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More Than a "Bad Apple": Applying an Ethics of Care Perspective to a Collective Crisis

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Abstract

The Larry Nassar case is one of many abuse stories within and beyond sports. Although conventional strategies of image repair such as identifying one "bad apple" are considered effective within an ethics of justice perspective, we argue that crisis responses must adopt an ethics of care when physical and emotional harm has occurred. Using a case study approach, we qualitatively analyzed organizational responses from Michigan State University (MSU), U.S.A. Gymnastics (USAG), and the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC), as well as media coverage of Nassar's sentencing hearing, through Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) framework. We theorize how the media landscape creates a space of resistance for survivors that facilitates ethics of care in a collective crisis.

Introduction

In January 2018, former doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison after decades of abusing hundreds of athletes (Cacciola & Mather, 2018; Levenson, 2018). The investigation into the case, which began in the summer of 2016 (Kwiatkowski et al., 2016), ultimately estimated that more than 50 people across three interdependent organizations—Michigan State University (MSU), U.S.A. Gymnastics (USAG), and the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC)—shared responsibility for enabling the continuous abuse (Wagner, 2018). Although the organizations did apologize and promise corrective action, such typical reactive crisis responses

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framed Nassar as a bad apple rather than part of a larger problem in the culture of sport. As such, the organizations failed to acknowledge collective responsibility in their responses and lack of preventative action. In Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney's words during Nassar's sentencing hearing:

> If Michigan State University, U.S.A. Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee had paid attention to any of the red flags in Larry Nassar's behavior I never would have met him, I never would have been "treated" by him, and I never would have been abused by him. (Abrams, 2018, para. 21)

Ultimately, the organizations' responses lacked an ethics of care—relational obligation and concern—toward the victims and those indirectly affected by this trauma and relied instead on an ethics of justice—a focus on legal responsibilities—that is the hallmark of most crisis communication (Tao & Kim, 2017).

Crisis communication, especially within a sports context, has generally focused on crisis management and image repair for organizations (e.g., Frederick et al., 2019; Len-Ríos, 2010). However, we argue that this narrow view of organizationally based crisis communication does not allow for adequate theorizing about the larger cultural problems and collective responsibility related to issues such as abuse. Following the lead of the collective voice of survivors and other feminist communication scholars, we argue for a continued move toward a feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) in crisis communication. Using a case study approach, we analyzed the crisis communication responses of the organizations involved in the Larry Nassar case, as well as media coverage of the scandal during the sentencing hearing. We offer a brief analysis of the organizational responses of MSU, USAG, and USOC as they enact a traditional bad apple response to the scandal. Then, we apply Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) for Ethical Strategic Communication to the collective crisis involving MSU, USAG, and USOC. Ultimately, we propose the media as an additional landscape of care to consider in the model to approach a collective crisis from an ethics of care that advances public interest communications theorizing.

Literature review

Our literature review begins with a brief overview of traditional approaches to crisis communication that result in a bad apple logic. Then we discuss the need to consider collective crises, particularly when focusing on networks of abuse. Finally, we discuss ethics of care in a crisis communication context.

Crisis communications and the bad apple

As Avery et al.'s (2010) analysis of 18 years of crisis communication research revealed, Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory and Coombs' (1995) situational crisis communication theory

(SCCT) dominate the field. At their core, both approaches are about maximizing reputational protection for organizations in post-crisis communication. Organizations can follow specific crisis response strategies such as denial, apology, justification, and excuse based on crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Because of this prescriptive approach to crisis response, there is a potential for organizations to shallowly follow these response strategies to avoid responsibility for the crisis and manipulate stakeholders into accepting the response (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Although Coombs (2012) insisted that, in SCCT, "people are the first priority" (p. 159) while reputation is second, this may not always be the case in practice. In a more recent examination of crisis communication literature, Zhao (2020) argued that such an organization-centric research agenda limits understanding of the broad implications of crises for a variety of stakeholders, which we contend includes victims of abuse.

Scholarship on crisis communication in the context of sports scandals follows this trend closely, focusing heavily on strategies for image repair and restoring organizational reputation and legitimacy (Brown & Billings, 2013; Bruce & Tini, 2008; Len-Ríos, 2010) and/or fan and community perceptions of the organizations and their responses to sports crises (i.e., Brown et al., 2015; Frederick et al., 2019; Harker, 2021). In such crises, a bad apple is usually named—someone who is "deficient or deviant in their individual choices, but not a product of the larger economic, historical, or political systems they inhabit" (Wingard, 2017, p. 137). The bad apple or separation strategy diverts responsibility away from the organization(s) and its culture because another person or entity is "really" responsible for the offensive act (Brinson & Benoit, 1999, p. 505). Smith and Keevan (2019) examined this strategy of separation in the domestic violence case involving football player Ray Rice and the response from the National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell. The scholars explain that the strategy of separation, borrowing from the logic of the bad apple, combines "bolstering, shift the blame, and corrective action to demonstrate that the acts of particular employee do not represent the attitudes, thoughts, or actions of the organization" (Smith & Keevan, 2019, p. 295). Similarly, media outlets oftentimes cover instances of child sexual abuse by employing the episodic frame, which diverts attention from the broader issues (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

Sexual abuse scandals, whether within or beyond the world of elite sports (e.g., Ohio State, Penn State, Baylor, Florida State, the Catholic Church, the military) cannot be viewed as isolated incidents but instead must be understood as arising out of a networked context of abuse. In other words, the crisis is not limited to the heinous acts of cruelty perpetuated by individuals (bad apples). As such, we cannot only look at responses from single organizations. It is from this position that we next introduce scholarship focused on understanding collective crises.

Defining a collective crisis

The Nassar case involves several interdependent and overlapping organizations (MSU, USAG, USOC) and can be considered a collective crisis, or a crisis involving multiple organizations

associated with the same crisis (Comyns & Franklin-Johnson, 2016). Crises that affect multiple organizations "presumably influence each other's crisis resolution responses because the organization's response can be easily compared with the responses of other organizations" (Ham et al., 2012, p. 19). This type of comparison then may permit the bare minimum of ethical responses as each organization tries to respond in ways that are equal to what other organizations have done with little motivation to go beyond that. For a collective crisis, one event may be multiple events that have occurred within different organizations. Collective crises may lead to distrust in not just one organization, but the system that sustains them. However, current theorizing in crisis communication typically only considers one organizational context and not these interconnected systems.

Although scholars and practitioners explore how these strategies are or are not effective at managing the crisis or repairing image, this narrow view of crisis communication does not address the larger cultural problem or collective responsibility among organizations. At the time of writing, research into the Larry Nassar case also has been limited to single organizations with Frederick et al. (2019) analyzing the traditional image repair responses (and fan perceptions) of only MSU. In sum, traditional crisis communication research and practice, especially in cases where harm has been done to human beings, does not do enough to acknowledge collective responsibility and an ethics of care. In the following section, we explain how an ethics of care has been considered in crisis communication research.

Ethics of care in crisis communications

Feminist scholar Carol Gilligan (1982) proposed an ethics of care to challenge discourses in ethical theory focused on rights and legal discourses—typically called an ethics of justice. In an early study of crisis communication and sexual harassment, Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995) found that legal strategy dominates organizational decision making in times of crises. Similarly, Tao and Kim (2017) found that "when organizations respond to their crises, they tend not to emphasize ethical approaches; though when they do it is more often the ethics of justice approach than that of the ethics of care" (p. 690). At the center of these different approaches is the relationship to the individuals involved. Put another way, an ethics of care is about fulfilling responsibilities toward people rather than resolving claims of conflicting rights (Simola, 2003). This type of ethical approach focuses not on issues of fairness but on issues of care given toward vulnerable populations (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018).

Bauman (2011) explored three different ethical approaches to crisis leadership, concluding that an ethics of care offers the best approach for dealing with crises that involve harm because people attribute intentionality to organizations and people who allow harm to occur. Ultimately, an ethics of care approach "requires leaders to manage the complexity and human relationships that are part of the crisis rather than spending time making impartial judgments and resolving conflicting rights" (Bauman, 2011, p. 288).

Crisis prevention is essential to an ethics of care framework. Simola (2005) argued that signal detection—paying attention to early warning signs (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993) and uptake—informing someone in power to act upon warning signs (Mitroff, 2001)—are key crisis prevention areas in which to apply a care perspective. According to Simola (2005), resistance, voice, and silence are concepts of care most salient to crisis prevention. People can engage in resistance to relational violations through voice by speaking "of their own observations, knowledge, and feelings. They also listen to voices of resistance in others" (Simola, 2005, p. 345). But, using voice to resist may lead to negative repercussions for individuals, resulting in silence that "precludes others from receiving information about potential problems" (Simola, 2005, p. 345). To summarize, a care perspective in crisis prevention allows for opportunities for people to voice concerns and for those concerns to be acted upon by those with the ability to prevent crisis situations.

Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) advanced previous theorizing related to ethics of care to formulate the AMCC, which can be used before, during, and after crises across contexts, organizations, and geographies. Drawing on feminist geographies (Dias & Blecha, 2007), the authors ground studies of care "in a specific time, place, and geopolitical landscape" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 23), meaning there is no one size fits all crisis prevention or response. Landscapes feature both material and ideological characteristics. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) identify four landscapes of care: (1) physical—material resources and geography, (2) cultural—gender roles, social norms, shared values, (3) political/economic—government institutions/norms/politics, economic structures, political systems, and (4) human—emotionality, existing networks/relationships, health. Further, there are situational variables based on traditionally feminine values, such as interdependence, relationships, vulnerability, and reciprocity, that crosscut each landscape. The authors argue that considering landscapes of care and these situational variables "could contribute to understanding and implementing effective *ethical* communication that holds public interest (vs. primarily organizational interest) at their core, even when practiced from an organizational or management perspective" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 19, emphasis in original). However, Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) studied only single organizations to develop their model. We believe there is an opportunity to further understand how ethics of care can be applied to a collective crisis by examining the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case. As such, the following research question guided our study:

RQ1: How, if at all, was the bad apple logic used in organizational responses to the Nassar scandal?

RQ2: How, if at all, can the collective crisis of the Nassar abuse case be understood through the AMCC framework?

Method

We used a case study approach to answer our research questions because the Nassar abuse scandal offers what Yin (2009) terms a "critical case" (p. 47), which is appropriate for research designed to confirm, challenge, or extend an existing theory. Patton (1990) explained that critical cases are "those that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (p. 174). To triangulate our data through multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009), we collected and analyzed both organizational responses and media coverage of the Nassar abuse scandal from January 19-24, 2018. Although Nassar's abuse can be traced back to the early 1990s (Dator, 2019), we focus on this week because it is when 156 women read victim impact statements during an eight-day sentencing hearing for Nassar. Victim impact statements play an important role in an ethics of care perspective because they allow survivors to experience "social acknowledgement, a sense of control, an opportunity to tell [their] story" (Herman, 2005, p. 574). Relatedly, this time frame also encompassed key dates in the organizational response of the USOC, USAG, and MSU, including the resignation of top leaders.

Data collection

We looked at each of the organization's website during the specific time frame of January 19-24, 2018, to find the organization's official statements. We included three statements from MSU, two statements from USAG, and one statement from the USOC in our study. Additionally, we included media coverage of the Nassar abuse scandal gathered from Factiva. Limiting our search results to the January 19-24 dates, the search terms "Larry Nassar" and "USA Gymnastics" yielded 312 articles, "Larry Nassar" and "Michigan State University" yielded 69 articles, and "Larry Nassar" and "US Olympic Committee" yielded 29 articles (n = 410). Our sample was primarily comprised of news articles, but we also included sports, feature, opinion, and broadcast/radio transcripts to gain a more holistic understanding of the case. When removing duplicate articles that included mention of two or more of the organizations, the total number of articles analyzed was 300. Furthermore, we also drew from existing secondary research on abuse in gymnastics and competitive sports in general (e.g., Chotiner, 2018; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008; Ryan, 1995) to give a more complete picture of the landscape of abuse in competitive sport to juxtapose this with the landscapes of care.

Data analysis

Articles and media releases were uploaded to NVivo to help organize and qualitatively analyze the data. In alignment with Yin's (2009) strategies for case study research, we relied on theoretical propositions to guide our analysis. For the first research question, we focused on analyzing the organizational sources and responses, using the bad apple logic (Wingard, 2017) as

a lens through which to analyze the data. For the second research question, we took a deductive approach to the data, using the AMCC framework (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018) discussed in the literature review to guide our analysis as initial codes: physical, cultural, political/economic, and human landscapes. In each of the four landscapes, we then considered how the cross-cutting care considerations of relationships, interdependence, vulnerabilities, and reciprocity were present or not. We integrated existing secondary research on the topics of sport culture and abuse in each landscape of care to provide a more holistic interpretation of our data.

Results

RQ1: How, if at all, was the bad apple logic used in organizational responses to the Nassar scandal?

All three organizations—MSU, USAG, and the USOC—responded to Larry Nassar's abuse in playbook ways, meaning they enacted traditional image repair strategies. Each organization enacted the strategy of separation as part of the bad apple logic. For example, MSU spokesperson Jason Cody explained that the organization did not cover up Nassar's horrific conduct, stating, "Nassar preyed on his victims, changing their lives in terrible ways" (Michigan State University, 2018a, para. 3). Former MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon, in her apology statement, said she was "sorry a physician who called himself a Spartan so utterly betrayed your trust and everything for which the university stands" (Michigan State University, 2018b, para. 4). Former CEO of the USOC Scott Blackmun apologized for "the pain caused by this terrible man" (Blackmun, 2018, para. 2). Simon and Blackmun did acknowledge a larger failure in the organizations; however, the failures were limited to this specific case (not acting soon enough) rather than an acknowledgment of the larger culture of Olympic Gymnastics. All three of the organizations' leaders have either been ousted or resigned (Haag & Tracy, 2018; Macur & Belson, 2018; Ruiz & Futterman, 2018) in another instance of bad apple logic.

Bad apple logic facilitates an ethics of justice response from organizations that solve the problem by removing the bad apple(s) but not addressing the deeper cause or the harm done to individuals at a relational level. The MSU, USAG, and USOC responses followed this pattern. For example, USAG claimed it followed the correct procedures and left the rest to law enforcement—in this case the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In her January 24, 2018, statement on the sentencing of Nassar, former USAG CEO Kerry Perry said that "USA Gymnastics applauds Judge Rosemarie Aquilina for handing Nassar the maximum sentence of up to 175 years, in an effort to bring justice to those he abused and punish him for his horrific behavior" (U.S.A. Gymnastics, 2018b, para. 1). Simon, who praised the tireless work of law enforcement and cyber forensics at MSU, also deflected responsibility to the authorities. In her December 2017 statement, she claimed she had "been intensely focused on making sure nothing interfered with the criminal investigation or bringing Nassar to justice" (Michigan State

University, 2017, para. 3). This ethics of justice response was further cemented by the NCAA's investigation that found no wrongdoing on behalf of MSU. Ultimately, MSU, USAG, and the USOC remain a part of the larger system that enables bad apples to ferment.

RQ2: How, if at all, can the collective crisis of the Larry Nassar abuse case be understood through the AMCC framework?

Physical landscape

In the AMCC framework, the physical landscape considers "the physical, lived realities of consumers, message receivers, clients, stakeholders, publics, and partners" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 31). When considering the collective crisis of the Larry Nassar abuse scandal, the multiple locations in which Nassar operated and was employed are part of what allowed the abuse to occur for so long. Child sexual abuse often thrives when adults are isolated with a child. In the same way, isolating organizational responses bounded by physical location isolates and silences the abuse, ignoring the interdependence of relationships. Although the organizational responses highlighted above are limited in their scope, it was overwhelmingly the media coverage of the abuse scandal and trial during the time frame analyzed that showed the larger network of abuse.

Mainstream media coverage implicated all three organizations to varying degrees, often centering around Nassar's shared employment status through MSU and USAG. One lede in an editorial talked about the sentencing of Nassar "having laid bare the utter and cataclysmic failures at USA Gymnastics, at Michigan State, and elsewhere, to keep the children in their care from harm" (Abraham, 2018, para. 2). Even when only one affiliation was highlighted in a headline, such as "Ex-USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar sentenced to 40-175 years in prison" (Reid, 2018a) and "Survivors slam MSU for response to Larry Nassar complaints" (Glor & LaPook, 2018), neither organization dominated the media coverage for its sole involvement in the crisis.

When each institution was implicated individually, the focus was primarily on a failure of organization leadership—with top leaders being named—and the need for an independent investigation. For MSU, calls primarily came for the resignation of then university President Simon whom Dey (2018) described as "hanging on to her job with bloody fingernails" (para. 2). MSU found its crisis being compounded when a "MSU trustee backs president, says there's more 'than just this Nassar thing'" (Yan, 2018, para. 2), which was viewed as a dismissive comment to the severity of this collective crisis. For MSU, accountability was framed as coming from the NCAA—"NCAA opens investigation into how Michigan State handled sexual abuse allegations against Larry Nassar" (King et al., 2018)—and the attorney general—"Michigan State University seeks Attorney General review of Nassar case; School asks state for review amid calls for president's resignation and public outrage over handling of abuse allegations" (Korn, 2018). The focus of these two entities as providing accountability for this crisis in the

context of MSU frames Nassar's abuse as a legal issue and with limited scope to athletics. The focus becomes more about what rules or laws were violated than the impact on the survivors, a clear indication of an ethics of justice approach rather than an ethics of care. In a *New York Times* editorial entitled, "U.S.A. Gymnastics Still Values Medals More Than Girls," Higa (2018) wrote that after the F.B.I. was contacted:

> Dr. Nassar was relieved of his assignments at U.S.A. Gymnastics two days later. But the organization did not contact Michigan State University or Twistars Gymnastics Club, whose athletes the doctor also treated and abused, and it has contended it did not have an obligation to do so…Legally, U.S.A. Gymnastics might be right. But can anyone credibly argue that was the morally acceptable thing to do? (Higa, 2018, para. 9)

Such editorial coverage rightly pointed out the flaws of an ethics of justice perspective and discussed how the abuse could have been prevented had any of the organizations stepped in to address the accusations or communicated with one another.

Cultural landscape

The cultural landscape of Olympic Gymnastics exemplifies traditional norms in gender roles (including masculine/feminine traits) and identities, social structures and norms, shared values, and shared personality traits. We acknowledge that this case involves more "newsworthy" victims of sexual assault because of their gender, race, and age (Marcel, 2013, p. 294; see also Gilchrist, 2010). Indeed, young female gymnasts embody the ideal of the "white American darling," an "ideal type against whom female athletes are commonly measured" (Butterworth, 2008, p. 266), and have more power behind their voices of resistance as their harm is more easily believed. Further, the high-profile nature of this case, due to the worldwide media spectacle that is Olympic Gymnastics, reinforces the perceived worthiness of the public's attention.

Interestingly, although the collective crisis primarily revolves around MSU and USAG, USOC is implicated in the coverage, but to a lesser degree and primarily in its investigative role and third-party accountability to USAG. However, USOC is also criticized heavily by survivors of Nassar's abuse for not acknowledging its role in preventing this abuse decades ago and doing too little too late. The focus of this criticism came from "six-time Olympic medal winner Aly Raisman" who "has ripped the US Olympic Committee saying it had 'failed' the young athletes and must be held accountable" (Agence France-Presse, 2018, para. 1). Rather than USOC having the credibility to serve in any sort of accountability role, gymnasts "Raisman and [Jordyn] Wieber charged that USA Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee 'emboldened' Nassar and 'enabled' his sexual abuse of more than 140 gymnasts and young athletes, creating what Raisman described as the 'worst epidemic of sexual abuse in the history of sports'" (Reid, 2018b para. 2). In this way, the extent of the collective crisis is revealed as the systems of accountability that are ostensibly in place in gymnastics are not working and not protecting the athletes. Institutional grooming takes place when "offenders manipulate entire systems or institutions into believing that they are no threat to children" (McAlinden, 2006, p. 339). That survivors

repeatedly informed parents and coaches of Nassar's behavior over decades illustrates the silencing and institutional grooming within elite gymnastics (Howley, 2018; Kwiatkowski et al., 2016). Gold medals were most important.

Political/economic landscape

The political/economic landscape considers how power disparities related to hierarchy and authority can create vulnerable publics (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Gendered violence, including sexual assault, abuse, and rape, is an epidemic plaguing all sports and all levels of sports participation. In their analysis of 159 cases of criminally defined abuse, Brackenridge et al. (2008) found that "nearly all (98%) cases were perpetrated by coaches, teachers, and instructors, who were predominately male and ranged in age from 16-63 years old" (pp. 395-396). As Anderson and White (2018) argued, sports help coaches and authority figures gain power, which then is used to teach obedience to their authority. This creates a relational power dynamic in which athletes or participants remain silent and deferential to their superiors.

This power dynamic is especially salient in an elite sport such as Olympic Gymnastics. This system creates circumstances "that allow for those who are dominant (especially White, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men) to perform acts of violence (sexual and otherwise)" without consequence (Cannella & Perez, 2012, p. 284). Like many other sports, Olympic gymnasts' routines are strict; their sporting and nonsporting activities are highly controlled and subject to the whims of coaches and, in this case, medical staff. Survivors illustrated how Nassar exploited his power through their harrowing stories of "anguished probing, under the guise of treatment...feeling helpless to challenge a doctor at that age" (Cacciola & Hauser, 2018, para. 6). Survivors also revealed Nassar's controlling practices—his treatments—such as when he gave McKayla Maroney a sleeping pill before a flight and then proceeded to treat (molest) her in his hotel room. In Raisman's victim impact statement, she attested:

> Imagine how it feels to be an innocent teenager in a foreign country hearing a knock on the door and it's you. I don't want you to be there, but I don't have a choice. Treatments with you were mandatory. You took advantage of that. You even told on us if we didn't want to be treated by you, knowing full well the troubles that would cause for us. (Gajanan, 2019, para. 11)

Although coaches and authority figures can maintain and exploit their forms of relational power, Fisher and Anders (2020) argue that "perpetration of abuse persists in sport spaces largely because athletes train and compete in relations of force that privilege structures and practices to which athletes are subordinate" (p. 129).

Economically, Olympic Gymnastics is part of the institution of corporate sport, which is marked by the "institutionalization, bureaucratization, commercialization, and spectacularization of elite sport as a mass entertainment product designed to generate maximum surplus value across myriad revenue streams" and "is now the accepted structural and ideological blueprint for

commercial sport organizations" (Andrews & Silk, 2018, p. 515). Survivor and gold medalist Raisman said of U.S.A. Gymnastics that "their biggest priority from the beginning and still today is their reputation, the medals they win and the money they make off of us" (Higa, 2018, para. 6).

Unfortunately, when such a high value is placed on the capital generated by elite sports, brand logic undermines all else (Proffitt & Corrigan, 2012). In an official statement, then MSU President Simon squarely articulates how protecting the financial and legal interests of the institution creates an antagonistic relationship with survivors:

> MSU is entitled to, and its insurers require, that we will mount an appropriate defense of these cases. This means MSU's lawyers are making arguments in defense of the claims of civil liability. There is nothing extraordinary about such legal efforts—they are typical at this stage of civil litigation. Given Nassar's horrendous acts, these arguments can seem disrespectful to the victims. Please know that the defenses raised on MSU's behalf are in no way a reflection of our view of the survivors, for whom we have the utmost respect and sympathy, but rather represent, as the Board has said, our desire "to protect MSU's educational and research missions." (Michigan State University, 2018b, para. 11)

Human landscape

The human landscape considers existing relationships, emotionality, and health at both an individual and collective level (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Although specific organizations' responses (and lack of response) were critiqued in various media sources, victims' voices and stories often prominently came through in media coverage in ways that went unaddressed in the official organizational responses. For example, during her victim impact statement, Raisman highlighted the lack of care toward the survivors, saying that "neither U.S.A. Gymnastics nor the United States Olympic Committee had 'reached out to express sympathy or even offer support—not event to ask, 'How did this happen?' 'What do you think we can do to help?'" (Cacciola & Hauser, 2018, para. 19). It is through the survivor voices and victim impact statements highlighted in the news coverage that the systemic, collective crisis in the sport is addressed and critiqued. Survivor voices, not official organization responses, displayed vulnerability and emotionality in communication about the case.

Additionally, within the media landscape, conversations were focused not on issues of organizational reputation, but rather on the deep and lasting impact of abuse for more than 150 young women and girls. Headlines such as "Ex-sports doctor's victims draw strength from each other" (Webber & Eggert, 2018) focus on the support they have provided each other that none of the three institutions at the center of this crisis did. A particularly poignant lede in *The Atlantic* said:

> It was an arresting moment, even on a day full of them. The Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman stood in front of a courtroom last Friday and addressed Larry Nassar, the

> former Michigan State University doctor who's been accused by upwards of 150 women of sexually abusing them over more than two decades. "Larry," she said from the podium in the Lansing, Michigan, courtroom, "you do realize now that we, this group of women you so heartlessly abused over such a long period of time, are now a force, and you are nothing." (Putterman, 2018, para. 1)

The coverage also highlighted individual stories and experiences disclosed during the Nassar sentencing hearing. For instance, one headline in the Daily Mail reads, "'I f***ing hate you': National champ Mattie Larson reveals Larry Nassar assaulted her in front of U.S.A. Gymnastics rep and says she quit after giving herself a concussion to avoid pedophile doctor's abuse" (Spargo, 2018). The individual stories reveal the personal pain among Nassar's victims stemming from this collective trauma. Their individual pain was juxtaposed with the fact that more than 150 young women and girls came forward with similar stories of abuse. The power of the survivors' voices and coverage of the victim impact statements during Nassar's sentencing demonstrate the extent of the collective crisis in a way that centers the moral failure of all three institutions toward these athletes. The collective story of survivors—and collective spirit of resistance conjured by their voices—will inspire systemic change. Raisman specifically called out U.S.A. Gymnastics for "rotting from the inside" during her victim impact statement (Reid, 2018b, para. 1). Raisman also articulated how survivors are tired of organizations' statements claiming that "athlete care is the highest priority" while "all the while, this nightmare is happening" (Reid, 2018b, para. 22). Coverage of the Nassar case in *The New York Times* highlighted the need for change in these organizations by focusing on survivors' collective story, shared trauma, and the relief brought about by Nassar's sentencing (Cacciola, 2018).

Discussion

The Larry Nassar sexual abuse case was undoubtedly horrific and highlights the need to consider collective crises related to human abuse as public interest communications issues. As the current analysis demonstrates, this case of abuse was the outcome of an underlying rot that had been festering for decades in the sport of elite gymnastics at the hands of negligent leaders, parents, coaches, and organizations collectively—not because of a single bad apple (Wingard, 2017). This case highlights the conditions in which Nassar was enabled to abuse, including the shared responsibility of people within and across organizations and landscapes of care.

To compound the harm, organizations' responses were crafted from an ethics of justice perspective rather than from an ethics of care perspective, which was not surprising given past research in this area (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Tao & Kim, 2017). In addition to an organization-centric focus on following proper laws and procedures, the perspective of those creating laws and policies related to sexual violence is generally limited, and an ethics of rights and justice often requires only a minimal response from organizations. We believe a focus on ethics of care can be an impetus for change in both organizational policies and the legal system.

An ethics of rights and justice is insufficient because when issues of abuse are only seen on an individual level (either a single bad apple or a single organization), the moral failure of the entire system is not sufficiently addressed. Discarding the bad apple is often touted as the solution at the organizational level but is unlikely to result in larger systemic change when the collective crisis is so pervasive.

Simola's (2005) work regarding ethics of care in crisis prevention is particularly relevant in the Nassar case, especially while reading victim impact statements. Because of a lack of ethics of care in signal detection and uptake in acting upon warning signs, more than 150 young women experienced abuse. Victim impact statements allowed survivors to resist and reclaim their voice (Herman, 2005). However, survivor voices should be acknowledged far before a sentencing hearing for an abuser. That each organization did identify tangible policy changes and procedures for reporting abuse is a positive step. In addition to MSU, USAG, and the USOC, the NCAA—in the same month it released the results of its investigation into MSU—adopted a "Policy on Campus Sexual Violence" that promised:

> A positive and thriving athletics team culture that revolves around respect and empathy for all, fostering a climate in which all feel that they are respected, valued and contributing members of their teams, athletics programs and institutions; and creating an environment in which students (athletes and nonathletes alike) feel safe and secure, both emotionally and physically, and are free of fears of retaliation or reprisal. The positive culture exuded by a member institution's NCAA teams is the catalyst for a positive culture across an entire campus. (NCAA, 2018, para. 3)

However, the corrective action in this and other cases is often reactionary, and that is not enough when crises are preventable. Although the sentencing of Nassar made clear how he will pay for the crimes he committed, MSU, USAG, and USOC have yet to truly answer all the gymnasts and communities harmed by Nassar (McGraw, 2018). As Maroney said, "It is time to hold the leadership of Michigan State University, U.S.A. Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee accountable for allowing, and in some cases enabling, his crimes" (Abrams, 2018, para. 22). As all three organizational leaders are gone, their replacements must critically examine the practices that contributed to this culture of abuse across multiple organizations and landscapes of care. Furthermore, people in positions of power need to make laws and policies to recognize ethics of care and proactively prevent sexual abuse of the magnitude that we have seen in not only the Nassar scandal, but also other cases in sports organizations, the Catholic Church, and other powerful social institutions. Rather than focusing on organizations, public interest communicators must treat child sexual abuse as a collective public health issue and crisis (Letourneau et al., 2014).

Theoretical and practical implications

Crisis communication scholars, in this case and others within and beyond the context of sports, have used traditional strategies of image repair, including bolstering, shifting the blame, and separation for single organizations to illustrate how effectively crises are managed. These traditional crisis communication analyses illustrate image repair strategies to "redirect audiences, and to control the narrative" (Frederick et al., 2019, p. 2). Such perspectives largely evade an ethics of care, which distinguishes the AMCC framework as an innovative approach to understanding crises (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). However, in applying this framework, it became clear that news coverage of this case served as the site for critiques of traditional organizational responses and prioritized survivors' experiences and needs across all four landscapes of care. Media coverage illuminated the collective crisis at hand and established relational attachment, centered, and rehumanized the survivors by platforming their voices. In this way, the media coverage modeled the type of response we hope organizations might adopt. As such, we argue that media should be considered a fifth landscape of care, particularly in a collective crisis.

Yet, this is not to suggest that media coverage always follows an ethics of care. Media can also perpetrate a bad apple logic while focusing on episodic framing of child sexual abuse (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Previous research has found that child maltreatment is frequently mischaracterized as an isolated atrocity committed by a bad apple (Aubrun & Grady, 2003). However, in what may signal a shift in media coverage, Hove et al. (2013) found that most news articles on child maltreatment were framed thematically and focused on societal causes of and solutions for child maltreatment.

We also recognize the irony in the time frame selected for this study; the media coverage unfolded during an important point of the legal process despite our criticism of ethics of justice. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to cover the extensive body of literature regarding the influence of victim impact statements (e.g., Eiler et al., 2019; Roberts & Erez, 2004), we believe that the inclusion of survivor voices in subsequent media coverage offered an opportunity for open dialogue for other survivors of abuse (Madden & Alt, 2021). Even beyond this study, we believe that open dialogue facilitated by media (both traditional and social) can allow for the interplay of factors of interdependence, relationships, vulnerability, and reciprocity (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018) in this landscape of care.

One salient practical implication of adopting the AMCC framework for a collective crisis surrounding issues of abuse is recognizing that these crises are entirely preventable. Instead of an organization waiting for a crisis to happen, organizational communicators can advocate for prevention trainings, such as Stewards of Children, that provide recommendations for specific organizational policies related to working with children. For example, one such policy might ensure that an adult is never alone with a single child (Darkness to Light, 2021). By requiring employee training on child sexual abuse prevention, organizations can both help to prevent a crisis at their own institution and play an important role in public interest communications.

Limitations and future research

As with any research, our study has several limitations. First, the selection of the time frame for our analysis limited the scope of the data included for analysis. Although this selection was intentional to focus on the victim impact statements, Nassar's abuse ultimately persisted for decades. A case study more longitudinal in nature would certainly yield additional insights into the actions and inactions taken in this case. Related to the limited time frame for analysis, we also included a limited selection of documents for analysis. At the time of data collection, Factiva was the only news aggregation research tool available to the researchers. We recognize the limitations inherent in all individual databases, which certainly influenced which media sources we included. Additionally, though not included in the current study, social media discourse surrounding this case could provide a fruitful source of data as well and would offer further research opportunities to expand upon the fifth landscape of care we proposed.

Future research should continue to explore a feminist ethics of care within and around sports—from coaching practices on the field or in the gym, to organizational responses before, during, and in response to the harm of human beings, to media and public discourses about sports. Because of the important role that sports play in society, we believe that public interest communications scholars have an important role to play in developing a body of knowledge related to ethics of care and sports culture.

Conclusion

Care should come before image. This case is emblematic of the countless other cases where multiple organizations, and not a single bad apple, are responsible for harm across the physical, cultural, political/economic, and human landscapes of care. Organizations must acknowledge the collective nature of these cases and scholarship on crisis communication must continue to assess the ethics of responses rather than simply the effects of those responses. The humanity of those affected, particularly in cases of abuse, must be prioritized in all stages of communication.

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