively acts as a means of social control in youth sport. The purity language we adopt is the moral discourse associated with fair play; pollution is the destruction of this by child abuses – physical, emotional, neglect-based or, especially, sexual.

In systems of religious purity, purification can occur through certain cleansing rituals. Cleansing of the purity system involves expulsion, sacrifice, appeasement, atonement, and the use of scapegoats. The term for this is 'lustration' (a ceremony of purification, purifying rite) more often applied today in the context of national and international human rights.<sup>1</sup> Atonement, or purification, occurs through ritual sacrifice – in sport this might mean time in the sin bin (cf. wilderness), a public apology, a fines or a donation. If Douglas' analysis is useful for understanding our responses to abuse in youth sport it should help us to answer a number of interesting questions. For example: at what point does youth sport make the transition from pure/clean to dirty ... in other words, when does it become exploitative (unclean)? What effect do purity rituals, such as Criminal Records Bureau checks or disciplinary hearings, have on our conceptions of the status of youth sport as a purity system?

In relation to child abuse in sport, the serving of a ban or suspension should therefore, in theory, cleanse the polluting individual. But such is our psychological attachment to youth sport as a purity system that these cleansing rituals are not necessarily shared symbols of forgiveness when child abuse occurs and re-acceptance is not uniformly agreed. We prefer either to deny that the pollution (abuse) has happened or, if this is not

possible, to expunge the polluters for ever. Both responses are attempts to maintain the boundaries around the purity system.

Risk perception depends on shared culture, not individual psychology ... *Arguments about risk are highly charged, morally and politically. Naming a risk amounts to an accusation.* The selection of which dangers are terrifying and which can be ignored depends on what kind of behaviour the risk-accusers want to stop.'

(Douglas 2002, pp. xix, emphasis added)

This danger or impurity is contagious under conditions where there is sharing of information about abusers, lobbying of peers or even reporting of suspicions against someone. Coaches become ritually impure/unclean by virtue of any accusation against them – whether justified or not. Regardless of the outcome of any investigation, they are marginalised and virtually, if not actually, prevented from re-entering the purity system (youth sport). Recent work with elite level coaches in a national sport (Collins 2005) indicates extreme concern about the issue of false allegations, even though there is very little systematic evidence of these in sport (Brackenridge *et al.* 2005). The athlete also becomes ritually impure/unclean by virtue of reporting the harasser/abuser, as does the whistleblower. By actually talking about suspicions or allegations the purity system is threatened – 'no sex please we're British sportspeople'.

### **The status of welfare/child protection within youth sport research**

The government's child care policy framework *Every Child Matters* (Chief Secretary to the Treasury 2003) has become the guiding light for social services and all related child welfare organisations, including the Sport England/NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit. It brings together the control and the care of children into a single discourse – that is 'safeguarding' (see Brackenridge 2006). So why, if WCP (safeguarding) has assumed a central place in government's youth policy, has it not assumed a central place in the sport research agenda?

The CPSU had its fifth birthday and launched its second long term plan this year. All exchequer-funded NGBs must meet the prescriptions of the CPSUs nine national standards by 2008 in order to qualify for their grants.

Paul Hickson is serving his eleventh year in jail for sex crimes against elite female swimmers. It is a decade since the ASA launched its first comprehensive child protection policy and procedures. Over 150,000 people have been through the FA's first level child protection workshop. Even the IOC has, at last agreed to develop a position statement on the subject (next month). So why is it that we have had seen only three doctoral theses completed on the topic in the UK (Yorganci, Summers and Bringer), only one known dedicated undergraduate module in the subject (at Edge Hill University College) and only one known dedicated masters degree in planning (at Brunel University)? I have not done the analysis but I would guess that, in comparison with doping, cheating or international development in sport, WCP also features as a bit part player in our major sport-related journals.

In the early 1990s, when major scandals about sexual abuse in sport were first hitting the headlines (even though they had been happening for years), we went through a period of organisational denial from the national governing bodies of sport who simply could not cope with the accusation that such practices were happening in their midst. They showed very low tolerance for the ambiguity between good (sport) and evil (abuse). A variety of interpretive discourse was adopted by NGBs as coping strategies (described in detail in Brackenridge 2001). During this period, the 'othering' of sex abusers through contrivances like criminal record checks simply reinforced the boundary between good and evil but it failed to acknowledge the possibilities of internally-generated pollution.

In the main, UK NGBs have moved through this denial phase now (although it is still in evidence in many overseas sport organisations). But the sport research community has yet to embrace the issue. Is this an example of an intellectual purity system at work? I'm not sure. If we carry forward the purity system idea, then perhaps sport researchers see this as outside the proper domain of sport and properly the domain of social work? Even more interesting is the possibility that sport researchers themselves, just like the NGBs in the 1990s, align with youth sport as a purity system and regard abuse research as dirtying, a pollutant. Most sport researchers come into the subject field through their own engagement with and love of sport so it would not be surprising if they found it hard to eschew their own emotional

attachments to the practice. From a reflexive sociology perspective, I think my own engagement with the issue is precisely because I see abuse as a polluting practice that infects paradise.

### **Sport and youth transitions**

I suggest that there are three types of youth sport research:

**1. Youth sport research** – about the *activities* that happen to be engaged in by young people (of variable ages). Welfare-related examples include cheating and bullying behaviour by individual athletes.

**2. Youth in sport research** – about the *roles, behaviour and experiences* of young people within sporting activities and organisations. Welfare-related examples include parenting behaviour on the touchline, burnout in young elite athletes and their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment.

**3. Sport in youth research** – about the place of sport within the *life transitions* of the 'young' (after Roberts in Bennet *et al.* 2003). A welfare-related example is, perhaps, sports counselling research (Nichols 1999).

Most youth sport research is based on the first two categories but, following Ken Roberts' (2003) call for a better focussed youth research agenda I would argue that we, in youth sport, also need to refocus our research agenda to pay more heed to the situatedness of sport within the unfolding life course of young people. I do not suggest that the first two categories of research are unimportant – quite the opposite. But I do argue that work here makes little sense without the underpinning knowledge and context offered by research in the third category. In other words that category 3 research is a logical prerequisite for the other two.

For example, we know that the rules of sport need to be modified to optimise so-called Long Term Athlete Development (Balyi and Hamilton 2003) (category 1), and that adherence to sports club membership or physical activity regimes varies by demographic status (category 2). But do we know where, when, how and why choices towards or away from sport are made in relation to family history, educational and employment opportunities, and to peer group dynamics (category 3)? Young people bring with them into sport a vast array of family, peer group and learning histories that influence their



motivations, aspirations and performance goals. Do we see this wider picture of life course transitions or simply receive young people into sport as if they were fresh starters in an homogenous group?

It was an uphill struggle in the mid to late 1990s to persuade governing body personnel to adopt child protection policies, procedures and training. One of the main levers for achieving this was not that it was the 'right thing' to do but evidence that children abused in their own homes already populated sport and that sport personnel had a responsibility to recognise this and do something about it. This argument often caused the scales to fall from the eyes of workshop attendees: until then they simply did not think about their young athletes as having a life – let alone a complex biography - outside sport.

According to Ken Roberts (2003), we should do youth research that "makes a difference to young people's lives and society's future". Under this umbrella, he argues youth research should be driven by the two major life transitions facing young people i.e. the transition from schooling to employment, and the transition from living at home to living independently. In other words, it is youth's changing conditions that should concern us rather than simply youth's performance (in school, in sport or on the streets). To put the point bluntly we too often regard youth as the independent (unchanging) variable in youth sport and concern ourselves only with improvements or decrements in talent development and performance. Alan Ingham *et al.* (1999) described this approach as privileging *human doing* over *human being* in sport. The place of sport, especially youth sport, as a purity system in our collective psyche separates it from the life course of the athlete, separates it from the life transitions that Roberts regards as so important and focuses the youth sport research agenda in very narrow ways.

There are twin discourses of 'youth sport', in which 'sport' dominates over 'youth' and 'youth' obscures maleness. Something we might all ponder is how to put youth (and gender relations) back into youth sport, in other words to look at athletes as human beings rather than simply athletes. This process of rehumanising sport contrasts with the dehumanising processes of so-called Long Term Athlete Development in which the youth athlete-as-machine is privileged over the youth athlete-as-person. In addition to contextualising

sport within the lives of youth, I also suggest that we need to recognise that WCP is the *context* for youth sport and not simply a bolt on to it.

### **A research agenda for welfare and child protection in sport**

Researching in this field over the past twenty years has been an interesting, challenging and, at times alarming experience. I have attempted to deal with the vagaries of the process by adopting, from time to time, a reflexive approach (Brackenridge 1999, 2001; Brackenridge *et al.* in press). Whilst the focus of my work has been broadly feminist and emancipatory I am acutely conscious of the accusations of bias and patronage that attach to these perspectives and to the potential for 'informed consent' to be based on false hierarchies and false assumptions (see Fraser 2004).

Very little of my research has actually engaged directly with youth. My interviews with sexually abused athletes were all, barring one, conducted with legally defined adults. But my most recent big project did involve direct data collection with 189 children using both semi-structured interviews (some of which were remarkably short!) and some game-like participatory devices (Brackenridge *et al.* in press) which were devised to be child-friendly.

I will abstract just a few lessons from the field:

AGE: We all know that chronological age is a poor indicator of sport ability but there is another reason to treat age with caution. Adults are infantilised in sport and elite child athletes often given adult responsibilities so we cannot rely on legal boundaries to help us much with understanding culpability. Instead, we need to look at the power relations in the situation in order to identify the parameters of abuse in sport. The concept of 'emerging adulthood' mentioned earlier might be helpful in this task, together with the related notions of 'progressive capacity' and 'evolving autonomy' that are used in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (David 2005).

REFERRAL: What do you do when you uncover allegations of abuse? Handling the potential for 'guilty knowledge' (Fetterman 1984) has been a constant challenge in my research. To deal with this I have adopted protocols that attempt to make sure that alleged perpetrators of abuse are reported and

that victims of abuse are supported without being disempowered. Not all research participants have chosen to engage with these systems.

**SABOTAGE:** In any area of sensitive research (Lee 1993, 1995) the researcher faces the possibility of obstruction, non-cooperation or sabotage. Because of the strength of the purity defences described earlier this has often happened in my own research. To deal with it, I have used several coping mechanisms (Brackenridge 1999), most recently using what I called 'bracketing interviews', self-interviews by each of the research team and each of the client team, that laid out our expectations of successes, failures and anticipated impediments.

**CONSENT:** Consent, or more accurately assent with children and young people is a very thorny problem precisely because of the mixture of legal and power relations. Codes of ethics do not always help. How can children possibly give informed assent on issues which they cannot understand? And how can we be sure that consent by proxy, i.e. parental consent, is any better informed? Even if we offer written, user-friendly descriptions and confidentiality safeguards we do not really have any assurances that our intentions are properly understood. One of my research colleague's attempt to secure consent with a group of young deaf footballers in a park setting verged on the comical (described in Brackenridge 2004) but would not have been so funny had something gone seriously wrong.

Most published research on WCP thus far falls within the first two categories of youth sport research that I set out earlier. Much of it is set within the disciplinary frameworks of psychology and social-psychology and even the sociological material – my own included – generally fails to set WCP issues within the wider biographical context of the young athlete.

In many ways the research agenda for WCP themes in sport is wide open, such is the paucity of work on it thus far. Under-researched areas include:

- male victims and female perpetrators
- emotional and physical abuse and neglect
- peer abuse/bullying/hazing and homophobic bullying
- female-female abuse
- abuse and welfare in recreational sport

- the child's voice, which absent in most research and policy

If and when we eventually come to research these themes we should have one eye on their situatedness within the life course of youth athletes and not simply concern ourselves with the social bubble that is sport. We might then begin to see youth athletes as human beings rather than simply humans doing.

How can we achieve this? Some research questions that might begin to move us in this direction are:

- What contribution can youth sport make to the anti-violence agenda for children with social, behavioural and mental problems?
- To what extent does engagement in youth sport build resilience and protective factors?
- How can youth sport be reconfigured to prevent abuses to young people, for example through empowerment strategies or adjusted coaching styles?
- Is there a backlash against WCP in youth sport? If so, why and what are its effects?
- Many critics argue that we cosset young people too much (Furedi 2001), so what might be the costs and benefits of reducing WCP in youth sport?
- If WCP is perceived as irrelevant to elite youth sport, can we identify a performance rationale for it?
- How far is Long Term Athlete Development a determining process for talented young athletes? To what extent do they consent to participate and can they opt out, or opt in and out?
- How does youth sport intersect with the key life transitions of school/work and home/independent living?

## **Conclusions**

Because we cling to rose-tinted interpretations of sport as morally pure, we are all the more shocked, annoyed or even angry when sport is defiled by clear moral breaches. They are deemed to pollute its purity. In my view, sport has wrongly been cast as a singular vehicle for good when in fact is an ideal, all-terrain vehicle for good, bad and ugly. This is not a new idea: recognition of

racism, sexism, homophobia and disability discrimination in sport has fuelled the sociology of sport for the past 30 years. Why then, is child abuse such a late-comer, and why is there, even now, reluctance in some sporting bodies and some corners of the sport science community to address it?

My answer is simple: the mix of sport + children gives us an emphatically 'pure' space in the cultural landscape (religion + children is perhaps similar in this regard). The presumed 'purity' of sport plus the presumed 'innocence' of children and young people means that both as sport practitioners and as sport scientists we have averted our gaze from the violations associated with child abuse. Why? Because to acknowledge such violations would require us, at best, to reconstitute sport and, at worst, to abandon it.

## Notes

1. "The term "lustration" derives from the Latin for "purification." In the transitional justice literature, it refers to a means by which some countries deal with a legacy of human rights abuses through the mass disqualification of those associated with the abuses under the prior regime." Eric Brahm June 2004 [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/lustration/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/lustration/) (Retrieved 7 Aug 2006)

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