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‘Am I sexually abused?’ Consent in a coach-athlete lesbian relationship

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Abstract

Elite-athlete Karin was 17 years old when the considerably older team coach Selma became her girlfriend. Responding to calls to prevent harm and sexual abuse in sport, this study represents Karin's story, investigates how she makes sense of her coach-athlete sexual relationship, and analyses what can be learnt about consent. Although sexual consent is often the defining criterion of sexual abuse, consent is rarely explicitly defined or its social implications examined. Moreover, there are no studies on coach-athlete lesbian or gay relationships despite sexual minority vulnerability. The interview with Karin was analysed using narrative case study methods; represented as a short story and discussed in reference to sexual consent theory. The analysis outlines contextual factors conditioning the negotiation of consent and problematizes heteronormative, gendered perpetrator and victim stereotypes. Secrecy, alienation, and isolation is recognised, extending into additional vulnerability inflicted on socially problematic and atypical coach-athlete relationships. In conclusion, social implications of consent are more complex than yes/no to sex or inherent incapability to consent. Consent is multi-layered, alternately absent and present; an ongoing process that includes compromises, contradictions, and (re)negotiations influenced by structure and agency. Further research examining a diversity of sexual experiences among majorities and minorities is proposed.

Keywords: *Coach-athlete sexual relationship, Sexual consent and abuse, Gender and sexuality, Sport, Narrative case study*

Introduction

This study draws on a story of a female elite-athlete under the pseudonym of Karin. At age 17 the considerably older team coach Selma (pseudonym) became her girlfriend. Five years later Karin contacted me to share her story. I accepted Karin's offer, as I was about to conduct a study with elite-athletes who had been in sexual relationships with their coaches. However, Karin's case was fundamentally different in ways related to consent. In the other interviews, consent was simple, obvious, and given because it was there; mutually perceived, having an obvious presence without us needing to talk about it explicitly (see Beres, 2007 'I know it when I see it definition'). In Karin's story, consent was complex.

Sexual abuse is a prevalent problem in sport that violates human rights and can cause severe damage to athletes' health (e.g., IOC, 2007). Because sexual abuse is often defined in reference to sexual consent, prevention efforts hinge on furthering the understanding of consent (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Mountjoy et al., 2016). In addition, authority-subordinate sexual relationships (e.g., coach – athlete and teacher – student) are typically taboo and socially problematic, often kept closeted and secret, constituting ethical mine-fields that can spark speculations and social repression, fuelled by occasional public scandals about inappropriate sexual relations and abuse (Johansson, 2013; Sikes, 2006). Relationships characterised by isolation, inequality, and lack of education and awareness can facilitate and hide abuse (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Many stories about sexual relationships, especially socially problematic, marginalised, deviant, and abusive ones, remain untold (Sikes, 2006). Encouraging athletes (and others) to voice their lived experiences is useful to empower, support and learn from, and it may contribute to a more open sport environment (Hydén, 2013; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). In addition, 'stories hold the capacity to problematize and challenge dominant, and sometimes oppressive, metanarratives' and can 'provide a way for often silenced and marginalized voices to be heard and felt' (Linghede, Larsson, & Redelius, 2016, p. 84). Owton and Sparkes (2015) stressed the obligation for researchers to get abused athletes' stories into the academic domain, and Sikes (2006) stressed that scholars have to acknowledge sexual minorities and challenge privileged, dominant narratives, informal rules, and societal pressures towards members of the LGBT community. In this sense, Karin's story is a counter narrative that offers a rare insight into a lesbian coach-athlete relationship. It may problematize and diversify predominant male-perpetrator, sexual majority, heteronormative narratives by storying some of the consequences such stereotypes can have on a minority in

sport where, moreover, experiences of same-sex abuse are largely unknown (Carless, 2012; Hartill, 2005; Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Ultimately responding to calls to prevent harm and sexual abuse in coach-athlete relationships, the research aim is to represent Karin's story, investigate how she makes sense of her coach-athlete sexual relationship, and analyse what can be learnt about consent from this story. Coach-athlete sexual relationships are defined as relationships between athletes and their coaches with a common sexual component, for example couple relationships or casual sexual relationships. In Sweden, the legal age of consent is 15. Sexual activities in relationships of dependency (notably teacher-pupil relationships), where such dependency provably has been seriously abused, are illegal. There is no regulation of coach-athlete sexual relationships in Swedish sport as long as they do not violate the Swedish Sport Confederation's policy against sexual harassment and assault.

Literature review

Consent is often the defining criterion to conceptualise sexual abuse and violence, for example in law, research, and sport policy (Beres, Herold, & Maitland, 2004; Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Johansson, 2013). For example: 'Sexual abuse involves any sexual activity where consent is not or cannot be given' (IOC, 2007, p. 3). The presence or absence of sexual consent, or the ability or inability for a person to give sexual consent, can thus distinguish mutually desired 'love making' from a criminal and violent act (Beres, 2007). Despite being critical, the concept of consent is underdeveloped, arbitrary, and rarely problematized. Conceptualisations of consent is often taken for granted, relying largely on assumed and implied 'common sense' rather than uniform or explicitly defined definitions (Beres, 2007). Moreover, sexual consent has primarily been analysed from legal perspectives, focusing on specific sexual activities and the outward communication of consent that plays a pivotal role in legal cases. Sexual consent, its social implications, and how it is understood in context is under-researched and under-theorised (Beres, 2007; Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013).

Within sport sociology, sexual consent has only been briefly addressed, mainly regarding child athletes' inability to consent by drawing on sexual abuse cases (Brackenridge, 2001; Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2002; Parent et al., 2015; Toftegaard-Nielsen, 2001). Yet, coach-athlete sexual relationships and sexual abuse occur among male and female athletes over and under the legal age of consent (Parent et al, 2015; Toftegaard-Støckel,

2010). Ambiguity regarding coaches physical touch and interpersonal, intimate, and sexual behaviours in coach-athlete relationships abound and has been linked to sexual abuse (Bringer et al., 2002; Hassall, Johnston, Bringer, & Brackenridge, 2002; Toftegaard-Nielsen, 2001). Athlete accounts of sexual abuse reveal that grooming and abuse of emotions, trust, dependency, and authority can make sexual activities appear to be consensual but be redefined as sexual abuse later (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Consequently, consent can be particularly complex in the coach-athlete relationship context, much due to power as a central, multidimensional factor (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). The multidimensionality of power is illustrated in Johansson and Larsson (2016), the only study including athletes above the legal age of consent with experience of consensual coach-athlete sexual relationships, where coaches' position of power, status, and authority sparked sexual attraction and love among the athletes. Furthermore, legal and consensual sexual relationships between male coaches and female athletes tend to raise dilemmas and problems, but this stems from dominant discourses framing them as such (unethical, harmful, and abusive) rather than these relationships being inherently problematic or abusive (Johansson & Larsson, 2016). In addition, problems connected to secrecy, isolation, sexual relationships kept closeted, and abuse going unreported run as a silver thread through this reviewed literature.

The current research focus is on sexual consent in heterosexual relationships (Beres et al., 2004). 'Sexual activity' typically implies heterosexual intercourse, which excludes a wide range of sexual behaviours (Beres, 2007; Humphreys & Herold, 2007). Literature on same-sex abuse and violence is relatively scarce compared to heterosexual abuse (Messinger, 2011). Although most sexual abuse is perpetrated by men and while heterosexuality represents the sexual majority, prevalence rates are similar across sexualities (McClennen, 2005). Sexual minority status can inflict additional harm, but frameworks to understand and recognise same-sex abuse are still novel (Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead, & Viggiano, 2011; Donovan & Hester, 2010). Theoretical frameworks on gender inequality to explain heterosexual abuse and gender harassment abound, including sexual abuse of female athletes by male coaches (Johansson, 2013; MacKinnon, 1998). This connects to a male perpetrator – female victim discourse, predominant in and outside the sport context (Hartill, 2005; Sikes, 2006). There are no studies on coach-athlete lesbian or gay relationships. Homophobic and heterosexist sport culture (e.g., Carless, 2012) and a potentially higher risk for LGBT athletes to be sexually

abused (Mountjoy et al., 2016), stresses issues of expanding knowledge and improving the conditions for LGBT athletes for in sport.

Methodology and ethical considerations

This study uses narrative single-case study methods to place Karin's story centre-stage (see e.g., Etherington & Bridges, 2011). Narrative research draws broadly on collecting, interpreting, and representing stories; how people make sense of their lived experiences as stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Similarly, case studies investigate social phenomena that require extensive, in-depth description *in context* to capture richness and complexity (Yin, 2014). Single-case design is adequate when studying unusual cases or cases representing such circumstances in-depth (Yin, 2014), which I found consonant with Karin's case both as a couple relationship and a coach-athlete relationship. Newkirk (1992) emphasise the narrative potential of case study design by contextualising cases; accounting for social and narrative conventions predisposing research subjects, participants, and researchers. By embracing complex, contextual, and multidimensional reflexivity these methods overlap and can be appropriate when studying sensitive topics (Etherington, 2007; Etherington & Bridges, 2011).

Three studies have storied female athletes' experiences of grooming and sexual abuse by their male coaches (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Fasting & Sand, 2015; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). These authors suggest narrative methods to be important and suitable to explore the sensitive, contextual, and complex nuances of sexual abuse in sport. Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) incorporated a within-case approach in their narrative analysis of sexually abused athletes' interviews. Following their lead, I combine narrative and single-case study methods in a dynamic way that I found appropriate to represent and analyse Karin's story in line with the research aim. Arguably, Karin's story is emotional, compelling, complicated, and powerful. Karin and I both believe the story has potential to be heard, felt, and evoke reader engagement; to empower, problematize, create understanding, and encourage change (Linghede et al., 2016; McMahon & Penney, 2011; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). Narrative case study methods bring Karin's story to the fore; giving nuances, contradictions, and complexity space and justice to be represented in depth and detail. This methodology accounts for and displays context, allowing Karin's individual, relational context, and her words, definitions, experiences, interpretations, and sensemaking to be voiced.

Sexual relationships and abuse are potentially private, sensitive, and controversial. This is, simultaneously, why sharing marginalised stories has potential to break taboos,

illuminate, heal, and increase awareness (Hydén, 2013; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). This is also why procedural (mandatory research ethics), situational (ethics in practice; unpredictable, upcoming situations) and relational (ethics of care and trust; drawing on reflexivity, empathy, and responsibility) ethics is paramount to avoid causing harm (Ellis, 2007). Situational and relational ethics are particularly important for qualitative researchers who encounter situations and reactions that is impossible to foresee and goes beyond standardised procedural ethics (Ellis, 2007). By employing collaborative, communicative methods and ethics that acknowledges power differentials and enhances participant involvement, perspective and voice, storytelling can have a clarifying, emancipatory, and empowering potential for the storyteller (Corbin & Morse, 2003; McMahon & Penney, 2011). Although empowering Karin was not a primary objective, her potential to help and inform others, to give voice to the voiceless, may contribute to a sense of purpose, validation, and comfort for her. As Karin put it herself: ‘so that something good can come out of it.’

Similar to Karin, some athletes with experience of coach-athlete sexual relationships, grooming, and sexual abuse express determination, purpose, and need to (confidentially) share their stories (cf. Johansson & Larsson, 2016; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). When studying sexual relationships that counter social conventions, morals, and professional standards, the honesty, disclosure, and willingness to participate can be compromised (Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Karin’s initiative to participate may thus improve reliability. It also contributed to the collaborative engagement: Karin is a participant in my study. She is also an interpreter of her own experiences and a storyteller who invited me as researcher/interviewer/listener/interpreter to take part in her endeavour to bring her story into the academic context. We co-constructed a story by including several layers of interpretation and voice(s) (Owton & Sparkes, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Multiple representations of stories drawing on Karin’s case is thus possible. Although I call it ‘Karin’s story,’ this study represents *one* story—not ‘The story’ (Linghede et al., 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Issues of power imbalance and voice permeate every research relationship in qualitative studies, including the power as researcher, ‘expert’, interviewer, interpreter, and author; stressing the importance of transparency and reflexive relational ethics (Brackenridge, 2005; Etherington, 2007). Implementing reflexive relational ethics, I strived to create a comfortable climate for open, honest communication and collaboration; balance proximity and professional authority; and to acknowledge my involvement, obligations, power, and reflexivity as researcher (Ellis, 2007). Taking such precautions and responsibility may

rebalance the power relationship between researcher and participant (Etherington, 2007; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). Indeed, I came to care a lot for Karin and my duty to her wellbeing and representing her voice was paramount as a reflexive ethical compass for me throughout the research process.

Procedure

The research project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board (No. 2011/669-31/5). Karin read about the project online and contacted me. We engaged in email conversations the weeks before the interview. Karin gave me a recap of her relationship. I provided detailed information about the study, research ethics, participation, voluntariness, interview procedure, and academic publication. We discussed confidentiality; which details needed to be uncovered to understand the context (e.g., ages, genders, and team-sport), and which ones would be altered (e.g., names, specific sport and clubs, exact locations, competitions, and dates). Karin was informed about precautions taken to prevent identification, but also the risk (however small) that someone close to her might recognise her story if reading this article (Hydén, 2013).

I met up Karin and we engaged in small talk on the way to campus. This pre-interview phase was important to establish a connection, comfort and trust (Corbin & Morse, 2003). I perceived that being a female elite-athlete of similar age myself, facilitated interaction and contributed to reciprocity and understanding (cf. McMahon & Penney, 2011). To avoid disturbance and attention, the interview took place in a secluded room at my campus. Although mutually agreed upon, seclusion requires interview skills and situational ethics to safeguard both participant and interviewer (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Before starting the interview, we talked through the procedure again. Karin gave verbal consent once more but was encouraged to stop the interview at any time. As I entered Karin's private sphere for her to story sensitive, influential experiences, a dynamic interview conducted as a joint enterprise between teller and listener seemed adequate (Hydén, 2013; Owton & Sparkes, 2015). Beginning with me asking Karin to describe how she first started to play sports, a loose chronological structure of before, during, and after the coach-athlete sexual relationship guided the interview. Consequently, Karin did most of the telling while I actively listened and asked follow up questions as they arose, allowing me to make continuing sense of what she talked about' (Hydén, 2013). The interview lasted for two hours, and was digitally recorded. Afterwards, the interview was transcribed verbatim and identifiable details altered. It is thus a

written representation of the verbalised content of the story that was analysed (similar to e.g., Fasting & Sand, 2015). The anonymised transcription was sent to Karin to read, comment on, and approve. The additional step of approval was taken to ensure interviewee validation of the actual transcript that was to be analysed (Etherington, 2007). This was also the last step for Karin's direct involvement as she explicitly wished to get the interview over with to put it behind her.

The analysis includes two primary steps. The first one draws on a within-case narrative analysis (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Etherington & Bridges, 2011) where I adopted a storyteller position. As storyteller I engaged in a creative analytical practice, using writing as method of inquiry as a way to represent, discover, and analyse through the telling of a story for a particular audience (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This served to analyse and transform the 30-page transcript into a co-constructed representation in a short story format, using mine and Karin's words. The transcript was reviewed during open readings. Inductive coding was performed to highlight critical aspects and key events informed by the research aim to create a story outline. The story was crafted by using writing, reading the coded transcript, and inserting illustrative quotations. I strived to be true to the events, phrases, tone, using quotations to include Karin's voice explicitly, while using my words to bring the story forward in a pace and wording adapted to the article format. When the storyteller process reached saturation, I translated the text from Swedish to English. This first step resulted in the section *Karin's story*.

During the second step I adopted a story-analyst position (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Simply put, the storyteller's analysis *is* the story while the story-analyst conducts an analysis *of* the story (Fasting & Sand, 2015). Thus, I set out to analyse and theorise the content of Karin's story and thus what can be learnt about consent. The story was coded in two main themes; context and consent. The critical aspects identified and storied during the first step was listed and described as contextual factors that conditioned consent in reference to theories on sexual consent and coach-athlete sexual relationships, abuse, and risk-factors. Then I analysed Karin's negotiations of consent and related issues. This analysis draws primarily on Beres' (2007) conceptualisations and review, as well as other theories into the social implications of sexual consent. This second step resulted in the section *What can be learnt about consent from Karin's story?*

Storyteller and story-analyst are positions of privilege over writing and analysis (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Therefore, Karin's voice was given authority in the writing and

analysing procedures (McMahon & Penney, 2011). Drawing on directions from Sikes (2010), I always did the most to represent lives respectfully; exercise authorial honesty; consider the significance of language and how words and phrases can be understood; never use narrative privilege to demean or belittle anyone, and repeatedly reflect upon if I were the participant and my experiences analysed and written about.

Karin's story

Karin was basically born into the sport and started playing at a young age. It was tough from the get go. Playing was associated with pressure to perform more than happiness. Karin put high demands on herself and coaches praised her talent. It felt important for her not to waste that talent. Her goal was to be and play among the best.

Growing up, Karin felt like an outsider: Marginalised and ostracised from the team, lonely and left out in school. It was, however, particularly difficult and embarrassing in the homogenous, 'perfect world' of sports:

When you expect sports to be fun and free from problems. It's somehow very shameful to be the one outsider in a sport. . . It's a failure. It's one of those places where everyone should fit in and you think everybody's included. . . Like; 'so, what was wrong with you then?'

Besides missing friends and somewhere to fit in, Karin had never had a girlfriend or boyfriend or any sexual experience. She wondered why no one ever fancied her. At age 15 Karin felt depressed because of her social situation. During this time, she advanced from the juniors to a women's team. That's when Selma came into the picture as the team's coach. Selma was different from Karin's former, male coaches.

Perhaps men must be extra considerate when coaching girls and women and keep a distance. . . I mean, female coaches are always with you in the locker room and so on. . . Like, this particular coach, she wanted to be part of the gang. She sought contact, I mean she didn't stick to the coach role. It created jealousy in the team like... because she... hung out with different players. And invited people home and had favourites. It sparked lots of talk... because she didn't just treat everyone the same.

Selma encouraged Karin to trust and confide in her, seemingly aware that Karin wasn't feeling well. For the first time Karin felt as though someone saw her. Phone calls, texts, and car rides home from practice became commonplace. It didn't seem weird at first, as Selma used to do such things. But soon the contact became more frequent, personal, and confusing.

It was very puzzling. And I thought it was because she like wanted to be kind. And we talked like every other day. And she wrote more and more weird things. . . I believed she crossed the line, like I thought so already at that point. And I believe so now looking back at it with like adult eyes. Like I could perceive in the beginning that this is over the line, but it like moved to being...that it was okay later. So there was nothing weird about my coach writing 'I miss you' to me at age 16. But it actually is really strange. . . But I still didn't get that she was interested in me. . . it didn't exist in my mind that it could be like that.

Before long though, Selma confessed that she was in love with Karin.

My first thought was 'no this cannot be happening'. It wasn't like 'yes how great,' it was 'no, this is not... this is not good.' But then it's really weird, that I, after all, answered 'yes we can try.' Because I was really afraid of losing her, she was the only one I had sort of. These feelings that I somewhere did have for her, that she was important and... yeah, I became very confused in my feelings for her. Because she was so important to me and I felt so dependent on her being there. But there was no... it was no infatuation. It was very strong emotions, but there wasn't really any attraction. And now I can think like, that if you took us out of that context, it never could have been a relationship. I mean, it's completely unimaginable that I would... yeah I was 17 when we got like together, and for me to meet a woman that much older and that... yeah, it was these circumstances that enabled the relationship to unfold. . . Then I thought 'but I can't say now that I... I can't back out now.' So I thought 'yes, I'll let a month pass first'. . . And then time went by and somehow the boundaries moved and I accepted

the situation somehow. . . I never said no to anything. I was never forced to do anything either. At the same time, it was like a coercive situation or what to call it. It was a very strange relationship in the sense that I didn't want any closeness, like I didn't really want [to].

Karin intuitively knew this was all wrong—definitely not normal. But going out with Selma entailed a sense of appreciation and care. Having someone to talk to, depend on, and trust—who also entrusted and needed her—was like an oasis in the desert for Karin. Although they were rarely physical with each other, it was confusing that Karin's body could still respond during the few times they did have sex. As total newbie, how do you know what sexual attraction feels like? To have told anyone about the relationship at this point just felt too difficult and complex, not even knowing herself what it was really. Not a couple, nor abuse felt as an accurate, simple recap of their relationship. The coach, girlfriend, friend mesh—it all became one confusing mess for Karin.

I saw her more like, still more like, a friend than a partner. So it was rather the friendship I didn't want to lose. . . I had protested if someone had tried to break up this relationship, or I had gotten really angry. Because I could... there were such mixed emotions all the time. So... yes, there was a huge gravitation, I mean I was drawn to her. . . I mean I saw it as voluntary. And it was sort of. But if someone would've said: 'This is not okay', I would've responded: 'But it's my own choice.'

Karin didn't want anyone to know that the team's coach was her girlfriend. They mostly hung out at Selma's place to not be seen together. Selma said she didn't mind going public, but agreed to keep the relationship secret for Karin's sake. That made Karin feel responsible. She often felt guilty for rejecting Selma's physical approaches and indebted because of everything Selma gave, offered, and paid for.

Constant lies and secrecy inflicted feelings of guilt, betrayal, and failure—especially to her parents, who were sceptical to Karin hanging out with her coach. It drove a wedge between Karin and her parents. The other coaches didn't react or seem to suspect anything, even though Selma was often physical and gave Karin special social treatment in public. Selma always sat next to Karin on the team bus and would massage Karin's feet in front of

everyone. Karin believes that no one suspected anything because it was a female coach; because they were both female. 'You think like "two girls; that must be okay, right." I mean I don't think people reckon that it could not be okay. That it could like be something suspicious.' Karin is quite sure several of her team-mates suspected something though and there were persistent rumours. This made Karin even more left out. Although it somewhat heightened Karin's social status within the team, making her a bit more untouchable, the relationship brought more problems than athletic benefits.

When two years had passed with Selma as coach and one year as girlfriend, Karin broke up. She had just turned 18 and Selma was her coach on and off as Karin switched teams. Karin had broken up once before, but changed her mind and took Selma back. This final brake-up wasn't dramatic or worrisome in itself for Karin. Selma got really upset though and accused Karin for toying with her, never investing long-term. After that Selma was either mean or totally ignored Karin.

Eventually Karin was selected to the team she had dreamed of playing with. She also met someone and fell in love. Similar to Selma, her new girlfriend was a middle-aged coach, but for another team. There was something appealing about getting older, authority-figures. Despite athletic success and new experiences of intimacy and love, thoughts of Selma occupied her mind. They occasionally bumped into each other and Selma sometimes watched Karin play. Karin began to recognise dysfunctional relationship patterns with women and men, and felt depressed. Realising that she needed professional help, Karin met with a physician and a therapist. Four years after the relationship with Selma, Karin dared to open up about her experiences. With that came new insights.

She [the doctor] said 'yeah but you were abused by this person.' . . . That's when I really like started to think this through seriously. And because she [Selma] laid it all on me, that it was me that shouldn't have gotten involved, but I have like gotten to a point where I think she shouldn't have gotten into it. . . I don't really know where the line is drawn for... I can think like it's not morally right, but then it's another thing what might be punitive and so... But it was a peculiar feeling hearing for example my doctor saying 'you were abused by this person.' But it's difficult to think of yourself as abused by someone. I mean I can think... I mean feel that she abused me and my vulnerability, but then think like 'am I sexually abused?' It's like a

difficult thought to think. And I don't have... I can't answer yes or no to that. Because I don't know.

I don't believe I'm without blame and participation, or what to call it. And I don't know what is right and wrong there. That's what's so hard, and that's why I can't get rid of this story either. If it would have been more of a typical case of abuse perhaps... or I guess there are no typical cases, but where it's obvious that it's a case of sexual abuse. Then perhaps it would have been easier to just let it go like 'but I had no part in this', but I feel that I had very much part in this somehow. . . I believe that if it [Selma] had been a man I would've probably like 'yes I was sexually abused', I reckon. And if I had been under 15 or so. I'm thinking like 'I was 17, I should have been able to say no.' Then someone would say 'but you were just a child.' Yeah, I don't know... are you a child at 17? Perhaps to some degree. You're not completely grown up, but perhaps not a child either. You're something in-between. . . at the same time I was depressed and had these problems. And the whole year when I was 16 all boundaries was broken down sort of, for what I could accept and so. So it wasn't weird, I mean nothing became weird.

Karin's therapist advised her to report Selma. 'But I'm not gonna do that,' she says. Despite all, Karin kept on playing, holding on to her dreams of becoming pro and the determination to prove her capability. The downward spiral that negatively affected her confidence and health from a young age, never made her question the sport environment. It only made her question and doubt herself. Today, Karin feels content in her team. Her coaches maintain a comfortable, clear professional distance. Despite her hardships in life, and thus sometimes not wanting to endure that life; 'now I'm pretty much out on the other side', Karin says.

What can be learnt about consent from Karin's story?

Context

Karin's story illustrates how contextual factors conditioned Karin's negotiation of consent and contributed to make sense of the experiences. The following contextualisation offers an

explanation of how and why the relationship could unfold, enabling a ‘completely unimaginable’ relationship to be imaginable.

Karin’s young and critical *age* in-between adult and child; above the legal age of consent, but completely *sexually inexperienced*, and there was a 20-year *age difference* between Karin and Selma (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Informed sexual consent requires a certain knowledge and maturity that Karin was lacking (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Humphreys & Herold, 2007). With new experiences of intimacy, sex, and love came insights that contributed to the redefinition of Karin’s prior experiences with Selma.

Karin’s life circumstances and history of feeling lonely, unattractive, and depressed, created *vulnerability and susceptibility*. She craved friendship, belonging, and validation; a need to be seen and have someone to mutually confide in. Karin’s coach-athlete sexual relationship rendered no professional advantages. The social status she gained within the team was overshadowed by ostracism and rumours (Johansson, 2013). *The sport context* did, however, constitute the venue for interaction, coherence, closeness, and ascribed Selma authority and power. Being an outsider in sport was particularly tough and Karin strived for a successful elite-athlete career. In this situation, Karin was not inclined to (want to) reject Selma’s intimate and sexual advances; it affected the perceptions, and created a social ‘vacuum’ readily filled for Selma to use (abuse) (Jackson, 2001). In addition, keeping the relationship *secret* made Karin vulnerable, *isolated*, and *dependent* on Selma. This context may affect perceptions of responsibility, participation, and consent, which can sometimes result in realisations of abuse once the context has changed (e.g., after a relationship has ended) (Jackson, 2001). Consequently, Karin accepted being Selma’s girlfriend (with sporadic sexual intimacy) due to a felt need for friendship.

Selma was atypical as coach, friend, and girlfriend all at once, which resulted in confusion and mixed emotions that facilitated a process of *breaking down and moving boundaries*. During the course of a normalisation ‘nothing ever became weird’ in that particular context. Grooming typically entails stages of gaining trust, breaking down interpersonal barriers as a conscious strategy for the abuser that goes unrecognised for the athlete until being entrapped, and then the initiation of sexual advances (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). However, Karin instantly noticed when Selma ‘crossed the line’ and was aware of the advancement and incremental shifts of interpersonal boundaries within the relationship as they played out. Thus, it seems to have been more a case of Karin accepting this development (for a while) rather than being unaware of it.

Karin's coach-athlete sexual relationship is atypical in relation to *gender*, *(hetero)sexuality*, *perpetrator/abuser*, and *victim stereotypes*. In reference to meta-narratives on sexual abuse as a gendered, heterosexual phenomenon (Donovan & Hester, 2010), Selma being a *woman* facilitated physical, emotional, and social access to Karin (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001 on *male* coach as risk-factor for sexual abuse), while simultaneously obfuscating and camouflaging the sexual and abusive dimensions for Karin and others (e.g., the other coaches). Karin was never in love with Selma. Her case thus contrasts to coach-athlete sexual relationships where mutual desire and love was fundamental for sexual consent (Johansson & Larsson, 2016). Meanwhile, love can hinder someone to leave an abusive relationship and make sense of why one chooses to stay (Jackson, 2001). Whereas it was relatively easy to break up with Selma once Karin made up her mind, she still struggles to make sense of why she accepted being Selma's girlfriend at all. In addition, there is a common reluctance, resistance, or inability to position one's self as a victim because such status is considered passive, weak, irresponsible, and lacking control (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Donovan & Hester, 2010). Karin articulates that 'it's difficult to think of yourself as abused by someone.' Avoidance of victim status can also extend to a general reluctance to identify partners as abusers or to label relationships as abusive (Jackson, 2001).

Sexual consent as boundary and agreement

Sexual consent is commonly recognised as a dividing line or agreement, often manifested in terms of 'yes' or 'no' to sexual activity (Beres, 2007). Postulating that consent is amenable to yes/no (verbal or nonverbal) indications, is influenced by legal rather than social implications of consent. Karin tried to make sense of her coach-athlete sexual relationship in terms of yes/no sexual consent to figure out whether she was sexually abused by Selma. However, her story shows that consent is *not* always amenable to yes or no answers—at least not mutually exclusive. An important question can be raised here though; what exactly does consent refer to in Karin's story? Consent did not primarily revolve around sexual activity for Karin, which was not the reason she accepted or broke up the relationship, but more around Karin's need for friendship. Yet it is whether she was sexually abused or not that she tries to distinguish and determine. The understanding of consent appears to hinder Karin from making sense of her experiences, and thus to move on and 'get rid of the story.' A less dualistic, more complex, and socially accurate understanding of sexual consent can be illustrated by theories of so called compliant sex. Sexual compliance implicates a disconnect between outward

communication to another person and inward, voluntary willingness; consenting to a sexual activity although it is not personally desired (Humphreys, 2007; Impett & Peplau, 2003). Compliant sex incorporates indirect pressures and conditions that can include pleasure as well as threats, harm, and force. In Karin's story, the sexual compliance depended on contextual factors in her negotiation of consent.

Sexual consent as agreement can be categorised based on three primary qualifications (Beres 2007): First, any yes qualifies (explicitly) as agreement to sexual activity. Second, although any yes can be given (implicitly), the conditions under which the sexual agreement takes place determine whether the consent is valid, real, full, true, and meaningful or invalid, forced, coerced, quasi, and partial. In Karin's story, these qualifications distinguish two different types of consent, where the second one is not necessarily valid. Third, consent can only be given voluntarily, willingly, and freely; free from coercive force, threat, undue influence or pressure. Consent is always under *some* influence though, derived from interaction within the cultural contexts that socializes us and affect both our understanding of consent and the activities that the consent regards (Beres, 2007; Humphreys & Herold, 2007). The forces at play can be categorised based on the emphasis put on individual and structural power, respectively (Beres, 2007; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The one extreme completely negates free consent due to cultural and social forces functioning as legal forms of coercion or constrain. Power inequity that negates consent has, for example, been attributed to coach-athlete relationships (Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000), student-faculty relationships (Lane, 2006), and to women in relation to men in patriarchal, heteronormative society (MacKinnon, 1989). The other extreme prioritizes individual agency and views sexual choices as freely made by autonomous subjects. Due to contemporary individualism and women's sexual liberation, young women today tend to perceive themselves as liberated and empowered. Nonetheless, women regularly consent to unwanted sexual activities and general sexual abuse prevalence is not declining (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Underpinned by hegemonic gender and sexuality norms, there is an assumed heterosexual, gendered nature of consent. Expected to be the sexual initiators driven by sexual desire, men *request* sexual consent, while women are typically expected to *give* sexual consent (Beres 2007; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Moran & Lee, 2014). These expectations do not generally apply to same-sex relationships, nor do they account for mutually initiated sexual activity, changing initiator roles, or women desired and initiated sex (Beres et al., 2004; Moran & Lee, 2014). Karin's story depicts Selma as sexual initiator seemingly driven

by love and sexual desire. Motives different from Selma's drove Karin to accept and engage in the relationship—although being uncomfortable and ambivalent. Karin's story incorporates both agency and structure. 'I was never forced to do anything either. At the same time, it was like a coercive situation' she says, acknowledging her ability to say no and the vulnerability that Selma (ab)used at the same time.

Towards an understanding of consent as a contextual, complex process

Karin's story illustrates a fundamental intersection of context and consent. Socially, consent can be understood as an ongoing process of (re)negotiation in relation to the context; a sliding scale of priority intersecting experiences, contradictions, ambivalence, compromises, needs, wants, dependencies, expectations, forces, agency, compliance, and resistance. Beres (2007, p. 99) describes:

Consent becomes something broader than just a 'yes' to sex with a specific person, in a particular place, at a particular time. It becomes a negotiation of social expectations, a way of expressing a social identity, or of fitting in to a certain social world. It creates spaces for sex that are neither consensual nor criminal or violent, although they may be socially problematic.

Outwards, the process of consent primarily operates in one preconditioned direction forward, making it unfeasible to step back having once crossed a line or manifested agreement, while inwards the negotiation can take any direction. This ('expansive') course is fundamental in grooming processes (Fasting & Sand, 2015) when developing mutually desired love relationships informed by cultural institutions such as marriage and family (Johansson & Larsson, 2016), and this is illustrated by Karin's story.

Social implications of consent include subjective dimensions that integrates individual agency, cultural influences, and social force. The process of consent, or the relationships within which it occurs, does not necessarily meet social conventions and expectations, mirror dominant discourse, or theories on sexual abuse in sport. In relationships that are atypical, the process of consent can be more complex and difficult to make sense of, which may pose risk of alienation, harm, and abuse. Having said that, sometimes 'objective' criteria are deemed necessary to define sexual consent and to create, inform, and uphold clear boundaries in terms of laws, policies, regulations, standardised behavioural codes, and risk labelling (Beres, 2007). Legal age of consent is one example, as is the growing prohibition of coach-athlete sexual relationships in the name of sexual abuse prevention, regardless of athletes' age or self-

reported consent (Johansson, 2013). Arguably, accurate conceptualisations of consent, and understanding of its practical outcomes, needs to distinguish between legal implications (specific behaviour and regulation) and social implications (subjective, context dependent experience) of consent. I encourage further study on the process of consent in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual coach-athlete relationships by drawing on a diversity of consensual and non-consensual experiences among minority and majority groups. Whenever sexual abuse (or harassment or violence) is defined as sexual activity without consent, it needs to be accurately and explicitly defined what consent means. The contextual and nuanced understanding of consent that I advocate for is particularly important when it concerns socially and ethically problematic, marginalised, contradictory, dysfunctional, and potentially abusive relationships. Sexual consent does not entail a moral or social standpoint of an unproblematic, appropriate, socially desirable, legal, pleasurable, or loving sexual activity—nor do coach-athlete, or other authority-subordinate, sexual relationships necessarily indicate the contrary (Johansson & Larsson, 2016; Sikes, 2006). Future challenges for researchers to take on include investigations and interventions to inform routines, education, support and report systems, and codes of conduct to manage coach-athlete relationships. Karin's story reveals that athlete protection needs to acknowledge structural vulnerabilities and constraints without disempowering or objectifying (female) athletes as inherently powerless and unable to consent in coach-athlete relationships.

This study has taken a small, initial step to begin to investigate and problematize consent in coach-athlete relationships. Hopefully this encourages further research. The study draws empirically on a single case. It centres on Karin giving and Selma receiving consent, although Selma's perceptions remain unknown. This limitation does not take away, change, or negate Karin's perceptions and subjectivity. The study is not intended to determine whether Karin was sexually (or otherwise) abused by Selma or not. I do, however, propose future research to investigate the experiences of both parties within coach-athlete (or other) relationships.

Conclusions

Context is crucial for the social implications of consent. Negotiation and renegotiation of consent depends on contextual (sexual and non-sexual) factors both within and outside of the relationship itself. Salient contextual factors in Karin's story included her age, sexual

inexperience, vulnerability, isolation, the sport context, and gendered, heteronormative, perpetrator and victim stereotypes.

Consent is not just about being either able or unable to say yes or no to sex—it is not merely about, or necessarily amenable to, yes/no distinctions at all. The possibility that consent can be alternately absent and present during events and phases in a coach-athlete sexual relationship, and incorporates both individual agency and social structure, needs to be accounted for.

Karin's case is yet another one that illustrates the problems with secrecy, isolation, and stigmatisation related to coach-athlete sexual relationships and abuse. In addition, while majorities comprise higher numbers per se, minorities and atypical cases (e.g., based on gender, sexuality, and age) can inflict additional layers of vulnerability, harm, and risk.

The process of alternately pushing, transgressing, and normalising boundaries in coach-athlete relationships does not necessarily go unnoticed by the athlete. It can, depending on the context, be accepted to progress because the athlete simultaneously perceives (or hope for) personal benefits.

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