



Methodological and ethical limitations of interpersonal violence research in Sports and Exercise Medicine: advancing an athlete-centred approach

Yetsa A Tuakli-Wosornu ¹, Natalie R Galea,² Kirsty Forsdike,³ Jelena G MacLeod ⁴

Interpersonal violence against athletes in sport can be insidious, systemic and normalised. As such, studying interpersonal violence can be methodologically and ethically challenging for Sports and Exercise Medicine (SEM) scientists and other athlete-facing researchers.¹ We argue that a specialised approach is needed: one that is athlete-centred, trauma-informed, human-rights-based and ethics-based, accountable to the complexities of sport (figure 1) and balances the potential benefits of screening, study recruitment and population-level prevalence data, against the ethical obligation to provide safety-net environments and therapeutic resources once interpersonal violence is identified.² Here we present the need to think through the role and impact of research methodology in harm-prevention and healing among affected sportspeople at the heart of interpersonal violence research.

METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF STUDYING INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE IN SPORT

In sport, most interpersonal violence stems from the exploitation of power, real or perceived.¹ A culture of secrecy, silence and shame, often widespread in sport, is fed by entrenched power differentials in interpersonal relationships (eg, athletes, entourage, sponsors, sports organisations) and across intersectional characteristics (eg, gender, race, class, ability, age).^{1,3}

¹Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Yale University School of Public Health, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

²Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne (AUS), Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

³La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University (AUS), Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

⁴Yale Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut, USA

Correspondence to Dr Yetsa A Tuakli-Wosornu, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Yale University School of Public Health, New Haven, Connecticut, USA; yetsa.tuakli-wosornu@yale.edu

Standard positivist research practices can inadvertently replicate, reinforce or resurface existing power imbalances at the heart of many trauma experiences.⁴ This occurs because current sports injury prevention research methods primarily derive from extractive public health models, extrapolating from detailed self-report surveys and survivor testimonies to estimate problem size and scope.⁵ Developed to study accidental sports injuries, these methods may re-traumatise athlete-survivors of interpersonal violence through trauma reactivation.^{4,6,7} Further, this methodology does not guarantee anonymity or necessarily facilitate access to resources and treatment, which is an essential component of ethical trauma screening. Positivist research paradigms that identify only quantitative measurements as trustworthy, can push scientists

to use survey or screening instruments to research affected athletes. Neither are perfect: scenario-based self-report surveys cannot account for nuanced contextual interpretations of abusive behaviours, which are necessarily subjective at times; while brief generalised screening questionnaires may reduce trauma reactivation risk, but may also miss key patterns and present interpretation challenges for population-level data.^{6–8} In the context of interpersonal violence against athletes, traditional research methodologies fall at the first hurdle of public health injury prevention models. As such, we introduce considerations for advancing an athlete-centred approach.

ATHLETE-CENTRED APPROACH TO RESEARCHING INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND PREVALENCE IN SPORT

Embed human rights and research ethics principles

Athlete-centred approaches start from the position that freedom from interpersonal violence is an athlete's human right. Thus SEM research scientists must (1) adhere to human research ethical principles by minimising harm; (2) protect rights by providing transparent and safe research practices, including the provision of trigger warnings and strategies to manage potential participation-related distress; and finally (3) be accountable for

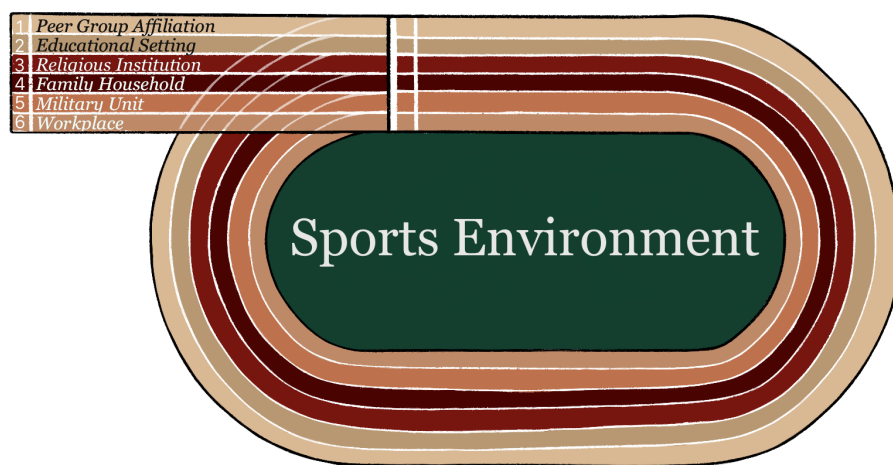


Figure 1 Similarities between the sports environment and other complex sociocultural contexts (non-exhaustive list). (1) Similar to a community-based peer group, peer pressure in sport can feel inevitable and hypnotic at times; (2) similar to an educational setting such as a classroom, learning, skill acquisition, hierarchy and personal development have primacy in the sports environment; (3) similar to a religious institution, the devotion and emotion of sport can reach levels of fervour; (4) similar to a family household, parental-type and sibling-type roles naturally occur in training groups; (5) similar to a military unit, camaraderie and a sense of country/team above self are salient in the sports environment; (6) similar to a workplace, the acquisition and application of professional skills, continual group and individual learning, and chain of command are important in the sports environment.

providing athletes access to evidence-based interventions as needed.⁴ This ensures that research practices including methodological choices and intervention development demonstrate non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice, and are underpinned by human rights and ethical principles.

Centre the athlete

Trauma-informed, human-rights-based and ethics-based research practices are athlete-centred in recognising (1) the ongoing impact that traumatic stress has on survivors; (2) the vicarious impact of traumatic stress on athletes' families and communities; and (3) the importance of multimodal approaches when exploring trauma to minimise harm to athletes. Ensuring methodologies are co-designed with relevant athletes facilitates ethical research that develops contextually appropriate outcomes.⁴ The provision of safety-net environments and therapeutic resources are important prerequisites for research teams.^{2,7}

CONCLUSION

Sports settings are traditionally upheld as 'special spaces' because they are multijurisdictional, while historically following rules of their own making. This has allowed sport to remain shielded from moral accountability and for the power imbalances that enable unethical behaviours and research practices to persist. For more appropriate interpersonal violence research, we suggest looking beyond extractive unidirectional models where participants contribute to science, but not the other way around. In addition, we must better work with trauma-informed systems and structures to minimise harm while developing effective measurement and intervention strategies.⁶

The proposed paradigm shift to human-rights-based and athlete-centred ethical

research practices consider the inherent complexities and importance of studying interpersonal violence in sport. To optimise this principled approach, methodological pluralism and concepts beyond the field of SEM must be embraced.^{4,6,7} Though the sports environment harbours elements of other sociocultural settings (figure 1) that we can learn from, an athlete-centred, trauma-informed, human-rights-based and ethics-based research blueprint that can be directly mapped from other settings onto sport does not exist. This is what athletes and scientists need to work together to build (online supplemental table 1).

Correction notice This article has been corrected since it published Online First. The third affiliation has been amended.

Twitter Yetsa A Tuakli-Wosornu @YetsaTuakli

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ORCID iDs

Yetsa A Tuakli-Wosornu <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5557-6953>
Jelena G MacLeod <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1103-6215>

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