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Institutional Perpetuation of Rape Culture: A Case Study of the University of Colorado Football Rape and Recruiting Scandal

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Institutional propagation of football hypermasculinity: An  
examination of the University of Colorado's response to rape

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On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001 a number of CU football players and recruits raped three women during and after an off-campus party at the University of Colorado (CU) in Boulder. These women were all current students of the school, and one was a student-athlete on the soccer team. After none of the perpetrators were charged with sexual assault, the women filed a Title IX civil lawsuit against the University for fostering an environment within the football department which allowed their rapes to occur. This civil suit was recently settled by CU for \$2.85 million. The civil suit, as well as numerous investigations, contended the football program used alcohol and sex as recruiting tools.

The thesis that I am currently writing examines how the University as an institution propagated a rape culture within the football department through its response to the rapes and subsequent lawsuit. One main feature of the rape culture pervasive in the CU football department is the hypermasculinity of some of the players. This hypermasculinity takes the form of an exaggeration and celebration of stereotypical “tough-guy” hegemonic masculinity, where men strive to perform the extremes of “what it means to be a man.” As will be discussed, this is a systemic problem that has been institutionalized within the CU football department through the importance CU places on the football program, the athletic department’s recruiting strategies, the coaching techniques, and the entitlements granted to players by the institution.

Universities - and especially athletic departments – view athletic recruiting as an important tool to further their athletic programs, which could heighten their national and international exposure, and potentially bring in more funding. CU’s athletic department spends \$315,000 annually on football recruiting according to David Hansburg, the University's director of football operations (Independent Investigative Commission [IIC], 2004). CU has found itself caught up in “a hyper-competitive recruiting ‘arms race’ that is complicated by the presence of

big money, lucrative media and easy access to alcohol and sex” (IIC, 2004, p. 5). The pressure to recruit and retain the top football players in the country has been an important contributing factor in the University’s ability to overlook the rape culture within the football program.

I will examine three of the forces that, when combined - as they were within the CU football department in 2001<sup>1</sup> - lead to the rapes of Lisa Simpson, Monique Gillespie, and Anne Gilmore. Rape culture, an extreme sense of entitlement, and football hypermasculinity all contribute to the sexual violence experienced by these women. Although I will try to outline them separately they are actually intertwined, interdependent, and mutually influential.

In my work I am examining rape culture as opposed to the individual people involved in the sexual assaults. I do so primarily to scrutinize the institutions and social forces at play. Researching rape culture allows me to analyze how institutional structures or one’s socialization may foster rape supportive beliefs. It also highlights the societal structures that aid a perpetrator in committing rape and escaping punishment. In addition, societal structures and socialization may hinder a woman who has survived rape from fully understanding what happened to her, reporting the crime, or receiving what some might call justice. Though there are individual factors at play for why certain men decide to engage in sexual coercion, rape, or gendered violence, the focus taken here is on the messages and pressures that society or culture place onto individuals that help shape their decisions and attitudes.

Now, a few qualifications are important to make here. While both men and women are raped, in this thesis I am specifically discussing a situation where men raped women which is why I focus on the male perpetrators and the women who survived rape. It also must be noted that rape culture is not a homogeneous phenomenon, it is present to different degrees for

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<sup>1</sup> Other documented sexual assaults committed by members of the football department occurred between 1997 and 2004 (IIC, 2004) and can be analyzed using these same criteria.

different people depending on their intersectionalities, activities, and the way they live their lives. This paper examines a small sub-segment of rape culture in the US: the football department at CU. It is historically specific, geographically bound and incorporates the pressures of competitive football hypermasculinities which include being a member of an all male peer support group, the higher education system, and the entitlements that come with being a Championship winning college football player at a Big 12 school (Benford, 2007).

A sense of entitlement plays a prominent role in football hypermasculinity celebrated in the University context. Entitlement is a personality characteristic that runs along a continuum where most people fall within the 'middle' range which allows them to seek and accept what they need to survive and live within this society. However, an excessive sense of entitlement describes a belief that one is entitled to things, people, or services that are not within the realm that he can actually be entitled to. Or, in other words, when people "take for themselves what has not been freely given" (Moses and Moses-Hrushovski, 1990, p.70). I argue that one factor which distinguishes a sense of entitlement from the 'normal' range is that the person who feels entitled does not take into consideration how his actions impact other people's feelings, needs, or desires. Michael Kaufman (1999) argues that men who commit violence against women may have sense of entitlement to privilege that, for them, justifies violence as a means to retain and bring attention to their status.

The university makes it easy for football players to adopt a sense of entitlement because of the special status and services they may be given by the educational institution, the media, and the community they live in. Within college football in the United States, revenue-generating athletes (those that compete for large, popular sports such as football and basketball) typically acquire the celebrity status that goes along with being a 'sports hero': college football players

give media interviews, sign autographs, and have their photos prominently displayed on the school website and promotional publications, etc. In addition, athletes also receive numerous academic concessions. Athletes at CU have access to special tutoring services, while those at Iowa State University are allowed to register for classes before non-athletes due to schedule conflicts associated with practices and games, and, according to Benford (2007), the athletic department will bend the rules to make sure athletes pass their classes. Also, the athletic department gives the impression to male athletes that they are entitled to sexual services from female students. By having carefully selected attractive female student ‘ambassadors’ show recruits around campus, Kuney (2004) states the university or athletic department is not so subtly sending the message that “sex is part of the package of athletic stardom, and that somehow or another, a right of access to female bodies is just part of the deal” (cited in Benford, 2007, p. 17).

However, the university did not, on its own, create the sense of entitlement that some players hold. In American society, as Lipsyte (1995) states, young skilled athletes are pampered and shuttled through life; they “are excused from taking out the trash, from learning to read, from having to ask, “May I touch you there?” (p. 55, as cited in Benford, 2007, pp. 16-17). But, although this sense of entitlement and hypermasculinity was not created by the university or athletic department, they still hold a responsibility for how they choose to treat the players: to continue to pass them through, or to attempt to stop the cycle.

Football hypermasculinity builds on the sense of entitlement that many players bring with them from high school. Researchers analyzing football hypermasculinity integrate the context of the game and explore what it takes for a man to be a ‘successful’ football player (Messner, 2005; Welch, 1997). Football is a violent contact sport. Though the aim of the game

is to score the most points by bringing the ball across the endzone line, the way to get it there is to tackle, chase, evade, and outrun one's opponents. The hypermasculinity necessary to be a successful football player incorporates the domination and violence embedded in the game. These characteristics include a celebration of domination, aggression, and sexuality as well as a large physical presence (Welch, 1997). Athletes in contact sports are paid, in one way or another, to exhibit and embody violence (Messner, 2005). When a player depends upon and thrives on these characteristics on the field, it becomes very difficult to turn this part of him off once the game is done.

Violence is just one aspect of football hypermasculinity that I am concerned about. Another aspect is the misogynistic and homophobic training techniques utilized by coaches and peers. Nelson (as cited in Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997) holds coaches partly responsible for the way women are stripped of their subjecthood and objectified when coaches make it explicitly clear that femininity is the enemy and use language that degrades women. Gary Barnet, Head Coach for the CU football team, made misogynistic comments to the press about his only female player after she came forward that she was also raped by fellow teammates (p. 28, IIC, 2004). If these types of comments are spoken to the press, I can only imagine what he says behind closed doors. Homophobia, via derogatory name calling and questioning the players' assumed heterosexuality is also used as a tool by coaches and teammates to shape the players' masculinity and motivate better athletic performance (Messner, 1992). The players will try their hardest to conform to the masculinity idealized by coaches, just as they would with other instructions coaches give.

One of the theories behind why some men rape is that they belong to all-male peer groups which enable gendered violence. The all-male peer support group present among some

of the players, according to Schwartz & DeKeseredy (1997), has two factors. First, the members are attached to each other, meaning they are friends which hold some loyalties to one another and care about maintaining their image for each other. Second, the group provides its members the resources, “such as verbal and emotional support for engaging in woman abuse ...[that]... may both encourage and legitimate the abuse of current or former intimate female partners” (p. 32). An interesting aspect that Sanday includes in her theory on all-male peer groups (as cited in Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997) is the idea that these men’s identities ride on this group affiliation, which influences their decision to partake in sexual assaults or to keep quiet about the assaults their friends commit. Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) theorize about how athletes may be more vulnerable to teammate pressure:

The training of a sports team to sacrifice everything to a group goal, and to immediately accept the complete authority of the leaders, may make some athletes unable to disagree with a group's goal, even if that goal is illegal, dangerous, or immoral. The male bonding in these groups, who work, live, and play together every day for years, can be very powerful. (p. 126)

Thus, many otherwise 'good boys' get caught up in watching or participating in gang rape and other bad behaviors because to do otherwise would be to go against the group, which has enormous consequences for the individual man (ibid).

While the group of men that participated in the rapes on December 7<sup>th</sup> did not know each other very well as they had only been together for a few days, they were nevertheless situated within a stable and somewhat predictable group structure. Player-hosts had been paired with recruits for years with the same expectations and responsibilities. They knew their role in the recruiting program was to show the recruits a “good time” and entice them to attend CU. According to the IIC (2004) which completed an internal report analyzing the football recruiting program, player-hosts lacked training and did not understand that part of their role was to take responsibility for their and the recruits’ behavior. The report states that “some hosts...resorted to



providing alcohol, drugs and sex, including visits to strip clubs and the hiring of strippers” (p. 13).

While the aim of this research is not to out and out change masculinities, it is possible to change the way in which the university conceptualizes and advocates for certain types of masculinities or certain characteristics within masculinities. Coaching styles, tactics, and effectiveness are certainly not dependent upon the degradation of women and homosexuality. There are ways of coaching that emphasize the positive aspects of players’ masculinities and teamwork without denigrating femininity and homosexuality.

Not all the blame should be placed upon the university. Many of these structures are in place at a societal level and were instigated long before the athletes came to the university. However, instead of attempting to mitigate hypermasculinist, misogynist, and homophobic behaviors and attitudes, the university actually perpetuated them through, as I have shown, its recruiting, coaching techniques, and special treatment. Combined, these three factors foster a sense of entitlement in the players, a sense, in this instance, that they had a claim to certain women’s bodies. Also, even though the CU football and recruiting programs became the focus of national attention, they are not the only schools with this type of problem. As Coach Barnett stated in his testimony before the IIC, many schools across the country use these same tactics; CU was just trying to compete. For me, this is a poor excuse and does not justify exploiting female students and perpetuating sexist and homophobic mentalities, let alone rape.

As this short paper indicates, systemic rape culture is a complex issue with no simple solution. But one of the first steps is to try and understand the various systems and pressures at work and the areas where improvement can be made while raising awareness about the potential dangers of big-time athletics for students, athletes, the university, and society.

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