The Comparison of Feeling of Loneliness among Athlete and Non-Athlete University Students

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to compare feeling of loneliness between athlete and non-athlete university female students. The sample of the research consisted of 220 university female students, including 73 non-athletes who did not have any experience of sport participation and were randomly selected from the students of general physical education course in eleventh region of Islamic Azad Universities (West of Iran), 73 table tennis athletes and 74 futsal athletes of university sport teams who were randomly selected from these teams. All subjects completed the UCLA Loneliness Scale. ANOVA was used for the statistical analysis of the data. Results showed that while loneliness scores did not differ between individual and team sport athletes, athlete students experienced significantly lower feeling of loneliness than non-athletes.

Key words: Loneliness %Individual sport %Team sport

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is defined as the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relationships is deficient in some important ways; including lack of group participation, absence of the sense of belonging, lack of social support, lack of relationship with others and feeling a lack of connection [1, 2]. The experience of loneliness has been described as a universal phenomenon [3]. People usually may consider it as a simple part of life that must be tolerated [4]. However, feeling of loneliness is potential to being pathological [5]. Indeed, numerous researchers have asseverated that loneliness has a major influence on psychosocial problems, mental health and physical well-being [4]. For instance, its relationship to depression [6], low life satisfaction [7, 8] and even suicidal ideation [9] was observed. The literature therefore suggests that high level of loneliness is linked to high severe consequences for physical and mental health and well-being [8]. Considering academic life, college and university students may encounter feeling of loneliness and social isolation because they live far away from home and also due to cultural diversity [7]. Likewise, loneliness has been found to be associated with poor academic performance and college drop-out [4]. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess and compare the feeling of loneliness among athlete and non-athlete female university students. It should be noted that although a growing body of research has been devoted to assessing the relationship between physical activity and mental health [10], association between loneliness and exercise/sport participation has received lower attention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample: The total sample consisted of 220 undergraduate female students (age 21.39±1.79 years), who were randomly selected from eleventh region of Islamic Azad Universities (West of Iran) and consisted of the following three groups based on research purposes: 73 non-athlete students who did not have any experience of sport participation and were randomly selected from general physical education courses at these universities, 73 individual sport athletes (Table tennis) and 74 team sport athletes (futsal) who were members of their university sport team.

Measurement: Loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The UCLA Loneliness Scale has been widely used in loneliness researches (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006) [4]. Scores are based on 20 items with a 4-point Likert scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘often’. The scale consisted of 10 positively worded statements
Table 1: mean and standard deviation for the loneliness scores and sport career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-athlete</th>
<th>Individual sport athlete</th>
<th>Team sport athlete</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness (M±SD)*</td>
<td>40.92(9.35)</td>
<td>35.36(8.88)</td>
<td>33.65(8.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport career (M±SD)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.32(3.14)</td>
<td>4.44(2.89)</td>
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</table>

*ANOVA=f (2,217)=13.12, p<0.000

Table 2: LSD post hoc test for paired comparison of loneliness between non-athlete and athlete students 95% interval confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean difference</th>
<th>S.E</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Lower bound</th>
<th>Upper bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-athletes vs. Individual sport athletes</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>8.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-athletes vs. team sport athletes</td>
<td>7.30</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>10.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team sport athletes vs. Individual sport athletes</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.251</td>
<td>-1.21</td>
<td>-4.35</td>
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reflecting satisfaction with social relationships and 10 negatively worded statements reflecting dissatisfaction with social relationships. Higher score means higher loneliness. An item example is “How often do you feel part of a group of friends?” According to Hojat (1982), UCLA has psychometric properties to assess loneliness among Iranian university students [11]. In this sample, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.91.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of loneliness and sport career are presented in Table 1.

At first, to determine whether there was a difference in sport career between athletes that might influence the pattern of results, paired t test was conducted. Result showed that there was no significant difference between individual and team sport athletes in sport career, t (146)=1.81, p$>0.07. In order to examine whether there was a difference in feeling of loneliness between non-athletes and athletes (individual and team sports), ANOVA was conducted. Results showed that there was a significant difference in feeling of loneliness between these two groups. Subsequently, LSD post hoc test was used for paired comparison. Results revealed a statistical difference in mean score of loneliness between non-athletes and athletes (individual and team sports) and no difference in mean scores of loneliness between individual and team sport athletes (Table 2).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated the feeling of loneliness among athlete (who had participated in individual or team sports) and non-athlete female students. Results showed that both athlete groups experienced lower loneliness as compared with non-athlete students. This result is consistent with previous studies [12-14]. The findings of these studies suggested that when subjects engage in exercise with other people, they do have a significant reduction in levels of loneliness. A possible explanation for this result is that sport participation in many cases is a social activity [15, 16] and a social relationship is generated through sport participations which is engrained in a larger and stronger social network, which could contribute to loneliness reduction. Moreover, earlier research revealed that team sports participants experienced high level of social support [17]. However, considering reciprocal variables, another explanation is that while lonely people often have difficulties in making friends and being friendly [4], studies showed that social skills such as easily making friends could be an important factor in explaining participation in physical activity and sports [18-20]. Additionally, Hawkley, Thisted and Cacioppo (2009) found that lonely people tend to exercise less [21]. Hence, it could be proposed that those who are lonely are less likely to participate in, initiate, or adhere to physical activity and sport. However, some coping strategies such as self-induced isolation, passive sadness and protective self presentation in lonely people may lead to higher feeling of loneliness and social-personal impairment consequences [22-24]. Moreover, some scholars suggest that the coping mechanisms used by people to deal with their loneliness can negatively affect their health. For example, Lauder, Mummery, Jones and Caperschione (2006) found that lonely people are more likely to smoke [25] and Cacioppo et al. (2002) have also reported that recreational drug taking was higher amongst lonely students [26]. On the other hand, there is ample evidence to support the beneficial effects of regular physical activity on health [10]. Therefore, lonely people as well as general population might be encouraged to engage in regular physical activity and sports to improve their physical-mental health and probably as a constructive low cost manner, to alleviate feeling of loneliness.
Another finding of this study was that there was no significant difference in loneliness scores between individual and team sport students. This finding was expected, because table tennis as an individual sport activity required at least one partner. Moreover, all of our athlete subjects were members of their university sport teams and usually members of sport teams experience a collective identity and sense of belonging in the collaborative pursuit of common goals.

The limitation of this study was the cross-sectional design, through which rigorous assumptions cannot be made. Future longitudinal and intervention studies in nonclinical and clinical populations are needed to investigate the efficacy of sports participation in reduction of feeling of loneliness. Finally, it would also be useful to further examine loneliness between sedentary population and participants in sports activities with and without partners.

REFERENCES


