Non-Physical Abuse in Sports: Organizational Culture’s Role

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Non-Physical Abuse in Sports: Organizational Culture’s Role

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Health, Sport and Exercise Science,
with a concentration in Recreation & Sport Management

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of sport professionals who worked in organizations that tolerated non-physical abuse. This qualitative study used active interviewing and grounded-theory design to guide the data collection and coding efforts. The data identified emerging themes to generate essential theory. The research collected data through interviews with 10 sport professionals. This phenomenological study looked at sport professionals’ experiences who worked at private sport organizations and those that worked within a university athletic department.

Interview responses illustrated that all participants experienced comparable treatment and felt similarly to the non-physical abuse taking place. An interesting discovery was that all participants were in some degree victims of this non-physical abuse themselves.

The themes, theory, and categories provided a vivid glimpse of non-physical abuse in sports. The biggest takeaway is that abuse happens throughout the organization, not only with the athletes. In offering a delineation of the different factors that prevent individuals who work within a sport organization from speaking up about non-physical abuse this study provides new information for policy changes, coaching behaviors and administrative decision making. This research is paramount in identifying why organizational tolerance exists and why it continues.

The study recommends further research of non-physical abuse at levels of the organizational chain, continued research on the impact non-physical abuse has, and recommends what can be done for prevention.
Acknowledgements

I first would like to thank God for giving me the strength and the perseverance to endure some really terrible experiences. If it was not for my faith, I do not think I would be here or would have ever finished this dissertation. There were so many days where I questioned “why am I doing this?” but I am proud to have seen it all through.

I want to thank sport. Though I have experienced some of the greatest lows in my life I have always somehow bounced back. Sport has given me a platform to develop a resiliency that I never would have had otherwise. I had such grand ambitions, but roadblocks were constantly present that for others seemed irrelevant. However, I would have never written this dissertation or had the stimulus of thought if I had not experienced what I did.

To the survivors. This dissertation is truly dedicated to those individuals who have been abused. I channeled your strength and courage in writing this. My experiences have shaped me to be the person I am and through it all I have learned my worth and value. I hope if any victim of non-physical abuse reads this, they see their worth and value too!

To my participants. I just want to thank you all for taking the time to speak with me. Your courage and boldness to participate is bar none. Nothing can change what each of you experienced but I know you all will be game changers in making sport much better for future generations. Thank you for being who you are and for contributing to the change!

I want to thank my advisor Dr. Merry Moiseichik. Thank you for believing in me! You saw something in me during a time where I saw no hope. You have been an advocate, a supporter, a cheerleader, a mentor, and a friend advising me to write this piece of work. I can never thank you enough for all the time and effort you have invested in helping me finish this
project. Thank you for your patience and for always encouraging me to carry on! I would not have been able to do this without you!

I want to say thank you to my committee, which includes Dr. Stephen Dittmore, Dr. Valerie Hunt, and Dr. Jean Henry. Thank you all for joining me on this journey. Each of you have known bits and pieces of what led to this topic, but I could not have written this without your guidance and support. I am truly grateful for all of your help over the years and am proud of what we have created together! Thank you for all of the incredible opportunities, mentorship, the projects we have collaborated on, and for endless support.

To the recently esteemed Dr. Kibaek Kim! I cannot thank you enough for helping me finish this dissertation! You were an integral part of this project and being a primary supporter throughout the entirety of this program. I am so glad I had you to go along with me on this PhD journey!

Lastly, I want to thank my family. As a first-generation student I would never have thought I would be the first in my family to have earned a doctorate degree. I always dreamt of being an Olympic Champion but walking across that stage being inducted as a Doctor Ian O’Rourke will be just as sweet! I can’t thank you all enough for being there to support me throughout all this. You know how challenging it has been at times, but I cannot thank you all enough for helping me see this through. I love you guys!
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Sport has the capacity to inspire, unite and empower people. It has the ability to create hope. For many, it is often much more than just a game. Countless individuals have felt the life-changing impact that sport can provide. We often get caught up in all the glamor of Olympic glory that includes the chase for gold, first place finishes, trophies, and the credibility that comes with being the best. We place athletes, coaches, and athletic programs on pedestals for their achievements in sport. Oftentimes, humanity even worships, glorifies, and idolizes the players and coaches for their incredible feats displayed on the field.

But what is often not discussed is the abusive side of sport. The aspect of sport that, for decades, has been swept under the rug. It has not been until recent media coverage and athletes speaking up that any exposure to this issue has even been a consideration.

In 2020, Washington DC’s Leading Local News WUSA did a cover story on former Olympic Gold Medalist Dominique Dawes. Dominique is known to many as a hero and as a member of the gold medal winning US Olympic Women’s Gymnastics team in Atlanta, 1996. She was the first black female gymnast to every win an Olympic Medal in the sport. But this article was not on the history she had made or the accolades she achieved; it was on an issue that is emerging nationwide in relevance to the improper treatment of athletes. The maltreatment of athletes has led to the growing media coverage of non-physical abuse. Dominique stated

While I might have reached the pinnacle in the sport, it was a very harmful environment, physically, verbally, emotionally and it’s not worth the sacrifice, it’s not worth the cost. They rewarded coaches for abusive behavior, for physical, verbal and emotional abusive behavior, that behavior resulted in us winning a gold in 1996 and making history, however, it’s not worth the cost.

-Dominique Dawes 3-time Olympic gymnast
(McBride, S., 2021, March 3. Para. 2)
Dominique spoke for a sizeable number of athletes who have suffered or fallen victim to non-physical abuse. Recent media headlines have found themselves immersed in scandals revolving around non-physical abuse.

Abuse in sports is not uncommon, but it has been something that has been neglected for decades. Harmful interpersonal experiences are commonly termed non-physical violence. Current research has looked at the psychopathological vulnerabilities of the instigator and target regarding situations of non-physical violence experienced by athletes. The construct of organizational tolerance and the lack of reporting has remained largely unanswered.

In 2016, the IOC released a Consensus Statement on harassment and abuse in sports that indicated the pervasive nature of this unfortunate occurrence identifying that there is no specific demographic that is singled out for this abuse. Non-physical violence happens to all types of individuals regardless of age, their status in sport or if they associate with a stigmatized group (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

“A stigmatized group represents a group of people who society may associate with a quality or trait, typically, negative in connotation that ultimately separates them socially from the prevailing group (Ahmendi, 2011). Often these groups are typically associated with receiving unwelcomed treatment by the dominant group (Ahmendi, 2011). However, as noted, there has been no specific trend found identifying that one group is more likely to be on the receiving end of this non-physical violence than another.

In 2017, the US Center for Safe Sport was founded to develop policies, procedures, and trainings that are geared towards prevention of abuse and misconduct (USCenterforSafeSport, 2020). The Center handles all allegations of abuse and misconduct within the National Governing bodies associated with the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee.
Recently, the US Center for Safe Sport administered SafeSport’s 2020 Athlete Culture & Climate Survey. There were 4,000 adult athletes who responded on their experiences in sport with 80% of the participants admitting they experienced some form of psychological abuse or neglect (USCenterforSafeSport, 2020).

It has been noted that one of the major reasons for the lack of progress or elimination of this type of abuse is because governing bodies ruling on these situations often deal with these situations on a case-by-case basis rather than as larger institutional issue (Roberts, et al., 2020). Non-physical violence often occurs through routine activities. These activities often involve coaching feedback and instruction. Cultivating, developing, and motivating athletes are prime reasons for this type of non-physical abusive behavior to thrive. These tactics are often used to reach performance goals. Screaming, yelling, intimidating, threatening, scolding, aggressively shaking, and berating are a few tactics that are exemplified by the coaching staff or even administrators to “motivate.” As a result, a safe place to train and compete is often not adequately ensured for the athletes. This type of non-physical abuse damages the integrity of the principles on which modern sport was founded, it harms the athletes mental, emotional, and physical well-being, and even calls into question the social contract between sport leaders and society. This social contract refers to the implicit agreement made by sport leaders to ensure social benefits for those who engage in all aspects of the sport industry. Turning a blind eye to the abusive behaviors, and the lack of accountability to correct these acts illustrates the injustices apparent in sport. Legally, the tolerated acts discussed in this paper are deemed socially and morally unacceptable organizational behaviors with legal implications in corporate America but have been “acceptable” in the sporting arena (Roberts, et al, 2020). Here lies the elephant in the room, as it is often known this type of injustice is happening, but no one is doing anything about
it. The environment in which athletes train and compete can affect their health and performance in negative and/or positive ways. As illustrated in the USA Gymnastics case there has been a tendency by organizations and administrators to cover up the allegations being made. It is said that psychological, physical, and sexual abuse can cause some of the most serious negative effects (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Stirling, 2008) making it paramount to rectify the situation.

The ability to understand the structural and social mechanisms located within sport organizations that allow for non-physical violence to be activated, tolerated, and accepted is limited. As mentioned prior, often rulings on these types of situations are based on specific examples of individuals or individual cases rather than the consideration of the overall system or the organizational culture itself (Roberts, et al., 2019). As a result, there is a huge gap in research in deciphering why these occurrences of non-physical violence in sport take place and why such practices have been tolerated.

In general, research on non-physical abuse is limited but current available research has focused its efforts on the individual athlete. There has been limited research on the role of support coaches, staff, and their involvement concerning non-physical abuse within the overall sporting organization.

**Background of the Problem**

It is important to understand the organizational factors that may reinforce non-physical violence. Recent literature has sought to develop theories of behavior regarding factors of aggression and how to counter incidents of non-physical violence in sport (Roberts, et al., 2019). Developing a systematic approach of evidence-based strategies to counteract non-physical violence and protect athletes from harm, safeguard their human rights and sustain the integrity of sport is the necessary next step for change.
Statement of the Problem

There is an ongoing issue within sport organizations where abuse in sports has become a normalized practice. It has become rampant how standardized emotionally abusive coaching practices in sport have become and tolerated by officials, parents, and coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Despite recent media coverage and awareness to the issue, abuse is still ongoing and harmful to those who receive it (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). This problem has negatively impacted the athletes who participate in sport; mentally, emotionally, and physically. The culture of winning has created a cycle that perpetuates abusive tactics depicting them as standard within sport. More specifically, no researchers to date have explored assistant coaches and support staff experiences of emotional abuse within a sport organization in efforts to understand what motivates individuals to tolerate abuse or an understanding of what enables it. The majority of research on abuse and its impact has been on elite athletes’ experiences in which assimilation often happens prior to participation in elite sport (Jacobs, et al. 2017; Miossi, 2021) Examining the design, structure and management of elite sport programs will help clarify gaps in the research surrounding involved staff members.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine staff members who were a part of elite sport training programs where non-physical abuse was occurring and to identify what aspects of organizational culture allowed for it to occur.

Significance of the Study

There is an ongoing issue within sport organizations where abusive tactics are being tolerated throughout various levels of sport organizations. Most recent and relevant research has been conducted on the athlete’s perspective. This research is novel because it focuses on participants’
perspectives who served as coaches and support staff at respected sport institutions. Often these administrators look at "abuse allegations" as isolated incidents when it is a systematic issue within the entirety of the organization. By understanding what is happening behind the scenes in programs where NPA or NPV (non-physical abuse or non-physical violence) occurs, administrators can begin to identify the symptoms and make purposeful changes to stop it.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What are athletes’ and staff members’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences of non-physical abuse within organizational culture?

RQ2: Why do participants think that non-physical abuse was a tolerated method of coaching and administering?

RQ3: What made it difficult for participants to report non-physical abuse?

RQ4: How do participants think non-physical abuse in sports can be prevented and addressed?

**Definitions of Terms**

*Organizational behavior*- The way in which people interact, communicate, and collaborate within an organizational structure (McNamara, 2005).

*Organizational culture*- The collection of values, expectations, and practices that guide and inform the actions of all team members in an organization (SHRM, 2022).

*Organizational norms*- An aspect of organizational culture that include expectations, habits, and ritual practices by those who are a part of the organization (SHRM, 2022).

*Power structures*- The hierarchy that encompasses the most powerful people in an organization (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

*Social values*- Criteria that individuals and social groups employ to identify goals and shape the structure of social order in a group setting (i.e. what is acceptable v not acceptable) (Tsirogianni, S., Park, E., & Sammut, G., 2014).

*Factors driving abuse*- Environmental pressures that could lead to the possibility of abusive behaviors to occur (The Administration for Children and Families, 2019)
Non-physical abuse- Abuse occurring through yelling, intimidation, physical threats, and forceful exertion of exercise that leads to a physical injury inflicted upon an individual that often results in a traumatic condition (Worlock., et.al., 1986).

Culture- The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a social group (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

Abuse- A corrupt practice or custom that involves improper or excessive use or treatment that negatively affects another person or one’s one-self. This is not limited to verbal, physical, mental, and emotional attack (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

Power-imbalance- When one partner or group of partners can dominate decision-making or asserts power in ways that disadvantages other partners in a situation. Often decisions are made by one partner that are not in the best interest towards achieving the partnership objectives (The Partnering Initiative, 2022).

Winner takes all mentality- Refers to a mindset in which the best performers can capture a very large share of the available rewards (Frank & Cook, 2013).

Conformity- Compliance with standards, rules, and laws often seen as behaviors in accordance with socially accepted conventions or standards (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

Dominant social values- Views and beliefs that are widely shared among most of a society (Jilks & Soules, 2022).

Organizational tolerance- Permissiveness, deliberate or not, of the responsible staff concerning the negative acts that could take place in the organization. Acceptance of wrongful behaviors because of organizational social norms (Perez-Lazzabal, et. al., 2019).

Role conflict- Occurs when workers are given different and compatible roles at the same time or their role overlaps with another worker or work group. The greater the role conflicts the higher the likelihood of a worker experiencing work-related stress (Mercer, 2019).

Ambiguity- The quality of being open to more than one interpretation, inexactness. For research this term refers to miscommunicated roles and responsibilities of an employment position (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

De-personalization- Periods of feeling disconnected or detached from one’s body and thoughts while being deprived of one’s sense of identity (Meriam-Webster, 2022).

Intensification- The action of making or becoming intense. In a work environment this term refers to the increasing amount of effort an employee must invest during work that results from increased pressure and societal changes (Bunner, & Korunka, 2018).

Deficient internal communication- The inability to communicate efficiently within an organization or social group (SHRM, 2022).

Professional uncertainty- When expertise is challenged, or job status is questioned (Wennberg, et al., 1982).
**Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study is that the unit of analysis will be confined to individuals with a background of having worked within a sport organization that tolerated non-physical abuse. Thus, the study may not be applicable to sport professionals who do not identify or admit that they worked within an organization where non-physical abuse was present. Furthermore, the study considers participants from two separate organizations and sports. Though the data showed great commonalities in responses, experiences may vary in other organizations and sports. It can be difficult to authenticate qualitative research as it offers “limited generalizability of findings” (Creswell, 1994, p.158). This study made observations and explored ten sport professionals. As this area of research in non-physical abuse evolves, there may be new experiences, categories, and meanings that arise. The possibility that sport professionals who were interviewed could be passing-on their own biases and prejudices and there could be some difficulty in replicating the study since it is a unique group of people from two different sport organization environments. Lastly, the relationship between researcher and participant could be a factor as an established level of trust was already present. This was a phenomenological study in which the researcher used to be employed at both organizations and therefore had inside knowledge that non-physical abuse was occurring.

Lastly, the researcher knew the various staff members well enough to allow them to be open to discuss the topic. The researcher was a former elite-level athlete, coach, and victim of the non-physical abuse discussed in this paper. The researcher and research team made every effort possible to ensure an unbiased lens. Ultimately, that is a delimitation that is left in the discretion of the reader.
Limitations

Although great insight is derived from qualitative data collected through interviews of primary sources, there are evident limitations. Identifying other factors that contributed to this phenomenon is limited to the perspectives of participants. Though connections can be made, it is difficult to prove the extent and impact those connections hold on an organizational structure without further research. It would be highly recommended for a quantitative study to be conducted to substantiate the current discoveries strengthening the qualitative data collected.

It is also important to note that it was quite difficult for some participants to admit that what they experienced was non-physical abuse. Admitting that they were a victim of non-physical abuse put confronted their reality that most had suppressed. One further limitation could be the method in which the study was conducted. Though phone interviews were sufficient in gathering data, an in-person interview may have provided a richer and more personal response.

Summary

This study sought to understand what restricts sport professionals from reporting non-physical abuse using a qualitative grounded theory. As most previous work on non-physical abuse in sport has focused on the impact it has had on athletes, there is a knowledge gap as to why sport professionals tolerate the abuse. The results of this study may help future administrators, coaches, athletes, stakeholders, legislators, and most of all sport professionals.

Four more chapters follow. Chapter II is a comprehensive review of the literature on research done on non-physical abuse in sport. In Chapter III, the topics discussed consist of the research design and specific details of how the study was conducted. Chapter IV provides the results, followed by an interpretation of the data in Chapter V.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Though the area of non-physical abuse has grown in media attention there is still limited research that has been done on the issue. Most published works focus more on the athlete than any other member of the sport organization. These studies offer valuable insight on the impact of non-physical abuse but do not seek reasons why it continues to happen.

The goal of this literature is to summarize the current research that has been done on non-physical abuse (NPA) in sports and to understand why a culture of tolerance exists. This literature review provides an in-depth analysis of the prevalence and impact non-physical abuse has had on the sporting community. Included in the literature are barriers that have been considered for why non-physical abuse continues to be prevalent, discussing organizational culture, organizational tolerance, and power dynamics. Finally, this study seeks to develop a theory for what prevents sport professionals from speaking up.

Prevalence of Non-Physical Abuse in Sport

Abuse can exhibit itself in several ways including psychological, physical, and sexual displays (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Sojo, et al., 2016). The term non-physical abuse explicitly identifies the deliberate nature of violence that does not necessarily always include physical harm. This is commonly observed when a coach aims to improve an athlete's performance through aggressive tactics such as screaming, shouting, berating, or any form of intimidation. These examples of aggressive methods show an inclination for non-physical violence (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004).

Deliberate, prolonged, repeated, harmful behavior with no physical contact describes psychological abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). This type of abuse reinforces all forms of non-physical violence and is often associated most with emotional abuse as articulated from previous
research. Encompassing a broader scope, psychological abuse often includes harm not only targeted at one’s emotions but also affects their cognitions, values, and beliefs about oneself and others (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Humiliation, scapegoating, rejection, isolation, threats, being ignored or denied attention and support are all forms of psychological abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008, 2013). Research has found that psychological abuse in sports is quite prevalent with findings indicating 44% (Vertommen et al., 2016) to 75% (Stafford, et al., 2015) of athletes have experienced such abuse while participating in sport.

Using physical force to cause injury indicates physical abuse (Grange & Kerr, 2010; Pinheiro, et al. 2014; Tjønndal, 2016). Kicking, bodychecking, forced or mandated age- or-physique-inappropriate training loads, training when injured or in pain, or systematic doping practices are prime examples of physical abuse experienced by athletes in sports. In some cases, there is a sexual element attached to the abuse. Any misconduct of a sexual nature is classified as sexual abuse (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Leahy, et al., 2004). Sexist comments and gesturing, unwanted sexual attention, and non-penetrative and penetrative sexual assault are all behaviors that would fall under classification of sexual abuse (O’Neil, et al., 2018).

Extensive documentation has been collected regarding the long-term impacts of non-physical violence and its negative consequences experienced by athletes. Psychological turmoil, physical ailments, poor-performance, injury, depression, marginalization, trauma summarizes the types of aftershock athletes suffer from experiencing non-physical violence (Stafford et al., 2015).

**Grounds for non-physical violence in Organizations**

Recent studies by social and behavioral scientists have discovered that workplace harassment and abuse are associated with several organizational factors that could show great
relevance within the realm of sport. These factors can be broken down into structural, social, and organizational stressors. Structural factors including power-imbalance, winner-take all rewards, and isolation, are examples associated with social factors linked to the notions of conformity, dominant values, perceived instrumental effects, and organizational tolerance, which indicate social stressors. Lastly, these factors are then compounded by organizational stressors that are applied methods of role conflict, ambiguity, de-personalization, intensification, deficient internal communication, and professional uncertainty that cultivate a culture of tolerance for acts of non-physical violence (Roberts, et.al, 2019).

The tiered nature of the relationships between different members and the control of valuable resources is associated with power imbalance. This power imbalance includes the performance reward systems in a winner-take-all rank order format and the level of physical and psychological isolation in organizational operations (Mountjoy et al., 2016). These characteristics are often evident in environments where non-physical abuse exists (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Specifically experienced in sport is the disparity of power imbalance. Often the dynamics of power are seen in a social relationship that takes place when there is some sort of condition of inequality. This happens when an individual or individuals in a particular situation have more opportunities or hold greater financial prowess, societal status, etc. This can also be seen in the amount of capital or assets a person, or an institution holds. Nevertheless, there is a perceived difference between the two parties associated. Power is often understood as influence. Often this dichotomy of power imbalance in the sporting world rests between some social actor often an athlete, assistant, or mentee coach, which can be overcome by another actor most noted is the coach (Pfeffer, 1981; Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Zehntner & McMahon, 2018). An instigator-
target relationship occurs when one social actor has control over the strategic and valued resources on which the other actor depends and who is often deprived of it by the existing power imbalance (French & Raven, 1959). Power imbalance is a key predictor of situations involving workplace mistreatment (Ilies, et al., 2003) and “is a necessary aspect of non-physical violence because without it the target could easily resist the aggression of the instigator” (Salin, 2003, p.20). These types of social relationships are usually complex as much of the relationship has arguably been conditioned in some way by prior existing institutionalized philosophy.

In sport, the institution typically associated with the governing sport body or athletic department puts a lot of pressure on the coach to produce winning programs. Legitimate authority to demand compliance, holding the ability to reward and punish along with identification and attraction towards the instigator (in this case the coach) serves as an external source of pressure on the coach/athlete relationship. The esteem afforded to individuals based on their membership to high status groups are formal and informal sources of power all granted to a sport agency in control (French & Raven, 1959). Intimidation, coercion, and manipulative tactics are often used by an instigator when a power imbalance is apparent. A situation like this often leads to the target of abuse being pushed into a position of helplessness and defenselessness when an instigator has exerted control. Historically, these types of situations of abuse have been brushed off, which the victim fears consequence to report, or they have been socially programmed to think they are being weak (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

Often seen in sport are established reward systems carried out by a winner take all rank order format that instills unintended and intended consequences. The winner in this situation gains an excessively large payout in comparison to the level of performance of other competitors (Leeds & Von Allmen, 2016). Winners typically reap great benefits, from status, to fame, and
even prize money, and are often seen as a token of national pride and grandeur. Failure to win can result in severe punishment that could lead to a loss of job, public shame, and even the potential for reputational damage (Roberts, et al., 2019). “A winner-take-all reward system may induce coaches and athletes to use whatever means necessary, including abusive methods, to achieve results” (Frank & Cook, 2013, p.131-154). When medals and results are utilized as a metric to determine future funding and project future success, leadership within organizations may turn a blind eye to non-physical violence (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

Physical and psychological isolation is another organizational structural factor related to non-physical violence that is often prevalent (Vertommen et al., 2016). When training occurs in remote locations, access to training is restricted, training or competition schedules separate them from social or familial support, or when athletes are socially ostracized by their coach or members of the team within the “sport context” these examples are often indications of isolation (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Potentially abusive training methods or sexually exploitive tactics are more likely to happen when isolation is present because it allows for a lack of oversight in the training environment making it even more difficult for athletes to reach out to third parties to seek support in dealing with abuse. As a result, athletes are more vulnerable to initial and repeated instances of abuse because they are not supported or do not realize the resources they have and therefore are more apt to accept the circumstances (Roberts, et al., 2019).

**Organizational Culture: Behaviors, stressors, social factors & structure**

Workplace behaviors surrounding beliefs, norms, and values are some of the most widely studied organizational driving factors to articulate prosocial and antisocial practices (Organ & Ryan, 1995; Sojo et al., 2016). Conformity to dominant values, beliefs about the instrumental effects of non-physical violence, and organizational tolerance are primary factors that lead to the
dissemination of non-physical violence witnessed and experienced in sport (Ilies, et al., 2003). A credulous approval and an undisputed pledge to core sport values summarizes what often takes place in a sporting culture. This type of acceptance and/or allegiance to core values of a sporting culture makes it easy to accept ethics that affirm high performance including the need to make sacrifices, overcome obstacles and adhere to a culture of masculinity through values of dominance, toughness, and the suppression of emotions (Roberts, et al., 2019). As Hughes and Coakley said such acceptance “represents shared, persistent beliefs about what is most important to sport, indicating desired states, and informing goal setting and striving,” which often trump the wellbeing of the athlete (1991).

A main reason for not reporting non-physical acts of abuse has been fear. From previous research the threat of abuse or actual abuse has in some realms of sport become a tactic for exercising control and teaching discipline to nonconforming members of the group (Salin, 2003). At its core of stereotypical masculinity, values of aggression and dominance are witnessed, accepted, and expressed outwardly in the sporting arena and are demonstrated at games, practices, or during workouts (Stafford et al., 2015). Often a culture of compliance is established by coaches and other powerful influencers who use their positional status to abuse because of the limited scope of resistance when a deference of expertise exists. Athletes, assistant coaches, or supporting staff are far more unlikely to speak up when a culture of compliance is engrained (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

One of the biggest caveats is that there are some coaching philosophies and motivation tactics that promote non-physical violence as a “functional” means of motivating athletes and pushing them to perform at their best (Brodsky, 1976). These types of beliefs provide reason for why abuse in sport occurs and is perpetuated. The use of normative social learning processes
such as when a coach emphasizes or explains how “tough coaching” allowed former athletes to achieve success instills within the athlete the belief that abuse is instrumental for performance success (Bandura, 1973). Through the cognitive process of rationalization non-physical violence is reframed within the athlete’s mind to be useful for performance gains and essential to attain success.

Non-physical violence [abuse] can be used with the intention to increase drive (e.g., “pump up” an athlete, increasing focus, adrenaline, effort), to deter future failure (e.g., punishment for poor performance), to maintain interpersonal control (e.g., control interpersonal relations through fear), to test resilience and commitment (e.g., test capacity to cope with challenging situations), to develop toughness (e.g., abuse as a legitimate tool to develop mental and physical strength and endurance), to increase internal competition (e.g., creating favorites or disharmony between team or squad members), and to impair competitor performance (e.g., athletes using non-physical violence on-field as a tactic to reduce the performance of a competitor and increase their chances of winning) (Roberts, et al., 2019, p. 11).

**Organizational Culture of Tolerance**

Sport has cultivated an arena where non-physical abuse has become widely accepted and tolerated because of organizational norms of tolerance for harassment and abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The lack of initiative to establish formal standards of acceptable behavior, the failure to punish unacceptable behaviors, the disregard for setting consequences for behavioral standards when they have been breached are often a direct result of coaches or administrations lack of initiative to prevent abuse (Brodsky, 1976). Social condemnation and bystander intervention
become less likely to occur due to a lack of clarity in appropriate behavior and enforcement through formal authority structures of an organization (Bowling & Beehr, 2006).

This type of organizational culture makes it more difficult for an individual to report or feel that a situation is dire enough to discuss with administration. When leaders neglect their responsibilities, the door opens for instigators to assume that abusive tactics are acceptable which ultimately provides an environment for the target of the abuse to be more likely to accept it when it takes place (Brodsky, 1976, p 12). Targets/victims of the abuse begin to believe that they are the ones to blame when abuse takes place and often are less likely to speak up because they do not believe their complaints will be taken seriously or feel that they may be at a greater risk of backlash if they do (Sojo et al., 2016). Therefore, a culture of silence transpires, and the abuse is not condemned due to the fear of backlash (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Organizational stressors in association with organizational structures and social factors that enable abuse provide the essential circumstances for non-physical violence to occur. When administration, coaches, or staff place demands or expectations on members of the organization it ultimately threatens their personal resources including self-esteem, skill, physical health, and well-being in the sport environment, all of which, exemplify commonly associated organizational stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). As a result, self-regulatory resources are depleted, and resistance is reduced to such intolerable abusive behavior and treatment.

*Organizational stressors in sport might include role conflict (i.e., conflicting role-related tasks or expectations), role ambiguity (i.e., lack of clarity about role requirements), depersonalization (i.e., denial of human characteristics such as treating athletes as machines), deficient internal communication (e.g., lack of mutual conversations about tasks and goals), intensification (e.g., ever increasing demands to*
meet performance objectives), and professional uncertainty (e.g., inadequate or short-term contracts) (Roberts, et al., 2019, p.12).

Summary

Non-physical violence can be easily triggered by everyday stressors when an environment or culture condones abuse. System, structure, culture, capital, and history all play a prominent role in the subtleties of social relationships and more specifically in power dynamics. Understanding these aspects are prominent in grasping the nuances of why social relationships are so dynamic and why occurrences of abuse tend to happen. If it cannot be understood why the abuse happens, it would be difficult to develop initiatives to overcome or prevent some of the negative outcomes associated with it.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The topic of non-physical violence in sport has become a widely researched topic as of late. The current study is built on previous work by engaging in a qualitative analysis of professionals who worked within a sporting culture and tolerated non-physical violence. This qualitative study will be novel in the fact that the narratives gained will offer the perspective of individuals who had the ability to report such abuse but did not. Understanding the reason behind this phenomenon is crucial to breaking down the systematic structure that allows non-physical violence to be tolerated. Recognizing this perspective is a major piece to the continuation of tolerance and provides a greater understanding of organizational culture and the power structure that impacts it. This study aims to add significance to the current catalog of narratives of harmful interpersonal interactions experienced by athletes and sport professionals in sport cultures by providing the perspective of professionals who are a part of it yet choose to or feel powerless to do anything about it.

There are organizational factors that drive non-physical abuse that have been associated with psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. This study aims to understand their perspective, why they tolerated these forms of abuse, recognize how it affected them, and distinguish if it was even something of which they were aware.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative grounded theory phenomenological study regarding what allows for non-physical abuse to exist in sport organizations. The approach allowed for a deeper understanding of sport professionals who worked within these organizations and why they struggled to speak up against the abusive behaviors that were happening and ultimately what motivated them to be tolerant. The applicability for phenomenological study is discussed in-depth in this chapter. The research
design, including the methodology, study participants, procedures, data analysis methods, instrumentation and ethical concerns are key components of this chapter.

**Research Questions**

This study sought to build a theory in answer to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are athletes’ and staff members’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences of non-physical abuse within an organizational culture?

RQ2: Why do participants think that non-physical abuse was a tolerated method of coaching and administering?

RQ3: What made it difficult for participants to report non-physical abuse?

RQ4: How do participants think non-physical abuse in sports can be prevented and addressed?

**Methodology Selected**

A qualitative study is suitable when the goal of research is to describe a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person’s experience in a given circumstance (Stake, 2010). As outlined by Creswell (2003), when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables utilizing a quantitative approach is appropriate. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of sport professionals working in cultures of tolerance a qualitative approach was the most fitting choice.

**Research Design: Phenomenology**

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research concentrates efforts on the fundamental nature of a lived experience (Flood, 2010). This type of approach looks at a phenomenon, that can be observed, felt, or experienced by people who have different viewpoints (Flood, 2010). Conveying as closely as possible, the way a phenomenon was lived by people who participated in such an event is the main aim of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). “What” the individuals lived and “how” they experienced it is the main
description of a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). There are various research questions and topics that imply when to use phenomenology as the suitable research method for a study. Focusing on the nature and the meaning of an experience or phenomenon, described by the individuals experiencing the event of interest is key criterium for phenomenological research (Annells, 2006). Understanding the essence of a particular group of individuals’ lived experiences is how phenomenology research is most often utilized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to explore a larger concept or idea phenomenology is used (Tomaszewski et al, 2020). Phenomenological studies have been broken down into at least two different types of emphasis. Describing the phenomenon and centering efforts on establishing descriptive categories regarding the perceived real-world from participants’ narratives is the first type of emphasis (Converse, 2012; Flood, 2010). The second type of emphasis is on participants’ explanation of what happened in the phenomenon and how individuals’ meaning-making process motivated their choices to understand the meaning of the experience (Converse, 2012; Flood, 2010). This is often done using phenomenological reflection and writing.

Interviews are the primary source for data collection for phenomenological studies because phenomenology’s aim is to understand a phenomenon from the people who experienced it. Interviews can also be supported by observations and personal diaries, past and present, that related to an event. With only the people who experienced the same phenomenon, interviews conducted should be unstructured in-depth phenomenological one-on-one conversations that seek to understand an individual’s lived experience (Flood, 2010; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Groenewald, 2004).

Focusing on what participants said while describing the phenomenon is the ideal way to analyze data utilizing the phenomenological approach. This can be broken down using a few
methods. The first way is an inductive type of phenomenological reduction that allows for bracketing (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Through this process the researchers read through the entire description provided by each participant and the researcher draws awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic, commonly known as bracketing (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Researchers can develop units of meaning from highlighting specific participant responses that highlight experiences that took place within the phenomenon under study. From these highlighted units of meaning, researchers create central themes based on information that is implicit, explicit and generalizations (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Researchers consult with one another to determine central themes based on the essence of the phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al, 2020).

There are many strategies that can be applied to any qualitative study to ensure trustworthiness and rigor. Peer debriefing, member checks, audit trails, triangulation, and maintaining reflexive journals during the design and development of the research projects are paramount in upholding trustworthiness and rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

For this study phenomenology was thought most relevant because key research questions looked at participant experiences and perceptions of what they experienced and why they thought what they did. The inductive nature of phenomenology aligned well with the research study at hand.

**Grounded Theory Methodology**

This qualitative study was performed using grounded theory methodology. “Grounded theory is a respected qualitative way of moving from individual knowledge to collective knowledge” (Stake, 2010, p. 17). Grounded theory is “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Glaser and Strauss (1967) created this methodology where theory could
develop by methodically coding interviews with terms that concisely and conceptually summarize each phrase, line, or even word.

Charmaz explained that “grounded theory contains both positivist and constructivist inclinations” (2006, p. 127). Birks and Mills (2011) and Charmaz described the positivist philosophical position as a view that comes from the human experience with complete objectivity, understanding a human’s perception is imperfect. Birks and Mills and Charmaz described the constructivist philosophical position as a view that comes from relative human experience (2011). This position is comparative to their individual paradigm, influenced by society, culture, or other external influences.

Utilizing a constructivist approach this grounded theory study sought to “conceptualize the studied phenomenon to understand it in abstract terms, articulate theoretical claims, acknowledge subjectivity in theorizing, and offer an imaginative interpretation” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 127). Seeking to conceptualize the phenomenon of each participant’s experience, coding the data from the interviews, and building a theory based on the interpretation of participants’ shared experiences was the main initiative for this study.

**The Researcher**

The researcher worked in elite level sports for 15 years and was an elite athlete and coach prior. No participant had a direct relationship with the researcher that represented a conflict of interest, such as a reporting relationship, contract, or any relationship with the researcher that may have imparted bias on the research study. It is important to note that the researcher held coaching roles at both organizations utilized for this study. These were two different elite sport disciplines that had similar training environments.
Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher for this study served as the sole instrument for research. The relationship between researcher and participant was an important concern. The researcher should be aware of their own biases and take the steps to mitigate them, while weighing any sort of liabilities or advantages from using an initial literature review if effectiveness is to be achieved.

It is worth admitting the possibility that my experiences in this type of environment, as an athlete and coach who experienced this treatment firsthand could lead to a forcing of concepts upon the data. The challenge for me as a researcher was to avoid bias due to my experience in the elite level world of sport and the depths to which I lived out the non-physical abuse on which I interviewed the participants. I will admit it was very difficult to begin the data analysis process due to the trauma and triggering of emotion that this topic resonates for me personally. But, it also gave me the will and the strength to complete the project because I know nobody should have to experience unjust treatment.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) conveyed, it is important for the researcher to avoid any preconceived or assumed theory dictating the process of research. Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted that “it is impossible to completely void our minds” when the researcher and participants “share a common culture” that common experience can be used for the greater good of research (p.80). With that said, Corbin and Strauss did not suggest adding their own experience to the data but utilizing their experiences to “bring up other possibilities of meaning” or propose “something new to think about that will make us confront our assumptions about the specific data” (p.80).

The researcher generated interview questions based on the initial problem statement, the key research questions and gaps indicated by relevant literature. Interview questions also reflected the phenomenological design of this study as questions were asked based on the
vocabulary and language of the participant to effectively state questions that were relevant to participants experiences (Benner, 1994). As Giorgi, the phenomenological research stated it is best that “questions are generally broad and open ended, so the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint extensively” (1997, p. 245). Utilizing open, broad, and open-ended questions in addition to asking questions in the vocabulary and language of the individual being interviewed allowed the researcher to be attuned to the conversation and able to clarify and probe for any follow-up answers by the participant responding.

Questions were formulated to cover participants’ experiences working in the organization, what they experienced, what specifically about the situation made it difficult, and ultimately inquired to see what could be done to keep this type of situation from continuing. Questions were not mapped to any theory but targeted to areas of importance. The questions were used to explore participants' perceptions and draw out their individual story. Being attuned to participant responses allowed the researcher the ability to ask follow-up questions that could provide more novel observations on a concept. Through the usage of open-ended questions to draw out participants’ stories to show that they were providing insight that was meaningful.

During the coding process transcripts were read and re-read to look closely at words and phrases that would allow “substantive concepts hypotheses to emerge on their own” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.34). The researcher’s background provided the possibility for more creative thinking and theory generating was enhanced because of the experiences as an athlete and a coach.

**Study Participants**

The sample was drawn from a population of sport professionals consisting of former assistant coaches, strength coaches, and athletic trainers who worked closely with collegiate and elite level athletes. All participants were staff members who worked within an athletic program
that unfortunately fostered non-physical abuse. Participants ranged from 22-35 years old associating with both males and females. All participants were former athletes, coaches or competed at a high level of sport previously before accepting the position they held in the organization that tolerated non-physical abuse. Career examples included athletic trainer, assistant coach, graduate assistant coach, strength and conditioning coach, nutritionist, and associate head coach. There were two separate organizations evaluated, both had five participants, one a club sport of elite athletes and the other was a college team.

Participants were recruited through the researcher’s existing professional networks and previous employment. An initial message was sent via social media channels, email or phone call to potential participants to inquire if they would be willing to participate in a study. Upon, further conversation of interest a more formal email/message was shared seen in Appendix A to recruit participants officially.

Participants from two different organizations were interviewed and sampled. The participant sampling pool was limited to participants based on their responses to the initial conversation and interest in participation. An informed consent form, (Appendix B/C) was received from each participant prior to participating.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled to learn about relevant information. Below are highlighted questions asked during each interview. All interview questions can be found in Appendix D. The interviews took place over the course of two weeks. The researcher connected with participants initially via social media and by phone call to see if participants were interested in the study. An initial outreach to about 20 individuals was conducted with ten of those
participants responding with interest. The researcher followed with an introductory call to explain the research study further and to schedule an appropriate time to call.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th><strong>Overview of Questions asked</strong></th>
</tr>
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| **EXPERIENCES** | • What was your role in this organization?  
• When issues would arise how were those handled?  
• How did you handle those situations? |
| **TRAINING ENVIRONMENT** | • What was the method of reporting if an issue arose?  
• How were the athletes you worked with, treated?  
• Did you agree with the way these situations were handled? |
| **REPORTING** | • What kinds of things were done and were not okay?  
• Who have you talked about this to? How did they respond?  
• If you did not report this to someone higher up what restraints were in your way? |
| **FUTURE OF SPORT** | • If you were to have re-lived that elite sporting experience, what would you have done differently?  
• If you were an administrator in that environment, how would you have acted?  
• Is there anywhere else you have seen this type of behavior? |

Both the interviewer and the interview questions were the instrumentation used for this study. Memos were used to capture any research thoughts during and after each interview. The interviews were recorded electronically using an OTTER Recording software and an I-phone 6. The interviews began with open-ended questions about the participants’ initial interest in sport and their initial career interests in general. As suggested by Charmaz (2006), more intensive questions followed, with the intent to gather data with more depth on the culture, and difficulties reporting. The interview concluded with more open-ended questions, framed to invite more depth regarding participants’ thoughts on what can be done to resolve, fix, or change the culture. Each participant interview took place in a single interview session of an hour duration, scheduled upon mutual availability between researcher and participant. Each interview was transcribed by
the OTTER Recording software and then additionally by the researcher to clarify/correct any typos or incorrect statements. Interviews were conducted over the telephone.

**Procedures Followed**

Grounded theory was used to analyze the data and determine if a phenomenon was discovered during the research process. Since a theory or phenomenon emerged from the data, it was possible that some interview questions were added, or that proposed interview questions were modified during the study. As some initial themes and ideas surfaced during the first few interviews, the researcher added clarifying questions or points to subsequent interviews to explore more on the topic or gap that emerged or gain a deeper description of the overall situation. Appendix D identifies all questions that were used. Interviews were not re-conducted using the new clarifying questions or points.

The initial interview began with basic demographic questions age, sex, race/ethnicity, and years coaching/working within a sport organization. There were four sections of questions that followed. The first set of questions focused on participants’ experiences and their role within the organizations. Questions included “what was your role in the organization” and what was your overall experience like working for your employer”? Section two addressed methods of reporting issues. These questions included “what was the method of reporting if an issue took place” and how were issues handled once reported”? Section three looked at participants’ perspective on their work experience when things did get out of hand. Questions included “what kinds of things were done that were not okay” and “who have you talked to about this? Section four looked at participants’ views on preventative efforts to rectify the abuse experienced by those within the sport organization at all levels. Questions included “If you were to have re-lived that elite sporting experience, what would you have done differently” and “if you were an administrator or
a person in power in that environment, how would you have acted”. To see the complete list of questions, see Appendix D.

After each participant finished their final remarks to the questions asked, the researcher thanked them for their time, reminded them of the disclaimer, and provided an opportunity to ask any post discussion questions. For those interested it was made known that the researcher would share the final manuscript with them upon request.

Data Analysis

Coders included two doctoral students and a senior faculty member. One of the doctoral students participated extensively in youth sports growing up but had never experienced non-physical abusive tactics. The other doctoral student was a former elite level athlete, and professional coach who did directly experience non-physical abuse. The third coder was a professor of recreation and sport management who had extensive involvement working with youth sports throughout their career but had never experienced or saw this type of treatment in sport.

Coding of transcripts was completed in the order of the interviews conducted, in batches of three at a time, allowing the researcher to reflect and edit the interview questions as theories began to emerge from the data. Coding was used to help the researcher in understanding the perspectives of the participants and in analyzing their combined experiences. Codes were created during the research process, based on the data. This was done so with the purpose of analyzing the data (Urquhart, 2013). Coding was conducted manually through categorization and comparison of major themes that emerged after reading the results from the interviews. Themes were compared to one another, and previous themes presented in the literature review. Specific
examples were used to emphasize the major themes. Personal data was coded and renamed so that participants remained anonymous.

Coding the transcriptions or breaking them down into meaningful and manageable amounts of data was a critical part of the data analysis. Coding used in grounded theory was instrumental in focusing the interview analysis on the experience of the participants in a structured way. Coding helps ensure a thorough analysis of the entire interview is conducted as well as preventing the interviewer from overemphasizing the importance of any one aspect early in the study (Charmaz, 2006; Stake, 2010).

The process of analyzing, reanalyzing, and comparing new data to existing data is known as constant comparison (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart, 2013). As each phase of coding began, it was important to continue reviewing the data in previous phases so that connections were constantly being made until saturation occurred. Coding terminology used for this dissertation was adopted from Urquhart (2013) who termed the three phases of coding as open, selective, and theoretical. This section provided details about the coding procedure and how themes were developed, which ultimately aligned analysis with the specific research design.

**Open Coding**

Open coding is the phase used when each line of transcribed interview text is coded line by line (Urquhart, 2013). Line-by-line coding is a critical part of grounded theory methods (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart, 2013). It is what its name reflects, where coding each line of the transcribed interviews by using a few words to describe the data, as suggested by Urquhart (2013), Birks and Mills (2011) and Charmaz (2006). This method of coding helped the researcher focus in-depth on every interview. This method also helps instill the discipline of grounded theory where the theory emerged from the data itself.
Coding line by line in open coding typically results in many codes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart, 2013). The researcher went through the written material identifying important words next to each comment made by the participant. The words were tallied and then compiled into sections and themes.

**Selective Coding**

Selective coding begins to occur when there are no new open codes, or when codes relate only to the core categories that begin to emerge (Urquhart, 2013). In selective coding, the researcher strives to find categories emerging, but will not have as many selective codes as open codes. Urguhart (2013) suggested revisiting the selective code categories if too many selective codes emerged from the original coding. Urguhart suggested that the researcher review selective codes to see if selective code names best represent the open codes or selective codes identified. During this process the three reviewers began to identify which of their initial codes overlapped or repeated.

**Theoretical Coding**

Theoretical coding occurs when the codes and categories that emerged during open coding and selective coding are compared, and relationships are found between the codes or categories (Urquhart, 2013). The theory or phenomenon emerges from these relationships. All of the coding is iterative. New codes should be constantly compared to existing data to determine if new categories emerge and whether these new categories are reliable. Memos played an important part in the theoretical coding process that helped with overall comparative analysis. During this phase the reviewers began agreeing upon which codes were most important and organized codes appropriately by theme and relevance. Essentially, this process outlined the
overall structure of section IV breaking down the larger themes, subcategories and set up the researcher to find appropriate quotes to support the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Participants were invited to discuss the phenomenon sought to be explored by the researcher if they choose. Major themes, quotes, and vignettes from the interviews were used to illustrate key themes for this study, which also served as support for the results of the study. One way to establish confirmability is to ensure no researcher bias. It is important to interpret what the data tell the researcher in an unbiased way. Transcribing entire interviews and manually coding them helped ensure a deep understanding of the interview content and participant intent. The use of comparative analysis ensures that systematic comparisons are made and that the research demonstrates the links between the analysis and resulting theories (Charmaz, 2006). Comparative analysis provided credibility to the theories that emerged from the data, highlighting those codes and categories that were going to be used in developing the theory (Charmaz, 2006). Utilizing two different case studies increased the application for transferability. Though the study sought to explore a unique topic, similar organizations that tolerate non-physical abuse could easily have many similarities.

One potential limitation of this study was conducting the interviews by phone versus in person. Birks and Mills (2011) noted that the researcher should increase attention to verbal communication to try to overcome the impact of missing non-verbal cues. To maintain consistency among all interviews, the interviews were all conducted the same way, on the telephone regardless of interviewee’s location in relation to the researcher. To minimize bias in the research, the researcher set up clear rules. Using conference call recordings and the Otter transcription software to capture the interviews prevented the researcher
from adding to or excluding any data from the participants’ interviews. Manually coding the interviews using grounded theory methodology helped ensure objective interpretation of the data, which also minimizes bias. Utilizing memos helps the researcher stay accountable to the theory that emerges during the research process (Birks & Mills, 2011).

**Ethical Concerns**

The researcher ensured ethics remained a top priority throughout the study. Following the methods as outlined in this chapter was paramount in ensuring the trustworthiness and consistency of the study. The informed consent form, read to each participant prior to the interview, is shown in Appendix C. The risks to human subjects associated with this study were minimal. All participants were over 18 years of age, and did not demonstrate any impaired mental capacity, as determined by their ability to perform the positions that they hold in the workplace. Meeting these criteria qualified them as participants in this study. Following final approval by the research committee, minimizing any future risks related to confidentiality all recorded materials will be erased.

**Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research questions. Identifying the specifics of the study, a discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and interview questions were outlined. The research study utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodology to develop insight on the difficulties in reporting non-physical abuse within sport cultures. All study participants contributed to this theory by sharing their experiences in sport organizations and their perspectives of what prevented them from speaking about their concerns.
Participants varied between men and women with a minimum of three years of experience in as a sport professional. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, there were three levels of analysis, open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. Fifty codes emerged from open coding. Constant comparison analysis was exercised using mind-mapping and ten selective codes emerged into categories from the open codes. Additional constant comparison analysis was used to discover the relationships between and within the open and selective codes, leading to four major themes. The goal of Chapter IV is to provide the study results and demonstrate that the methodology described in Chapter III was followed.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter contains the results of a phenological study conducted to answer the research questions:

RQ1: What are athletes’ and staff members’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences of non-physical abuse within the organizational culture?

RQ2: Why do participants think that non-physical abuse was a tolerated method of coaching and administering?

RQ3: What made it difficult for participants to report non-physical abuse?

RQ4: How do participants think non-physical abuse in sports can be prevented and addressed?

This chapter also includes a discussion indicating that the analysis conducted was consistent with grounded theory methodology and how the analysis ties back to the research questions. Participant demographics are also described. The process used to analyze transcripts from the 10 individual interviews conducted to uncover codes and themes is described in detail in this chapter. Three levels of analysis were used including: (a) open coding, (b) selective coding, and (c) theoretical coding. At each level of analysis, constant comparison was used to concentrate the data further, until themes were derived from the data. Tables and graphics used to present detailed code and theme data, along with illustrations and vignettes from the individual interviews were used to highlight important themes and the resulting theories are included within the chapter’s content.

Sample

Ten participants were interviewed for this study. Appendix E indicates the participant demographics. Both a private sport organization and a university athletic department are represented in the sample. Of the ten participants, five held a role in a private sport organization
and the remaining five worked with a university athletic department. Five participants trained/worked out at the organization where they eventually were employed. All research participants had participated in competitive sport at some point in their life before pursuing coaching or support staff roles. Participants responded from perspectives relative to their experiences as a coach and athlete. Over 50% participated in athletics beyond high school and at the club sport level. Over 50% aspired to be collegiate/elite level athletes. About a third of the participants interviewed mentioned a desire to compete at the Olympic level, arguably the highest level of sporting competition. They ranged between 22-35 years of age.

Participants who were 30 years or older represented 30% of the sample, 30% were between 26 and 29 years of age, 40% were between the ages of 22-25. Twenty percent of the sample population interviewed was male and eighty percent were female. The participants sampled were predominantly white and middle class. There were participants that identified with Black and Native America/Pacific Islander communities. All participants had linear career paths, where the participant was an athletic participant and then sought careers within athletics.
### Table 2

**Demographic Information**

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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Time in the Organization Coaching (in years)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Level of Interest</th>
<th>Years of Experience Coaching</th>
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<td>Native American/ Pacific Islander</td>
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<td>10+</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Level of Interest:** Refers to each participant’s aspiration in sport.  
1 = Olympic/World 2= Collegiate 3= Recreational

The total years in athletic professions varied among the 10 participants. Those participants with over 10 years of experience represented 20% of the sample size. Those participants with five to ten years of experience represented 30% of the sample size each, while the group having two to five years of experience represented 50% of the sample size. Five of the 10 participants sampled were from a university with over 300 employees that housed many different departments and included a Power 5 Collegiate Sports Program that is commonly
known in the athletic world as a fully funded program with state-of-the-art facilities. Recently, this university has had great athletic success that has contributed to the overall permanence of enrollment numbers at the university. The athletics department housed about 300 employees including administrators, media teams, compliance associates, nutritionists, sport psychology, academic coaches, sport performance/conditioning coaches, and various sport coaches. Participants who worked for this university served in various roles that assisted 475 student athletes. The employee’s interviewed for this research worked with a specific group of athletes and support coaches.

The other five participants represented a private sport organization in the Northeast with between 25-50 employees. This organization housed about 200+ athletes and about 35+ coaches/administrators. The organization had a history of statewide success and was reputed for its location and cost of tuition. Facilities were dated but the head coach had been employed there for 30+ years. Participants who were interviewed for this study were former athletes of this institution prior to serving in a coaching capacity.

Data Collection

The 10 research interviews with men and women employees who formerly worked for organizations that were identified for tolerating non-physical abuse in sport served as the primary source of research data. After the 10 interviews were conducted, the responses were then coded manually to identify emerging themes. Following this method, the researcher ensured grounded theory methodology was apparent throughout the collection of the research process while providing original interview protocol and identifying any subsequent interview question changes.
Data Analysis

All interviews were coded manually during open coding. The interviews were analyzed upon completion of all participants. Three reviewers had one month to analyze participant responses coding and analyzing for categories or themes. Questions or clarifying questions were addressed on relevant themes.

Transcripts were uploaded into computer software, Otter, for further analysis. Each interview recording was coded again manually using the software and then compared to the manual coding initially completed during the interview collection. Coding the interviews again, having all 10 interviews to compare, aided constant comparative analysis techniques critical to grounded theory methodology. This process helped the researcher to remain consistent in emphasizing key points during coding. Transcriptions were shared with two other reviewers to analyze separately. After initial analysis the team of researchers agreed upon relevant themes. The themes were broken into subthemes. Initially, the research team indicated six overarching themes with about 20 subthemes with supporting quotes. Upon a follow-up meeting the team researchers discussed minimizing the twenty sub-themes into 5-7 subthemes that highlight the most important points within each overarching theme.

Adhering to grounded theory methodology, some questions were asked of some participants but not of others. For example, every participant was asked questions regarding their experiences in the sport culture environment, but some conversations sparked further inquiry about what specifically happened, how that participant handled it, what prevented them from doing anything about it, and what could be done to change it in the future. Formulating codes can be done through inductive and deductive analysis. Utilizing theory to justify and analyze discoveries is considered deductive analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 2023).
Categorizing, coding, creating patterns and themes after the review of transcriptions is the process of inductive analysis (Miles, et al, 2020). The research team agreed that inductive analysis was most suitable for this study. Applying codes to describe data, identifying patterns to craft categories, themes and theories that ultimately showcased similarities and differences across the data offered by participants responses were the main actions used for this inductive analysis.

**Main Themes: Abuse-centered codes**

Main themes were developed from comparable words utilized by participants to express their experiences during each interview. The main themes are organizational culture, coach/athlete experience, coach/athlete reaction, administrative structure, and prevention. Each theme provides insight into the experiences participants had and the non-physical abuse that was tolerated. Below is a table indicating the main sub-themes and themes that were developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of non-physical abuse</td>
<td>Mental health, mind games, physical abuse, job satisfaction/turnover, tolerated behavior: norms of the sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Training Environment</td>
<td>elite groups, cliques, control, motivation to win, tense tactics/pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete/Coach Perspective</td>
<td>Code of conduct, confusion, emotional response, avoid confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete/Coach Reaction</td>
<td>Desire to quit, minimized reactions, toughen up, protection of self, frequency of occurrence, athlete protection, current relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Structure and Reality Gaps</td>
<td>Closed practices, not reporting, general disregard, tolerated abuse, coach/admin relationship, reputation-based hiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention</td>
<td>Cultural change, training/education, accountability, transparency/visibility, administrators’ awareness, established standards/expectations, winning is not everything, need for leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Description of non-physical abuse**

Description of non-physical abuse is an umbrella term to describe the main issues that impacted participants negatively while working within a sports organization that tolerated abuse. These sub-factors deterred overall performance and ultimately job satisfaction. Sub-themes within this section included mental health, mind games, physical abuse, tolerated inappropriate behavior, and job satisfaction/turnover. All participants admitted that this experience took a major toll on them and were ready for that chapter of their lives to be over prior to their actual cessation in the role. It is important to note that most participants stated how they grew from this experience even though it was bad but would not wish the experience on anyone else.

**Mental Health**

In this day and age, the discussion of mental health has become a topic for debate across the board. However, the severity to which this work environment affected participants is alarming and should be noted. Participants discussed how their employment experiences and participation in sport severely affected their mental health to the point where they wanted to physically hurt themselves so they couldn’t attend practice either as an athlete or as a coach. A majority of respondents reflected on their experiences both as a coach and as an athlete.

I don’t ever recall being so deeply affected by something negatively before working for this head coach. I always thought I had a pretty level head and some thick skin. So, when I started having these bouts of… I guess depression? I really started to question what the heck was going on. I remember walking from my car to practice in the morning hoping I would get hit by a bus. Anything would have been better than walking into that practice. I couldn’t believe that even I wanted to do that, and I was one of the coaches. I could only imagine what the athletes felt or thought (Participant 10).

It got to point where we just didn't care whether you were a coach or an athlete. We were all so broken not only physically but mentally and emotionally. There were times coaching that I stood there as if I was an armed guard trying to blend into the wall and not be noticed. In those moments I would wonder what am I even doing here? I remember as an athlete, we didn’t care if we got hurt… we actually would do everything in our power to maximize our chances of injury because at least then we would have a break and the head coach would get off our back(s). As a coach you always want to have
a level head and maintain emotional control, but I really struggled mentally. I often dreaded walking into practice because I had no idea what was about to come and knew it could be me who was about to get chewed out over who knows what. I had a hard time prioritizing myself. I struggled with my weight, sleeping habits, and upkeep my workout regimen because I was so stressed out all the time. I had worked in high pressure and high-performance sport environments prior, but this was different (Participant 8).

Mind games

Treatment was another sub-code that was communicated. Participants touched on how they were impacted by the mental, emotional, and psychological mind games that the head coaches inflicted on them. Participants touched on some of the methods they watched that exemplified this type of behavior.

So, it was emotional warfare. I can’t tell the number of mental attacks that took place because it was constant. Mainly just because of the things that they would say and like how intensely they would psychologically, get in your head. They knew how to cut you deep with the things they said. More personal attacks than anything (Participant 8).

I used to watch the coach pin athletes against one another or even coaches. Sometimes they would tell one coach specific information and withhold it from another in order to show apparent favoritism. This often created a lot of drama between coaches and I would watch them try to win the head coach over and get back in his good graces. With the athletes, they were so desperate to be in the coach’s favor that they often used it against one another in order to gain clout. It was wild (Participant 4).

Physical Abuse was a real threat

Though participants did not identify that physical abuse was present, a majority stated that the threat of it was real. Participants mentioned that there were times when abusive tactics were used to train the athletes with physical touch by the head coaches being commonplace.

There were some times when the coach was “handsy” especially when the head coach was upset… they would aggressively grab you, they may even pull on your arm or hold the back of your neck especially when you didn’t perform well. It kind of made me feel like property. Watching some of the athletes who were definitely being pushed to exertion and then get injured was hard too. I remember watching one athlete who was struggling to make a drill successfully and the coach just screamed at them and made them do it over and over and over again. Later that week I watched the same athlete almost kill themselves doing it in competition because mentally they were so in their head from not getting it right that week in practice (Participant 6).
Absolutely, I think it definitely would have gotten to that point of physicality because the coach had no problem putting their hands on my boss who was one of their peers and in a completely separate department within the organization. My boss was a big presence. The head coach even did this in front of people and it was like a hard grab on the neck or shoulder. That was a red flag to me internally. And I kind of kept note of that moving forward. The coach would do it as a power move to show his dominance. There were also times when he took people in the hall and chewed them out, pointed at them, and touched in a very threatening demeanor, but nobody ever said anything or did anything about it they just looked the other way (Participant 5).

I remember watching the head coach throw a chair. They said they were just playing around after they had purposely yelled at one of the athletes. I also watched that same coach throw one of the athlete’s crutches when they had to sit out from a competition after returning to practice from a doctor’s appointment and one of the assistant coaches was grabbed by the neck when they spoke back. Rumors had spread about an assistant coach getting choked out but I had never seen it. I do remember one day when the head coach pulled me aside and said I am going to make one of the coaches staff cry… and I said why would you do that? He said because it would be funny. I remember saying some off the cusp remark that made us laugh and luckily discontinued that conversation. All I recall is how disgusted I felt he would even say that. (Participant 10).

Job Satisfaction & Turnover

Many participants mentioned that there was a lack of job satisfaction, high turnover, and a feeling of depersonalization, demoralization, and disregard. Participants discussed that the organization was often so transfixed on the head coach’s goals/program initiatives and as a result their own (the participants) needs were not justified or were considered obsolete.

There were times when I just felt like a body. I felt at times that anyone could have just been standing there and like mimicking whatever the other person was doing. When I started coaching, I just assumed it was “tough love” or tough coaching because it was what I was accustomed to when I was an athlete. I didn’t really question it. But when I wasn’t of use, I was pretty much disregarded and ignored. There was no appreciation. There was never a thanks for what you do or a thanks for your time. There was none of that, there was no like, hey, let me get your opinion on this. Everything was just expected. When they addressed you, it was only when things went wrong, and it was always my fault that those things went wrong. I was often told, you know, you're lucky to [be here]. I felt guilty and always questioned what I was doing wrong. I thought many times about how I thought my efforts showed how committed I was to being here. I guess I misread that big time. So, you just never knew where you stood, and I always felt the pressure to be at my best. You could never let your guard down (Participant 8).

I watched coach after coach come in and out of that door. Within one year I
watched five different coaches take over and assume responsibility for a specific training aspect and then lose that responsibility because of the head coach’s dissatisfaction with one thing or another. I came to realize no matter who was in that role, no matter what they did, it was not going to be good enough (Participant 9).

It ended up being less about I care about you as a person and more about I don’t really give a sh*t what happens… do what I say, or I am going to scream at you. “we are just going to treat you like garbage, because we know you’re not going anywhere. Because we know that you don't want to leave”. So, we're just going to continue yelling at you. And it became less of we care about you and more of a you know, you're just a body. You’re just a number. I mean, everyone was on edge. Everyone was always walking on eggshells. You never knew who was going to get yelled at. The funny thing is that we all wanted to leave we just did not know how. We all felt stuck and like it was never going to end (Participant 6).

**Tolerated behavior: norms of the sport**

When asked about the bigger picture and what things were prevalent that allowed for this type of behavior to be tolerated participants discussed out of date coaching philosophies and how this type of coaching style has been supported by national governing bodies.

I think that's just the culture of the sport. We were all trying to be the best. And to get to that level, the intensity of the coaching style, and the environment that was created at practice, it was almost part of the culture. It seems like that's what every other coach was doing or was told it worked in the past. So, in a lot of ways it became the norm (Participant 8).

Honestly, it's really not a surprise because this type of coaching was fostered with the national team. That is how it was run. The organization wanted a specific level of skill set/performance to be done at each level as an athlete progressed from beginner to elite. So that's the way it was in order to get you to that level or that was how it had been done elsewhere, especially in other countries around the world where athletes are looked at as just a body. I think what happened at the private club level was an extension of what the national team had done, supported, and recognized as successful and it’s a lot easier to get away with it at the collegiate level because there is less oversight. I think they made it so serious in order to get those top level athletes and to try and get to the top at World and Olympic level competition (Participant 6).

**Organizational culture/environment**

Organizational culture/environment is an umbrella term to describe what the overall work situation was like for participants that included sub-themes of worked with elite groups, clicks, controlling the life of athletes and coaches, motivation to win, and tense tactics/pressure that
allowed for continued prevalence. Six open codes were assigned to the umbrella term of organizational culture. Every participant mentioned at least three of these descriptors for the umbrella term of organizational culture.

When participants were asked about the overall environment many spoke regarding working with or serving a part in programs, classes, or teams within the organization itself that were considered elite or specialty. Two participants capture the overall structure of the sport program of which they were a part.

**Worked with the elite groups**

I worked with athletes who were a specialty positional group of the team. In some ways they were like a specialty team. Though they contributed to the overall team performance they trained, worked out, and received almost completely separate treatment to the rest of the team. There were number of athletes and sports teams that made up the organization (Participant 5).

There were several different training groups that you would advance through depending on your skill level. I remember when I was an athlete, we would be like separated a little bit from everything. I didn't 100% pay attention to all that kind of like drama. I feel like the other groups that were not a part of the “elite team” was like, drama free zone, because everything else didn’t really matter in comparison (Participant 1).

**Cliques**

Participants mentioned that there was an elitist type culture where it was made evident that exclusivity existed to only those that were allowed into the group.

One participant stated,

that the culture was very “clicky”… it came down to acceptance. If you were an outsider, it was made known. There was like a pride associated with being a part of this elite group. It took a while to become welcomed. There was almost a period of hazing in a sense to see how tough you were and to see what you were made of. Typically, it was noticed by remarks and comments made by those already a part of the group or having to earn privileges to do certain things those who were already a part of the group got to do (Participant 9).

Another said,
It was more so the older people versus the younger. There are a lot of athletes that I trained with that also coached too. If you were like older more experienced, they kind of considered you a part of the elite coaching staff, in a way it was almost just like a little click. Those of us that were coaching to make a little bit of extra money was like another little click. There were no real attempts by leadership, the head coach, or administration to try and bridge those gaps (Participant 8).

Controlling the life of the athletes and coaches

From participants responses it was made aware that the work and training environment was overtly involved and controlling. Many discussed the difficulties in pursuing other interests or having a life outside of their work or training when they were an athlete/coach.

I remember when I was an athlete trying to play other sports was like a big no, no. If you wanted to do like other sports and stuff like in high school, even if we were like in offseason, the coaches didn’t like that. They wanted sole control over each athlete, so we focused on just solely on our sport and nothing else. Honestly, they wanted to control as much of your life as they could from what you ate, when you ate, and when you had down time. There were even times when they wanted to know who you were hanging out with outside of practice (Participant 8).

Another participant discussed how difficult the work-life balance was stating,

In that environment it was difficult to separate my life from work. I was kind of at the beck and call of my employer. I mean, what was time off? We were training to be the best. We ate, slept, breathed sport. I often would get calls outside of my workday about taking care of business-related things. Everything was of utmost urgency. The term work-life balance was definitely nonexistent at times for sure. There were times when I was trying to get other certifications to help with my own career or make me more marketable and I remember having to push them off because if I were to pursue them, it often interfered with our practice schedules. I mean heaven forbid I do something for myself. It was more of a hassle trying to explain this to the coach than it was just to not even bother. I found this out early on when I tried to miss a competition for a wedding and the response was a no (Participant 10).

Motivation to win

Motivation was a sub-theme that explained why this culture was the way that it was.

Participants were very direct in what motivated the programs and organizations for which they worked to foster the culture that it did, and the majority of that motivation centered on winning.
Our organization wanted to win. It was commonly expressed the desire to win championship titles and be at the top of the podium. Every young athlete wants to stand on the top of the podium and win a huge trophy. Who doesn't want to? Who doesn't like to win at competitions, games, or meets? That is often the main point. Also, winning is validating. It validates that the program is working. That the hard days are worth it. Winning attracts business. Coming from a winning program helps me with job prospects (Participant 1).

Most of the athlete’s I trained and worked with wanted to compete on the elite level or wanted a college scholarship. Even if we didn’t have a chance in hell of doing so that type of culture was apparent. Trying to be the best in the country so you can get noticed was a major indicator (Participant 6).

There was a fear instilled that losing meant you lost your job, and it was a subconscious feeling everyone in the department felt (Participant 10).

_Tense tactics/pressure_

There were several responses that discussed tense tactics describing the different ways the coach reacted to situations. Many of the participants admitted that these incidences happened in front of the team. These weren’t side conversations or backdoor discussions. Participants mentioned they often felt the head coach was like a “ticking time bomb”. The level and need for control by the head coach was extensive. This expression revolved around the way in which the coach handled situations specifically when situations didn’t go according to plan. Yelling was often prevalent at workouts and practices. One participant stated,

Whenever there was any small issue that arrived, it was like World War Two. There was yelling, there was screaming. There was miscommunication. There was, I mean, I don’t exactly know the best way I can put it, but when the coach did not get their way they would literally throw a temper tantrum. The coach would threaten to throw things or break things. They would personally call out and attack athletes and other coaches. There was even times when he would corner trainers, strength coaches and support staff. I can handle those blow outs every now and then. But it was over almost anything. And it was like minor issues, a wire would go missing to a camera... Somebody wouldn't like the uniform they ordered, he would blow up. It just felt like every day was going to be World War Two every time an issue came up or something didn’t work out right. It was like they could not handle the stresses of being a coach. It is funny because I always thought being a coach, in my experience, is all about putting out fires. Whereas for working with this one coach, it felt like you would grab the closest bottle of gasoline
and throw it on and watch it all blow up. They created their own issues, and we all were forced to watch things go up in flames (Participant 2).

There would be times when the head coach would give weird seething stares at people. It just made me really uncomfortable. You had no idea what they were thinking... and then all of a sudden, they would just explode yelling and shouting... you name it. Sometimes it was at you, sometimes it was at someone else (Participant 1).

There was no conversation. Conversation wasn’t a thing. It was you got called into the office sometimes or the head coach (my boss) would yell at me, to come into the office. There were times when I didn’t even need to be called into the office and I would get yelled at or someone in the gym for that matter. That was not a good experience. It's like my whole stomach would drop, I would start sweating and start thinking like, ‘oh my God what am I in trouble for this time’. The only communication I've ever had with my boss was me getting in trouble. I got lost in that emotion. There was always a pressure to perform no matter what role you were in because you were always being judged or criticized. It was always so intense. As an athlete and as a staff member I was afraid to mess up. As soon as I walked in the door, I’d start to get anxious (Participant 9).

There was a time when the head coach was upset about something that was completely out of my control. And, you know we were at practice, I was leading this particular practice, and I took time away from the workout to try and handle the situation with the coach who had the issue. The coach just seemed totally unappreciative of my efforts to try and rectify the situation. My boss got wind of it and at 11:30 pm, after hours, calls me up, berates me on the phone for how I handled the situation. You know, for me I can take a lot, but this was completely unacceptable. He was like, you need to figure out how to be flexible or I'm gonna find someone to replace you. And so basically, like I didn't sleep at all that night, and I was expected to go in the next morning and now I am afraid of what’s going to happen. This was all a tactic to gain back control. I made one executive decision and now I am going to be guilted and gas-lighted for the next week because of it. Then on top of it I have my supervisor and co-workers talking about it all right in front me while I am trying to coach. This type of treatment was straight up petty (Participant 5).

**Athlete/Coach Perspective**

The theme of athlete/coach perspective captured participants perspective on what was perceived to be happening and what tactics were used to cope. Within these codes were some of the reasons participants were not able or did not feel like they could speak up in the situation. Sub-themes for this section included participants’ statements regarding this is how it was done, did not understand what was going on, felt uncomfortable, fear, keep your head down and do
your job and I deserve it. Six open codes were assigned to the umbrella term of athlete/coach perspective. All participants mentioned at least three of these descriptors and examples/reasons for the umbrella term of athlete/coach perspective.

This is how it was done

For many of the participants initially they just presumed that what they were seeing and experiencing was simply how coaching was done. All participants discussed that they didn’t realize what was really going on in that environment until they were out of it. Participants stated,

A lot of the coaches were athletes themselves and athletes at this organization. So I feel we all kind of just assumed that’s how it is. And, you know, I’d seen a couple of people like kind of start to follow in suit in how they coached. Almost, how you don't want to grow up to be your parent. And then, 50 years later, there you are, like, acting just like your own parent, because it's a learned thing over time. This coach I worked for was the worst coach I’ve ever met. And the worst coach I’ve ever seen, get a job at the elite level of sport. They were honestly a hack not necessarily from a technical standpoint, they knew how to coach the sport enough, but from an emotional and verbal standpoint they were a tyrant. The things that matter to a coach like growing the athlete, making them a better human, supporting the athlete as they make their way through life this coach had no consideration for. So, 95% of the time, I never agreed with how he handled situations in addition to how upset he got (Participant 3).

Did not understand what was going on

Other participants just frankly didn’t understand what was happening. One participant stated,

I think initially, early on. I didn't know what to really think. I was like this is just the way things are handled. I internalized it, I internalized a lot of it as just like, you got to suck it up, you've been told your opinion doesn't matter. So don't even try to talk to somebody who could maybe help you out, or you know, do anything about it. That was really hard to cope with that. I got really down on myself and struggled with wrapping my brain around what was actually going on. Like to have to go every day to work with people I don't respect, because they don’t respect me, and treat me like garbage… it was un-motivating… and to put it simple… it was awful (Participant 5).

Felt uncomfortable

When participants began to recognize what was happening all stated that they didn’t
agree with it. For most it made them feel uncomfortable.

I'd say I felt awkward around it. I felt like something wasn't right. I felt that it was not appropriate. That those behaviors by the coach were disrespectful. But I didn't have the power to do anything about it. I wasn't recognized in this environment. In my head I would think to myself this is all ridiculous. I would never treat somebody like that. But no, I felt weird. I felt bad for whoever was the victim that day (Participant 2).

It wasn’t until I was out of that environment that I realized how bad it was. But I always had this gut feeling that something was off. There were times when I definitely felt uncomfortable” (Participant 9).

**Fear**

Being afraid was another major sub-theme that was evident within all participant responses. The fear came from the constant unsurety with day-to-day reactions and behaviors of the head coach.

I was scared. Watching how the head coach reacted when someone screwed up terrified me. I never wanted to step out of line for fear of what they were going to do or say. You never know what was going to come (Participant 1).

At the time I was afraid of what might happen if I were to leave or if I were to mess up on the job. I didn’t know what was going to happen” (Participant 5).

**Keep your head down and do your job**

When asked how participants handled these types of situations, a majority of respondents just tried to stay focused on the job at hand and strived to uphold a manner of professionalism.

The coach reacted as they did sometimes combatively and a bit hostile, but I know it was because they were upset or could not control what was going on. As a professional I just tried to keep my blinders on to their overly emotional response and just move forward because we have a job to do (Participant 7).

I was there for the athletes. I kept my head down and supported them because they needed me to do that. I needed to do my job to the best ability no matter what was going on all around me (Participant 2).

**I deserve it**

A few participants noted that being in that environment they actually believed that they deserved the treatment they were given.
Initially, I just started blaming myself for the blow ups and I would just spiral. I’d often beat myself up for what was said in the heat of the moment. It is tough because you have so much respect and rapport for this person that you almost buy into whatever they say. I really struggled to detach myself from the coaches’ behaviors and struggled to see that they were wrong. Maybe that’s why I tolerated the job for so long. I thought I deserved it [the abuse] (Participant 4).

It’s weird though because in those moments I definitely thought I was the problem. I thought it must be something I am doing but I was dumbfounded because I was often trying to do the right thing and it would blow up in face (Participant 9).

It’s kind of sad to say… but there were definitely points of it all where I truly believed I deserved this. I honestly felt I deserved to be treated like garbage. I had lost sight of my worth and value. It was nothing in comparison to the coach’s vision or should I say their empty promises. It got to the point that if coach wasn’t happy my self-value tanked. In a strange way those outbursts especially when focused towards me validated how I felt about myself because I didn’t feel like I was achieving like I normally do and it made me yearn to get back into good graces with the head coach (Participant 10).

**Coach/Athlete Reaction**

This section captured themes relevant to the participants’ perspective on what was perceived to be happening and what tactics were used to cope. Within these codes, how the coaches reacted to all this is identified. Sub-themes for this section included participants’ statements regarding wish to quit, minimize the reactions, toughen up, protection of self, frequency of occurrence, protect the athletes, and current relationship. Seven open codes were assigned to the umbrella term of athlete/coach perspective. All participants mentioned at least three of these descriptors and examples/reasons under the umbrella term coach/athlete reaction

*Wish to quit*

As participants reflected on their experiences some touched on wanting to quit but choosing not to. Many referred to the culture that made it difficult to pull the plug and quit.

Literally, it depended on what Coach felt that day, or whatever. It was just like everything wasn't good enough sometimes, so it was just like a lot of loud yelling from, you know, from the Head Coach. And there were tears all the time from athletes, so. Everyone's crying. A lot of “I’m quitting” that happened in a lot of “Let's talk here. Let's talk this out” and seeing they're just like, No, I just want to quit because you're just tired
of being yelled at and not being good enough and it’s just not fun anymore so why would I, you know, put myself through that. Overall, it was really rough on some of the athletes… and even the support coaches too (Participant 3).

And I was going to quit, and I was going to switch organizations, but I had teammates and coworkers begging me not to leave. Honestly, you like get to a point where you are in too deep. You get to the point where you convince yourself it can’t be any worse. Plus, it didn’t help that a number of the athletes at this place had major mental health issues going on and they trusted me, which is really why I didn’t leave. I stayed there to support them. Even though I was getting pushed aside, the coaches had written me off, I knew the reason I was there was for my teammates and supporting them through all that was going on at the time (Participant 6).

Minimize the reactions

When participants were asked about how they responded when disagreements happened many stated how they tried to deflect the situation or figure out ways to minimize the reactions of the head coach. One participant stated,

When disagreements happened you know, we just kept to ourselves. You figured out ways to fly below the radar, so you didn’t have to deal with it (Participant 3).

This statement was supported by another respondent saying “so I would just physically distance myself” (Participant 9).

Mentally it would kind of bring me back to when I was younger, and I would be like, oh man, I wonder what’s going to happen today (Participant 1).

Toughen up

The majority of participants just tried to suppress what was happening by only focusing on the good. Many of the mantras expressed reflected the notion of “do your best” or “it’s not really a problem” and most just told themselves to “toughen up and not be so weak”.

For a while there I just tried to convince myself that it was not even happening. I just tried to see the good and suppress the bad. I was totally convinced it wasn’t happening. But when I did start to notice things or thought things were off, I kind of just told myself to be tough. That it wasn’t a problem. This is how it is supposed to be (Participant 3).
My first response was toughen up. Like, genuinely, my parents put me on medication, because I was literally suicidal for years. And they told me to toughen up. What was I gonna do? Tell my parents? The coach is yelling at me and all they would say is deal with it, figure it out on your own. I mean, nothing was going to change because nobody thought that it was a problem. And it made us as athletes and then as coaches like we were creating a problem that wasn't there. We just assumed it was all in our head (Participant 6).

**Protection of self**

Other participants stated that they stayed out of it because they were trying to protect their reputation and job security.

My job as the coach is ultimately to protect the team and the program. Its conflicting. I did not want to hurt the head coach who had opened doors for me. I didn't want to hurt you know, the reputation of the program because that ultimately hurts recruiting and recruiting is all about reputation... so no I never really talked about it. Unfortunately, the head coach had a heavy hand in my future job prospects, so I had to play the game (Participant 2).

The head coach was well connected or at least they always said they were. They had been around a while in the sport and had a reputation. They would convince you that they had a strong pull even though now I look back and realize that really wasn’t the case. It was made aware I could easily be replaced. At the end of the day you had to figure out a way to just get through it and get out of there because for a lot of us this was just a pit stop before our next career move (Participant 4).

I don’t want it to get back to anyone when I’m speaking about it as there is a real possibility. I had also saw how this coach reacted when unflattering information did get back to them. I was well aware that I could receive some threats or hostility especially from the head coach. The fear of how it could all negatively affect my life. There was a chance they could get fired but there was a bigger chance nothing would be done, or it would end up backfiring on me. Even when I was applying for new jobs, I was super discreet because I had no idea what this coach would do if they found out. They could easily call up and try to sabotage me just because they didn’t particularly like me (Participant 5).

**Frequency of occurrence**

These types of comments led to the majority of participants breaking down mentally and emotionally. Participants often commented on the notion that it happened frequently and that there wasn’t necessarily one specific person being attacked. One participant stated,
And this was not just a me problem… it was everybody and anybody around them. I’d often get in my head and would even breakdown sometimes. It was a two-week cycle of getting screamed at or you were blacklisted from them. And if they weren't yelling at you, they were blowing up on someone else. It seemed like a game to win over the coach’s favor (Participant 5).

I would get in trouble for things that would happen, a month or two prior to my employer actually going off on me. They would hit me verbally or attack me out of nowhere with some of this verbal beratement, laying into me, sharp like, and I would sit there and I would just take it. Had no idea this was abuse. Well, I mean, I definitely knew the head coach was angry manipulative, abusive in their own ways and intense training, but it didn't have to be that intense. It was just failure to lead the program correctly. Manipulation was literally their number one tactic was manipulation. There would be days when they would tell us, the assistant coaches, I am gonna make the athletes think that I’m mad at them. I’m gonna walk in with this look on my face, I’m gonna drop my eyes drop my jaw, I’m gonna cross my arms and walk in, aggressively. And I want the athletes to think that I’m upset over something... there would be times when they would give an eerie, bone cringing look that you just knew you screwed up. Or they would just completely ignore you and not even acknowledge your presence. There were definitely times when I felt that for some of the things I got in trouble for, I felt less than human. It was tough not to breakdown because it happened so often (Participant 4).

Protect the athletes

At times some participants sacrificed themselves for the well-being of the athletes over themselves.

With all that was going on, the only thing I could do was try to be the lighthouse in their storm and to be the one place that the athletes could turn. And I’d always tell the athletes like know you’re loved even if you aren’t getting that support from coach. I don't care. I value you and I care about you. I'm going to try to protect you. Especially whenever you're under my watch. It’s funny because there were times when I actually got chewed out for being a support but at the end of the day, I knew in my heart being there for the athletes was right no matter the repercussion (Participant 4).

The athletes came first and foremost. I was there to do my job and protect them regardless of what kind of rubbish was coming out of the head coach’s mouth (Participant 2).

Current relationship

Most of the participants mentioned that they do not have a current relationship with their previous employer and expressed disdain.
Another went so far to say,

To be quite frank, I would never, ever go back. Even if there was a high paying position open there I would never consider until that head coach left even if the job were to bring me closer to home. I wouldn’t go back. I don't even go back to visit. I will go nowhere near that coach or even that organization (Participant 8).

“After everything that happened, I could never go back into that environment or work for that coach ever again. F*ck them!” (Participant 10).

**Administrative Structure Realities and Gaps**

This section captured themes relevant to the participants’ perspective on what aspects of the organization provided opportunities for the non-physical abuse that took place along with the culture that was apparent that allowed it even when they tried to speak out. Within these codes are some of the reasons participants were not able to or did not feel like they could speak up in the situation. This section also identified the administrative structure and the role the administration had in “encouraging” a culture of tolerance relatively directly or indirectly. Closed practices, reasons for not reporting, general disregard, untouchable, close relationship between coach and administrator, and reputation-based hiring are the sub-themes addressed. Five open codes were assigned to the umbrella term of Administrative Structure Realities and Gaps. All participants mentioned at least three of these descriptors for the umbrella term of administration structure realities and gaps.

**Closed practices**

At both organizations parents or anyone from outside the team was discouraged from attending practices. Some participants alluded to the idea that indirectly/without knowing, parents tolerated or supported this abuse because they did not really know what was going on and kept taking their athletes back. From participant responses, many parents were blind to it or just thought their child was being overly dramatic. Ultimately, parents were not advocating for their children because of this lack of awareness. Several participants stated how some of the
coaches would manipulate what information was being told to the parents about what was happening if questioned.

It was made quite apparent that the head coach did not want any unplanned visitors at practice. There was a number of times when I cringed when someone walked in that was not a part of the team. You had no idea how the coach was going to react. There were days when I saw them told to get the **** out of here and other days where they were just ignored… sometimes even welcomed if the head coach was feeling it. For a while there was a parent that was consistently coming and eventually that ended when the coach told the athlete that their parent should not be present (Participant 10).

It didn’t help that parents weren’t allowed to watch. Often the doors were closed and there was no viewing. It was often suggested to parents that they would be a distraction to the athletes. Also, many of these parents got off on the idea that their kid is going to be the next Olympian so they often put a lot of faith and trust in the program and the coach (Participant 8).

To what extent and obviously as you got older, the parents didn't watch practices as much as they did when you were younger, so a lot of the stuff, your parents weren't actually seeing so the coaches knew they could get away with more like if they implemented that fear and that psychological fear in you along with the yelling and screaming. It's like well, your parents aren't here to do anything about it so, once again, you could go home and tell them but you don't want to be that person whose parent comes in and says like, oh, like, You're being mean to my kid like, Oh, you were being a little harsh with them and it's like, well, they just found a way to speak to the parents in a way where it just made it sound better or your parent just said you were being soft and you needed to toughen up (Participant 6).

Reasons for not reporting

When asked about reporting issues or why they did not report, all participants stated that there was no official method of reporting. There were some implied protocols, but nobody formally ever discussed what to do when a situation was questionable or borderline abusive. For those who did not report, discussed the fear involved, the lack of formal process in doing so, and the blame that would be redirected towards them.

I really don't think there was a formal system of reporting. If I had an issue, I would go to either, you know, to the head coach, or you know, the administration? I would tell them what was going on. And then they would often inform me to figure out, and throw it back into my court… saying you know, how to go about navigating the problem at hand? Or if things really got heated I’d get the response, ‘are you sure that’s
what they said?”… ‘do you really think that’s what they meant by that?’… They worked hard to sell me on that (Participant 3).

For me, it was like I told my supervisor, hey, this is what happened. How would you handle it? They would respond well does it seem like it was your fault? And in my mind I was like, no, but the way they responded made you feel like it was your fault. And there wouldn’t be much more discussion after that. So I would say there was definitely no official channels, I wish there was, I wish there was like a conversation about like, hey, how’s everything going? Heavy? Do you have any issues with sport coach or you have any difficulties? And then that way it opens the door to discuss what is going on or if there were any issues. It would have been nice if administration would have been more open to listening and inviting us to come talk to them. Honestly, we just had to fend for ourselves (Participant 4).

General disregard

A majority of the participants touched on what would happen if they brought a concern up the administration channel. All participants stated that there would be no response or any action to rectify the situation. All participants were quite frank that administration was unaccommodating and could not be bothered. If they were to respond, concerns were invalidated. Often the individual who inquired was made out to be the problem or issue. Participants mentioned not feeling supported in reaching out to administration.

My complaints, my words, my you know, bringing the issues I was dealing with to my supervisor was the only way I thought to report what was going on but they just swept it all under the carpet or disregarded what I had to say. They often said, ‘Oh, don't worry, you know, I'll protect you and just stay the hell away from them’ [whoever was giving you the issue]. And for the most part my supervisor did. Ultimately, they did remove this coach from my life, but ignored the issue (Participant 5).

I wouldn't say it was supported. I want to say it was shoveled under the rug. Sweeping these types of things under the carpet and keep moving forward act was not gonna happen. And that's from the highest administration. That's what happened. I mean who was I to tell? The office manager? Who was never there and if they were, they were probably asleep? Most of the time they weren’t even there when we had practices. The only one there was the head coach, the athletes, and support staff. I felt like there was a general disregard by administration as they obviously couldn’t be bothered (Participant 6).
Untouchable

Not only was there a general disregard in the overall culture of these sport programs but all participants felt disregarded by administration or that things were ignored because of their “untouchable” position within the organization.

So, I think negligence was a big factor. And then there was just sheer selfishness, or this idea that you are untouchable because of your cushy administration role. It was this idea that you can do whatever you want because of your position. There were things that should never have happened and even when the coach admitted it, administration did nothing about it. I was floored. The coach said that the administrator responded about the incident, well they (referring to I) would either get over it or get on with it. There was no further discussion (Participant 10).

There was nothing done to address it with the sport coach. And I would be like, So... you're not gonna say anything? And then I would have to deal with the treatment from the coach. And I’m like, I'm not okay with it. I have a lot of self-respect and dignity to be like, No, I’m not okay with being yelled at like that. I believe it was supported, because it was tolerated in the sheer fact that there was nothing done to address it. My bosses knew what was going on. They knew the way the sport coach acted, they knew their behavior but I guess they were untouchable. Because of the head coach’s position, I guess the administrators didn’t want to deal with it. They had power and a lot of money, they knew the coach apparently had a lot of deep connections into the Board of Trustees. And that was one thing that was very hard to swallow. When you're one phone call away from getting fired is a reality, it's just a hard way to live in general. But it's a hard way to coach too, especially when you are putting up with what I said (Participant 5).

Close relationship between coach and administrator

Participants felt strongly about the way in which administration operated. It was made aware that the majority of participants felt the relationship between the coach and the administration was not conducive to the health and well-being of the athletes or support coaches who worked for the organizations.

Administration was terrible, and it didn’t help that the head coach was best buds with our sports admin, you know, in a lot of ways it was like they had each other in their back pocket(s). So you really couldn’t bring any complaints about the head coach to the sport admin because they too would disregard it, which made it quite stressful and makes you feel like you were crazy for even thinking such a thing (Participant 10).
The main problem with this situation was that sports administrators chose favorites. They didn't look at them as coaches, they looked at them almost specifically as friends. It was kind of like the old boys club. And unfortunately, in my line of work, and basically everybody's line of work, you have to look at numbers, and you can't think of the person personally, but you have to think of them as a worker, as a staff member and the sports admin to a certain point they overstepped that personal work life relationship which blurred the lines. It ultimately made it much more difficult to reprimand or implement any kind of repercussion for wrongdoing. That's where the tolerance came in. This put the head coach of the team in an awkward position. Since sport administration was buddy-buddy with this one coach, he made it difficult for him to speak out on his outrages. It made it difficult to show that there was anything wrong going on because this coach had history and connections that ran deeper. If someone was to complain it could potentially affect the head coach’s position. But it more likely could potentially backfire. I think the main problem was, administration picked a favorite and they stuck with it. And it just shouldn't be that way. Kind of putting the blinders on, was the issue for admin. If the issues don’t make headlines unfortunately nobody will act on. All administration and the public then sees is the good PR. The team’s results, their performances showcased in the media. But what happened beyond the camera isn’t forecasted. problems. At the end of the day in this type of situation people are protecting their jobs and they will do what they need to protect themselves even if it’s at the expense of someone who has suffered abuse or mistreatment (Participant 5).

Reputation based hiring

Some of the participants touched on the perception of the good coach and the reputation that came with it. One participant said,

I think that the organization was very concerned about hiring for win/loss records instead of for the actual background of the coach. There had been a lot of hearsay surrounding some of the head coach hires. To be honest I don’t think people were fully investigating who they were hiring. Administration wasn’t concerned because this coach had previous success or athletes that had done well in the past. Even though they weren’t a good coach their reputation spoke volumes and served as clout (Participant 4).

It’s all about perception. And often an organization is going to hire based on prestige or reputation rather than on good coaching because the PR is what sells (Participant 2).

Prevention

Prevention provided the final major theme describing participants own perspective on how to resolve and fix the problems at hand. This section identified a number of preventative methods, ideas, and concepts that participants felt were necessary to curtail the abuse
experienced and correct the issues for healthier playing conditions for athletes in the future. 

Change the culture, training and education, accountability, transparency and visibility, administrator’s awareness, established standards and expectations, winning is not everything, and the need for leadership were subthemes addressed. Eight open codes were assigned to the umbrella term of prevention. All participants mentioned at least three of these descriptors for the umbrella term of prevention.

*Change the culture*

When participants were asked about preventative methods or how do we fix this type of non-physical abuse from happening, many discussed the culture today and how it has changed over recent years.

I think because it [non-physical violence] was so prevalent and because so many coaches experienced this type of treatment whether they are aware of it or not, they are looking to coach differently. But a lot of coaches were abused and continue to act out on the athletes they coach just like they were treated prior as an athlete. The constant need to win, striving for perfection, and the pressure to be the best often provides the catalyst for this type of culture. For me, personally, through my experience, I have seen the benefit in explaining to my athletes why they are doing something, and they have responded better than from me just getting angry and screaming at them. I also feel like as a coach I have developed a greater rapport and trust through this process because they aren’t as afraid to fail. This high stress, high performance sport culture is often intensified when the parents buy-in and nobody advocates for the individual athlete because everyone correlates winning with success and opportunity. Unfortunately, there can be a lot of toxicity associated when people get too caught up on the wrong things (Participant 9).

In a lot of different sports, there's a cultural ideology that you have to be tough, and you have to make all these sacrifices and you have to be mentally and physically tough so your coaches scream at you and force you to do all this painful intense stuff because if you're not tough, if you're not hurting, if you're not suffering, then you're not willing to push hard enough to be the best. If you couldn’t handle it, you would be asked to leave. I think we are definitely seeing positive gains in the coaching world. The new generation of coaches don't do it (the verbal/emotional bashing) as much. And the ones that do, only do it because that's the culture. I mean, that's what they're taught is okay and acceptable. That is how they were coached (Participant 8).
Training and education

Training and Education was a statement that all participants felt was crucial for the cessation of non-physical abuse in sports and just the need for improved practices in sport altogether.

I definitely think training and education is necessary for coaches and even for administrators. I mean, I know there is technical skill training but there isn’t really training to be a good coach, administrator, or universal training for sport professionals in sport organizations. Let’s be honest, most of these elite private club and college coaches don’t have a degree in coaching. The reason I say that, is because I know there's a lot of jobs nowadays that require you to have continuing education and I feel it is quite limited in sport as many people get hired because of reputation. Regardless, I think education could be more universal such as a CPR or even trainings on sexual harassment. I think organizations need something to further the knowledge of the coach on coaching practices in general or even team management for that matter. Just something that’s more universal so that coaches are coaching in a productive and athlete focused way (Participant 1).

I’d honestly like to see a little more collaboration in sport. The pressure is often put on the coach to produce results. It would be interesting to see what would happen if we really looked at cultivating that coach-athlete relationship. It’s the kind of relationship that I am working on developing in my own current profession. I just think this allows the athlete to have a say in what happens, versus, you know, an adult telling a kid, you know, who's always been taught, you have to listen to the adults, like the adults are right, the kids need to obey. It's different in the profession that I work in now but that’s because the organization where I work and who I am has made it that way. We have empowered our athletes to collaborate more and have a say when appropriate. With my clients you lay out a variety of options, and you can educate them and kind of tell the person what you think would be most appropriate or suit them best. But ultimately, what happens is up to them to decide how they would like to move forward. This is definitely a concept that should be taught as most coaches have been taught the opposite in that it’s their way or the highway (Participant 2).

I feel like, you know, when you're hiring coaches in their 30s, 40s and 50s, for that matter, like they’re set in their ways, and they are who they are, growth and change is a lot more difficult. So I think it starts with the hiring process. I think it starts there. It's getting a good hire because once people are set in their ways, and if they've been coaching for years and years, it's hard for them to change, and rightfully so, you know, you're not going to change your whole outlook on things like once you reach a certain point in life, where it's going to be harder to, but if you do, like as upper administration, find yourself in that situation, you got to look on how you can try and remedy it or fix it or call them out (when necessary) and tell them they need to watch themselves and their actions. There needs to be more guidance provided. I also feel like coaches need
guidance, just like anybody else does, you know, so administrators should be providing
guidance to coaches, educational opportunities and resources that can remedy some of
these pre-conceived coaching philosophies (Participant 7).

**Accountability**

The need for accountability was significantly expressed by participants.

If there was a better way to hold people accountable that would be key. Because I feel there has been a stigma of whistle blowing… but if you see something that’s not productive, and potentially needs to be reported then I think we need to find a better method to get the situation looked into than just historically disregarding it. I mean I know that there's stuff in other jobs where sometimes they, employees, who have been accused of a wrongful behavior are watched or like shadowed or reviewed to make sure they are doing a good job. However, sometimes that's always counterproductive too because then you just kind of like put on a good face when you're getting watched. But I just feel more could be done than what we are seeing now (Participant 1).

Honestly, a lot of people just need to be held accountable, I just feel a lot of things are just brushed under the rug or abusive coaching styles or techniques are just kind of accepted because that’s what's always worked, but it doesn't mean that that's what's going to be sustainable long-term. Maybe, even having somebody come in to talk to the athletes one on one, to get their perspective of how the coaching is. This way they're not influenced, because I think that's a big thing too. I feel like it's constantly where the coaches or an administrator is always involved when something's going on with the athletes, and sometimes it's like, maybe bring in the parent or maybe just get permission from the parent to talk to the athlete alone so it's not like they’re pressured to say a certain thing because there are coaches around. Personally, I always felt that pressure of my coach, it was like well I want to tell my mom the truth but I also don't want to upset my coach or I don't want to look bad to my coach like I don't want to suffer repercussions from that, but I just feel there could be better ways to evaluate what is actually going on. I think having that awareness will allow people to be less fearful of speaking up and coaches would then be more likely to be held accountable for what they are doing (Participant 3).

**Transparency and visibility**

The need for organizational transparency/visibility was expressed by participants as the majority described a major lack of it and how that impacted operations and ultimately supported this type of non-physical abuse. Visibility was another element that at least half of the participants stated was necessary to end this type of behavior. Most of the time practices are
behind closed doors and at the beck and call of the coach. Even at the collegiate level there is really no one supervising what is going on during practices or competitions.

One participant stated,

Communication is difficult. Messages can be easily misconstrued. People are more likely to understand when someone says this is why I’m doing it, or give them a better reason than to just to blow up on them, and then never attempt to reconcile that. It just keeps the issue there. I think it is really important to be transparent about what is going on especially from the top down so that when issues like this happen they can be taken care of appropriately (Participant 4).

I would say probably the most important thing is transparency. I believe everybody should have a pretty good idea of what is going on and the overall mission and goals of the organization. Especially when you are working with younger kids, like the parents should be there, they should be able to see and watch and know everything that’s happening. Although I will admit sometimes the parents are part of the problem. But I think it would go a long way in helping curtail some of the issues we are discussing here. If there was some kind of accountability where the coaches knew that somebody was watching them, if like the national governing body was watching them, or the coaches knew someone was watching them. They wouldn't try to cover things up. People would be far less likely to engage in bad practices. Also having a system in place for reporting would be monumental. Most companies do, any HR department that you can go to, if there's an issue with your supervisor or something, harassment etc. there is a framework or a policy on how to handle it… though there may still be some gaps as things fall through the cracks and don’t get appropriately handled at times, but at least bare minimum an organization should have some kind of system and be open and transparent so if something does happen, a person would know who talk to, and it's a separate person from organizational hierarchy standpoint (Participant 8).

I think the way the media portrays sports is a major part of the issue. Coaches are always portrayed as really tough. And there's also, such a, I don't want to say like secrecy, but the idea that all of our practices were behind closed doors, right? So it makes that kind of perception. And that's the case for a lot of sport organizations, especially when you get up to the elite levels of sports. Where athletes are going to move to where their coaches live or are going to these camps and their parents aren't there, and their parents are sending their young athletes to these places under the assumption that the coaches are going to be the ones that are filling that parental role, but they're not. And then there's nobody to keep them in check. I just think there is a lot of gaps in the perception of what is really going on behind closed doors so to say. All of it just needs to be looked at and re-evaluated because I think it's so easy to get caught up in the perception of it all and lose sight of the reality of things which ultimately affect the athlete. Realistically, I don't have high hopes for a full wipe of the institutional or a revamp of the way in which sport institutions of elite sports operate. That's probably not
going to happen. But I definitely think more visibility and also more awareness of the prevalence of abuse that is happening in these environments is important, so that when it does happen, people can recognize it, and they know what to do or at least can respond appropriately (Participant 6).

Administrators’ Awareness

Participants noted that administrators should be aware of their relationship with the coaches. It was strongly stated that the coach and administrator relationship adhered to the tolerance of the non-physical abuse that was experienced.

I think the biggest thing is a sports admin cannot become too close with their staff. And if they do become close, they need to have the ability to separate themselves from the person and the situation. Separate between the relationship with the coach and the fact that ultimately decisions made could have a major impact on the company you represent. It’s like the saying goes, you don’t hire family because they often take advantage of the situation. The same type of thing goes here (Participant 5).

I think the biggest thing is a sports admin cannot become too close with their staff. And if they do become close, they need to have that ability to separate. Separate and know the difference between work and play. That is what's best for your organization (Participant 7).

Established standards and expectations

Many of the participants discussed how institutional policies were pretty open-ended and that there was a lack of established standards and expectations within the organization. These policies were vaguely stated but were not clear. It was mentioned that there were no cut and dry rules on behavior for the coach, administration, or support staff, for that matter.

I think part of it is, 1) there's no clear establishment of standards and expectations. That's a big thing. Another one is there's no accountability of my superiors from the executive staff. I never felt like I could really be honest with the executive staff. If someone asked you like how things are going, the political answer and the answer you're always supposed to say, ‘things are great’, but they're not great. They gave off the attitude that you’re lucky to be here, you know… and if you complain about something, it was like a strike against you. I think there's no accountability, up and down the board or like the chain of command. I think this becomes the case because these top coaches over time, they've gained more and more power and sports is a lucrative business nowadays. With that power, a sport coach can recruit high profiled players and influence better facilities to be built. And you know every sport coach now wants their own weight room,
they want their own locker room building, they want their own this and that, and some organizations have granted them that. I think because of that sort of pedestal we have put athletic coaches on a pedestal, but ultimately it just enables the sport coach to do more and abuse their power more. These coaches are not held to any kind of accountability and are kind of treated like gods. There's not a checks and balances system for these coaches (Participant 5).

Anyone can define what they think is fair, and I think fair is being objective. I know not everything in life is fair. For instance, college sports, college athletics, you know we say they are equal opportunity, but at the end of the day it’s still not fair as we are adding roster spots, but the funding isn't the same for men’s and women’s sports. I know that. But I think being fair, it's important that you're objective. It is important to evaluate and hold people to a standard. I mean, sure, we have some incredibly great athletes, like physically gifted athletes. Yes, they do make a difference in a program recruiting branding, marketing, enrollment and impact our community. But what really makes an organization be great is the operational fundamentals, executed on a day-to-day basis. Being able to communicate, hold people accountable, practice emotional intelligence, that kind of stuff, those things really add up. What an organization stands for far outweighs the revenue they bring in or their win/loss count. But because we are so caught up on this other stuff because it is what is known to make money, there's no checks and balances system of established standards and expectations gets lost and because of it, the problems are only going to get worse (Participant 6).

Winning is not everything

Participants stated that there has been a change from traditional schools of thought regarding team dynamics and winning. Traditionally, most sport institutions believe that though winning is not everything, it dictates many aspects that come with the power and prestige of sport. In addition, the term family used to describe team dynamics has seen a decrease in usage due to the toxic nature that blurs boundaries and athlete wellbeing.

I think that society as a whole can appreciate the things that sport teaches us. But we often get so caught up on things like the first-place trophy or how you did at the game. I really think that as a society we need to start focusing more on what you get out of the sport, like the journey, the life skills, rather than what merely what's waiting at the finish line (Participant 1).

We spend so much time together in the sport world that we often act like a family. But considering any type of workplace environment a family can be toxic. Winning can be toxic. Boundaries can be blurred and overstepped, and I definitely see that is what took place at this organization. I think this notion of family is what made it so difficult to leave because not only were we bought in and got caught up in the allure of what the
program could be, but we also felt this family bond that made you feel guilty for doing anything that deterred from it. We became fixated on all aspects that were a part of it especially on winning. That kind of environment needs to be remedied in sport because so often athletes’ and coaches’ entire livelihoods are on the sport field and there is really no separation between sport and normal life. I just think a healthier balance needs to be formed (Participant 6).

*The need for leadership*

When asked about how to change the treatment of athletes a majority of participants stated that it ultimately comes down to leadership at the top (in an administration role).

I think it comes from leadership, you know, if you're hiring the right administration, the right leaders, the ones that have the right vision of what sport should be about, how to properly manage a sport organization appropriately, then you are set... Obviously, yes, we all want to win. Winning isn't everything but it dictates everything, so I get it, we have to win, we have to perform well and there's things that have to happen. I know it's necessary to achieve those things but the way we treat people needs to be the number one priority and that is in reference to the support staff, the coaches, the athletes, the janitor, that's everybody, you know what I mean. That needs to be at the top of the list because that is what helps an organization be high functioning. Sure, frustrations happen, things happen, but those things can happen and can be dealt with appropriately because people are more willing to do right because they have been respected (Participant 2).

Leadership needs to take issues like we are talking about on headfirst. When situations like this arise, it comes down to them to tackle it. We get so caught up in the accolades, and these coaches winning that we do not reprimand them when they step out of line. That needs to change. Leadership needs to change (Participant 3).

*Conclusions*

This chapter comprises the findings of the analysis, joins the analysis back to the research questions, and expresses consistency of the analysis with grounded theory methodology. Ten participants from two different organizations were interviewed for this grounded theory methodology study. Interview questions were structured to understand what factors contribute to the continuation of abuse in sport cultures, focusing primarily on what prevents people from reporting. The six themes resulting from this study identify major aspects that have impacted the prevalence for non-physical violence in sport which include (a) description of non-physical
abuse (b) organizational culture (c) athlete/coach experience (d) athlete/coach reaction (e) administrative structure and operations and (f) prevention.

There were no differences in the factors that contribute to non-physical violence that occurs within private and public sport organizations. The data provided some initial insight on what societal factors contribute to continuation of this phenomenon. While great strides have been made in researching non-physical abuse, it is evident in the research results that there is variability in why NPA persists. Chapter V includes the summary for the critical analysis and discussion on the six themes.

Both participants representing public and private sport organizations shared similar experiences, concerns, and insight for rectifying the issue under analysis. Though there has been an increase in media attention to the issue of non-physical violence and tolerant cultures of abuse in sports via media sources this area of research is still a relatively new and a topic that has been covered up or often glanced over. The respondents captured the realities of sport professionals and former athletes who are trying to navigate these situations. Chapter V includes the summary for critical analysis and discussion on the six themes.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory study was to identify what factors lead to tolerance of abuse within organizational cultures of sport. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings as related to literature on abuse in sports and what implications may be valuable for use by legislators, organizations, administrators, athletes, and coaches who work in, or plan to pursue careers in athletics. Also included is a discussion on connections to this study, current topical relevance, and the future of sport organizations primarily regarding treatment of employees at all levels of the organization. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a summary.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions:

RQ1: What are athletes’ and staff members’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences of non-physical abuse within organizational culture?

RQ2: Why do participants think that non-physical abuse was a tolerated method of coaching and administering?

RQ3: What made it difficult for participants to report non-physical abuse?

RQ4: How do participants think non-physical abuse in sports can be prevented and addressed?

The research identified overarching multi-dimensional themes in response to what factors led to tolerance of abuse within sport organizations. These include (a) description of non-physical abuse (b) organizational culture (c) athlete/coach experience (d) athlete/coach reaction (e) administrative structure and operations (f) prevention. Some factors relate primarily to the individual, some to the overall organization, some to sport in general, and some to a combination of all facets. All factors contribute to the understanding of why organizational tolerance of abuse exists and what efforts can be sought to proactively combat it.
Interpretation of Findings

While the organization in which each of the participants worked varied, responses for each of the common themes were prominent in addressing what factors were relevant during their experiences working within a sport organization where non-physical violence was prevalent. These themes have a dynamic dimension to them, as participants were able to reflect on their experiences and provide valuable insight to what could have been done differently and pinpointed what made it so difficult to speak against the injustice that was occurring. Each theme is described in detail in the following sections.

Elite athletes and support staff experience unrelenting and constant threats to their mental and physical health

Providing more insight to answering research question 1, participants commented on the impact abuse had on mental health as an athlete and as a sport professional. It was stated that there is an evident gap between what the coach envisions their tactics are doing for the athlete/support staff with whom they work versus what is actually happening. There seems to be a disregard or lack of caring by the coach as they are solely focusing on performance without understanding how such tactics are affecting the athlete.

The need to be in control, fear of losing the game, and the possibility of losing a job are what often lead to authoritative coaching practices being discussed (Protrac & Jones, 2011; Potrac et al., 2002). As a result, the obedience of athletes is expected and enforced, which takes them out of the decision-making process and ultimately their voice when proactively asking questions or questioning training regimen (Adams et al., 2010). This research shows that fear is relevant at all levels of the organization (Protrac & Jones, 2011) and was certainly identified by participant responses.
As participants noted, most coaches have never learned about sport psychology or counseling. Mental health is most certainly an area in which the sport organizations need to put their attention. Participants mentioned that a major contributor to mental health issues was the mind games that these head coaches used to pit them against one another. Part of this could be the fact that sport often serves as a space for the social construction of gender and reifies traditional gender norms (Sappington, 2020) and affirms that those who participate should be strong, tough, and heterosexual to succeed (Hartill, 2005). Mental health, emotions and victimization is an area that sport has yet to accept is a real issue because, in doing so, targets some of the foundational values on which it stands (Anderson & White, 2018; Coakley, 2017). However, as this and previous research done by the U.S. Center for Safesport have made clear, it does not matter who or what you are, effect of abuse is not selective (USCenterforSafeSport, 2020).

Because of these hegemonic norms, physical abuse was a real threat to participants employed within these sport organizations, which they admitted made it difficult to assert themselves. These statements echoed what has been noted by previous research, that these power imbalances where tactics of coercion, intimidation, and manipulation are presented to push the target of abuse into a position of helplessness and defenselessness (Roberts, Sojo, & Grant, 2019). One major point noted in the literature and derived from the research was the impact of power and the dynamic relationships formed within sport. Part of the issue is that coaches possess a position where they can hold all the basic types of power. This includes power that is gained from being selected into their position, coercive power as they can give or take opportunity from an athlete, reward power as they can provide the opportunity for a desired entity, expert power as they have been given this role based on training or perceived experience,
and reverent power because of the respect gained from society (Anderson & White, 2018). Knowing this, provides valuable insight to the power dynamics within sport organizations and the platform of influence sport coaches have.

**What are athletes’ and staff members’ perspectives regarding their lived experiences of non-physical abuse within organizational culture?**

In response to the first research question, this study sought to explore organizational culture and environment, it was discovered that sport organizations’ environment plays a primary role in the continuation and tolerance of non-physical abuse. Organizational norms, power structures, social values, and beliefs often are factors driving abuse (Roberts, Sojo, & Grant, 2020). This environment was based on an elitist mentality that was very exclusive. Participants mentioned that there was an appeal to be a part of these groups. As French & Raven stated in the literature review, there is often great esteem that is afforded based on membership to high status elite groups (1959). Gervis and Godfrey (2013) associated this elite sport environment to a cult; they illuminated how both cults and sport include isolation, sacrifice, fear, shared obsession, and a charismatic leader (Gervis & Godfrey, 2013). Although suggesting elite sport is like a cult may appear to be an extreme conclusion, the symptoms the coaching staff and athletes addressed in this study that they suffered were also extreme.

Participants felt incredible amounts of pressure, hostility, and intimidation. All participants were threatened, depersonalized, and disregarded at one point or another. The work and training environment was overtly controlled, and it was difficult to pursue other interests outside of work and training. Communication was often very aggressive, targeted, and frequently escalated to confrontational beratement. There was an evident level of fear that was felt at most levels within the organization. Participants’ responses validated this notion of psychological abuse describing how it targeted their emotions and impacted their cognitions, values, and beliefs
about oneself and others, often negatively (Mountjoy et al, 2016). This change in values derived from being subject to humiliation, scapegoating, rejection, isolation, and directed threats as mentioned by Stirling & Kerr in the literature review (2013).

There was no apparent difference between the abusive tactics used between the private versus public sport organization setting. All participants responded similarly with how they were treated and what the environment was like. Both groups identified similar narratives as they described the environment in which they worked.

**Continued tolerance**

Captured themes relevant to the participants perspective regarding how they coped with what was happening and what made it difficult to speak up about what was taking place gave great insight into the second research question posed in this study. Specifically, results from this study included three main sentiments (a) a naivety to what was occurring (b) avoidance for the sake of survival/fear of speaking up (c) and a notion that this treatment was rationalized/validated. Underlying all the sentiments was an inference to a perceived “trust” in the employee-manager relationship that was ultimately based on fear.

This study’s conclusion emphasizes the need for understanding sport professional’s perspective in rectifying these types of situations since they are a main factor for continued tolerance. Participants’ responses also validated that their experiences were handled on a personal level rather than as an issue the organization was facing. Both groups within the study had members who worked within the same timeframe and issues that were taking place or reported were managed on a personal level. These issues were not addressed as an organizational issue, validating what Roberts, Sojo, and Grant stated in 2020.
As the participants noted, the acts of non-physical violence took place in the public sector during practices that involved coaches’ feedback and instruction (Kerr et al., 2019). This type of behavior took place at various locations within the competitive sporting environment and outside of it.

Participants touched on the structural and social mechanisms located within sport organizations that allow non-physical violence to be activated, tolerated, and accepted. One main construct used was the sheer fact that not only were the athletes pinned against one another, but coaches and support staff were as well. Essentially, participants experienced having to directly choose to be in their oppressor’s good graces by tolerating the treatment being administered or chose to advocate for whoever was being abused on any given day. This “dog eat dog” mentality was something that spread throughout the organization.

Participants validated grounds for non-physical violence in sport organizations through extensive descriptions of the structural, social, and organizational stressors that cultivate it. Power-imbalances, winner-take all rewards, and isolation were experienced by all participants (Roberts, et al., 2020). Results from a recent study conducted in the Netherlands suggested that parents and athletes made sense of and normalized the abuse they experienced through their interactions with others who were limited to the elite world of sport as athletes adopted a code of silence in which they stopped telling their parents what occurred at practice (Jacobs et al., 2017). Meanwhile, parents made sense of the coaches’ actions because of their own experiences with sport participation. These findings demonstrate that not only do coaches train others the way they were taught, but parents rationalized and accepted this instruction because it emulated their own experiences playing sports (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). These responses validated this sport ethic of dedication to the game over anything else (Coakley, 2017).
Issues with reporting

In seeking to answer the third research question posed in this study it was addressed that no matter if it was discussed at the peer, family, administrative, or supervisory level of the sport organization, support was almost non-existent. Most participants spoke about how other people did not really grasp or understand what was happening when they were told about it, they often eventually accepted reaffirming notions that sport has some unhealthy cult-like tendencies (Gervis & Godfrey, 2013). Though some participants discussed how they created friendships in the workplace, no participant discussed any advocacy initiatives by peers in regarding the NPA that they were experiencing, and a culture of silence was evident (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Participants admitted this notion of bonding over perceived experience of trauma, but they were not empowered enough to advocate for one another or for themselves. Most often situations were never really discussed after it happened. It was incredible to hear how most participants did not share their experiences with anyone because they were afraid of what could happen to them or their future job opportunities. These responses aligned directly with the literature, as this type of organizational culture makes it more difficult for an individual to report or feel that a situation is dire enough to discuss with administration (Brodsky, 1976). Head coaches often serve as gatekeepers to athletes’ and coaches’ futures because of the perceived power and influence they have (Potrac & Jones, 2011). As a result, support staff and athletes’ sense of urgency and ability for advocacy is often suppressed in these types of sporting environments that lead them to become vessels with their sole purpose to carry out their coaches’ and/or employer’s desires (Anderson & White, 2018). Simply stated, athletes and support staff are expected to take direction without question and suffer penalties when they act in defiance.
Diving deeper, with discussion about tolerance, when participants were asked about how their peers and other employees who worked for the organization responded when they admittedly disagreed with a coaching tactic, they ultimately aligned themselves with the head coach’s perspective and did nothing to refute it. Responses supported the literature claims that when coaches, administration, or staff place demands or expectations on members of the organization, it threatens their personal resources including self-esteem, skill, physical health, and well-being in the sport environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). Participants inability to speak up or advocate for themselves follows in suit that self-regulatory resources are depleted, and resistance is reduced to such abusive behaviors and treatments.

Participants often tried to deflect the situations when they got too intense and suppressed what was happening around them by only focusing on the good. Overall, participants were just trying to protect their reputation and future job prospects, though they did everything they could to protect and support the athletes with whom they served in that environment. Most participants were just trying to get out of the situation with minimal repercussions and distance themselves from members of that organization after their period of employment.

**The role administration has in all this**

The results derived from the data would agree with the literature that a culture of compliance exists within sport organizations (Roberts, et al., 2019). This provided further insight to help answer research question 3 of this study. The threat of abuse or actual abuse has become, in some realms of sport, a tactic to exercise control and teach discipline (Roberts, et al., 2019). Participants discussed how, although there was this intense proclamation “to be the best”, other aspects of the organization fell short in overall operational efficiency.
There was often a lack of communication, administrative oversight, reporting, and parent/third party involvement. During the hiring process, most study participants who coached had very informal interviews and often did not sign any sort of contract agreement regarding their position, their duties, or their role/responsibilities. This continued into a common thread that there was a lack of on-job training or any sort of training material.

There was extensive dialogue on perception and how they were not valued at these organizations. Administration held a lot of power and weight as it was made evident that there were focused efforts on maintaining it. Participants viewed administration as ultimately untouchable, especially when it came to reporting an issue. The lack of formal channels for reporting did not help the cause, if anything, it hindered it. Reasons for not reporting were aligned with fear. It was important to understand ultimately why participants did not speak up.

Participants made several remarks regarding the hiring process within sport organizations. From the responses it was stated that within sport organizations administrators often hire by reputation rather than by checking references and backgrounds where they may find evidence of abuse. A person who moves around a lot may be the result of an organization not wanting to deal with them or the administration not addressing why they were dismissed. The opposite could also be true where a coach could remain employed at an organization because of a winning history and the organization tolerating the abuse.

Executive leadership within an administration was a key area that participants mentioned regarding prevention of non-physical abuse. Most participants hoped that if they were in a position of such power, they would be more forthright in addressing the situations head-on when it took place. Accountability was consistently mentioned by participants regarding reporting and tolerating non-physical violence. The notion of accountability extended into administrators’
relationship with the coaching staff. Most of the participants discussed the relationship between coach and administrator as it is crucial in the advocacy of the athlete or support staff. If an administrator is too “buddy-buddy” with a coach, it will be far more difficult to report them if inappropriate behaviors are happening. It was highly suggested that a professional working relationship is crucial for overall health, well-being, and overall sustainability of those employed.

The research validated that in most other social contexts the apparent emotional abuse tolerated within sport is not an accepted practice that sparks the question why is it allowed? Sport is one of the few institutions where there is a lack of oversight and regulatory systems that ultimately allows for the institution of sport to operate without any repercussions due to its own self-regulated policies and procedures (Kerr et al., 2019). This may be the very core of the issue itself.

**What can be done to curtail this and prevent it from happening again?**

At the core of this study’s fourth and final research question was the fundamental question, how can this be fixed? As it has been extensively discussed, cultural behavior plays a big role in sport organizations. For so long acceptance of a culture of abuse existed within sport because coaches used their positional status to abuse those with whom they worked, whether it was intentionally or unintentionally. This is due to the limited scope of resistance, often created by the deference to expertise that exists between coach/administrator to an athlete, assistant coach, or a support staff member, which makes it more difficult to speak up when a culture of abuse is established (Roberts, et al., 2019). Most of the participants felt that the sport culture in which they once worked has not changed over the years. However, those who work in sports have become more cognizant of what is occurring and are less likely to accept non-physical abuse when it happens. An evident lack of exposure to the issue still exists. Recently, there has
been a high visibility of sexual abuse in the coach/athlete relationship but limited scholarly or media attention on emotional abuse (Anderson & White, 2018; Kerr et al., 2019; Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

One gray area that was addressed was the lack of training and education. Many of these coaches were not certified but coached athletes at some of the highest levels of sport. They have gained credibility from “experience” and reputation. From the remarks made by participants, many of them have not studied or developed other aspects of coaching, such as counseling, human development, and or even biomechanics and yet the role of the coach continues to expand. In most cases training to become a professional coach is solely based on previous playing experience, rather than any formal certification. Often coaches have little supervision or evaluation on their coaching in the day-to-day sense (Anderson & White, 2018). Whether they are a good coach is often based on their win-loss ratio, otherwise they can do as they please. Because of a lack of formal education and training beyond previous sport participation and the emphasis of winning being paramount to building clout and reputation, the way sport organizations recruit prospective coaches (Anderson & White, 2018) perpetuates abuse and ultimately undermines the standards of care expected in most institutions of employment (Coakley, 2017)

These other duties expected by a coach today provide further stress and pressure beyond just coaching as the administrative duties can be burdensome. Regardless, there is still a large opportunity for continued development of all parties involved in a sport organization, especially a coach, as they often take on several roles and responsibilities in addition to leading daily practices. One concept area that could be examined is what defines a good coach? Is it reputation
or actual knowledge? Further articulation of what makes a good coach, administrator, athlete, etc. could help rectify the issue.

The need for organizational transparency and visibility was expressed by participants as mose described a major lack of it and how that impacted operations. Especially with what had been seen in the news, the issues often happened behind closed doors or at least away from the public eye. Though this type of non-physical abuse is common and may happen in front of everyone at a practice, it is rarely something that is witnessed by anyone who is not a part of it. Because of that, several participants advocated for established standards and expectations as policies, as they exist now, are typically open-ended with no real cut and dry rules. No policy is one factor that opens the door for non-physical abuse to take place.

Participants mentioned some of the toxic social concepts of “sport is like a family” and “though winning isn’t everything, it dictates everything” were cautionary signs that athletes/coaches did not realize were the gateways to tolerating non-physical abuse. Thus, authority, punishment, and power often considered as non-child-centered sport practices, are able to be endorsed due to the self-organization nature of sport (Fisher & Anders, 2019; Kerr et al., 2019). The emotional abuse that is delivered becomes anticipated, tolerated, and unchallenged (Anderson & White, 2018; Kerr et al., 2019; Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

At the core of it, everyone needs to be accepted, everyone wants to feel worthy, but at what cost? Responses expressed that the most direct way of changing this type of treatment comes down to leadership at the top, those who are in administration making the calls and promoting what they value.
What needs to change?

Ultimately what can be done? From the research it is quite evident that open practices should be a viable option and highly encouraged if not mandated. In addition, one-on-one discussions with athletes should take place to verify that feel safe and support within their training environments. Administrators should strongly work towards more professional relationship with the coaches’ enforcing policies and protocol. At the educational level abuse in sports should be a commonly discussed topic for future sport administrators. At elite levels of sport nationally and globally sport leaders should be more proactive and outspoken about not tolerating abuse.

Implications for Practice

The study was written for current, or perspective athletes, coaches and administrators engaged in or supervising, working, or training within a high-level sport organization, whether associated with the private and/or public sector. Examples from the interviews in addition to the findings derived, provide valuable information on the realities of the situation. The themes, theory, and categories provided a vivid glimpse of non-physical abuse in sports. It is important to note that these sport professionals were abused too. It was not just the athletes. They were placed in vulnerable situations and were not protected either. Continued efforts should be put in place to protect all members of an organization from non-physical abuse.

Suggestions for Future Research

For this study, qualitative research was the right choice, but qualitative interviews are not designed to capture hard statistical evidence. If this study were to have been paired with quantitative research, the credibility would heighten. Providing some sort of survey that is designed from quantitative research may provide subsequent statistical analysis that would strengthen the qualitative data collected.
A larger study using more diverse populations, other sports organizations that cater to
different athletes, would be advantageous to compare perceptions and experiences for sport
professionals across the United States who have been a part of an organization that tolerated non-
physical abuse. As the literature stated, abuse is not specific to any demographic. The study did
have some variance as participants ranged in demographic affiliation but that was not a focus
point. Demographic affiliation certainly is an area that can be included for future research.

From this initial research, it has been identified that there are a lot more athletes and sport
professionals across all sport disciplines at the youth, collegiate, and elite levels of sport who
experience non-physical abuse. There is a great opportunity to develop extensive research on this
area to influence policy change and sport professional practice. There is a new concept in the
social sciences coined “emotional warfare” and it is a concept worth investigating further as it
may be quite relevant to combatting the issues being discussed in this paper.

It was noted that athlete and coach perspective could have blended in responding to
interview questions as all participants were both athlete and coach at one point in their personal
lives. There may be a more cohesive way to distinguish the two for more articulated data.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that it was difficult for some participants to admit non-physical
abuse was occurring for fear of the implication. There were definitely a few participants who
even now, years away from the situation, were concerned about what would happen if they were
to speak ill about their former employer.

Breaking down the fear and advocating for those who are in vulnerable situations is the
change that needs to happen. It is crucial that research like this continues to happen and that
those who are affected by this speak up and are heard. This dissertation has been the culmination
of a journey through athletics that finally sees its end. An epic journey where aspirations got sidetracked by non-physical abuse. No one deserves to be on the receiving end of non-physical abuse and this dissertation is a primary testament to that.
References


Stafford, A., Alexander, K., & Fry, D. (2013). ‘There was something that wasn’t right because that was the only place I ever got treated like that’: Children and young people’s experiences of emotional harm in sport. *Childhood, 22*(1), 121–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213505625


Appendixes A - Participant Consent Form

Abuse in Sports: A Closer Look at How Organizational Culture Can Lead to Tolerance of Non-Physical Violence
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Principal Researcher: Ian O’Rourke
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Merry Moiseichik

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about non-physical violence in sports. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have previous experience working for an organization where non-physical violence was tolerated. This study seeks to find useful information in evaluating programs and developing protocol for assessment when identifying potential programs that foster non-physical abuse.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?
Ian O’Rourke

Who is the Faculty Advisor?
Dr. Merry Moiseichik

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of the study is to examine staff members who were a part of sport training programs where aspects of organizational culture allowed for, promoted, encouraged, or tolerated acts of non-physical abuse.

Who will participate in this study?

Sport professionals consisting of former assistant coaches, strength coaches, and athletic trainers who worked closely with athletes will be interviewed. All participants were staff members who worked within a sport program that unfortunately fostered non-physical abuse. Participants will vary in range and gender. All participants will be former athletes, coaches or athletes before accepting the position they held in the organization that tolerated non-physical abuse.

What am I being asked to do?
Your participation will require the following:

A zoom call that will last about 1-2 hours in duration. The zoom call will be recorded and then transcribed. After the transcription is complete the video recording will be destroyed.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?
Participants may feel uncomfortable discussing the topic.
What are the possible benefits of this study?
Participant’s responses will contribute to protecting future generations of athletes from suffering this type of non-physical abuse. Responses will provide the baseline for future programming and further research on the topic.

How long will the study last?
Participants will be required to partake in a zoom call interview that will last 1-2 hours in duration.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?
Not at this time.

Will I have to pay for anything?
No, there will be no cost for participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?
If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your current career position will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy. Data will be collected by video recordings via zoom, transcribed, and the video recording will be deleted immediately after transcription to uphold confidentiality.

Will I know the results of the study?
At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Merry Moiseichik or Principal Researcher, Ian O’Rourke at iborourk@uark.edu. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?
You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Ian O’Rourke
iborourk@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor
Dr. Merry Moiseichik
merry@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.
I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. My answering the interview questions indicates that I consent for my answers to be used in this research.
Appendix B - IRB Approval Letter

To: Ian B O'Rourke  
    BELL 4188
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair  
      IRB Expedited Review
Date: 03/17/2021
Action: Exemption Granted
Action Date: 03/17/2021
Protocol #: 2012305501
Study Title: Abuse in Sports: A Closer Look at How Organizational Culture Can Lead to Tolerance of Non-Accidental Violence

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.
Appendix C- Recruitment Letter

Initial Participant Correspondence

From: Ian O’Rourke
Sent: Date To Be Determined
To: Participant Name
Subject: Dissertation Qualitative Study – Tolerant Abuse Sport Culture

Dear [Insert first name],

My name is Ian O’Rourke, and I am a doctoral student in the Recreation and Sport Management program at the University of Arkansas. In addition to my studies, I am also employed at the University of Arkansas serving as a Graduate Assistant for the Office of Student Activities.

My dissertation will be a qualitative case study concentrating on sport cultures which are tolerant of abuse. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the role organizational stressors play and the impact they had on those who worked within these sport cultures that condoned non-physical violence. It is said that psychological, physical, and sexual abuse can cause some of the most serious negative effects (Mountjoy et al., 2016, Stirling, 2009). Harmful interpersonal experiences are commonly termed non-physical violence. Specifically, the study aims to identify what factors prevent staff members from speaking up about incidents of non-physical abuse.

Participation in this study includes one 60-minute interview that will be done on-line through Zoom or face-to-face. The interview will be scheduled at a time that is agreeable with your calendar. The interview will consist of about 5-20 questions. As a participant, you will be able to review your transcript and clarify any information. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. The zoom call will be recorded and transcribed. After the transcription is complete the video recording will be deleted.

You qualify for this study because you have previously worked for a sport organization that was identified for tolerating behaviors associated with those aligning with non-physical abuse.

Thank you in advance for your time and willingness to take part in this study. I look forward to meeting you and learning about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Ian O’Rourke
Appendix D - Interview Questions

Abuse in Sports: A Closer Look at How Organizational Culture Can Lead to Tolerance of Non-Physical Violence

Warm Up:

- Briefly touch on your athletic background and how you got to __________?

Experiences

- What was your role in this organization?
- What was the contract agreement for your position? Was it clearly established what your job role and duties were? If not, how so?
- Can you describe what the communication style was like working in this organization? Do you feel it was transparent? How was information disseminated? Was it coherent? Or was it confusing?
  - Clarification may be needed (with boss/supervisor or sport coaches worked with)
- When issues would arise how were those handled?
- What was your overall experience like working for your employer?
- Was there ever a time where you felt depersonalized? Did your employer ever make you feel like you were a robot or merely there to serve one specific function?
- Did you ever feel threatened or was it a supportive working environment? Please explain
  - If you did sense hostility how was that expressed? Were you ever micromanaged? Stonewalled? Isolated? Gaslighted? Treated with contempt, scorn or disdain?
- How did you handle those situations?

Training Environment

- What was the overall organizational culture?
  - How did you feel in the (gym, club etc)
  - Were there ever any incidents of abuse?
- What was the method of reporting if an issue arose? Were there any?
- How did/were they handle or was this type of behavior supported?
- How were the athletes you worked with treated?
- Did you agree with the way these situations were handled?
- Did you ever feel your personal safety was threatened? If so, did you ever report it? What happened?

Reporting:

- What do you think the problem is?
- When did you become aware of it?
- What kinds of things were done and were not okay?
• Who have you talked about this to? How did they respond?
• If you didn’t report this to someone higher up what restraints were in your way? What made you feel like you couldn’t? Why didn’t you?
• What needs to be done in organization to prevent this type of behavior or these types of situations from happening?

**Reflective Questions regarding future of sport:**

• What are your thoughts on sport today? How have your experiences changed or maintained your perception of it?
• If you were to have re-lived that elite sporting experience, what would you have done differently?
• If you were an administrator in that environment, how would you have acted? Do you feel those situations were handled appropriately?
• Is there anywhere else you have seen this type of behavior? If so, where?
• Do you think it is abusive behavior? If so, how would you go about changing it? What do you think can be done?