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ORIGINAL

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS OF HIGH PERFORMANCE SPANISH BASKETBALL PLAYERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

RELACIONES INTERPERSONALES DE JUGADORAS DE BALONCESTO DE ALTO RENDIMIENTO: ESTUDIO EXPLORATORIO

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to describe the essential characteristics of loving bonds in female high performance basketball players. The sample consists of 64 active professional players between 18 and 35 years. The evaluation analyzes the characteristics of loving bonds. Descriptive statistical analysis and Square-Chi (χ^2) comparative statistics show that players do not exhibit any normative development pattern in the formation of loving bonds. 84,4% of the players consider that their sexual orientation is determined by their emotional involvement and not by their sexual conduct, as it would be expected. 90.6% of the players are explicitly flexible in their sexual orientation throughout

life. As a conclusion, the Women's Basketball League may be an ecological niche in the development of loving bonds.

KEY WORDS: loving bonds; sexual orientation; Women's Basketball.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es describir las características que conforman los vínculos amorosos de jugadoras de baloncesto de Liga Femenina. La muestra la forman 64 profesionales en activo entre 18 y 35 años. En la evaluación se analizan las características de los vínculos amorosos. Los análisis estadísticos descriptivos y comparativos ponen de manifiesto que las jugadoras no siguen un patrón normativo de desarrollo en la formación de los vínculos amorosos. El 84,4% de las jugadoras consideran que su orientación sexual está condicionada a la vinculación emocional y no a la conducta sexual, como sería previsible. El 90,6% de las jugadoras manifiestan flexibilidad en su orientación sexual a lo largo de la vida. Como conclusión, el baloncesto de Liga femenina podría suponer un nicho ecológico en el desarrollo de los vínculos amorosos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: vínculos amorosos; orientación sexual; baloncesto femenino

INTRODUCCIÓN

Socioaffective and sexual development is an evolutionary dimension that concerns the linking of each subject that is born with the society in which he or she lives. A social group requires individuals to perpetuate itself, and the individual needs the social group to survive.

Affective bonds are articulated in three types of relationships, namely family, friends and couple or romantic ones. An unconditional link named "attachment" is generated with the family; it ensures survival. A social network of "peers" is built with friends. And couple relationships are made up of a repertoire of sexual behaviours, primarily predetermined for emotional bonding and perpetuation of the species, towards the other sex (Cass, 1990). However, within the current state of research, all that can be acknowledged is that the causal factors for couple relationships being directed towards the same or the other sex are at the moment unknown (Schweer, Vaske and Gerwinat, 2010). Consequently, it is incorrect to define amorous heterosexual and homosexual relations only according to sexual behaviours. It should be kept in mind that sexual behaviour does not always constitute an expression of sexual orientation, since in a percentage of the population that is not at all insignificant there are people who don't always exclusively engage in homosexual or heterosexual behaviours throughout their lifetimes (López, 2009).

An example of this fact can be seen in women who play top-level competitive sport (Chawansky and Francombe, 2013). Social opportunities for female

athletes have opened up debate on the flexibility of sexual orientation as a form of expressing physical, emotional and sexual potential. However, the sexual behaviour of sports people is a cross-cutting theme in top-level sporting competition. It has not been researched much, and elicits a lot of social controversy (Davis-Delano, 2014; Piedra, 2016, Piedra, García-Pérez and Channon, 2017).

Sexual identity is our psychological awareness or feeling of being a man or a woman, which is one of the most obvious and important aspects of our self-concept. Sexual identity normally—though not always—corresponds to gender role, the individual's sexual anatomy and sexual orientation. This fact is noted in the scientific literature through the life stories of former elite-level practitioners of individual sports. For example, in the 1920s, Lili Álvarez, Spain's first well-known elite female athlete, did not practice sport as a leisure or entertainment activity, or to look after her health and have a strong body capable of fathering children strong and healthy, or to enhance her beauty. She trained to explore her body and express herself with it; she competed for the pleasure of winning and the challenge of being the best (Carbajosa and Riaño, 2005, 2010). From the perspective of equality, the athlete Krane (2009) sums up the discrimination experienced, demonstrated by her lack of means and opportunities to develop her bodily and sexual potential due to her not conforming to the standard gender role. Irigaray (1992) asserts that the clear sexual difference between genders in the sporting context of high-level competition is made equal when male and female athletes put what they feel in high-level competition into words: pleasure, freedom, challenges, exploration and expression of the body's affective, sexual and physical dimension, properties usually identified in the definition of romantic ties (López, 2005). This perspective is Martín Horcajo's (2006) point of reference for justifying the need for a language that allows us to think about and interpret sporting experiences from the perspective of androgyny, thus avoiding social roles for men and women, since these in any case limit people's potentialities.

High-performance sport presents specific properties that allow it to be considered as an ecological niche, as can be accredited by such features as: early uptake of sports, the achievement of a high level of fitness and the sharing of experiences with other athletes during long periods [cfr. Horcajo (2006)]. These characteristics are an invitation to investigate the regularities, coincidences and discrepancies of the evolutionary development of female players in relation to the parameters of normality. Through doing so, it may be possible to establish principles and strategies that are useful not only for improving elite sports performance, but also for determining the influence of its practice on romantic ties and the athlete's welfare (Díez Florez, Zubiaur and Requena, 2014)

In light of the studies reviewed, some of the features of romantic relationships, such as the influence of the role of gender and sexual orientation, have been addressed in the life stories of women who have practiced individual sports. Here we propose an investigation of this variable in a team sport, specifically high-level competitive basketball. According to the research consulted, these players have certain common characteristics that distinguish them from other

players. The players tend to have started doing sports activities at early ages, and have about ten or more years of experience (Ericsson and Lehman, 1996). They are strongly committed to sporting activity, and they have a desire for excellence and a great emotional stability (Jiménez, Calvo and Sáenz-López Ibañez, 2009). This research describes the characteristics of the affective and/or emotional bonds of female basketball players in a high-performance environment.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Participants

The target population of the sample were Spanish basketball players from the senior women's level. The sample consists of 64 professional players from the Women's League. They were aged between 18 and 35 years, with an average age of 25.25 (SD = 3.71) years. They have played at all the preceding levels, are still playing the sport and have been living outside a family environment for at least three seasons. Of the total sample, 6 (9.4%) players have completed compulsory secondary-education studies, 13 (20.3%) players hold a high-school baccalaureate, 6 (9.4%) players have completed professional training, and 39 (61%) players have completed university studies. 100% of the players are single.

The inclusion criteria were: having played at all age levels—alevín (beginner), pre-infantil (pre-children's), infantil (children's), cadete (youth), junior (junior)—and be playing at the senior level or Women's League 2 or the Women's League. The exclusion criteria were: living at the family home, being an amateur and having played for fewer than two seasons in the senior category

Instrument

The instrument used was developed for the purposes of this research. It consists of two parts: The first contains information about the sporting career of the players: chronological age; the age when they started playing basketball; their education; their reasons for taking up this sport; the teams and levels that they have played in; titles that they have won; whether they play in the starting lineup; and the sex of their coaches. The second part consists of items related to socioaffective bonds: family; friendship and romantic relationships; the characteristics of those romantic relationships; sexual orientation and its variables, namely desire or pleasure, attraction, fantasies, emotional bonding and sexual behaviours (see description of items in tables of results).

Procedure

1st phase: the first phase consisted of elaborating and validating the instrument related to the socioaffective dimension of the players in the Women's League and Women's League. For the validity of the content, experts (ten judges) were selected based on the following criteria: they had experience in the psychology of sports and physical activities, and in the use, development, evaluation and

validation of psychometric instruments. All of them agreed to evaluate the first version of the data-collection instrument. These experts conducted a qualitative and quantitative review of the questionnaire, in order to improve the quality of the items and eliminate possible errors resulting from the instrument's structure; the revision process was also an important part of validating the instrument.

In the qualitative review it was determined if the questionnaire's instructions were appropriate, concise and complete, and if the items were suitable for our objectives. The quantitative evaluation consisted of establishing a numerical index for the validity of the questionnaire's content, using for this purpose the CVR (Content Validity Ratio) index proposed by Lawshe (1975) and Veneziano and Hooper (1997). The CVR index is based on an average that takes as its reference the number of judges that considered an item to be "not necessary"; "useful" or "essential" for measuring the domain to which it had been assigned and the purpose of the questionnaire. Each expert evaluated each of the items in the questionnaire and determined whether it was representative of the concept that the instrument was intended to measure. Items that had a value of less than 0.70 were eliminated from the questionnaire.

2nd phase: To capture the sample, the President of the Association of Basketball Players (AJUB) was contacted through an e-mail, the content of which included two documents: a letter that explained the characteristics of the research and the instrument that the players would have to complete in electronic format. It was intended that this would be distributed among the association's players. This same email was sent to the clubs that were competing that season.

3rd phase: after three months, 38 questionnaires were sent, of which only 18 were valid; the rest were discarded since only the identification data had been filled in. We made contact with the professional players once more, this time through the coaches. To that end, we sought information on the fixtures calendar for the Women's League through the Basketball Federation. We contacted team coaches by telephone and emailed them the information letter on the study and the questionnaire, requesting at the same time permission to speak with the players. Through this method we obtained 94 questionnaires, of which 46 were valid and 48 were rejected for the same reason described previously. Of the 132 received questionnaires, 64 were valid for the purposes of our study. The sample was taken from all of the teams that made up the Women's League—a total of 294 basketball players. In light of the small representative size of the sample, the data have been analysed with a confidence level of 0.89 and a sampling error of 11%.

Statistical analysis

In order to process the data obtained from the instrument, descriptive statistics of arithmetic mean, standard deviation and frequency distribution and their percentages have been used. For the interpretation of the data comparison, Pearson's Chi-square (χ^2) statistic has been used.

RESULTS

Table 1 contains information on the sporting careers of the players in the sample, through which it can be seen that they were introduced to basketball during the middle of their childhood development (the average age is 9.3 years), and were motivated mainly by their family and an enjoyment of the sport itself. 95% have come from the youth system, passing through the various levels up to the top one; and throughout the process male coaches have been predominant.

Table 1. Career data

| N = 64 | M | DT |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|
| Age began playing basketball | 9.30 | 2.62 |
| Teams played in | 5.30 | 2.34 |
| Titles won | 3.14 | 2.78 |
| Motives for taking up basketball | Frecuencia | Porcentaje |
| No answer | 3 | 4.7 |
| Extracurricular | 7 | 10.9 |
| Family | 22 | 34.4 |
| Friends | 13 | 20.3 |
| Enjoyment of sport | 19 | 29.7 |
| Team Categories | | |
| Women's League 2 | 29 | 45.3 |
| Women's League 2 + Women's League | 32 | 50.0 |
| Women's League | 3 | 4.7 |
| Starting position the previous season | | |
| Yes | 43 | 67.2 |
| No | 21 | 32.8 |
| Sex of coach | | |
| Male | 54 | 84.4 |
| Female | 10 | 15.6 |
| Total | 64 | 100.00 |

With regard to socioaffective links, basketball players involved in top-level competition put family and friendship ties above couple ones, feeling that they are more supported in the context of sports by their family than by their partner (table 2)

Table 2. Attachment

| Attachment | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|---------|--------|-------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| | Family | Friends | Couple | All | No answer | | |
| Basic needs by importance | 17.2% | 34.4% | 3.1% | 29.8% | 15.6% | | |
| By whom do you feel most supported? | 28.1% | 6.3% | 4.7% | 46.3% | 4.7% | | |
| | Family | Friends | Couple | Coach | Team | Everyone | No answer |
| Who is most important for you? | 50.1% | 0% | 4.7% | 0% | 0% | 44% | 1.6% |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|----|----|----|----|-------|------|
| For whom are you most important? | 18.9% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 79.9% | 3.1% |
|---|-------|----|----|----|----|-------|------|

Table 3 presents the data related to the players' romantic relationships. This tables shows that at present heterosexual relations (43.8%) predominate, in which partners are essentially seeking sex and affection (71.9%) and have a positive assessment of their romantic, emotional and sexual life (79.7%). On the other hand, a very high percentage believe that sexual orientation changes throughout life, in part as a result of the context. They believe that what makes someone desirable is the person more than sex, and 56.3% believe that the most frequent sexual orientation of athletes is bisexuality. For our athletes, the order of importance of the variables for sexual orientation appear to be: in 1st place, emotional bonding; in 2nd place, sexual attraction; in 3rd, sexual behaviour; and in 4th, sexual fantasy.

Comparative analysis of the items that collect information on the hierarchy of basic needs and affective ties in variables related to sexual orientation is illustrated in table 4. Each table is divided into two distinct parts. The column on the left shows the analysed question in relation to the questions to which it has relevance, and in the column on the right data of statistical significance are recorded.

Our results show that those players who believe that what makes someone desirable is not his or her sex but the person in turn look for sex and affection both in couple relationships and sexual ones and positively value their affective, romantic and sexual experience.

Table 3. Romantic relationships

| Romantic relationships | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Number of partners | One 33.1% | Two 20.3% | Three 32.8% | Four 34.4% | No answer 9.4% |
| Sex of partners | Male 43.8% | Female 17.2% | Both 29.7% | No answer 9.4% | |
| Change in sex of partners | Male/female 26.6% | Female/male 1.6% | Male/female/male 1.6% | Female/male/female 1.6% | No answer 68.8% |
| Aspects looked for in couple relationships | Affection 29.7% | Sex and affection 67.2% | No answer 3.1% | | |
| Aspects looked for in sexual relationships | Affection 7.8% | Sex 15.6% | Sex and affection 71.9% | No answer 4.7% | |
| Overall assessment of romantic, affective and sex life | Fairly good 79.7% | Okay 14.1% | Fairly bad 4.7% | No answer 1.6% | |
| Does sexual orientation change throughout life? | YES 90.6% | NO 9.4% | | | |
| Why does sexual orientation change? | Context 31.3% | People 15.6% | Stages of life cycle 10.9% | Chance 14.1% | |
| What makes someone desirable is not sex but the person | YES 84.4% | NO 10.9% | No answer 4.7% | | |
| Which variables are prioritized in relationships | Physic. and psychol. 39.1% | Psychological 20.3% | Physical 28.1% | No answer 12.5% | |
| What sexual orientation is more frequent among athletes? | Heterosexuality 18.8% | Homosexuality 18.8% | Bisexuality 56.3% | No answer 6.3% | |
| Order of variables for sexual orientation | | 1st place | 2nd place | 3rd place | 4th place |
| | Sexual attraction | 31.3% | 51.6% | 6.3% | 4.7% |
| | Sexual fantasy | 1.6% | 6.3% | 15.6% | 70.3% |
| | Emotional bonding | 59.4% | 28.1% | 3.1% | 3.1% |
| | Sexual behaviour | 1.6% | 7.8% | 68.8% | 15.6% |
| The person with whom I have most sexual contacts | Male 51.6% | Female 35.9% | Both 7.8% | No answer 4.7% | |

While most of them said that at the time of the study they were part of a heterosexual couple, those who had been in more teams and played at a wider variety of levels assert that they change partners without making distinctions

about sex. The players who have been part of a couple with a man believe that the most frequent sexual orientation in the sport they practice is bisexuality. The players who have been in a couple with women believe that it is homosexuality. In any case, the belief of 90.6% of the players is that sexual orientation changes throughout a person's life due to contextual reasons, attraction to individuals or chance (table 4).

When they are in couple relationships they look for affection or affection and sex, and in their sexual relations they look for affection and sex. And regardless of whether they look for sex or sex and affection in their sexual relations, they value their own romantic, emotional and sexual experience positively, something that is in turn related to a sense of greater family support.

Table 4. Sexual orientation

| Sexual orientation Questions and answers with significant relationship | | SPSS results | | Chi-square |
|--|--|---------------------|----|---------------------------------------|
| | | Value | gl | (Bilateral) asymptotic solution |
| Sexual orientation changes throughout life | Family is the <i>most</i> important | 8.512 ^a | 3 | .037 |
| | What makes someone desirable is the person | 10.474 ^a | 2 | .005 |
| | The most common sexual orientation in athletes is bisexuality | 12.996 ^a | 3 | .005 |
| What makes someone desirable is not their sex; it is what they mean as a person | They feel more supported by the family | 17.157 ^a | 8 | .029 |
| | In their couple relationships they seek sex and affection above all | 14.414 ^a | 4 | .006 |
| | In their sexual relationships they seek sex and affection above all | 31.756 ^a | 6 | .000 |
| | They judge their romantic, affective and sexual experience as good | 31.408 ^a | 6 | .000 |
| Variables prioritized in relationships | When they feel more supported by their family they prioritize psychological variables. | 25.689 ^a | 12 | .012 |
| Most frequent sexual orientation among athletes | Sex of partners they have had: male in the case that sexual orientation is heterosexual or bisexual, and female in the case that the orientation is homosexual | 17.377 ^a | 9 | .043 |
| | Person with whom they have had most sexual contacts: male in the case that sexual orientation is heterosexual or bisexual, and female in the case that the orientation is homosexual | 20.228 ^a | 9 | .017 |
| | Assessment of romantic, affective and sexual experience is good regardless of sexual orientation | 19.893 ^a | 9 | .019 |
| Change in sex of partners | The sex of couples they have been part of is interchangeably male or female | 59.543 ^a | 6 | .000 |
| | least frequent sexual contacts are heterosexual | 18.789 ^a | 6 | .005 |
| Sex of partners | The more teams they have played in, the more frequently they have had a bisexual partner | 10.018 ^a | 3 | .018 |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---------------------|----|------|
| | The greater the variety of levels of teams that they have played in, the more frequently they have had a bisexual partner | 12.552 ^a | 6 | .051 |
| | The number of partners is smaller when the relationship is a homosexual one | 69.680 ^a | 12 | .000 |
| | Sexual contacts are conditional on the type of partner: Male when the partner is heterosexual and female when the partner is homosexual or bisexual. | 69.916 ^a | 9 | .000 |
| In couple relationships I seek | When they seek sex and affection in their couple relations, they also seek sex and affection in sexual relations, regardless of the type of couple | 26.196 ^a | 6 | .000 |
| In sexual relations I seek | In any case, the assessment of the romantic, affective and sexual experience is good | 25.799 ^a | 9 | .002 |
| Assessment of romantic, affective and sexual experience | When the assessment of the experience is good they feel more supported by their family. | 29.188 ^a | 12 | .004 |

DISCUSSION

In the present work we have tried to describe the characteristics of affective and/or emotional links of basketball players in the context of high performance, using a questionnaire that allowed us to delve into the complexity of their affective and romantic life. One of the most striking aspects that emerges from the results obtained is that our athletes put family and friendship ties above couple ones, feeling more supported in the context of sports by their family than by their partner. These data do not correspond to the normative pattern for socioaffective development (López, 2005).

The affective relations of the players are characterized by a basing of romantic desire on emotional attachments and not on sexual behaviour, as would be expected according to the normative data of development (Díez Flórez, 2012, Díez Flórez, Requena and Zubiaur, 2012). Emotional ties are positive affective feelings of tenderness, falling in love and admiration towards people of a different or the same sex. These results seem to be in line with the studies by Horcajo (2006) and Ortega (1996) in the respect that interpersonal relationships are independent of sex and dependent upon the role that they play in specific contexts, for example sports.

A question raised by this work is as follows: Do sportswomen competing at a high level shape their sexual orientation in the sporting context, or do they choose this context in order to find better opportunities for their romantic ties within it? The early construction of sexual orientation and the premature influence of the sporting context on players who compete at a high level complicates any answer.

According to the theory of intersectionality (Méndez, 2013), women in some way or another suffer social discrimination. The combination of athlete and non-

conventional sexual orientation makes the adversity they experience twofold (Schweer and cols., 2010). The scientific literature brings together life stories of professional female players with and without conventional sexual orientations; these coincide in considering that the area of high-performance sport is skewed with mainly male characteristics. For example, Sartore and Cunningham (2009), authors of numerous studies related to sports characteristics, link basketball with prototypical male characteristics such as strength, speed, stamina and deception strategies. This means that women with unconventional features (such as sexual orientation), find more protection in this type of sporting context than they do in “typically feminine” sports such as rhythmic gymnastics. However, while all women have to contend with sexism, to avoid a further discrimination heterosexual elite athletes often distance themselves from homosexual ones. They protect their social identity with hyperfemininity—that is, there are sportswomen that deliberately present themselves in a feminine way (for example, they wear headbands and make-up, and they have manicured nails), or in sports such as basketball they feel the need to dress in sportswear fitted to their bodies. This behaviour could be considered as an open attempt to comply with hegemonic femininity and avoid the “butch” stigma that is common in some high-level competitive sporting contexts (Chawansky and Francombe, 2013). In any case, in the life stories there is evidence that elite women athletes find in the sporting context a place that encourages personal development and well-being rather than a way of hiding their sexual orientation (Nuñez, Martín-Albo, León, González, Domínguez, 2011). Retired elite athletes such as Navratilova and King took advantage of their statuses as ex-players in high-level competition to bring about a change in perspective on their homo- or bisexuality, recounting their feelings of being involuntarily “marginalized.” Other players such as Mauresmo have spoken openly of their sexual orientation while still competing, which led to both rejection by their own team mates and the approval of the public. Lesbian sportswomen who have voluntarily come out and discussed their lesbian identity are considered as examples of social competition, since they have spoken openly about a taboo theme in women’s sports (Chawansky and Francombe, 2013). Spencer-Devlin, Giove, Wicks and Sheehan have publicly discussed their sexual orientation. These individual actions provide an opportunity for heterosexual people to agree that they “know” someone who is a lesbian, which can contribute to the process of reinterpreting the intergroup dynamics between athletes with different sexualities. However, status is not a prerequisite for enacting social change; it is one of many possible tactics. Social competition also contributes to “cambiar el efecto en las relaciones sociales entre individuos, grupos subordinados y grupos dominantes” (Cox and Gallois, 1996, p.21, to change the effect into the social relations between individuals, subordinated groups and dominant groups). Social competition requires social and political action—for example, new laws that recognize different types of sexes and couples—to bring about change.

We have underlined how Women’s League basketball players display a sexual orientation that is changeable and determined by context. This result clashes with the widespread intuition of the population and the epistemology of development psychology, so future research is needed to address this open question.

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