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Documentary Review: Broken Trust- Ending Athlete Abuse

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Aubrey Huber for her feedback and comments throughout the writing process.

The documentary *Broken Trust* (Yesko, 2020) weaves together narratives of sexual abuse to move towards both personal healing and structural change in sport. Highlighting stories of sexual abuse from former and current athletes and coaches, *Broken Trust* serves as a valuable resource for feminist educators to pursue social justice goals in the classroom. In the following, I provide an overview of the documentary, including both its accomplishments and limitations. Finally, I consider how this film might be applied to feminist classrooms.

Broken Trust sheds light on those who have experienced sexual abuse in sport, potentially aiding in the fight for justice and prevention. The opening scene illustrates this through gymnast Katelyn Ohashi as she recites a poem about sexual assault. She labels those who have experienced abuse as “contenders” and those they fight against (abusers and organizations who do not protect athletes) as “offenders” (Yesko, 2020). With this framing of a justice battle in mind, the documentary features subsequent stories of sexual abuse, reporting options for athletes, and possibilities for healing and prevention. Justice and healing become closely intertwined with accountability when interviewees directly name their abusers and describe how sport organizations are slow to act in athletes’ favor. For example, figure skater Craig Maurizi first made official complaints of sexual abuse against his former coach, Richard Calihan, to US Figure Skating in 1999. However, it took 19 years to ban Calihan from coaching. In addition, Jessica Armstrong and her daughter drafted proposals to install protocols for coaching training and sexual abuse reporting in US gymnastics. Unfortunately, their proposals were ignored. Although these accountability efforts are often slow or unanswered, the ability to speak up and tell their own stories has been important for athletes to continue moving forward. Speed skater Eva Rodansky demonstrated this importance in the film when she stated: “I spoke what I felt was the truth and I stood up for what I believed was right. And I’m not sorry” (Yesko, 2020, 29:44).

Broken Trust also reveals a variety of sexual abuse narratives that challenge dominant single storylines about how and when abuse occurs. Varying narratives reveal that sexual abuse can occur in undetected ways. For example, former Olympic swimmer Nancy Hogshead-Makar explained that sexual abuse was difficult to recognize under prolific swim coach Mitch Ivey. He “didn’t try to hide” his relationships with swimmers because “there was no cultural expectation that this was prohibited” (Yesko, 2020). Furthermore, former figure skater Craig Maurizi discussed how, from the time he was fourteen years old, his coach’s sexual abuses became something “normal” to him and he still struggles at times to acknowledge that he was sexually abused. Although *Broken Trust* widens the lens of recognizable abuse in sport, the viewer is also left considering the stories that still have yet to be told. The documentary does not feature any stories in which a female coach committed sexual abuse, although female administrators have certainly been involved in sport organizations where these stories occurred. In addition, most of the athletes featured in the documentary are white. Acknowledging the absence of different gendered and racial identities can deepen thinking around remaining barriers that prevent particular stories from being told or why some stories are told more often than others.

Broken Trust is especially relevant for educators who are committed to feminist pedagogical practices because it engages with personal stories of injustice and resistance, investigates connections between individual experiences and institutional power, and provides alternative forms of learning for students. According to Hess & Macomber (2020), feminist educators are invested in personal forms of knowledge production, including “stories of injustice and resistance” (p. 307). *Broken Trust* directly centers the first-person accounts of injustice and resistance told by numerous athletes. Integrating this documentary in the classroom allows

feminist educators to highlight the importance of different forms of knowledge production, including personal experience, in resistance movements.

Pragmatically, feminist pedagogues can use this film to promote alternative and innovative forms of learning. In a Communication and Sport course, for instance, a possible final project could be to create a “mini-documentary.” Hess & Macomber (2020) state that documentary-making meets basic tenants of feminist pedagogy practices, including the development of technological skills. In addition, showing and making documentaries appeals to visual styles of learning and provides multiple avenues into ways of knowing that go beyond traditional learning formats. By showing *Broken Trust*, students can investigate themes around crisis communication in sport, player-coach relationships, and gender in sport, while also building knowledge around the purpose and process of documentary making. One way these aims could be met is through an activity in which each student chooses a particular scene of the documentary for further analysis. Students can individually analyze the setting where the documentary interviewee is talking, the lighting and camera shot angle, the length of the clip, and verbal/nonverbal language. Then, students can hypothesize how these aspects inform one another and what these details communicate to the audience. Students may also presume what kind of questions the interviewees were asked in order to elicit particular responses. In small groups, students should then discuss their findings and draw upon each other’s perceptions about documentary-making and how sexual abuse in sport is framed.

Part of pursuing social justice goals for feminist educators includes considering the ethical implications of showing films that discuss sexual abuse in classrooms. Stories of sexual abuse can stir up traumatic experiences for students. However, rather than merely providing “trigger warnings” that might curb student engagement, or dismissing emotional reactions from the classroom completely, feminist educators have an ethical responsibility to make space for individual experiences and connect them to broader social systems. Kubala (2020) suggests making films with abuse and violence accessible to students. Accessibility means recognizing individual pain, yet “resist[ing] the individualization of this pain” (p. 202). Ultimately, Kubala argues that through this approach, students can be encouraged “to believe that we can intervene in these really huge problems” (p. 202). As a result, documentaries such as *Broken Trust* can contribute to both individual and socially holistic, justice-oriented healing and problem-solving.

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