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**Sports as a risk environment: homophobia and bullying
in a sample of gay and heterosexual men**

Roberto Baiocco, PhD, roberto.baiocco@uniroma1.it¹,

Jessica Pistella, PhD Std, jessica.pistella@uniroma1.it¹,

Marco Salvati, PhD Std, marco.salvati@uniroma1.it¹,

Salvatore Ioverno, PhD, salvatore.ioverno@utexas.edu²,

Fabio Lucidi, PhD, fabio.lucidi@uniroma1.it¹

¹ Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology,
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

² Population Research Center, Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas
at Austin

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Roberto Baiocco, PhD, Department
of Social and Developmental Psychology, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology, Sapienza
University of Rome, Italy, roberto.baiocco@uniroma1.it. T. (+39)06.4991.7671

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Abstract

Research on bullying and homophobic bullying has mainly focused on school contexts, with little research in sports-related contexts. This study used a sample of 88 gay males and 120 heterosexual males between 18 and 36 years of age to examine the frequency of bullying experiences in Italian sports-related contexts. The results showed that gay men reported more frequent bullying and homophobic bullying than heterosexual men. Gay men reported dropping out of sports more frequently, namely due to a fear of being bullied and greater familial pressure to conform to masculine-type sports. It is necessary to promote safer sports-related contexts for people who self-identify as a sexual minority.

Keywords: sports, bullying, homophobic bullying, internalized sexual stigma, masculinities.

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Introduction

Research on bullying and homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts have mainly highlighted that these social phenomena are frequent in socialization contexts such as sports environments, and they are clearly linked to the compromised well-being of youth (Evans, Adler, MacDonald, & Côté, 2016; Peguero, 2008; Shannon, 2013; Symons, Sbaraglia, Hillier, & Mitchell, 2010; Volk, & Lagzdins, 2009). Bullying is a social phenomenon defined as repeated negative actions, based on an imbalance of power between peers whereby the individual who is more powerful attacks or harasses the individual who is less powerful with an intention to damage or disturb (Olweus, 1993). Homophobic bullying is the exploitation of an individual's actual or perceived sexual orientation with the intention of belittling and denigrating, often with the intention of inflicting mental or physical harm (Brackenridge, Rivers, Gough, & Llewellyn, 2007; Prati, Pietrantoni, Buccoliero, & Maggi, 2010). Homophobic bullying does not exclusively affect lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) youth; it also affects people who are perceived as not conforming to traditional masculine/feminine gender roles, even if these people do not self-identify as LGBT (Nappa, Palladino, Menesini, & Baiocco, 2017; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013).

Symons and colleagues (Symons et al., 2010), in a comprehensive survey on the sports-related experiences of 308 LGBT Australians, found that 43% of the athletes reported being targets of discrimination during their sports involvement. Rivers (2011), in a longitudinal study on the incidence of bullying in schools in the United Kingdom (UK), showed that 50% of people identifying as a sexual minority experienced homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2011) reported that of 93,079 LGBT adults (aged 18 or over), from 28 countries, nearly half (42 %) reported avoiding sports clubs out of fear of being assaulted, threatened, or harassed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Specifically, gay men (53 %) were more likely to adapt their behavior in order to avoid such risks than lesbian and bisexual participants. Evans and colleagues (2016), in a study on 359 Canadian

athletes, found that bullying was less prevalent in sport compared with school, that 14% of participants experienced victimization in sports-related contexts and that male athletes were more likely to be victimized than female athletes. In addition, results revealed that those victimized through bullying reported weaker connections with peers compared to those were not bullied.

Studies have recognized that sports environments are established sites for the privileging of particular forms of heterosexism and homophobia (Cavalier, 2011; Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2010; Gilbert, 2000; Plummer, 2006; Shang & Gill, 2012). According to Griffin (1993), the intense homonegativity among athletes is a result of the fact that the sports field has been culturally conceptualized as a training ground where young boys learn masculine skills and where the expression and admiration of physicality is central (Rivers, 2001). Furthermore, unlike other public venues, the sports field allows men to openly demonstrate their emotional closeness to each other without fear of being teased. In addition, many sports require physical contact and intimacy among men, and this is perceived to be acceptable among athletes (Griffin, 1998). Consequently, the fact that an athlete is gay, bisexual or transgendered (GBT), will be associated to some form of sexual interaction or sexual gratification for the GBT individual interacting their team mates. For these reasons, coming out in sports-related contexts by sexual minorities may also be associated with negative consequences, such as bullying and prejudice (Baiocco et al., 2015; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002).

Moreover, gender-nonconforming youth are at elevated risk levels for experiencing victimization (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010), negative psychosocial consequences (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006), and social pressure to conform to the category associated with their biological sex (Carver, Yunger, & Perry, 2003). Additionally, in a stigmatizing context such as sport and in a peer culture that demands conformity to masculine gender, gay men (or those perceived to be gay men) face greater pressure to choose a particular kind of sport in adolescence than heterosexual young people, mainly due to gender-nonconforming behavior (Brackenridge et al., 2007).

Victims of bullying are at risk of developing long-term adverse mental health consequences, such as depression (Forster & Dyal, 2013; Lindquist, Livingston, & Machek, 2017), social anxiety (Espelage & Holt, 2001), loneliness (Juvonen & Graham, 2002), poor self-esteem (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010) and suicidal thoughts (Peter, Taylor, & Campbell, 2016; Russell, & Toomey, 2013). Retrospective research (Duarte, Pinto-Gouveia, & Rodrigues, 2015; Matos, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2012) has suggested that bullying experiences, and the subsequent shame, may become the basis for negative self-evaluation in the form of self-hatred, self-inadequacy and low self-reassurance. According to Gilbert, Clarke, Hempel, Miles, and Irons (2004), negative self-evaluation is not a single process but has different forms: One was related to desires to try to self-improve and self-reassure and the other of feeling self-inadequacy and self-hate. The way people criticize or reassure themselves or trying to be warm, and encouraging, has shown to be strongly correlated with well-being (Bluth, Campo, Futch, & Gaylord, 2017), also in lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals (Matos, Carvalho, Cunha, Galhardo, & Sepodes, 2017). For instance, Cook and colleagues (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010) conducted a meta-analysis of predictive factors of bullying and found that victims of bullying were more likely to have negative cognitions about themselves (Nansel et al., 2001), compared to those were not bullied. Indeed, several studies found that criticize or reassure themselves stimulate the same neurophysiological systems as criticism or reassurance that we receive by others (Petrocchi, Ottaviani, & Couyoumdjan, 2016). These evidences suggested the strong connection between negative self-evaluation, bullying, homophobic bullying, and well-being.

Homophobic bullying may also increase internalized sexual stigma (ISS) among lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) youths (Baiocco, D'Alessio, & Laghi, 2010). A review by Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008), revealed that homophobic bullying had a direct and indirect impact on self-esteem through ISS. Studies that have assessed the impact of bullying on ISS among LGB youths (Blais, Gervais, & Hébert, 2014; Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013), found that LGB people who were bullied on account of their sexual orientation also reported higher

levels of ISS (Feinstein, Goldfried, & Davila, 2012), in addition to difficulties in accepting one's sexual orientation and possibly increased negative self-evaluation in the form of self-hatred or self-inadequacy (Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013).

Utilizing Connell's (1990) theory of hegemonic masculinity, several studies argued that sports are a cultural idealization of masculinity and represent a belief system that privileges heterosexuality and stigmatizes other sexual behaviors (Eng, 2008; Griffin, 1993, 1998; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Salvati, Pistella, Ioverno, Giacomantonio, & Baiocco, 2017). Likewise, this line of reasoning is one also frequently reported by non-academic work. For example, the first international study into homophobia in sport, named 'Out on the Fields' (Denison & Kitchen, 2015), highlighted that of 9,494 participants, from 6 predominantly English-speaking countries, the majority of them (73%) did not believe that sports were a safe place for LGB participants and the 62% of all respondents believed homophobia is more common in team sports than in other parts of society. However, several limitations and problems were found in this international research. For instance, the study permitted people to retrospectively account for their experiences in sport and conflated the experiences of heterosexuals, bisexuals and trans-gendered people with gay and lesbian individuals (for more detail see Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). Moreover, another recent survey (Stonewall, 2016) in a sample of 1,249 sports fans across UK, reported that 72% of football fans observed homophobic behaviors in sports-related contexts and that homophobia remained a problem in sport across all levels, while a British governmental inquiry (DCMS, 2017) found that homophobia was a big problem in football.

To the contrary, according to Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory, several recent studies highlight a rapid decrease in cultural homophobia in the U.S. (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson & Kian, 2012; Anderson et al., 2016), most notably in UK (Cleland, Magrath, & Kian, 2016; McCormack, 2012) and Australia (McCann, Minichiello, & Plummer, 2009). These results suggested that sexual prejudice is playing less of a role in the experiences of sexual minorities in sport (Bush, Anderson, & Carr, 2012). Inclusive masculinity theory employs Connell's theorizing

for periods of high societal homophobia. However, Anderson argues that as the level of homophobia declines, the mandates of the hegemonic form of masculinity hold less cultural influence (Anderson & Kian, 2012).

Although qualitative (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2008; Shannon, 2013) and quantitative studies (Evans et al., 2016; Symons et al., 2010; Peguero, 2008; Volk & Lagzdins, 2009) specifically addressing bullying frequencies in sport settings, and it has been found a progressive decline of homophobia in several countries (Anderson, 2009, 2011; Anderson, et al., 2016; Bush et al., 2012; Cleland et al., 2016; Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Zipp, 2011), to our knowledge, this issue has not yet been investigated in Italy. Moreover, few previous studies have investigated differences between heterosexual people and sexual minority people in rates of bullying and homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts (Brackenridge et al., 2007; Evans et al., 2016; Peguero, 2008; Rivers, 2001; Symons et al., 2010).

This study was conducted in Italy, a country where sexual minorities constantly face the effects of the societal heterosexism (Baiocco et al., 2010). Furthermore, the Italian situation is unique because of the presence of the Vatican State, which had a considerable influence on Italian development of moral, social and ethical values. Consequently, the recognition of civil rights for LGBT people is progressing slowly due to of the link between clerical and political power (Lingiardi et al., 2016). For example, Italy legalized same-sex marriage in 2016, while in other Mediterranean countries with strong Catholic cultural traditions such as Spain and Portugal, the recognition of civil rights for LGBT people was already occurred (Petruccelli, Baiocco, Ioverno, Pistella, & D'Urso, 2015). In such a stigmatizing context, the decline of homophobia seems less likely than other countries. In addition, younger gay men have a greater risk of internalizing homonegative opinions (Lingiardi, Baiocco, & Nardelli, 2012) and being bullied because of their sexual orientation (Nappa et al. 2017; Szymanski et al., 2008).

We aim to contribute to an understanding and examining how bullying in sports-related contexts may increase the risk of developing psychosocial problems and highlighting the necessity

of policy interventions regarding sport safety and violence prevention in Italy. Despite the little research on bullying in sports-related contexts in Italy, investigating the effects of bullying in a context of socialization (as is the case for sports-related contexts) could be useful to better understand the underlying mechanisms by which these effects operate. In particular, it seems important to study the role of bullying in predisposing individuals to dropout from sport, given that it may indirectly promote no sports participation or increase negative self-evaluation. Thus, to complement previous empirical investigations in this area, the current study aimed to examine the relationship between bullying in sports, dropout out of sports due to fear of being bullied, negative self-evaluation (in terms of self-hatred and ISS) and addressing the question of whether this relationship change in sport participants (as compared with non-sport participants) and in gay men (as compared with heterosexual men).

In line with the literature and taking into account the cultural frame of the present study, we hypothesize that: (Hypothesis 1) gay men and non-sport participants would report higher levels of bullying and homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts than heterosexual men and sport participants, respectively (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008); (Hypothesis 2) gay men would show more negative self-evaluation levels than heterosexual men, after controlling for bullying and homophobic bullying (Duarte et al., 2015; Gilbert & Irons, 2008); (Hypothesis 3) according to the original Lingiardi and colleagues' study (2012), younger participants would show more levels of ISS than the other group (26 to 35 years old), after adjusting for bullying and homophobic bullying; (Hypothesis 4) gay men have higher dropout rates for sports due to a fear being bullied compared to heterosexual men (Brackenridge et al., 2007); (Hypothesis 5) gay men face greater pressure from family and friends to choose a particular kind of sport than heterosexual men (Carver et al., 2003). The further aim of this study was to explore variation in the descriptions of pressures they received from family and friends. More specifically, the intention was to find out if there was any difference between gay men and heterosexual men regarding the type of pressure

and if gay men received more pressures related to gender-nonconforming behavior than heterosexual men (Brackenridge et al., 2007).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 208 Italian male participants who self-identified as heterosexual (57.7%) or gay (42.3%) men. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 ($M = 27.20$, $SD = 4.89$). No age differences were found between gay men and heterosexual men, $t(206) = -.394$, $p = .088$. Moreover, 52% of participants indicated they did not practice any sports at the time of completing the questionnaire (56% of gay men and 48% of heterosexual men), and 48% indicated that they practice sports at least once a week (44% of gay men and 52% of heterosexual men). No differences were found between gay and heterosexual men for practicing sports, $\chi^2(1, 208) = 1.46$, $p = 0.22$.

Measures

Identifying Information. An identifying information form was completed by all participants to collect data related to demographic characteristics. Participants were asked to report their sexual orientation by answering a single item (1 = gay; 2 = heterosexual; 3 = other). In the case of the "other" alternative, participants had the possibility to specify their sexual orientation. Finally, participants were asked if they practiced any sport; namely, they were asked the following question: "Do you practice, at this time, any sport?" (0 = "I don't practice any sports," 1 = "I practice at least once a week"). The following definitions of sport participation was given before the question; "in the current study, sport participation is regarded as regular sport activity, which means at least 30 min once per week".

Bullying in sport contexts. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of bullying they experienced in sports-related contexts with the following question: "How often have you been bullied in sport contexts?". Participants responded to a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = "never" to

5 = “frequently”). This single-question about bullying was based on the World Health Organization’s international study of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001), adapting it to sports related-contexts. The following definitions of bullying was given before the question, based on previous research by Olweus (1993); “bullying occurs when a person or group of people repeatedly say or do mean or hurtful things to someone on purpose. Bullying includes things like teasing, hitting, threatening, name-calling, ignoring, and leaving someone out on purpose”. In addition, participants were asked to indicate if they had ever dropped out of sports due to fear of being bullied (no = 0, yes = 1).

Homophobic bullying in sport contexts. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of homophobic bullying they experienced in sports-related contexts with the following question: “How often have you been bullied about being perceived as gay, lesbian, or bisexual in sport contexts?”. Participants could answer on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = “never” to 5 = “frequently”). The wording for this question was derived from the World Health Organization’s international study of bullying (Nansel et al. 2001; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig 2011), adapting it to sports related-contexts. The following definition of homophobic bullying was given before the question (Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001); “homophobic bullying takes place where general bullying behavior such as verbal, and physical abuse and intimidation is accompanied by or consists of hostile or offensive action against lesbians, gay males or bisexuals (LGB). In addition, homophobic bullying is experienced by people who are (or are perceived as) LGB, but it can affect any individual who is different in some way from everybody else (e.g. including feminine men, or masculine women”).

Pressure to choose a sport. Participants were asked to report if they had ever been pressured by friends or family members to choose a sport: “Have you ever been pressured by your family/friends to choose a particular kind of sport?” (no = 0, yes = 1). If they responded “yes” to either question, we asked them to explain with an open-ended question about the pressure from friends and family members.

The Forms of Self-Criticizing and Self-Reassuring Scale (FSCRS; Gilbert et al., 2004). The FSCRS (short version with 12 items) was used to examine the levels of hated self, inadequate self, and reassured self. Participants responded, using a five-point Likert scale (from 0 = not at all like me, to 4 = extremely like me), to series of questions: e.g. “I have a sense of disgust with myself” (hated self); “I am easily disappointed with myself” (inadequate self); “I find it easy to forgive myself” (reassured self). Good convergent validity has been found with other measures of self-criticism (Dunkley, Saislow, Grilo & McGlashan, 2009; Kupeli, Chilcot, Schmidt, Campbell, & Troop, 2013). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha values were .72, .84, and .80, and the split-half reliability were .77, .83, and .82, respectively.

Measure of Internalized Sexual Stigma for Gay Men (MISS-G; Lingardi et al., 2012). The short version of the MISS-G was used to measure the internalized sexual stigma (Pistella, Salvati, Ioverno, Laghi, & Baiocco, 2016). The scale (6 items) measures the negative attitudes that lesbian and gay people have toward homosexuality and toward this aspect of themselves. “I do not believe in love between gay men” is an example. Participants could answer on a five-point Likert-type scale (from 1 = “I disagree” and 5 = “I agree”). A mean score for these items was used with higher scores, indicating a greater level of ISS. Research with this scale has also demonstrated good convergent validity with other measures of ISS (Lingardi et al., 2012). In this study, the Cronbach’s alpha value was .77 and the split-half reliability was .80.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from universities, community recreational centers, and work places in Rome, Italy. Specifically, the majority of sexual minority participants were recruited from LGB organizations in university and community settings in Rome, Italy. Data were gathered through advertisements posted on websites, social networks, emailing, and handing out the online link directing the participants to the survey (hosted by SurveyMonkey). A brief description of the study, purpose, and inclusion criteria were provided during the announcement. We explained to participants that the purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between sports

activities and well-being in Italian men. The explanation was voluntarily generic because we did not want participants to know the actual research objectives. Inclusion criteria were: (a) Italian nationality; (b) male gender; (c) identification as gay or heterosexual; and (d) age (18-35 years old). According these criteria, 10 participants were excluded because their sexual orientation was different by gay or heterosexual ones (6 bisexual, 4 pansexual) and 3 participants were excluded because they completed only the identifying information form.

In total, 94% of distributed questionnaires were completed (completely filled in).

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents answered the same questionnaire individually (20–30 minutes to complete). All potential participants could access the survey only if they had signed informed consent and an indication that they met inclusion criteria described prior to starting. They were also informed of their right to stop completing the survey at any time. No compensation was provided for filling out the questionnaires. The protocol was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology at the Sapienza University of Rome. The research was conducted in accordance with the Social Research Association's ethical guidelines (Social Research Association 2003).

Data Analysis

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0) to conduct the analyses. Pearson (when both variables were continuous), and Spearman's rho (when one variable was ordinal numeric and one was continuous or ordinal numeric) coefficient correlations, chi-square test (when both variables were dichotomous), and *t*-test statistics (when one variable was continuous and one was dichotomous) were calculated to examine the relationships between variables. Group differences were analyzed using the Chi-Square test, Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), Multiple Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA), and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was performed to identify emergent themes based on the answers to the open-ended questions posed in the study. The analysis consisted of a phased process, starting with familiarization with the data. Initially, two

independent coders, both psychologists trained in qualitative data analysis, read each answer and coded it manually, line by-line, taking notes and focusing on participants' descriptions and interpretations of what they were saying.

Results

Variables Associated with Bullying Crossed by Sexual Orientation and Sports Participation

To examine the relationship between key variables in gay men as well as in heterosexual men, we performed four association matrices taking into account their participation in sport: Participants engaged in sports activities (ES; Table 1a) vs. participants not engaged in sports activities (NES; Table 1b). We found that being bullied in sports-related contexts was positively correlated with self-hatred in sport participants, regardless of sexual orientation (gay men ES: $r = .39, p < .05$; heterosexual men ES: $r = .33, p < .01$). In addition, in gay male participants not engaged in sports activities, there was a positive association between ISS and being bullied in sports-related contexts (NES: $r = .34, p < .01$), in addition to feelings of self-hatred (NES: $r = .38, p > .01$) and self-inadequacy (NES: $r = .34, p > .05$), while there was no correlation between ISS and being a victim of homophobic bullying (ES: $r = .19, p > .05$; NES: $r = .10, p > .05$).

Moreover, a series of *t*-test indicated that participants who (a) reported dropping out of sports due to fear of being bullied (gay men ES: $M = 2.89, SD = 1.05$; gay men NES: $M = 2.95, SD = 1.25$; heterosexual men NES: $M = 2.82, SD = 1.25$); (b) received pressure to choose a particular kind of sport from family (heterosexual men ES: $M = 2.14, SD = .90$; heterosexual men NES: $M = 2.50, SD = .76$); and (c) received pressure to choose a particular kind of sport from friends (gay men ES: $M = 2.71, SD = .76$; gay men NES: $M = 3.20, SD = 1.03$; heterosexual men ES: $M = 2.50, SD = .71$), presented higher level of bullying than those who have not dropped out of sport (gay men ES: $M = 1.69, SD = .71, t[36] = -3.924, p < .001$; gay men NES: $M = 2.07, SD = 1.15, t[48] = -2.589, p = .013$; heterosexual men NES: $M = 1.64, SD = .73, t[56] = -4.143, p < .001$), those who have not received pressure from family (heterosexual men ES: $M = 1.45, SD = .57, t[60] = -2.801, p = .007$; heterosexual men NES: $M = 1.76, SD = .96, t[56] = -2.075, p = .043$), and friends (gay

men ES: $M = 1.81$, $SD = .91$, $t[36] = -2.448$, $p = .019$; gay men NES: $M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.26$, $t[48] = -2.143$, $p = .037$; heterosexual men ES: $M = 1.50$, $SD = .62$, $t[60] = -2.223$, $p = .030$).

Additionally, gay male participants who have dropped out of sport due to fear of being bullied reported higher level of homophobic bullying (gay men ES: $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.09$; gay men NES: $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.25$) and showed higher levels of self-hatred (gay men NES: $M = 1.87$, $SD = .81$), and ISS (gay men ES: $M = 2.83$, $SD = .59$) than those who have not dropped out of sport on the levels of homophobic bullying (gay men ES: $M = 1.38$, $SD = .67$, $t[36] = -4.648$, $p < .001$; gay men NES: $M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.07$, $t[48] = -2.383$, $p = .021$), self-hatred (gay men NES: $M = 1.35$, $SD = .42$, $t[48] = -2.872$, $p = .006$) and ISS (gay men ES: $M = 1.92$, $SD = .83$, $t[36] = -3.001$, $p = .005$). The other t -test and chi-square analyses were not significant. For parsimonious reasons, we only reported statistically significant differences in this exploratory analysis.

Table 1a and Table 1b

Sports Participation and Sexual Orientation Differences in Bullying and Homophobic

Bullying

About half of the total sample reported experiencing bullying or homophobic bullying at least once in sports-related contexts ($n = 127$; 61.1%): 27 gay men (13%) and 49 heterosexual men (23.6%) reported that they were bullied in sports environments for non-homophobic reasons, 3 gay men (1.4%) and 4 heterosexual men (1.9%) were victims of homophobic bullying in sport, and 33 gay men (15.9%) and 11 heterosexual men (5.3%) reported that they were victims of both types of bullying in sports-related contexts.

We conducted a 2 (sexual orientation: gay vs. heterosexual) \times 2 (sport participation: participation vs. no participation) MANOVA on bullying and homophobic bullying in sports. The analysis revealed a significant effect for sexual orientation, Wilks' $\Lambda = .90$; $F(2,203) = 11.30$; $p < .001$, and sports participation, Wilks' $\Lambda = .96$; $F(2,203) = 4.47$; $p = .01$, and

no significant interaction on sexual orientation \times sports participation, Wilks' $\Lambda = .99$; $F(2,203) = .18$; $p = .83$. There was a more significant difference between the scores of gay men than those of heterosexual men and between participants not engaged in sports activities vs. those involved in sports activities. In particular, gay men reported higher bullying, $F(1,204) = 14.58$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, and homophobic bullying frequencies, $F(1,204) = 14.92$; $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, than heterosexual men. Conversely, participants who were not engaged in sports activities showed higher bullying, $F(1,204) = 8.99$; $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, but not homophobic bullying frequencies, $F(1,204) = .78$; $p = .37$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, than sport participants. Mean and standard deviations are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Bullying and Homophobic Bullying as Covariates in the Negative Self-Evaluation

One-way MANCOVA was used in order to see whether there were differences in negative self-evaluation levels by sexual orientation after controlling for bullying and homophobic bullying. All three of FSCRS dimensions (hated self, inadequate self, and reassured self) were used as dependent variables. The analysis revealed a significant effect for bullying, Wilks' Lambda = .94; $F(3,202) = 4.01$; $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, but no significant main effect of sexual orientation, Wilks' Lambda = .98; $F(3,202) = .77$; $p = .512$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and homophobic bullying, Wilks' Lambda = .98; $F(3,202) = 1.16$; $p = .328$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. The effect of bullying in sports was significant for the hated self, $F(1, 204) = 10.39$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .049$, and inadequate self, $F(1, 204) = 5.28$, $p = .023$, $\eta_p^2 = .028$, but not associated with the reassured self, $F(1, 204) = .02$, $p = .985$, $\eta_p^2 < .001$. Participants who reported higher bullying rates in sports showed higher levels of self-hatred and self-inadequacy, but they did not show lower levels of self-reassurance than those who reported lower bullying frequencies.

Sexual orientation was not significantly associated with the hated self, $F(1, 204) = 2.13, p = .146, \eta_p^2 = .010$, with the inadequate self, $F(1, 204) = 3.04, p = .08, \eta_p^2 < .02$, and reassured self, $F(1, 204) = .12, p = .735, \eta_p^2 < .01$, subscales. Therefore, there was not a significant difference between gay men and heterosexual men in the FSCRS dimensions. Similar results were found for homophobic bullying experience, which were not associated with hated self, $F(1, 204) = 1.23, p = .269, \eta_p^2 = .006$, with the inadequate self, $F(1, 204) = 2.03, p = .156, \eta_p^2 = .010$, and reassured self, $F(1, 204) = .01, p = .985, \eta_p^2 < .001$. Mean and standard deviations are shown in Table 3. These results showed a significant effect of bullying in sports as covariate but no significant main effects of sexual orientation. Thus, victims of bullying, regardless of sexual orientation or homophobic bullying experiences, reported higher levels of hated self, inadequate self, but not of reassured self than those who reported lower bullying frequencies.

Table 3

In gay male participants, ANCOVA was used to examine the differences in the level of ISS for the age groups (18–24, $n = 31$, vs. 25–35 years old, $n = 57$). We included covariates to adjust for bullying and homophobic bullying. The main effect of age was not significant, $F(1, 84) = 1.08, p = .300, \eta_p^2 = .013$. Therefore, the two age groups did not differ from each other (18–24: $M = 2.09, SD = 1.03$; 25–35: $M = 1.85, SD = .72$). With regard to covariate modelled, only bullying in sports was significant, $F(1, 84) = 11.06, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .328$, whereas homophobic bullying was unrelated to ISS, $F(1, 84) = .75, p = .758, \eta_p^2 = .116$.

Dropout from Sports and Pressure to Choose a Sport: Sexual Orientation Differences

Using a series of chi-square analyses (Table 4), we further examined differences in sexual orientation in relation to frequency of dropout from sports out of fear of being bullied and of pressures received from friends and family members to choose a particular kind of sport. As we

expected, gay participants reported significantly higher dropout from sports due to a fear of being bullied ($n = 31$; 35%) relative to heterosexual participants ($n = 16$; 13%), $\chi^2(1, 208) = 13.914, p < .001$.

Table 4

Moreover, gay men ($n = 17$; 19%) received more pressure from friends to choose a particular kind of sport than heterosexual men ($n = 5$; 4%), $\chi^2(1, 208) = 12.323, p < .001$. No differences between gay men ($n = 18$; 20.5%) and heterosexual men ($n = 15$; 12.5%) were found for pressure from family, $\chi^2(1, 208) = 2.407, p = .121$ (Table 4). Additionally, most relevant to the goal of the study, we analyzed the content of the open-ended question that asked participants to explain the particular kind of pressure they received from family and friends ("What kind of pressures did you receive from friends and family regarding your choice of sport?"). IPA identified two different main categories (Table 5): "masculine-type sport," which included homophobic insults or pressures related to not conforming to gender norms, and "intrinsic quality of the sport," which included motivation related to the specific characteristics of the sport.

Table 5

Regarding the family context, gay men reported more "masculine-type sport" answers (gay men: 10 out of 18; heterosexual men: 3 out of 15). Heterosexual men reported more answers related to the "intrinsic quality of the sport" (gay men: 8 responses out of 18; heterosexual: 12 out of 15). Regarding the question about pressures received from friends, gay men reported more "masculine-type sport" answers (gay men: 14 out of 17; heterosexual men: 2 out of 5) and less answers related to the "intrinsic quality of the sport" (gay men: 3 out of 17; heterosexual men: 3 out of 5). Although the aim of IPA is to understand the meanings of experiences rather than measure

their attendance (Smith et al., 2009), we indicated the frequencies expressed by participants to simplify the complexities of the open-ended questions.

Discussion

This research aims to extend knowledge about experiences of bullying and homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts in a sample of gay men and heterosexual men, both sport participants and non-participants. The retrospective nature of the study did not permit evaluation of the effect of bullying and homophobic bullying on current sports participation of the sample or to confirm a progressive decline of homophobia in Italian sports-related contexts (Anderson, 2009, 2011; Anderson et al., 2016; Cleland et al., 2016; McCormack, 2012; Zipp, 2011). However, a number of participants could continue to be troubled by recollections of bullying long after they had left sport, and these could have an important effect on current sports participation (Rivers, 2004).

First of all, this study examined whether being bullied in sports was significantly associated with self-hatred. Results were in line with previous research (Duarte et al., 2015; Matos et al., 2012). Bullying was associated with feeling of self-hatred in sport participants. This result suggests that discrimination and victimization arouse negative self-evaluation in those participants who still frequent places potentially associated with their personal experience of bullying (Roth et al., 2002). Indeed, bullying was also associated with dropping out from sport for fear of being bullied in all participants. This positive association may be explained through the coping style identified as “avoidance oriented strategy” (Endler & Parker, 1994), a coping strategy intended to solve problems and it represent the efforts of people to face (and overcome) stressful situations. One such explanation highlight that victims of bullying used avoidance behaviours as a coping response to stressful event, with persistent desire to get away from or avoid a situation or environment related to the traumatic event. The finding provides support for the overall effect of bullying on sport avoidance, such that participants who self-report victimization are also likely to report avoidance behaviours.

Another interesting result was that feelings of self-hatred were strongly connected with dropping out only in gay men non-participants. One explanation is that the expectation of being rejected or discriminated by others can lead to increased minority stress, as discussed in previous study (Meyer, 2003). The expectation of such negative events (with corresponding vigilant and avoidance behaviour) is one of the three components of the minority stress model. The other two components of this model are: 1) external objective events and conditions, such as discrimination and violence; and 2) internalized sexual stigma. Consequently, bullying in sports-related contexts and the expectation of being discriminated are risk factors in dropping out from sport, with notable increases in negative psychological outcomes, including negative self-evaluation (as self-hatred) and internalized sexual stigma (Meyer, 2003; Pistella et al, 2016). Although the patterns of correlations across the various groups were somewhat different, the results should be interpreted cautiously because subsample sizes were small.

MANOVA results revealed that gay men reported higher levels of bullying and homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts compared to heterosexual men (Hypothesis 1). These differences may still reflect homophobic and discriminatory behaviors based on stereotypes of masculinity (Lingiardi et al., 2016; Petruccelli et al., 2015; Plummer, 2006), which are also present in sports environments because sports are a cultural idealization of masculinity (Drummond et al., 2015). This result is not surprising because Italy is a country where sexual minorities constantly face the influences of the Catholic perspective, but also of the societal heterosexism and homophobic climates (Baiocco et al., 2010; Lingiardi et al., 2016; Pistella et al., 2016). However, as recently Magrath (2017) pointed out higher bullying and homophobic bullying frequencies in gay men could be read in light of the prevalence of banter, such as bum-touching, testicle slaps, and feigned sexual attractions toward teammates in various settings. Bantering and “homosexually-themed language” with others (McCormack, Wignall, & Morris, 2016), such as the common expressions “gay” and “that’s so gay”, were one way to show friendship and inclusivity, without the intent to wound or

marginalize other boys. Nevertheless, many gay men could feel bullied, while the intention was probably not to offend, or to belittle anyone.

Moreover, we found a significant effect of sports participation on bullying (sport participants reported more bullying than non-sport participants), thereby suggesting the potential influence of being bullied on sports participation. In detail, as reported in a previous study (Volk & Lagzdins, 2009), bullying occurring less frequently in people participating in sports activities, indicates that sports participation may protect people from victimization. One explanation for the higher frequency of bullying in non-sport participants compared to sport participants may be that many people leave their sports because of bullying and the fear associated with it (Kopels, & Pacey, 2012), as previously discussed (Endler & Parker, 1994). However, these results concerning sports participation should be interpreted cautiously due to the retrospective nature of the items about bullying and homophobic bullying.

Additionally, participants who were victims of bullying in sports-related contexts reported higher levels of self-hatred and self-inadequacy than those who reported lower bullying frequencies (Hypothesis 2). These differences may reflect the strong effects of being bullied beyond one's sexual orientation, indicating that experiences such as bullying can activate feelings of self-hatred and self-inadequacy, for such experiences in bullied persons may indicate that the self creates in others desires to reject, persecute or harm the self (Gilbert & Irons, 2008). Results were consistent with previous research suggesting that such traumatic experiences play a crucial role in well-being and in the formation of maladaptive defensive strategies (Duarte et al., 2015). Moreover, traumatic or stressful social experiences such as bullying are one of the strongest risk factors for self-harm (West, Newton, & Barton-Breck, 2013).

Our third hypothesis was that younger gay men (18–24 years of age) would report more levels of ISS than older group (25–35 years of age), but this was not confirmed. ISS levels did not differ significantly when comparing younger participants to older group. Probably, in comparison to the previous study (Lingiardi et al., 2012), the small number of the participants enrolled in this research

($n = 31$ vs. $n = 57$ gay men), and the lack of lesbian women in the sample, may have influenced the result. However, we found that gay men who were bullied in sports-related contexts reported higher levels of ISS than gay men who reported lower bullying frequencies (Hypothesis 3). Compared to their counterparts who were not bullied, gay men who were bullied may have interpreted these prejudices as signs of societal disfavor and condemnation of sexual minority status, which would lead to higher levels of ISS and negative attitudes toward themselves (Blais et al., 2014). These feelings of diversity suffered in a context of socialization and integration, as is the case for sports-related contexts, can have a significant influence on the relational well-being of people who identify as LGB. Moreover, this finding is notable when collocated in the context of the increased risk LGB people have for developing poor mental health (Meyer, 2003), and the well-being impact of sexual stigma on gay athletes.

Data showed that gay men reported higher rates of sport dropout due to fear of being bullied (35% vs 13%) compared to heterosexual men (Hypothesis 4). This is in line with previous research on the subject (Brackenridge et al., 2007; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2011). Indeed, similar results patterns were found by Bouris and colleagues in a school context (Bouris, Everett, Heath, Elsaesser, & Neilands, 2016): LGBT students were more likely to skip school to avoid victimization than heterosexual students. This result is in line with our previous finding (hypothesis 1) about higher prevalence of bullying in gay men than heterosexual men and in non-sports participants than sport participants. A possible explanation of this result could be the fact that those who have been victims of bullying in sports have less wish to participate in sport activities due to the fear and risk of being assaulted again (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2011), and this evidence is stronger in gay men because they are generally more bullied than heterosexuals. In trying to create an inclusive environment, therefore, sports-related contexts should be looking to reduce the risks, barriers, and prejudices that sexual minorities encounter in sports settings in order to increase their sport participation and, consequently, their well-being.

Finally, gay male participants (19% vs 4%) reported greater pressure to choose a particular kind of sport from friends than their heterosexual counterparts (Hypothesis 5), whereas no difference in pressure was found when looking at family members. Findings partially confirmed our hypothesis. Analysis of answers to the open-ended questions regarding the type of pressure (using IPA) indicated that gay men reported greater pressure related to “masculine-type sport,” and less pressure related to “intrinsic quality of the sport” from friends and family members.

These results suggest that gay men perceive greater pressure to conform to masculine stereotypes and gendered norms (Eng, 2008; Griffin, 1993; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Salvati et al., 2017) in sports-related contexts, because they may be perceived as “a risk” to the norm (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, & Olofsson, 2017). Previous studies on people who identify as LGB have found greater parental pressure aimed at discouraging gender atypical behavior during childhood (D'Augelli et al., 2006; O'Brien, Putney, Hebert, Falk, & Aguinaldo, 2005). Indeed, parents or friends are eager to press their son or their friend toward masculinity, because they are worried that their boy or their friend may become feminine (Martin, 1990). For instance, the parents might be concerned that their feminine boys will grow up to be homosexual or transsexual (Sandnabba & Ahlberg, 1999).

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

We should mention some limitations of this study. This research was based on a convenience sample that may limit the generalizability of the results. Another limitation is related to the use of self-reporting instruments that may be influenced by social desirability. Moreover, the retrospective nature of the study and small sample size may mean the results are not necessarily a true representation of the population. Finally, bullying measures were detected by a single item; Huang and Cornell (2016) showed that use of a general item about bullying produces an underestimate of the bullying rates in comparison to use of more specific items about the different forms of bullying (such as exposure to teasing, verbal abuse, insulting remarks, or social exclusion). However, in this study, these single-item measures on bullying were used to guide the exploration of the phenomena

in Italian sports-related contexts with a quantitative method since the majority of the research on these issues used a qualitative approach (Anderson, 2009, 2011; Anderson et al., 2016; Cleland et al., 2016; McCormack, 2012; Melton & Cunningham, 2014; Mishna et al., 2008; Shannon, 2013; Zipp, 2011). Recently, a scale was developed for assessing homophobic bullying (Prati, 2012) validated in Italian contexts, but this measure was used in school contexts and with adolescent participants. Future research should include measures designed to evaluate bullying and homophobic bullying with adapted scales in Italian sports-related contexts.

In addition, replication of this research using only athlete groups with different gender and sexual orientations may offer another possibility for further research. Again, we did not include bisexual/pansexual men, although several studies reported that negative attitudes toward bisexuals are more prevalent than negative attitudes toward gay men (Eliason, 1997; Pistella et al., 2016), while other research found a decrease in negative attitudes toward them (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). However, bisexual/pansexual people are difficult to recruit, and this research was designed to assess the specific phenomenon of bullying and homophobic bullying in gay men in comparison to heterosexual men. So, future research should include bisexual/pansexual people in the sample to enable an analysis of differences between gay, heterosexuals, pansexual and bisexual people in the rates of bullying and homophobic bullying, which, to our knowledge, no study has yet done with quantitative research.

Finally, further investigation could also examine the role of fans and bystanders in promoting or discouraging homophobic bullying episodes or heteronormative sporting climate (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012). Future studies could also use a more representative sample of the whole sexual minorities by involving women too, in order to analyze even differences of bullying between lesbians and gay men. In fact, the sport environment is even hostile toward lesbian athletes (Symons, O'Sullivan, & Polman, 2016); future research on lesbian athletes should include different variables, such as sexism (Pistella, Tanzilli, Ioverno, Lingiardi, & Baiocco, 2018), heterosexism (Szymanski et al., 2008) or the pressures and risks associated with "hegemonic femininity" (Krane,

2001; Roth & Basow, 2004), and should be further investigated in relation to the different ways in which they experience explicit homophobia compared to gay athletes in sports-related contexts (Griffin, 1993).

Conclusion

The present study suggests that some sports-related contexts have been are a particularly problematic setting with remarkable homophobic behavior. This is especially true for the health and well-being of sexual minorities, who tend to be an 'at-risk' group due to prejudice and discrimination suffered. The implications of this study concern not only the health of people who identify as a sexual minority but also the well-being of young people who self-identify as heterosexual yet are perceived as LGB, in addition to those who deviate from the traditional roles imposed by society (Ryan & Rivers, 2003). In terms of practical implications, the present study suggests that sport organizations should target their bullying-intervention on all sports-related contexts (Ahuja et al., 2015). Indeed, early intervention in these environments may help prevent young people from being discouraged to participate in sports due to a fear of being bullied. It could be useful to develop programs that would combat homophobia in sports, (e.g. through training, counseling, and public service announcements), or promote various events such as the Rainbow Laces campaign in support to LGBT rights (Anderson et al., 2016), as well as to run a series of sensitization campaigns and educational programmes in Italian sports-related contexts (Krane, Barber, & McClung, 2002).

Another practical implication of the results is that, in order to support and prevent young people from dropping out of sport, the focus should be on protective factors (Baldry & Farrington, 2005). For example, coaches may provide a positive and supportive environment, which partially protects the participants from the psychological effects of such unsupportive environments and may reduce the risk of dropping out of sport (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). Likewise, data confirmed that sports-related contexts should include anti-bullying policies to prevent victimization based on gender nonconformity and LGB status (Cohn, & Leake, 2012), mainly in a context such as the

Italian one, where traditional gender norms and homophobic attitudes are still rife. It is important then to create a sports context in which bullying and homophobic bullying are non-normative (Sentse, Scholte, Salmivalli, & Voeten, 2007). Finally, we have highlighted the need of a policy network regarding sport safety in Italy, as has happened in other countries (Binkhorst & Kingma, 2012), and policy initiatives aimed at promoting psychosocial risk management caused by bullying (Iavicoli et al., 2014).

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Table 1a

Participants Engaged in Sport Activities: Associations for Gay Men ($n = 38$, below the diagonal), and Heterosexual Men ($n = 62$, above the diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	1.00	.09	-.13	-.10	-.06	-.14	/
2. Victim of bullying in sports-related contexts	.08	1.00	.28*	.33*	.04	.15	/
3. Victim of homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts	-.07	.49*	1.00	-.19	-.04	.01	/
4. Hated self (self-criticizing scale)	-.17	.39*	.04	1.00	.38*	-.22	/
5. Inadequate self (self-criticizing scale)	-.33*	.20	.08	.66*	1.00	.33*	/
6. Reassured self (self-criticizing scale)	.04	.16	.26	-.29	-.27	1.00	/
7. Internalized Sexual Stigma [^]	-.22	.23	.19	.09	.31	.14	1.00

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ^ Internalized Sexual Stigma refers only to gay participants. Participants rated the continuous measures on “victims of bullying in sports-related contexts” and “victim of homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts” (1= never to 5 = frequently)

Table 1b

Participants not Engaged in Sports Activities: Associations for Gay Men ($n = 50$, below the diagonal), and Heterosexual Men ($n = 58$, above the diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	1.00	.15	.10	-.15	-.06	-.09	/
2. Victim of bullying in sports-related contexts	-.12	1.00	.13	.13	.24	.07	/
3. Victim of homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts	-.33*	.39*	1.00	-.07	-.04	-.12	/
4. Hated self (self-criticizing scale)	-.04	.26	.24	1.00	.56*	-.19	/
5. Inadequate self (self-criticizing scale)	.12	.02	.02	.59*	1.00	.19	/
6. Reassured self (self-criticizing scale)	-.26	-.08	.21	.44*	.39*	1.00	/
7. Internalized Sexual Stigma [^]	-.05	.34*	.10	.38*	.34*	-.24	1.00

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ^ Internalized Sexual Stigma refers only to gay participants. Participants rated the continuous measures on “victims of bullying in sports-related contexts” and “victim of homophobic bullying in sports-related contexts” (1= never to 5 = frequently)

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations for Bullying and Homophobic Bullying in Sports by Sexual Orientation and Sports Participation

	Bullying in Sports			Homophobic Bullying in Sports		
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Sexual Orientation*						
Gay Men (<i>n</i> = 88)	2.25 (1.16)	14.58	<.001	1.81 (1.11)	14.92	<.001
Heterosexual Men (<i>n</i> = 120)	1.69 (.82)			1.28 (.81)		
Participation in Sports**						
Sports Participation (<i>n</i> = 100)	1.70 (.80)	8.99	.003	1.42 (.88)	.78	.37
No Sports Participation (<i>n</i> = 108)	2.14 (1.15)			1.57 (1.07)		
Total Sample (<i>n</i> = 208)	1.93 (1.02)			1.50 (.98)		

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. *Significant main effect of sexual orientation on both dimensions of bullying (bullying and homophobic bullying). **Significant main effect of sports participation only on dimension of bullying in sports

Table 3.

Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Criticizing Subscales by Sexual Orientation

	Hated self	Inadequate self	Reassured self
	<i>M</i> (DS)	<i>M</i> (DS)	<i>M</i> (DS)
Sexual Orientation			
Gay Men (<i>n</i> = 88)	1.63 (.78)	2.80 (.95)	3.34 (.80)
Heterosexual Men (<i>n</i> = 120)	1.43 (.50)	2.53 (.86)	3.37 (.78)
Total Sample (<i>n</i> = 208)	1.52 (.64)	2.64 (.91)	3.36 (.78)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

No significant main effect of sexual orientation on FSCRS dimensions. Bullying and homophobic bullying was used as covariates

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Table 4.

Differences Between Gay Men and Heterosexual Men in Dropping out of Sports and Pressures from Family and Friends

Sport dropout and pressures in sports-related contexts	Total Sample (<i>n</i> = 208)	Heterosexual men (<i>n</i> = 120)	Gay men (<i>n</i> = 88)	χ^2
Sport dropout due to a fear of being bullied	47 (22.6%)	16 (13.3%)	31 (35.2%)	13.91*
Pressures to choose a sport by friends	22 (10.6%)	5 (4.2%)	17 (19.3%)	12.32*
Pressures to choose a sport by family	33 (15.9%)	15 (12.5%)	18 (20.5%)	2.41

Note. * $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$. The χ^2 refers to the difference between heterosexual men and gay men. Statistics on "sport dropout due to a fear of being bullied", "pressures to choose a sport by family" and "pressures to choose a sport by friends" refers to the answer "yes" to the questions

Table 5.

Example of a Theme Table Showing the Types of Answer from Two Open Questions

	Pressures to choose a sport: family's answers	Pressures to choose a sport: friends' answers
Masculine-type sport	"You are a boy and you have to play soccer"	"It's a sport for women"
	"Do you want to be call with homophobic names by the other?"	"It's so gay!"
	"My parents said me that I had to change sport because it was embarrassing"	"Only faggots play this sport"
Intrinsic quality of the sport	"You should swim because it's better for your health"	"The soccer is a better sport"
	"Martial art is a violent sport"	"You have to choose the basket because is better"
	"It's not a sport appropriated to the growth"	"It is not a real sport: the soccer makes you stronger"

Note. Transcription of some answers to the following questions: " have you ever been pressured by your family to choose a particular kind of sport?" and " have you ever been pressured by your friends to choose a particular kind of sport?"