

Sexual Relationships between Athletes and Coaches: Love, Sexual Consent, and Abuse

av

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Akademisk avhandling

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Abstract:

Coach-athlete sexual relationships (CASR) and sexual harassment and abuse (SHA) in sport can profoundly impact athletes' welfare and performance. Yet, it is often ignored due to sensitivity, secrecy, and lack of knowledge. There is no previous research on SHA in sport in Sweden, and legal, consensual, same-sex CASR is under-researched. The overall purpose of this doctoral thesis is to examine CASR in competitive sport in Sweden. More specifically: a) athletes' experiences of CASR; b) prevalence of SHA in coach-athlete relationships; c) conceptual and theoretical issues to broaden the understanding of CASR and SHA, will be examined.

Survey methodology is employed in Article I to explore the prevalence of SHA, coach-athlete relationship factors, and association between relationship factors and SHA. A random sample of current and former male and female Swedish athletes (n=477) aged 25 participated. Article II outlines critical issues of CASR, and theories and conceptualisations of romantic love, sexual consent, and female athlete sexual agency is further developed in the thesis research summary. Drawing on interviews with five female elite athletes aged 23-30, experiences of CASR are analysed in-depth using discourse analyses in Article III and narrative case study design in Article IV.

Results show that athletes' experiences of CASR are positively and negatively diverse but potentially problematic because boundary ambiguity, secrecy, and isolation are common. Social and ethical dilemmas may also occur because CASR intersect contrasting discourses regarding elite sport, coach-athlete relationships, and romantic love. Moreover, CASR integrate professional and private contexts in which equality and power deviate. The research illustrates empirically and theoretically how female elite athletes exercise agency and recognise consensual, mutually desired CASR where romantic love is priority. However, sexual consent can be ambivalent rather than a mutually exclusive yes/no dualism. Socially, consent is a process of negotiation informed by contextual factors, sexual agency, and social structure. In addition, 5.5% prevalence of SHA perpetrated by male coaches is reported, distributed throughout the sampled athletes' gender, age, sport performance levels, and individual/team sports in the sample.

In conclusion, this thesis expands knowledge of athletes' experiences of love, sexual consent, and abuse in CASR. Previous evidence of SHA in sport is confirmed to include sport in Sweden. Implications for sport and sport sciences are offered.

Keywords: coach-athlete sexual relationship, sexual harassment and abuse, romantic love, sexual consent, gender and sexuality, power and agency, sport

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