

Spoilsports: Understanding and Preventing Sexual Exploitation in Sport

By Celia H. Brackenridge. Published 2001 by Routledge, London. (304 pp., £60.00 hardback, £19.99 paperback)

Reviewed by Katherine J. Grahn, Hardhorn, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire, UK

Participation in sport is supposed to enhance an individual's mental, physical and spiritual health and "bring out the best in us" (p. 243). Yet, as the shocking number of incidents of sexual abuse depicted in *Spoilsports: Uncovering and Preventing Sexual Exploitation in Sport* suggests, the consequences of participation may be otherwise. The world of sport has been slow to recognize that sexual exploitation can and does occur and it is taking high profile cases, such as Sheldon Kennedy and Paul Hickson, in combination with pioneering work of researchers such as Celia Brackenridge, Sandra Kirby, and Helen Lenskyi to break the prevalent "not-in-my-back-yard" attitude ("NIMBY-ISM") of the wider sporting community.

Brackenridge's book has two main aims: to fill the scholarly vacuum on sexual exploitation in sport and to review, shape, and inform policy and practice. Brackenridge's bottom line is an "unashamedly political agenda, which is to bring about change in the way sport is structured and managed" (p. 5). The book is divided into two major sections. The first section (Parts I and II) serves as an introduction and critical review of the empirical and theoretical research conducted to date. It includes an historical trace of sexual exploitation, epidemiological data, (sub) cultural explanations, typologies of offenders, etiological investigations, risk factors, myths and stereotypes. The second section (Parts III and IV) offers the reader a critical outline and analysis of policy and practice. These chapters include anti-harassment checklists, frameworks for policy and action plans for organizations.

Sexual exploitation is a highly complex problem—one that cannot be neatly categorized into a single academic discipline. Thus, Brackenridge draws upon research and literature from an array of social scientific disciplines including sociology, clinical psychology, criminology; and feminist, cultural, social and policy studies. In fact, it is because of the multi-disciplinary nature of the book that it represents the first comprehensive and indispensable resource on sexual exploitation in sport. It covers a vast amount of research, theories, literature and evidence in a small amount of space. Yet, despite the fact that one would assume work of this magnitude would consist largely of review material, only relevant to the academic scholar, Brackenridge's work has many important practical implications for sports policy makers and managers. Most of the major issues and concepts that relate to discussions of sexual exploitation are covered, including discussions of power, terms such as "victim" or "survivor," and minorities (e.g., the disabled and male survivors). Brackenridge chooses to employ the term "sexual exploitation" rather than sexual abuse, which effectively covers all forms of ambiguous behaviour from harassment to abuse and ultimately eliminates the "grey area" that exists by implication. Of particular note is Brackenridge's notion of the sexual exploiter as a "predator" (Chapter 7) rather than "offender" or "paedophile." The notion of the predator underscores the significance of individual responsibility without ignoring sociocultural influences. It also highlights a key stage in the abuse process known as "grooming" whereby a predator chooses whom to abuse and gradually breaks down the

athlete's boundaries and barriers to resistance so that the athlete may not even realize where and when the abuse first occurred.

Brackenridge has an impressive awareness of recent work in progress on a global level. Another strong point is that mainstream literature is always placed within the context of sport through the use of specific case studies and examples. By the same token, the reader is encouraged to look beyond the sporting situation to the wider sociocultural domain. Key authors in the field of sexual abuse such as Finkelhor and Wolf feature often and their work is supported with "evidence" gleaned from survivors, legal cases and even abusive coaches themselves. When information and data are lacking Brackenridge bridges the gap by conducting her own empirical research, always clearly outlining her methodologies and using her data to support her theories. Chapter 8, *Managing Myself*, describes Brackenridge's own personal experiences as a researcher and illustrates that conducting research on any "sensitive" topic is an extremely difficult and unpopular task due to secrecy, stigmatization and the responses of stakeholders and organizations to data publication. Brackenridge's aim to eradicate sexual exploitation in sport underpins all her research, despite what often appears to be at great sacrifice to her own emotional health. In this chapter, Brackenridge does a service to other researchers in the area by warning them of the many challenges that lie ahead. Whilst not wanting to detract from her admirable task however, I would argue that this chapter might scare other researchers away from a desperately under-researched area. It is left with the reader to decide whether this is the case.

Chapters 10 and 11, *Making Policy* and *Making Policy Work*, are noteworthy for their critiques of current approaches to preventing sexual abuse in sport in several different countries. Particular emphasis is placed upon Canadian research as they are currently at the forefront of work in this area. These chapters are rich in specific, practical suggestions for future improvements for policy makers. However, if one of Brackenridge's aims is to help to prevent sexual exploitation in sport then the book must include a more comprehensive section on the effects and indicators of sexual abuse in athletes. Although effects and indicators of abuse were alluded to, these were in passing and scattered throughout the text. A dedicated chapter on indicators and effects of sexual abuse is required in order to enhance early recognition and intervention.

Spoilsports specifically aims to reach academics, those managing sports practice, administrators, coaches, athletes and other stakeholders (p. 7). However, Brackenridge may be trying to do too much and reach too many. The chapter *Mind your Language* effectively discusses the terms of abuse that all her audiences can follow. However, at times Brackenridge doesn't mind her own language when she discusses post-modernism, structuralism, process sociology, agency/structure debate and ethical relativism, and the like. Indeed, in the introduction to the book the sentence: "If all this sounds rather too structural or even determinist for those of a post-modern persuasion" (p. 1) may make some of her potential readers place the book back on the shelf in the bookstore even though the bulk of the book is very readable. It is a great shame that arguably the two most important chapters in a book—the introduction and conclusion will be the most taxing for non-academics. If her work is intended to be for the breadth of audience it suggests, then a glossary or boxed section offering a paragraph of definitions and explanations is needed to maintain the user-friendly format. I would argue whether athletes and parents would be tempted to read this book otherwise.

Overall, the book would be an excellent resource and supplemental text for graduate students and researchers interested in sport from a sociological, political, feminist, and psychological perspective. It would also be an ideal starting point for those studying sport management or

policy analysis. Undergraduates may find the book too specific and hard going in places. However, it may encourage course leaders to include a module specifically covering sexual exploitation in sport in their syllabus. For students and researchers completing reviews of literature in this area, this book is a core text since it presents all the major research articles, categorized tables of information and research and well-illustrated figures that exemplify theories. The book is completed with appendixes of useful web sites and practical resources of interest to anyone requiring personal help, additional information or research.

Brackenridge's work will undoubtedly provide awareness and focus much-needed attention on sexual exploitation in sport. It is a thorough and detailed review and analysis of theoretical and practical research, which leaves few stones unturned. I would have liked Brackenridge's book to have been available to me when I as a graduate student, researched the topic of sexual abuse in sport myself. It is essential reading for anyone working in this area and it will be the authoritative and definitive resource on sexual exploitation in sport for many years to come. Hopefully, the book will spur others to research the issue and the underlying barriers that allow sporting institutions to maintain the façade of NIMBYISM.

Spoilsports: Understanding and Preventing Sexual Exploitation in Sport

By Celia H. Brackenridge. Published 2001 by Routledge, London. (284 pp., \$135 hardback, \$49.95 paperback)

Reviewed by Erica Berman, Department of Exercise Sciences, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

The image of the predatory male coach of female athletes is now well established in Western sport, and this book does nothing to dispel that image. Brackenridge points out that several decades of research have demonstrated institutionalized patriarchy, sex discrimination and harassment in male dominated environments such as sport. Nevertheless, policy responses and organizational restructuring in sport have lagged behind other milieux in western society. More recently, the problem of sexual exploitation in sport entered the spotlight due to a moral panic created by several high profile cases in the media. Little information on the issue, however, has left a deficit of resources to promote reparatory action.

In her book, *Spoilsports: Understanding and Preventing Sexual Exploitation in Sport*, Celia Brackenridge (Professor of Sport and Leisure at Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education), attempts to provide both an information resource and guidebook to "bring about change in the way sport is structured and managed." *Spoilsports* is intended for all interested academics and policy makers, as well as those working directly in sport (i.e., administrators, coaches, athletes, etc.) who endeavor to address sexual exploitation through a restructuring of the institution.

Clearly, Brackenridge is both an academic expert and an anti-harassment advocate. She has studied sexual abuse and child protection in sport for over ten years. Brackenridge is also a former international athlete and captain of the England and Great Britain lacrosse teams, a Staff Tutor for the National Coaching Foundation in the U.K., a member of England's Research Committee for the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA), and she convenes the Sexual Harassment in Sport Task Force Three on behalf of Womensport International.

Her research is drawn from a variety of sources, spanning numerous academic disciplines, specific fields of study and industrial applications. The book is divided into four parts. The first two are intended to introduce and review the existing research on sexual exploitation in

sport, examining the empirical data and several theoretical frameworks. Parts Three and Four provide a review of policy and practice, examining how sports leadership might be transformed and sexual exploitation might be prevented.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this work is how explicitly the author divulges her biases and then addresses and notes all of the foci and omissions of her research. The book excludes a discussion of harassment in terms of race or ethnicity, explains Brackenridge, because there has been no substantive research on the area within sport (p. 6). She does not delineate between adult and child very often because athletes are often treated like children and are virtually powerless, regardless of age. Using the term “sexual exploitation” rather than harassment or abuse may seem unusual, but it is perfectly consistent with the book’s premise: “‘Sexual exploitation’ has been proposed as a more politically powerful term, one which confronts head on the abuser’s responsibility for his [sic] own actions.” (p. 35). Finally, she justifies her use of the male pronoun when referring to abusers as due to both a paucity of research on sexual exploitation perpetrated by females in sport as well as data showing that only a minority of positions of power are held by women in sport. Whether or not the reader agrees with her arguments, one cannot deny that Brackenridge has made a valiant attempt to be honest about her mission, forthcoming about her methodology and its limitations, and explicit about her theoretical and ideological assumptions.

Unfortunately, Brackenridge’s candid approach encourages self-indulgence, and too much time in *Spoilsports* is dedicated to personal disclosure. A whole chapter of the book discusses Brackenridge’s voice as “a lesbian engaged in a gendered research process” (p. 149) or, more specifically, “a white middle-class, lesbian engaged in sensitive research about (largely) female oppression in a (largely) male-dominated world” (p. 150). Here Brackenridge outlines steps she took during the research process to manage the constraints of her identity and social position in order to maintain the reliability of her data. Although the section might be helpful to fellow researchers, it would have been more appropriate had Brackenridge included a more concise discussion in her introduction.

As well, by addressing what she has overlooked, Brackenridge does not necessarily justify her omissions. There is evidence in recent reports that harassment of males by females may be more widespread than has been assumed (e.g., stalking, in the sport environment), and while Brackenridge discusses several high profile cases of sexual exploitation of males by males in sport she does not review sexual exploitation of females by females. Nor does she consider harassment of lesbians. Perhaps in trying to prevent her personal identity from skewing her perspective on the issue, she has let it do exactly that. Brackenridge focuses exclusively on sexual exploitation by males and neglects to address harassment based on sexual orientation.

Finally, Brackenridge’s ambition to appeal to such a wide readership risks alienating her target audience. Many stakeholders in sport will find it condescending that several parts of the book are devoted to academics while others are devoted to those working within the institution. The “non-exclusively academic” sections might not be as accessible as intended because they are written in a relatively dense, academic style and use terminology that could be unfamiliar to a “non-social scientist.”

In sum, while *Spoilsports* provides both a necessary and sufficient resource for other researchers interested in sexual exploitation in sport, it is doubtful that the other elements of its target audience will find it useful or appropriate for their own purposes. Moreover, Brackenridge ignores important elements of sexual exploitation in sport which is not excusable simply because she admits doing so. A more complete picture of the issue might

have included a discussion of both female perpetrators and harassment of, and by, both gays and lesbians.