

Understanding the concept of sport integrity in ACT Coalit Major Participation Sports Clubs

ABSTRACT

The term sport integrity is regularly used in sport governance and competitions (Gardiner et al., 2017; Kihl, 2019). Gardiner et al. (2017) noted “the ubiquitous use of the term has resulted in its exhibiting both imprecision and superficiality” (p. 7). Government sport integrity agencies’ (e.g., Sport Integrity Australia) national integrity frameworks are based on the notion that sport integrity represents “big integrity” or corrupt behaviors and/or illegal practices (doping, child abuse). However, local and state actors may have different understandings of sport integrity or involve “smaller integrity” concerns that pertain to personal ethical conduct or safeguarding integrity during competitions (e.g., official abuse, eligibility). The disconnect between national understandings of sport integrity in comparison to local clubs and state actors’ perspectives could create integrity risks. Developing the concept of sport integrity by gaining first-hand accounts of local and State Sporting Organizations (SOS) administrators’ understanding of integrity is therefore important.

The concept of sport integrity is a contested concept where there is no accepted definition in the sport literature (Loyens et al., 2021). However, broadly integrity incorporates the notion of wholeness and morality (Kihl, 2019). First, integrity means wholeness or consistency with values and behaviors. It represents the opposite of corruption that is the deterioration from a whole state (Huberts, 2014). Second, integrity as morality has a normative emphasis where right or wrong is determined by moral values in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in different sport contexts (e.g., competitions, governance, management). Sport integrity in many respects is a multifaceted term that varies in its meaning depending on the context and organizational level (Kihl, 2020). This study aims to examine the multifaceted and socially constructed nature of sport integrity in a local club and state association context to seek conceptual clarity and its meaning in practice.

The purpose of this exploratory research was to investigate administrators’ understandings of integrity in the Coalition of Major Participatory Sports (COMPS) in the Australian Capital Territory. COMPS members include the sports of Australian rules football, basketball, rugby union, rugby League, football (soccer), cricket, hockey, netball, and tennis. Using a narrative inquiry, 26 semi-structured digitally recorded interviews with COMPS administrators “responsible for integrity” were conducted where they were asked demographic questions, their understanding of sport integrity, and to provide examples of sport integrity in their club or SOS. Secondary data was also collected via club website, policies, and strategic plans.

Drawing from the thematic and grounded theory techniques, the preliminary findings showed participants broadly constructed integrity based on individual normative values, wholeness, and organizational integrity. Integrity was understood as respect, honesty, and fairness. Understandings reflected wholeness by fulfilling their individual professional obligations (e.g., upholding regulations), consistency in actions and decision-making, and accountability. Organizational integrity was displayed by promoting community confidence in sport by upholding policy standards. Exploring how local clubs and SOS safeguard their sport advances our understanding about how the levels of a sport organization influences the social construction and meaning of integrity (Loyens et al., 2021), which addresses an important theoretical gap in the literature.

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