

## **‘First, do no harm’: Conducting research on interpersonal violence in sport**

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## **‘First, do no harm’: Conducting research on interpersonal violence in sport**

### **‘First, do no harm’**

It was Hippocrates who stated “First, do no harm,” and we believe the sentiment of this medical principle is one that every researcher should embody when conducting research on interpersonal violence (IV) in sport. Conducting such research presents unique considerations for researchers, particularly in relation to supporting participant and researcher well-being. Similarly, approaching this sensitive topic with clear definitions of IV in sport and an understanding of trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) is paramount to the protection and care of everyone involved in the research.

### **Defining interpersonal violence in sport**

The landscape for researching IV in sport that has rapidly emerged to investigate its determinants from various lenses including; ethical, sociological, psychological, criminological, and organisational (1,2). The siloed nature of research on IV in sport also has led to inconsistency in terminology, hindering effective communication and collaboration within and outside the field. The terms used to describe and study IV in sport have a profound impact on how the problem is communicated and understood. The use of diverging definitions creates challenges for determining what is within or outside the scope of research, limits our ability to meaningfully compare prevalences and experiences reported across projects, and impacts methodological considerations such as the effective recruitment of participants. Currently, terms such as maltreatment, non-accidental violence, harm, harassment, abuse, and IV are used interchangeably, and clarification on the use of terminologies is essential. This paper aligns with the latest IOC Consensus Statement (1) and the World Health Organization’s typology of violence (3) and focuses on “*interpersonal violence*”, which differs from self-directed and collective violence (Box 1).

## **Trauma- and violence-informed care in research on interpersonal violence in sport**

Conducting research on IV presents several unique considerations for researchers, particularly in relation to supporting the well-being of participants, researchers, and partner organisations. While TVIC has traditionally focused on supporting research participants with lived experiences (4), we propose a broader, more holistic approach for applying TVIC principles. Regardless of whether participants have direct experiences of violence, the very nature of this research can create potentially traumatic situations for both researchers and participants. Therefore, a TVIC approach is necessary to support all involved in the research process (5).

TVIC builds upon trauma-informed care (Box 1) by accounting for the intersecting impacts of systemic and IV and structural inequities on a person's life (6). It takes a holistic approach that recognizes individuals may have experienced multiple forms of trauma and/or violence and emphasizes the need to consider the historical and ongoing impacts of these experiences. The distinction between violence and other sources of trauma, such as natural disasters, is crucial because violence often has long-lasting and complex effects. Importantly, in IV research, trauma may be pre-existing or emerge as a result of conducting the study itself. Researchers and participants alike can be affected by hearing or sharing stories, reflecting on their own experiences, or developing new understandings of past events. There is a need to acknowledge that any form of current or past experience of direct or indirect violence or trauma should be considered as a *potentially* traumatic event, and the application of the principles below should be considered throughout the project and by all those engaging in the research (1).

The core principles for TVIC include:

- 1) building trauma awareness and understanding;
- 2) safety and trustworthiness (e.g., emotionally and culturally);

- 3) fostering opportunities for individual choice or collaboration;
- 4) strengths based and capacity building.

To support researchers in applying these TVIC principles, we developed a Reflective Guide (Table 1). This guide is not a checklist but rather a tool to stimulate meaningful reflection and discussion within research teams. There are reflection prompts to consider for each TVIC principle, but the list is not exhaustive and researchers are encouraged to refine and extend the prompts as relevant for their specific research project.

### **Practical application of trauma- and violence-informed care principles in interpersonal violence in sport research**

There are several key stages in a research project on IV in sport where a TVIC approach is critical. First, when assembling the research team, it is important to recognise the emotional labour associated with this work. It is recommended that at least one team member should have training in TVIC, and the team should have access to external professionals for debriefing or emotional support when needed (7). Emotional labour can have a significant impact on researchers, especially in fields dealing with sensitive topics like IV.

It is also essential to ensure the research team is diverse in experiences and perspectives. Individuals may enter this field of research with diverse experiences of IV in the sport context, including those who have “lived” (experienced IV), “laboured” (working with IV), “learned” (studied IV) and “loved” (those with family/friend/teammate who experienced IV), or who have no experience at all (8). This diversity requires careful attention to how personal, educational, and professional backgrounds influence researchers' understanding of IV, which can, in turn, affect research methodologies and data interpretation. Reflexivity—ongoing self-examination and awareness of one’s biases and preconceptions—is critical to maintaining trustworthiness and independence in this research.

## **Ethical considerations and managing risks**

Securing ethical approval is a crucial step in IV research. Due consideration should be given to potential risks, debriefing arrangements, and distress protocols. Researchers must plan for situations where participants or researchers experience distress, even if no participants with lived experiences of IV are involved. Ethics committees often raise concerns about the risks involved in IV research, assuming it poses significant emotional harm without providing direct benefit. However, there is growing evidence that participation in research on traumatic topics can be beneficial or even therapeutic for participants (9). For example, studies have found that individuals who engage in qualitative interviews about trauma report greater benefits compared to those who complete surveys (10). Researchers must present this evidence to ethics committees to challenge assumptions and demonstrate the potential positive impact of participation, whilst also demonstrating an ethics of care around safeguarding the participants' and researchers' well-being.

## **Supporting researcher well-being**

Self-care is an essential, yet often overlooked, aspect of the research process, especially when dealing with sensitive topics like IV in sport. Researchers and teams should be equipped with strategies to maintain their well-being and productivity. Tools such as mentoring, peer supervision, and reflexive practices (e.g., journaling) can help researchers process their emotional responses and maintain a healthy boundary between their professional role and personal life (11). Incorporating mindfulness practices, time in nature, or other forms of self-regulation can also promote mental health.

By embedding self-care practices into the research process, research teams can support professional longevity in the field. Researching IV in sport can be emotionally taxing, therefore fostering a culture of self-care can help researchers navigate these challenges while maintaining both their personal well-being and the integrity of their work.

## **Ethics of care for those with lived experience of interpersonal violence**

For those who have lived experience of IV in sport, the experiences or impacts can be ongoing, intergenerational, and even linked to broader historical contexts, cultures, or environments, all of which add to the complexity of the experience (12). Without an understanding of how trauma and/or violence can impact people, researchers can potentially either re-traumatise individuals or not be equipped with the skills to effectively and appropriately respond to traumatic experiences within the research process. TVIC principles aim to support the safety and well-being of everyone involved in the research project but also to enhance the quality of the research by recognising and responding to the impacts of trauma and/or violence (13).

When adopting a TVIC approach to IV in sport research with those with lived experience, it is necessary for researchers to reflect on, and address, their position of power within the research. Individuals with lived experience of abuse in sport often have been traumatised by people with power and authority over them, and who held a formal position within the sporting organisation. The relationship between the researcher and individual with lived experience (including within the research team when a researcher is also a person with lived experience) can potentially replay some of the power dynamics that occurred during their experience(s) of IV. Therefore, researchers should prioritise creating safe spaces for those with lived experience throughout the project and fostering opportunities for choice and collaboration (14). It is recommended that access to TVIC support be ensured for the participants and/or the research team as needed throughout the project.

One key ethical consideration is ensuring participant autonomy. While ethics committees encourage clarity on participants' rights to withdraw without consequences, additional flexibilities should be considered, particularly when conducting projects with those with lived experience of IV. This flexibility in how participants engage can take many forms—

such as interviews, written submissions, or oral histories—but importantly, the choice can help create a sense of autonomy and safety.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this editorial is to encourage and support researchers in applying TVIC principles in their research on IV in sport. By understanding terminology related to IV in sport (Box 1) and actively engaging with the Reflective Guide (Table 1), researchers can create safer, more supportive environments for both participants and research teams. This approach not only enhances the ethical conduct of research but also promotes and safeguards the well-being of all involved, fostering more meaningful and effective engagement throughout the research process.

### Box 1. Glossary with operationalised definitions of interpersonal violence in sport

**Interpersonal violence:** Violence is defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (3). Interpersonal violence involves the intentional use of physical force or power against other persons by an individual or small group of individuals. It can occur online, be perpetrated by different actors, and take different forms (1,3). In line with the WHO typology of violence, the IOC consensus statement recognises four types of IV towards athletes: sexual violence, psychological violence, physical violence and neglect (1). Child abuse/maltreatment is often referred to as a specific form of IV with specific definitions and a broader scope than IV towards adults.

**Person with lived experience:** A person who is/has directly experiencing(ed) IV. They may identify themselves as victim, survivor, victim-survivor, affected person or differently (15,16). In this editorial we used “person with lived experience” to be inclusive of all these terms people may prefer to adopt.

**Safeguarding:** All actions taken to prevent and respond to IV in sport, as well as holistic approaches to their welfare in sport (1).

**Strengths-based approach:** A way of working or an approach that emphasises capabilities and knowledge rather than deficits.

**(Potentially) Traumatic event:** Traumatic events are powerful or distressing events that are usually either life-threatening or that seriously threaten the physical and/or psychological safety and well-being of individuals. In its simplest form, trauma is a psychological injury and as with all injuries, the severity, longevity and impact can vary substantially between individuals. “Potentially traumatic” refers to the fact



that not everyone who experiences or witnesses IV in sport will experience trauma, but the potential for trauma still exists (17–19).

**Trauma:** Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more (20 para 1).

**Trauma-informed care (TIC):** An approach in the human service field that understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery, rather than practices and services that may inadvertently retraumatise. It recognises the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual’s life, as well as the potential impact on service or support staff (13,21).

**Trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC):** TVIC expands on TIC to further account for the converging impacts of systemic and interpersonal violence as well as recognises both historical and current experiences of violence and trauma, and that the experiences exist not just within people, but can be due to broader structural or social conditions. Adopting the principles of TVIC allows a more expansive understanding of people’s experiences of violence *and* trauma (6).

**Table 1.** Reflective Guide for Research on Interpersonal Violence in Sport

<b>TVIC Principle</b>	<b>Reflection Prompts</b>
Building trauma awareness and understanding	<b>Reflect on whether the research team composition includes/considers lived experience and has training in TIC or TVIC.</b>
	<b>Hold an open discussion amongst the team about preliminary preconceptions that exist about the research.</b> <i>This could include diverse lived experiences of violence/trauma in sport or other contexts, experience as an athlete, and beliefs about how to define violence.</i>
Safety and trustworthiness	<b>Consider what established supports are in place for researchers and participants to debrief should they experience distress.</b> <i>Researchers could consider team debriefing sessions, with established parameters to manage explicit disclosures. For participants, distress protocols and follow up procedures should be considered.</i>
	<b>Actively promote the importance of relational safety, consistency and accountability to build trust amongst the research team and with the participants.</b> <i>This includes non-judgemental in interactions; building and sustaining connections; being clear with contact points, explaining deviations from original plans; and being accountable if/when things deviate or change.</i>
	<b>Rooms or spaces utilised for the research should be easily accessible, with options to step out as needed.</b> <i>If conducting research in person, select accessible rooms that provide privacy but easy entry and exits, and discuss options for the participants to leave as needed. If online, have a procedure for identifying distress and have options to disengage and re-engage as needed.</i>

Fostering opportunities for individual choice or collaboration	<p><b>If the research will engage those with lived experience (as researchers or participants), what choices/autonomy can be offered for how they engage?</b></p> <p><i>For example, for interview-based studies, consider an option for a written submission. For focus groups, consider individual interviews if preferred.</i></p>
	<p><b>Set clear and transparent expectations to create an environment that is validating for individuals with lived experience.</b></p> <p><i>Providing participants specifics about the project conduct, the proposed partners (i.e., sport, organizational, or government bodies) and what will happen post-project with their data and stories.</i></p>
	<p><b>If engaging individuals directly in the research, offer an entry and exit strategy that places primacy on the autonomy of participants.</b></p> <p><i>Discuss the closing of the research relationship and project end points and what this transition means for contact and future engagement.</i></p>
Strengths based and capacity building	<p><b>At the onset of the project, consider discussing communication and engagement practices with the research team.</b></p> <p><i>Discuss how the team would like to communicate with each other about hard topics (perhaps some members prefer writing over verbal communication), how disagreements will be managed, and how power dynamics will be balanced.</i></p>

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