



Understanding concussion in socio-cultural context: A media analysis of a National Hockey League star's concussion



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Sport psychology researchers have yet to explore the socio-cultural context of concussion. The aim with this study was to explore the contribution of one socio-cultural context (i.e., sport media) toward understanding the construction of meaning(s) of a sport celebrity's concussion and the implications for sport psychology.

Design: A qualitative approach was used to explore concussion as a socio-cultural issue shaped by cultural narratives (i.e., news media). The meanings and implications for how sport concussion is understood and “constructed” through a key media incident were of interest.

Method: An ethnographic content analysis (see Altheide, 1996) of the mediation of the National Hockey League's (NHL) star player Sidney Crosby's concussion from January 1, 2011 (when the concussion occurred) to June 30, 2011 (end of the NHL season) was undertaken on North American news data.

Results: The ethnographic content analysis of 68 articles revealed that Crosby's concussion and its associated meanings were constructed within a central narrative: a culture of risk and its impact on athletes. Multiple meanings of concussion within the risk narrative emerged depending on three sub-narratives: (a) Crosby's concussion as a cautionary tale, (b) Crosby's concussion as a political platform, and (c) concussion as ambiguous.

Conclusions: The culture of risk narrative raises awareness of the physical risks, physiological effects and the politics of concussion. These cultural meanings do not acknowledge/include the psychological implications/effects of concussion. This study furthers understandings of sport concussion within a socio-cultural context.

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Concussion is a significant problem in sport with prevalence rates increasing and athletes having permanent damage following their careers, or in some cases ending their careers (Benson, Meeuwisse, Rizos, Kang, & Burke, 2011). Epidemiological studies have estimated the number of concussions per year in the United States spanning sport and recreational activities to be 1.6–3.8 million cases (Benson et al., 2011; Daneshvar, Nowinski, McKee & Cantu, 2011). As awareness of the potential dangers of sport concussion has increased, so have the guidelines for concussion management and return to play (Goodman & Gaetz, 2002; Mainwaring & Trenerry, 2012; McCrory et al., 2009). In addition to the media attention (see Anderson & Kian, 2012) and awareness being paid to concussion in contact sports (see Amin, 2012; Benson et al., 2011; Wennberg & Tator, 2003), the psychosocial implications of concussion have been explored within sport psychology. Key issues identified include emotional trauma, anger, social isolation,

depression, pain, anxiety (Barth, 2012; Bloom, Horton, McCrory, & Johnston, 2004; Caron, Bloom, Johnston, & Sabiston, 2013) and pressure on athletes to return to play (Kontos, Collins, & Russo, 2004; Mainwaring, 2012; Mainwaring, Hutchison, Bisschop, Comper, & Richards, 2010).

Research from sport sociology provides compelling evidence that psychosocial issues of sport injuries such as concussion can be further understood within the context of socio-cultural influences. This is because sport culture often encourages and/or rewards pain and injury in order for athletes to gain respect and/or puts athletic performance ahead of athlete health and safety (Nixon, 1992, 1993; Sabo, 2004; Safai, 2003; Young, 1993, 2004). Sport sociologists have termed the foregoing a *culture of risk* (see Donnelly, 2004; Nixon, 1992), whereby pain and/or injury tolerance are linked with desirable athlete-attributes of toughness, strength and commitment (Coakely & Donnelly, 2009; Donnelly, 2004; Safai, 2003). While both male and female athletes' identities, experiences and behaviours are impacted by a culture of risk (Donnelly, 2004; Nixon, 1992; Safai, 2003) male athletes who “give in” to their

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pain and/or resist playing injured have their manhood and athleticism questioned, while those who do not give into their pain are lauded and rewarded (Donnelly, 2004; Messner, 2007; Nixon, 1992, 1993; Young, 2004; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994). These views are circulated as “truths” by sport institutions, sport media and social agents (e.g., coaches), which draw upon a pain and passion narrative to frame athletes’ pain and injury as normal, reinforcing ideals that being a “real” male athlete involves bodily sacrifices within the game and/or violence toward the self (Messner, 1990, 2007; Nixon, 1992, 1993; Young, 1993). As a consequence of risk culture and these associated pain and injury meanings, athlete health and well-being may be threatened or compromised (Safai, 2003).

When interpreted within the context of risk culture, concussed athletes may experience an “urgency” to return to play, which may be linked to emotional responses, such as stress and anxiety (Barth, 2012; Caron et al., 2013). The complexity concerning return to play may be further understood by considering the meanings surrounding what concussion “is”; namely that concussion has been described as an “invisible injury” (Bloom et al., 2004; Caron et al., 2013; Fallis, 2012) because concussed athletes may have no overt physical signs (e.g., swelling, visible bruises) or symptoms showing that they have received a traumatic brain injury (Bloom et al., 2004). With no visible signs of injury, athletes may return to play because they do not perceive they are hurt, hide or downplay their injury, and/or be encouraged to return to play by others (e.g., coaches, trainers, medical staff) who may not be aware of, or fully understand, the risks to the athlete in question (Barth, 2012; Caron et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2004; Kontos et al., 2004). Framing the complexity concerning athletes’ urgency to return to play, the hiding or downplaying of injury, and/or being encouraged by others to return to play, are normative cultural ideals that circulate within sport culture – particularly in traditionally violent and aggressive sports such as hockey—concerning what it means to be a “real” tough, committed male athlete (Messner, 1990; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Young, 1993; Young et al., 1994). Known as hegemonic masculinity (see Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) male athletes receive little to no leniency to stray from taken for granted masculine ideals, norms and standards (e.g., playing through pain, not complaining when injured, using one’s body as weapon, violence toward the self) that they are held to within the sport injury complex (Anderson & Kian, 2012; Messner, 1990; Safai, 2003; Young et al., 1994).

Additional factors which may encourage return to play too soon and/or silence concussed athletes’ disclosure of psychological issues are that there is no “standard” of treatment care for concussion and that it is not generally understood or accepted that athletes with concussions require a long period of recovery time (Caron et al., 2013; Mainwaring, 2012). Again interpreted within the context of risk culture and its associated meanings, such (mis)understandings concerning the recovery time for concussion can place further pressure on athletes to return to play (Nixon, 1993; Safai, 2003; Young et al., 1994). When coupled with an “invisible” injury such as concussion that is not well-understood, notions concerning pain and masculinity within risk culture may help explain why concussed athletes return to play too soon, experience social isolation and/or emotional distress, and try to live up to masculine ideals (Anderson & Kian, 2012; Caron et al., 2013; Messner, 1990; Nixon, 1993; Sabo, 2004; Safai, 2003; Young et al., 1994).

Sport media: understanding concussion in socio-cultural context

Despite the potential of explicitly studying socio-cultural issues to extend understanding of concussion in sport psychology, studies

have not yet explored the socio-cultural construction of concussion meanings and the implications of such meanings for athletes. This point is further underscored by calls within the broader sport injury literature within sport psychology to consider socio-cultural context to further understand injury risk, response, and recovery of injured athletes (see Wiese-Bjornstal, 2010; Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, & Morrey, 1998).

One way to understand concussion within a socio-cultural context is to focus on sport media narratives within the context of key sport media incidents surrounding recognizable athletes. A recent study exploring the mediation of one star athlete’s (i.e., Aaron Rodgers) self-withdrawal from a National Football League (NFL) game after being concussed revealed that news narratives drew attention to the devastating health effects of concussion along with a “softening of masculinity” narrative (Anderson & Kian, 2012). These narratives served as forms of resistance, permitting male athletes to distance themselves from dominant cultural narratives that surround masculinity, injury and risk culture in sport. Other cultural studies scholars have advocated focussing on sport media as a cultural site to explore the representation of athletes through “key” media incidents (see Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Trujillo, 1991; Whannel, 2002). Such a focus is deemed important because the media “constructs” athletes’ identities, influencing the way(s) in which they are perceived by society and also the ways they perceive themselves (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Coakley & Donnelly, 2009; Trujillo, 1991; Whannel, 2002). It is through careful analysis of key sport media incidents (e.g., concussion of a high profile athlete) that we see how athletic identities such as those of concussed athletes are constructed and narrated (Anderson & Kian, 2012). From such analyses, we can begin to problematize the taken for granted meanings concerning concussion and the implications for athletes, opening up the possibility of narratives more advantageous for athlete health.

While the above ideas have been largely confined to the cultural studies of sport research genre, the study of athletes’ identities and sport media within sport psychology is growing (see McGannon, Hoffmann, Metz & Schinke, 2012). Such research is part of the growing genre of cultural sport psychology research (see Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009) whereby athletic identities are viewed as the product of individual, social and cultural narratives which interact to create particular meanings concerning these cultural identities (McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012; McGannon, Hoffmann, et al., 2012; Smith, 2010, 2013). In-line with what cultural studies scholars have suggested, an understanding of athlete identities and the associated psychological implications necessitates a focus on cultural narratives that (re)produce them (McGannon, Curtin, et al., 2012; McGannon, Hoffmann, et al., 2012; Smith, 2010; Sparkes & Smith, 2008), making the study of sport media in sport psychology advantageous. Further underscoring the novelty and contribution to the sport psychology literature our study makes, as far as we are aware, this is the first study to take an interdisciplinary approach (i.e., integrating sociology/cultural studies and sport psychology) to examining concussion in hockey.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the present study was to understand the meanings surrounding sport concussion and the implications for athletes in a socio-cultural context by examining sport media (i.e., news reports) narratives surrounding a concussion incident within contact sport (i.e. hockey) that happened to a sport celebrity (i.e., NHL player Sidney Crosby). An ethnographic content analysis (see Altheide, 1996) of news reports of this celebrity athlete’s

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