



Abjection in sports: An ethical approach

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Abstract In her essay *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva investigates the concept of abjection. Essentially, the term means “the state of being cast off” and according to Kristeva it is a feeling of disgust, filth and humiliation, things we tend to reject for becoming subjects and protecting identities. But as I will argue here, by rejecting athletes who dissolve the culturally strict boundaries in sports, the sports organizations become abjects themselves, and consequently evade moral responsibility.

Keywords Kristeva · abjection · sports · ethics · identity

In her seminal essay *Powers of Horror* (1980/1982), the linguist, philosopher, psychoanalyst, and feminist writer Julia Kristeva investigates the concept of abjection. Literally, the term means “the state of being cast off” and according to Kristeva it is a feeling of disgust, filth and humiliation, things we tend to reject for becoming subjects.

Many have been attracted to the theory ever since Kristeva published her book, but one can also notice that the concept is seldom used in contemporary sports research. One may find that strange. On the other hand, psychoanalytic theories have always been overlooked when it comes to analyzing sports. It does not mean that the cluster of psychoanalytic theories would be irrelevant for the understanding of sports. Quite the contrary. In fact, psychoanalytic theories can provide important perspectives on sports and sporting matters, not least as an alternative, or a complement, to contemporary sport psychology (McFee, 2005; Free, 2008; Burston, 2019; Ferraro, 2019). Because, as some have noticed, “sports exemplify basic Freudian concepts, such as unconscious motivation, unconscious conflict and

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compromise, and the centrality of sexual, aggressive, narcissistic, and attachment themes throughout the human life cycle” (Hansell, 2010, p. 539). To this list one might add Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

In this paper, I try to show the relevance of connecting the theory of abjection to sports, by focusing on two general aspects: abjected bodies (with the case of Caster Semenya) and abjected behavior (with focus on the doping issue). That said, this paper is prompted by a very specific intuition. It is an intuition that the dominant sports organizations, and the sports culture at large, are much ruled and driven by the fear of the “unclean” and the “filth,” a fear of those who disturb “the order” in competitive sports, for example athletes who challenge or transcend the rather narrow cultural and ideological norms.

Based on that, and as an overall thesis for this paper, I will argue that the sports world (as we know it) is being trapped in internal paradoxes. Or, to be more specific, by rejecting athletes who dissolve the strict boundaries in sports, sports organizations become abjects themselves, and because of that evade moral responsibility.

First, however, I will outline some of the basic aspects related to the concept of abjection. So, let us start by turning to Julia Kristeva and her theory.

Aspects of Abjection

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva develops a theory of abjection by exploring the origins of certain negative sensations, such as revulsion and disgust. Based on that, she suggests that the abject is the reaction of horror to a threatened collapse of the distinction between subject and object. Thus, abjects are things we reject (or want to reject) for the protection of the distinction between subjects and objects. However, Kristeva continues, abjects (or abject things) *precedes* subjects and objects. According to her, an abject is neither a subject nor an object, but a “pseudo-object” that “confronts us” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, pp. 1–12). Kristeva illustrates this by taking an example from what she considers to be perhaps the most “elementary and most archaic form of abjection”—the loathing of “an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung,” including the “spasms and vomiting that protect me” (1980/1982, p. 2).

Using “loathing” of certain food items not only paints a psychologically graphic picture of abjection, but also suggests what it may mean to become a subject in this world. It also says something about how subjects relate to objects outside of us, as when something so trivial as when the “eyes and the lips touch the skin of the surface of milk,” suddenly becomes the opposite of what one would think is basically harmless, when it becomes a threat (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). How can this be?

According to Kristeva, when touching the skin of the milk, we may experience a gag reflex, something that make us nauseous. This sensation tells us that something is far from “harmless,” even though we may simply separate ourselves from the object that provokes the reaction. And not only that, the sensation that makes us “balk at the milk cream” also separates us from the persons who proffer it, in Kristeva’s example, the mother and father. And she continues, “since food is not an



‘other’ for ‘me’ ... I expel *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 3). From this one can draw the conclusion that “subjectivity is, in Kristeva’s account, always in revolt against itself” (Tyler, 2013, p. 29).

Kristeva’s argument suggests that abjection plays an important role for how identity is being constructed, and in determining we believe can be considered as threatening to an identity. She says:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is savior ... It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 4)

Based on this, one might say that the subjective reaction to abjects things (the horror) seems to serve the specific purpose of protecting identity. This is also why the abjection—the feeling of loathing and disgust—awakens in us when encountering certain matter, images, and fantasies; that is, abjection as “the horrible, to which it can only respond with aversion, with nausea and distraction” (Young, 1990, p. 143).

As I will show in this paper, this is a view relevant for the understanding of morally controversial sporting matters as well. For example, one might see the usually strong aversion against certain sporting behavior as a form of protection of a certain set of sporting values. This also may explain why violations of, let us say, “fair play,” or the “ethos” of sports, are often met with (moral) disgust.

In talking about abjection, it also seems reasonable to distinguish between bodily experiences and social ones, or to be more specific between *biological abjects/objects* and *cultural abjections*. The difference between these two aspects can be described as follows: *Biological abjects/objects* may include things like “excrement, blood, mucus, menses, vomit, sometimes semen, and ultimately the corpse whereas *cultural abjections* may include things like sexual taboos, prisons, disease wards, freak shows, anything that threatens to confront the leakiness of order and *other*” (Jones, 2007, p. 62). Even if one can detect a distinction, the boundaries can at times collapse: for example, when it comes to sports, the boundaries between self and society, and the biological and cultural, are often conjoined. In this regard, the human reaction of “horror” is not only ambiguous but also transcends the distinction between self and society. This issue becomes even more complicated when we consider the fact that we also can be drawn to the “horror,” that is abject things. Or, as the political philosopher Iris Marion Young claims:

The abject is at the same time fascinating: it draws the subject in order to repel it (1990, p. 143).

That said, one should add that there is a moral side to the concept of abjection as well (and I will show the relevance of this later). In Kristeva’s understanding of abjection, there is no denial of morality in the abject. On the contrary, morality (in



this regard) comes in the shape of the “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 4), again, things we usually want to reject. However, this may be a much more complicated issue than we first may think. As I show later, one can easily find examples where powerful organizations, supported by their own ethical codes and historic traditions, use their power to reject “abjects.” Perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of other emotions or ideas. Whatever the reason, it is difficult to overlook the internal power relations within, let us say, the sports community. In fact, one might even say that the elementary and archaic form of abjection Kristeva speaks of “offers a means of understanding behavior and interactions that express group-based fear or loathing” (Young, 1990, p. 142) in the sports world. The sports world (as we know it) is governed by history, tradition, ideas and norms of perfectionism. Out of this one can see how sporting subjects are being made. This, in turn, influences how subjects relate to abjects (or, abject aspects in a sports context). The establishment of the close connection between these two concepts needs to be further scrutinized.

On Becoming a Subject and Abject (in Sports)

With the establishment of modern sport during the late nineteenth century, sporting subjects were formed, not least under the influence of the romantic ideas of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Based upon masculine virtues and values, a preferably male, able-bodied, healthy and virtuous athlete emerged before the world (de Coubertin, 2000). In line with Coubertin’s fantasies of ancient Greece, athletes were supposed to be a reflection of the Olympic fantasies. However, along with the subject-formations of modern sports, others were excluded or categorized as the Other. This is not innocent, as I will show later.

But first, what can theoretically be said about the relationship between subjects and abjects? To answer that question, we may first need to know more about the notion of subjectivity. To do that, I here turn to one of the most influential theories of subject-formation, namely Louis Althusser’s (2001) notion of interpellation.

In a famous passage in one of his essays, Althusser tries to capture the theoretical constitution of the subject, by linking the concept of subject to ideology:

I shall ... suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was “really” addressed to him, and that it was *really him* who was hailed (and not someone else). (2001, p. 118)



What should we make of this scenario? The police officer in this example represents “the state,” or the overall ideology of society. Consequently, as members of society it means that we are subordinated not only to the hailing police officer, we also are subordinated to a specific ideology we cannot easily escape. That is how we become subjects. That said, there may be a paradox embedded in such a scenario. Or, as Judith Butler describes it:

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what “one” is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. (1997, pp. 1–2)

Following Butler’s reading of Althusser’s theory, the term subjection contains a double meaning. Or, as she likes to put it:

The term “subjectivation” carries the paradox in itself: *assujettissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection – one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency. (Butler, 1997, p. 83)

Butler suggests that being subjected means that we (as subjects, or as individuals subordinated to an external power) are being “punished” by a “law” that, at the same time, constitutes the subject (Davis, 2012). It is a paradox, difficult to escape. Not only that, it also means that the subjectivation essentially is about performativity. We *become* subjects through interpellation. However, according to Butler, we also may find ourselves with a matrix “by which subjects are formed,” and “thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of affect beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who perform the *constitutive outside* [emphasis added] to the domain of the subject” (Butler, 1993, p. 3).

The term “constitutive outside” essentially refers to concepts and understandings that are being excluded from certain discourses *but* simultaneously give meaning to the accepted concepts (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 109). Following this, I think it is possible to recognize that the distinction between the constitutive inside and the constitutive outside can be transferred to the distinction between subjects and objects, where, as claimed, the object is understood as the excluded or rejected, although defining, part of the subject.

The conceptual interdependency of subjects and objects also connects to the issue of identity. Being objectified also tends to consolidate “identities” founded on the instating of the Other through exclusion and domination (Butler, 1990; Young, 1990). Evidently, being objectified usually has consequences for the objectified: for example, when challenging the social, cultural, and moral norms leads to an increased risk of discrimination, harassment, and oppression. Sports is not an exception in this regard.

Over the course of history, female athletes, paraport athletes, transgender athletes, racialized athletes, and, for that matter, doping users and others who break the “rules,” have all been targeted as the Other. One thing they all have in common, is that they – *with their bodies* – challenge, and transcend even, the narrow norms of sport. However, according to the idea of the “constitutive outside” they also define



the cultural norms of sport (that is, the “constitutive inside”). But usually, it comes with a prize. As in the case of Caster Semenya.

Abject Bodies in Sports

Sports history is full of abjects, and one of the most debated cases in recent years concerns the runner Caster Semenya (see, for example, Takemura, 2020; Martinková et al., 2023; Sailors, 2020). In some respect, her case is a perfect illustration for how the abjection process often works when it comes to sports.

First, a short background to the case. In 2009 Caster Semenya won the gold medal for the 800 meters at the World Championships in Athletics in Berlin. At that time, Semenya was a rather “unknown” eighteen-year-old runner from South Africa. Her winning the gold took many by surprise, mostly because of the way in which she won the final race. Her performance was nothing less than outstanding. It was as if she had no competitors. Of course, “everyone” thought it was “suspiciously” outstanding. The gut reaction from the hosting organization, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), and officials from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) as well as sports media, was the same: “something” was not right here. Semenya looked “too masculine” for being a female athlete, she was “too outstanding,” she was “too young,” and she was “unknown” to the Western sports community. Obviously, she had to submit to the normal procedure after a winning race, by taking a test for detecting proscribed performance enhancing drugs. It turned out that she was clean. The story could have ended here. At that point, no one knew that it was only the beginning of a long and complicated case. The reason for that was simple. The IAAF was not satisfied. It could not accept the outcome of the competition. Therefore, it turned to question her gender. Was she really a (“real”) woman? The IAAF decided to subject her to a “gender verification” process in order to “determine” her sex.

It turned out to be a difficult process. It took almost a year before the IAAF had a result (Schultz, 2011). The result from the gender verification test showed that Semenya had ten times higher levels of the hormone testosterone compared to “average women.” In other words, she was *too* “strong,” or strong in a “wrong” way for being a female athlete, at least according to the IAAF’s ideas and norms. Apparently, the IAAF did not consider that gender boundaries (and gender identities) can be fluid. Instead, it played out the fairness card. In an interview for an Australian newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, the IAAF president Sebastian Coe claimed: “The reason we have gender classification is because if you didn’t then no woman would ever win another title or another medal or break another record in our sport” (PA, 2019).

Now, Semenya was faced with a choice. If she wanted to continue competing, she was forced to physically weaken herself—in the name of “fairness” towards “normal” athletes. With artificial methods she lowered her testosterone levels. One might even say that she (indirectly) was subjected to an inverted doping process, based on rather dubious assumptions, and despite the fact that “there is a cluster of



reasons that there is no robust connection between athletic performance and testosterone level” (Davis & Edwards, 2014, p. 53).

A long and juridical complicated process followed. Being a black female athlete born and raised in the South African countryside, Semenya was an easy target for the Westernized and predominantly white masculine sports culture. She became “a ‘raced’ Other” (Miller, 2015, p. 299). The ideological and political dimensions can easily be interpreted in terms of abjection. The Semenya case, and other cases like hers, is not just about the intersection of race/ethnicity, nationality, age and gender, it is also about cultural norms and psychological structures underneath the surface. It is about identity, and it is about how the two aspects earlier mentioned, the biological and the cultural, started to coexist in the case of Semenya. Also, one can as Judith Butler has observed, notice that athletes’ bodies do not exist in a cultural vacuum. In fact, the athletes “exercise a cultural norm” (Butler, 1998, p. 105). And that is not something we should take lightly. In fact, Butler takes inspiration for her argument from Freud, who claims that the “ego is first and foremost a *bodily* ego [emphasis added]; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of the surface” (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 26). From this it follows, Butler says, that in becoming an ego in a Freudian sense, “one must become a spectator to one’s own body” (1998, p. 106).

I think one can apply this argument to the Semenya case as well. Semenya was “forced” to submit to the traditional Western view regarding her own body. She was forced to become a “spectator” of her own body and life, if she wanted to pursue a career in athletics. In some respect, she needed to detach herself from her own identity, simply because the “bodily ego is always an effect of a culturally framed body, a culturally elaborated projection, an idealization brokered by prevailing cultural norms” (Butler, 1998, p. 106). Semenya did not fit into the Westernized idea of what a sports body is supposed to look like and behave. Therefore, she was forced by the rules and norms to internalize the norms. However, it was not without resistance. Taking her case to legal courts can be understood as resistance. Nonetheless, she became an abject before the (sports) world.

Caster Semenya did not do anything wrong. She did not break any formal rules. She was qualified to participate, and she subjected to the general rules and norms of sports and did not try to manipulate the conditions. The same cannot be said about everyone.

Abject Behavior in Sports

Again, Semenya did not do anything morally wrong. But what about athletes who *do* challenge the *moral* norms of sports? For example, what about athletes who take proscribed performance enhancing drugs to improve their athletic abilities?

The use of proscribed performance enhancing drugs is usually considered to be the cardinal crime of sports. Nowadays, there are rigorous regulations surrounding performance enhancing drugs. The main reasons given for doping prohibitions are based on health reasons, reasons of fairness, and the idea of keeping sports “clean” and “natural.” However, it is difficult to decode these reasons. For example, when it



comes to the health issue, one can say that elite sport in itself is unhealthy, but still accepted; when it comes to the issue of fairness, it seems that some rule breaking is accepted and part of a competitive culture; and when it comes to the idea of “clean sports” it seems that we are dealing with rather abstract ideas of what “sport” is supposed to be about. In short, there is a disturbing ambiguity when it comes to all of these official reasons.

That said, a competitive sport is a rule-governed practice, based upon constitutive and regulative rules that define the sport and the purpose of the sport in question (Loland, 2002). There are different levels of rule-breaking in sports. Not all of them are seen as a threat to the ethos of sports. Consider, for example, so-called tactical fouls, that is mild violations of the rules within a game. These sorts of rule-breaking behaviors are quite common in many sports. Even though rule-breakers of these sort may be seen as cheaters, one might also say that they are still playing “within the rules” (Fraleigh, 1995, p. 186), and as long as they are doing that, their behavior is not considered to be an immediate threat to the ethos of the game. They are still playing the game. Therefore, they are not being abjectified.

When it comes to rule-breaking by doping, the moral logic seems to be different. Athletes getting caught for taking proscribed performance enhancing drugs are usually not seen as athletes at all. That is the rhetoric, at least. How can that be? Perhaps it is because doping users not only challenge regular moral and legal norms, but also an *idea* of what sports “should be” and what a sporting body “should look like.” Doping users do not respect the borders of a sport and become abjects for that reason alone. But what exactly is it they do not respect? Consider, for example, the internal tension between preserving traditional rules and regulations and the drive for breaking boundaries for what is humanly possible to do using sports as a means. How should we navigate this issue? Perhaps the norms and ideals of the healthy and morally sound athlete is just a fantasy? What to do with, for example, doping users who attempt to “transcend the body subject’s fleshy limitations” (Fairchild, 1989, p. 74)? While we think about these questions, a doping user will be abjectified as a “depersonalized, anonymous Other, who subsequently becomes abhorrent through his very otherness” (Fairchild, 1989, p. 77). This has consequences for the athlete. As soon as the athlete has been abjectified, they become rejected by the sports community. At that very moment, they have become “a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 11). And because the organizations do not “hear,” they need to repress the part of the sporting subject that is undesired. They need to repress those who threaten the symbolic order of sports, and doing that they fail to see their own fear. This has ethical implications.

Concluding Remarks: Abjection and Ethics

In this paper, I have presented two examples of where abjection takes place in sports. As I have suggested, one can say that athletes such as Caster Semanya, or athletes who stretch the moral boundaries of sport (for example, doping users), “police” the order and the system constructed by the sports organizations. Or, as



some put it, “the abject is the vandal *and* the policeman of the self, threatening to dissolve it while simultaneously reinforcing it” (MacAfee, 1993, p. 121). In a sports context, “the vandal” can be “gender cheaters” as well as doping users (and others who challenge and thereby threatening sports ideology). They embody “the outcasts” the sports organizations need; they are the “constitutive outside” of the sports world, constructed by discourse (Butler, 1993, p. 8). From that point of view, the “cheaters” become subversive agents who—with their bodies and behaviors—define the boundaries of the sports world while dissolving the very same boundaries. Based on this argument, one might say that the violent reactions against the “cheaters” is nothing less than a defense mechanism in action. The commonly known affective reactions against athletes who commit the “cardinal crimes” of sports may be a proof of that.

Still, sports organizations *do* accept rule-breaking and foul play. In some respects, rule-breaking is part of sports. The rule-breaking behavior may lead to sanctions during and after the game or competition, but the athletes are hardly ever banned from sports altogether because of that. They are still considered to be morally valid athletes, and part of the sport universe. They do not have to face the fear of being stigmatized. But, when it comes to athletes who “manipulate” their bodies (or, are suspected thereof), other values come into play.

Perhaps Iris Marion Young describes it best when she claims that the “abject provokes fear and loathing because it exposes the border between self and other as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border” (1990, p. 144). As it seems, the organizations fail to recognize their own vulnerability.

The organizations may believe that they protect important values of sport when they abjectify athletes who do not follow “the rules.” However, when rejecting the “constitutive outside” of sports, they become abjects themselves. At least morally. This is both an irony as well as a paradox. But more important, it also means that the powerful organizations (perhaps unconsciously) evade moral responsibility towards the athletes as well as towards sports in itself.

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