

Creating and maintaining social networks: women's participation in *Basque pilota*

Creación y mantenimiento de redes sociales: participación de las mujeres en la pelota vasca

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Abstract

Basque pilota is a traditional sport played mainly by men. A project emerged in 2005 to promote female participation: Emakumea Pilotari (Woman pelota player). In this article we present the main points that emerged from an ethnographic study of the social relationships that playing Basque pilota can provide. The study was carried out in 2011-2012 season with a purposive sample of 28 adult women Basque pilota players (pilotaris) (between 22 and 60 years old). 26 participants were pilotaris in recreational groups and the other two were their trainers. The results suggest that a sense of community, team membership, the development of a general reciprocity and group security are the most important aspects for players. A sense of community is the fundamental reason why they practise this sport. The group as a whole is the top priority. Female pilotaris share the desire to relate to each other as women, build relationships, create bonds and help each other.

Key words: women; sport; leisure; relationships; ethnography.

Resumen

La pelota vasca es un deporte tradicional practicado mayoritariamente por hombres. En 2005 se puso en marcha un proyecto para promover la participación de las mujeres: Emakumea Pilotari (Mujer Pelotari). En este artículo se presentan los hallazgos de un estudio etnográfico llevado a cabo durante una temporada en torno a las relaciones sociales que genera jugar a pelota vasca. La investigación se realizó con una muestra intencionada de 28 mujeres pelotaris adultas (entre 22 y 60 años), de las cuales 26 eran participantes de un programa recreativo y dos entrenadoras. Los resultados indican que los aspectos más importantes para las participantes son el sentimiento de comunidad, ser miembro de un grupo, el desarrollo de la reciprocidad general y la seguridad que da el grupo. La comunidad es la razón fundamental para practicar este deporte, ya que el grupo es la mayor prioridad. Las mujeres pelotaris comparten el deseo de relacionarse entre ellas como mujeres, construir relaciones, crear conexiones y ayudarse mutuamente.

Palabras clave: mujeres; deporte; ocio; relaciones; etnografía.

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Introduction

Physical activity provides an important context for social interaction (Hellison, 2011; Ramírez, Vinaccia, & Suárez, 2004). In this sense, published studies delve deeper into the differentiating effects the practice of sport has on girls and boys. Thus, if for boys the determining factor for favourable socialisation is skill, for girls there are other factors that influence their participation, beyond their ability regarding the discipline shown (Gutiérrez, 2005). Additionally, traditional sports such as Basque pilota imply dominantly male contexts in which female participation and socialisation conform to specific factors. According to the Basque Government's Sport Department (2012), there are 153 women league licences and 2570 men pilotaris in the Basque Country. As a consequence, women practise it in a minority situation. Moreover, their participation does not adapt to sports played by masses like, for example, football or basketball, where there are 2800 and 3004 women licences, respectively. Thus, do women deal with their situation of gender inequality by social interaction? What types of social relationships are formed by women who practise this sport? What role do social networks play?

Theoretical perspective

This study has employed a symbolic interactionist perspective. From this standpoint (Blumer, 1986), the meaning of a type of conduct is founded on social interaction. Even though there are many different theoretical perspectives to analyse physical activity and sport contexts, this perspective is helpful to collect the meanings and social definitions of the actors (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The result is a system of inter-subjective meanings, a set of symbols in whose meaning the actors take part. Symbolic interactionism places major emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation as essential human resources. People create shared meanings through their interaction and these meanings become reality. Blumer summarises symbolic interactionism in three points:

- People act towards things on the basis of the meanings they have for them.
- Meaning is defined by the social interaction that the individual has with their fellow citizens.
- Interpretative actions are created and modified by their meaning.

In doing this, researchers need to achieve intimate familiarity with one's subject matter by engaging with participants in their natural settings and employing informal and unobtrusive data collection techniques (Blumer, 1986). Indeed, we individuals interpret the reality of our environment – we do not respond as if we were robots (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001). It is necessary to take into account that interaction and the construction of meaning in sport are influenced by social organization, power and material conditions in society (Lagardera, Puig, & García-Ferrando, 1998; Machado & Puig, 2009; Puig, 2008).

Basque pilota and women pilotaris

Basque *pilota* is a discipline within the family of ball sports, originating from a medieval game called *jeu de paume* (palm game) and it is a popular traditional activity in the Basque Country (Bombín & Bozas-Urrutia, 1976; Usabiaga & Castellano, 2014). There are almost thirty varieties of Basque *pilota*. All of these varieties of *pilota* games share common characteristics, although there are also other specific characteristics which depend on different factors such as: the place where the sport is played, the type of bat or racket and ball to be used, the number of participants on each team, and the use of the space-defined limits. The most common version is handball, played by men, which accounts for about 50% of affiliated players. However, the versions women play most are the ones that use a wooden

racket called *paleta*. Women play only three varieties: Argentine *paleta* in what are known as *trinquetes*, *paleta goma* (racket and rubber ball), and *frontenis* on a short *pilota* court. All of these varieties are played as doubles. However, the type of ball used depends on whether the competition is a league sport (hollow rubber ball or solid rubber ball) or only a recreational game (tennis ball). Similarly, the court is different depending on the version of Basque *pilota* being played.

As already mentioned, Basque *pilota* is traditionally a sport played by men (Etxebeste, 2012; González, 2013), thus, *to be born a pilotari means that first you were born male* (González, 2005, 98-99). Other articles that have been written about sports from a gender perspective have corroborated the fact that historically the sport was a man's domain, thus imposing a traditional model (Díez, 2003; Hargreaves, 1985; Pfister, 2010, 2012; Puig, 2001). Despite the fact that Basque *pilota* is predominantly played by men, there is a minority of female *pilotaris* who also play, although not even 10% participate in an organised league¹. These women are considered inferior and are underestimated (Del Valle, 2001). Women have not the same consideration/space in Basque *pilota*. Their participation is stereotyped as they do not act like they are expected by society's cultural view of femininity. Therefore, they have to demonstrate their ability each time, their results are considered of second or third level, they are not legitimated to play, their resources are worse than those of men and mass media do not pay attention to them. They are underestimated and invisible in comparison with men (Fernandez-Lasa, Usabiaga, & Castellano, 2013).

A decade ago the Gipuzkoan Federation of Basque *Pilota* (GFBP) began a programme called *Emakumea Pilotari* (female Basque *pilota* player) to encourage women to play Basque *pilota*. This programme was designed and implemented because of a sharp decline in licences issued to women who began playing in the 90's and within ten years (2000), about half of these *pilotaris* had quit for different reasons, such as injuries, motherhood or changing their preferences. The programme started up in 2005 in three areas: school, recreational and organised sports. Thanks to this initiative, female participation increased considerably, achieving a major response and filling a need within the recreational area². The other Basque *Pilota* Federations do not have any specific programme to develop and promote women's participation in their provinces.

Sport and social networks

Practising sport helps weave, increase and strengthen social networks. These relationships are important to women who participate in physical activity and sport (Bidonde, Goodwin, & Drinkwater, 2009; Lim et al., 2011; Walseth, 2008). In team sports a sense of community is created and reinforced (Theberge, 1995). According to this author, in ice hockey the group is formed based on sharing interests and concerns, involving oneself with one's colleagues and uniting with the rest of the women by taking advantage of these shared identities, passions and experiences. Team membership and community involvement increase (Kinsel, 2005), providing security and the comfortable feeling of being part of a group. Helping and sharing with others produces a positive effect on people. It fortifies trust in the other colleagues in the group and helps develop a sense of community and family, which means forming social networks (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007; Roster, 2007). The social group promotes women's initiation and continued participation (Wood & Danylchuk, 2011). Furthermore, these elements of the social group serve to strengthen their connection with one another and with the sport. According to Heuser (2005), lawn bowls became the key to building a community for a group of women. For these women, retaining these relationships and friendship are the main reason for continuing to participate. Walseth (2008) draws the conclusion that the group's success depends on mutual respect and the ability to work together as a team,

consequently establishing strong bonds by putting the group ahead of personal interest. A general reciprocity is developed, creating a collective “we” to mutually protect or shelter each other and share objectives, standards, values and interests in order to stay united without expecting anything in return (Walseth, 2008). Furthermore, women share the desire to relate to each other. Stemming from the simple fact of being women, they construct meaningful relationships based on *affidamento* or confidence and create ties among themselves, acknowledging power and respecting each other's differences (Martín, 2006).

Basque *pilota*, as we have already mentioned, is also a team sport in which women compete against each other collectively. Consequently, it is not out of the question to infer that many of these rules of behaviour cited in other team sports can be applied to this traditional sport. However, this lack of theory is what motivated us to delve further into the personal experiences of the women that participated in the *Emakumea Pilotari* project. The aim of this article is to analyse the female *pilotaris*' social networks, studying the importance of a sense of community and the influence of social relationships in its creation, to know how significant are these social networks and team membership for women and how the community influences their involvement and commitment to this sport.

Method

Bearing in mind that a qualitative study *focuses on specific case studies* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 6), in this case, we have developed an ethnographic study about women and Basque *pilota*, specifically focusing on aspects such as socialisation, identity, motherhood and women's social responsibilities. In this article we present our findings about the socialisation of female athletes who participated in the recreational physical activity programme organised by the GFBP as part of the *Emakumea Pilotari* project, which was implemented in the province of Gipuzkoa, located in the north of Spain.

This study made it possible to grasp the subjective experiences linked to a broader social context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) while keeping in mind the holistic nature of a qualitative study. In order to respond to the research questions perspectives were recounted according to specific contextualised settings based on personal experiences and memories (Denzin, 2003) of the women *pilotaris*. This article is based on the data obtained by participant observation and formal and informal interviews carried out during the 2011-2012 season.

Participant observation

The observations made of the participants formed the ‘backbone’ of the data gathered from the ethnography developed. This technique, according to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), is the one most frequently used to study human social life. These observations have made it possible to describe the women from these recreational groups and their activities, enabling the gap to be closed towards an understanding of a group of people from different perspectives (Krane & Baird, 2005).

The main researcher carried out the participant observation phase of the study between September 2011 and June 2012. She observed a total of 83 training sessions, each lasting approximately two hours: an hour and a half of training and fifteen minutes of conversation before and after each session. The data collection was recorded using traditional ethnographic study strategies, such as field notes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Woods, 1986) and a fieldwork journal (Guasch, 1997; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

Observation implies diverse activities, the first of which being the choice of the setting (Adler & Adler, 1994). This was done by trying to involve the maximum amount of variety possible. To this end, observation took place in three different towns with three specific groups that were enrolled in the *Emakumea Pilotari* project organised by the GFBP. The settings were chosen bearing in mind the following criteria: a) the characteristics of the location, especially the number of inhabitants, b) how many years the participant had played, c) the training time schedule - morning or afternoon and lastly, d) the relationship the group had with the main researcher. Twenty-six women and two coaches between the ages of 22 and 60 years old were enrolled on courses to learn how to play the *paleta* version of Basque *pilota*. All of the women were white adults, middle class, partnered, mainly Basque speakers, borned in Gipuzkoa and lived in the same town where they played. However, there were differences among them which lent heterogeneity to the group. For example, some of the women had more experience playing team sports and some of the women were mothers while others were not.

Previously, the main researcher had worked for the GFBP on the *Emakumea Pilotari* project for three years. She had even coached some of the participants from the study, allowing her to continue maintain a close relationship with the organising institution, the two coaches and some of the *pilotaris* during the observation phase of the study. Permission to observe and participate in the activities of the *Emakumea Pilotari* was granted by the main organisers, i.e. the GFBP and the female coaches from the town where the courses were given. The two group coaches to be observed were also informed about the goals set out by the study. Likewise, the main researcher was an affiliated player for five seasons, competing at the highest level of this sport, as was the person in charge of communications for the project. This gave her a mutual understanding of and *rapport* with the participants (Krane & Baird, 2005; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Thus, the main researcher played an active role throughout the study and her participation as a *pilotari* enabled her to get close to the women being studied. You could say that she went back and forth between being a participant-observer and a observer-participant - the definitions put forward by Wolcott (1973) and Anguera, Blanco, Losada, and Hernández-Mendo (2000). The decision was made to inform the women about the researcher's status and about her intentions regarding the research. Likewise, the choice of *enablers* and *key informants* (Guasch, 1997; Woods, 1986) was an important factor in order to establish ties with the participants in the different settings. The proper selection of these key figures meant that the women accepted the researcher from the beginning, which allowed their relationship to continue to grow until finally she was considered to be just one more member of the team.

During the participant observation part of the study, the following documentation was incorporated in the existing information: the list of all the courses offered, posters advertising the courses, the *Emakumea Pilotari* Day programme schedule and the minutes recorded by the committee in charge of managing the project.

Interviews

Both formal and informal interviews were conducted during the field work in order to complete the information gathered during the participant observation phase of the study. The ethnographic interviews were essential to explore the information retrieved in the role of observer and very useful in gaining specific, more profound, opinions regarding the questions that arose during this time period (Krane & Baird, 2005; Woods, 1986). This made it possible to study the data from different angles.

The formal interviews were semi-structured and carried out with the help of a script, which attempted to anticipate the needs and problems related to the research (Kvale, 2007). These conversations were based on a combination of flexibility and focus, leading to a multidirectional open interview. This facilitated the collection of data that was not identified by the researcher (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, the interviewee determined, to some extent, the structure of the conversation and what was discussed (Woods, 1986).

Nine *paleta* players and two coaches were interviewed after an initial observation and interaction period lasting seven months. In the first case, the interviewees were selected based on *significativity* criteria (Patton, 1990) such as playing experience in a specific type of Basque *pilota*, devotion to the activity, the performance level shown and the group the player belonged to. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were recorded, transcribed and returned to the interviewees who were then asked to confirm what was written. Before conducting the interviews, the participants signed informed consent forms as suggested by Kvale (2007).

The informal interviews, however, were carried out between the participants and researcher during the 83 sessions and with all the 28 participants throughout the season in the court. The topics discussed developed as a result of the observation process. Towards the end of the season, the frequency with which the women met off the court increased, their being motivated by end-of-season dinners, extra training sessions that some of the players had arranged or just to have a coffee. All of these gatherings increased the opportunity to converse with each other. These informal interviews helped enrich the data collected and build a *rapport* with the players (Krane & Baird, 2005).

Data analysis

The analytical process began at the same time as the data was being collected, with no distinction being drawn between them (Dey, 1993); the combination of the different techniques and stages of the research occurs at all levels (Woods, 1986). In any case, the group of researchers focused on and delved into the analysis and interpretation of the data once the field work had been completed. Analysis of the data that came from the observations, the interviews and the documentation took categorisation of the data for granted in order to identify the main ideas that emerged (Martos-García, Devís-Devís, & Sparkes, 2009).

The reports generated from this data were analysed by four researchers from this study and three *pilotaris* from the recreational groups observed, thus strengthening, by means of critical opinion and verification of each part, the standards of *credibility* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sparkes & Partington, 2003).

The analytical process was accomplished in three stages: initial analysis or discovery, categorisation and codification, and identification by interpreting the relationships and concepts (Friese, 2012). The software ATLAS.ti 6.2 was used to accomplish this, due to the large amount of data generated from the observations and interviews. All information (primary documents, quotes, codes, memos, etc.) was kept in a hermeneutic unit. Transcriptions, inductive codification via a bottom-up format (Navarro, 2007) and subsequent analysis were done using this qualitative data analysis programme. Codification referring to the socialisation theme was carried out by an emergent category-system. The selected option to codify was *open coding*. These codes, which are related to relationships among players, are included in table 1.

Table 1. Hermeneutic Unit codes.

Code
First contact
Deepening
Maintenance
New players
Group identity- <i>affidamento</i>
Inside exchanges
Outside exchanges
Group security

Confidentiality and ethics

All of the names given in the study are pseudonyms, with the exception of the main researcher and the public figures, in order to protect the identities of the people interviewed. This confidentiality guarantees their security as well (Nespor, 2000). This study was approved by the Teaching and Research Ethics Committee at the University of Basque Country UPV/EHU.

Findings and discussion

All throughout the research and beyond the simple practice of a sport, the data has shown the importance of social networks have for female *pilotaris* when establishing a sense of community that, at the same time, leads us to other relevant topics or discussions which we will explore in the next section.

Sense of community

Martínez & García (2002) emphasise that the system of relationships within a group is fundamental because, to ensure tolerance and mutual respect, basic relationships that go beyond the mere practice of a sport must be forged. Our results follow along these lines, to the extent that many women think that the act of forming the group is very influential in their decision as to whether to play or not. If this friendly or attractive environment were to disappear or lessen, many *pilotaris* feel that it would affect their decision to quit playing, highlighting the fact that this loss would sadden them.

I go, I have fun and if at some point something changes and I don't like the atmosphere or the situation, I will quit. (*Pilotari Haizea*)

In the case of some women golfers, cultivating friendships is one of the main reasons for participation, as well as being the main reason for continuing to practise the activity (Wood & Danylchuk, 2011). This statement coincides with what Haizea says about abandoning the practice owing to a deterioration of friendship between participants.

The most obvious, as well as most frequent, expressions of group character were the informal conversations and of these, the playful pulling of one's leg that took place during the

sessions. This demonstrated that the *pilotaris* shared a common trust and group character. No matter what the topic of conversation was during the training practices, an endless amount of meaningful comments emerged. Regarding this subject, Theberge (1995) concludes that the group is the key to establishing the community in sport because of its diverse conversation topics, which do not necessarily revolve around sport. In our case, the conversations that surfaced between the *pilotaris* mirrored the same situation, showing that other topics of interest surfaced while playing Basque *pilota*.

The process of forming the group does not usually happen by chance; likewise, the group does not usually develop a group sense of belonging or unity the first day. In both cases, this happens when the members get to know each other better. This process was obvious in one group where the participants met for the first time. In the first training sessions, the activities were more individually oriented and did not take into consideration the interests and desires of the other women. However, there were many signs that the women established contact with the others in the group. With time and as a result of this contact, all of the participants came to form part of the group and feel a sense of belonging, thus strengthening these ties by the end of the season even more.

For me everyone was a stranger. I didn't know who anybody was or where they were from, but I realised the first day that they knew each other from before, and so they were a bit distant. But the truth is that later we had a great relationship. I think we bonded as a group. It was a women's moment. Again, all of them were married with kids, I think, except for one... That makes a difference. It was a time and space for them – their moment and they respected that. So, socialisation, yes, loads of it. (Coach Haizea)

Martín (2012) deduced from conversations with rugby players that they shared a connection and the sense of belonging, stemming from the team itself, because friendship and closeness are important traits of being part of the group. The author underlines the fact that the team is not homogenous, but that the team's nature and sense of community carries its weight and significance. This feeling was also a trait that appeared with the *pilotaris*, because rivalry was only present during the games. After the game it is more important to get together with the others and leave behind the sense of confrontation.

Likewise, Messner (2011) criticises the fact that many coaches assume that naturally girls establish groups more easily than boys do. Also, they recognise the fact that boys act more competitively and focus on their personal interest as opposed to group interests even if this is detrimental to them. The following example also makes reference to the sense of community and its importance to the *pilotaris* when compared to other activities and different contexts.

Aerobics is a group sport, but I used to go, work out for forty minutes, and, well, usually hurried home afterwards. And, in *pilota* you talk, and yes, I think the atmosphere is different and that is great. (*Pilotari* Jaione)

These social networks are equally important for older women and their decision to take part in a physical activity programme (Bidonde, Goodwin, & Drinkwater, 2009). The reason for this is that at this age the social networks and ties decrease, and so it is important to have friends who also participate in the programme. Moreover, the participants use the terms “our time” or “our group” to highlight this sense of community. In another article about older women, Pietillä (2009) expresses the importance of relationships because participating in an association is beneficial socially, providing the opportunity to connect in a time and place exclusively for them.

Sharing common interests enhances this sense of community (Kellett & Warner, 2011). Strengthening and maintaining this sense of community helps develop important tools and one's capabilities, such as the ability to establish close friendships, cooperate and work in a group (Brown & MacDonald, 2008). In the same way, Migliaccio & Berg (2007), basing their opinion on the advantages of acting like a team in American football, highlight meeting new team-mates and the importance of feeling like a team. Roster (2007), based on research into women who rode Harley Davidson motorcycles in their leisure time, also concludes that it is important for women to make new friends and establish social networks because this is a favourable source of empowerment for them. Along these same lines, Fields and Comstock (2008) speak of the advantages social interaction have for female rugby players, valuing the social aspect of the game and the fun had by playing. They also highlight other aspects such as the need to:

- Be rivals on the court but friends when the game is over as well as the need to nurture relationships.
- Establish strong ties with the other players.
- Form a family, care about their friends and fellow players and gain support from those around them.

From I to We

Although the main researcher and many *pilotaris* became members of the group, there are various elements that motivated this integration process, and so we have also gathered together some cases that demonstrate that the sense of belonging to a group was not enough to continue in the group. With respect to the reasons for the change in a group, the difficulty with integrating and the sense of community, Walseth (2008) - based on the concept of social capital - analysed the experiences of young female athletes who played team sports, focusing not only on trends and favourable attitudes, but also on the not-so favourable ones. She divided the relationships into two groups: women with similar traits, customs and surroundings, etc., and women who were different or did not have the same traits. She underlines the fact that the women in the first group share similar goals and also previous involvement in some other type of social activity (book clubs, church related activities, etc.) which helps establish homogenous and exclusive groups. In the world of sport you can also form bonds that help strengthen these social networks. The team-mates are very good friends, many of whom have been friends since their younger school days. Their bond is strengthened further by being part of the same sports club. These relationships are generally founded on reciprocity, which is the essence of the group's success, standing out above all else. These women usually spend a lot of time together, supporting each other and working together to strengthen their bonds, eventually arriving at a collective "we" and taking possession of a group identity.

I stay in the group because of the people. The afternoon group is better because it is smaller and you play more, but, well, for relationships, the morning group. Yes, I picked mornings. (*Pilotari* Ainara)

It is customary for relationships to go beyond *pilota* courts, which strengthens the bond and the group of *pilotaris*. For instance, it is common for some participants to get together either before or after matches for lunch or dinner. These exchanges outside *pilota* activity both enrich relationships and strengthen the bond between *pilotaris*. Hence they also strengthen attachment to the activity, the group and team-mates.

People who move within the world of *pilota* generally tend to be pleasant and we have a good time. We suggest very good plans – in other words,

you take part in a championship and then the post-match lunch, or you go out and party. It's great from that perspective. (*Pilotari Eider*)

Moreover, despite having given up *pilota* some years ago, some maintain this bond with their former team-mates, getting together three or four times a year.

I maintain good relations with my *pilota* friends - both to play *pala* from time to time and to get together three or four times a year. We always arrange a lunch in a cider house every year. Nine of us who used to play at the same time got together a couple of weeks ago. I love maintaining that friendship with some of those who started playing *pilota* in the 90s. (*Pilotari Itxaro*)

Complementary activities help to foster a sense of belonging to the community (Bidonde, Goodwin, & Drinkwater, 2009; Wood & Danylchuk, 2011), such as those described by Eider and Itxaro. In addition, in some cases they create a favourable environment for a sense of family (Fields & Comstock, 2008). Union, the nature of the group and the community are defined as a "family" by some *pilotaris*. The following comment is a good example of the closeness existing among them:

It's like another family. For instance, we're now going to start the Kutxa Championship and you're already excited. It's an elite championship for us. It's all about seeing if you can show you can really play while, at the same time, you have this match and this meeting – the lunch, when you see them all. At the end of the day, it's a family. I spend more hours with all the ones I'm playing with than I do at home! (*Pilotari Nekane*)

Group security

We would like to highlight the importance of the support the groups provide. At times, due to the closeness of the *pilotaris*, group interests come before individual ones. For example, when picking colleagues for a competition, the team's opinion weighs more than each individual opinion.

If a colleague had gone in my place, fine, no problem, I would have cheered her on and if she had done the same thing, well, that's it, she tried. (*Pilotari Gurutze*)

"If you go, I'll go" is a sentence we must highlight because we realised that the group influences the choice and tendency of each *pilotari*, for example, to participate in the *Emakumea Pilotari* Day. The decision to go or not to this type of event or to participate in another activity is influenced by the group.

I think that if we were going in a group, I would go. The group offers you security. (*Pilotari Gurutze*)

As for the social factors that contribute when doing physical activity, Eyler et al. (2002) underline how important the social networks are for social support and emphasise how much fun it is to play sport as a group. Furthermore, the support received during the activity impacts on the decision to continue playing in the programme, which in turn affects the amount of fun that can be had. Being a member of a group is an important reason to participate because you get the opportunity to share moods and friendship. Garrett (2004) concludes that this is an important factor in the girls' experiences and that it also motivates them to have fun and bond.

Martín (2006) uses the concept of *affidamento* – confidence or trust – coined by Italian feminist thinkers, to explain her experiences and those of her rugby team-mates. In this regard, she stresses that the relationship between women is elementary in order for them to give meaning and value to their experiences both on and off the field. When a relationship is based on *affidamento* each woman accepts the femininity of the other, respecting her way of playing rugby, of living and of being. Women want to gain meaningful relationships from playing rugby and they want the fun had playing sport to be in harmony with what they feel when interacting with other women both on and off the field.

Starting from experiences, Gómez & Martín (2006) highlight the fact that the relationships established between women are different in nature and purpose. These authors also base their opinions on the Italian feminist movement, acknowledging feminine authority, albeit distinguishing it from power and imposition. This authority is closer in meaning to sharing, opposing the symbolic order of masculinity, because this type of interaction is not usual among women. The manner of relating to one another differs from the “sisterhood of the oppressed” that traditional feminists proclaim and accepts the differences between women, appraising each one for who she is and what she does, and rejecting male paradigms. They argue that solidarity is not enough and that the difference is enriching, and goes beyond defending common interests. Group divisions were very evident on *Emakumea Pilotari Day*, visible in both the structuring of the groups and the networks formed that day, as well as during the taking of group photos, where there was no prior organisation.

Everyone got in circles with their fellow team-mates waiting, talking and looking around. Every once in a while, women from one town would mix with women from another because they had met the year before in the same place, but the groups seemed to be hermetic. It looked like each town had its specific spot. (Fieldwork journal, p. 499)

In the networks that are established by the women *pilotaris*, in their own settings as well as their ties to other players, smaller groups are also formed due to the close relationship, trust and camaraderie the team-mates share.

Conclusion

The *pilotaris* need to share, interact and mix with other women in order to create a positive sense of community. The social organization and the contextual situation influence the characteristics of the recreational *pilota* programme for women as the interaction and relationships formed and established among the players. They construct their meanings and social definitions of the activity. Thanks to their participation and interaction, in the majority of the cases, the players created a group vision - a sense of belonging to a group. Most of the *pilotaris* begin their *pilota* journey individually. Nevertheless, thanks to the interaction and their general reciprocity they end up establishing a social network. They establish a friendship relationship, becoming part of the same community. Furthermore, this group sense is one of the central axis to get involved in their *pilota* activities, sharing interests beyond the limits of the sport court and becoming helpful, confident and trusting women for the other players. For this reason, we see the need to stress the concepts of “our group” or “our time”, because this did not appear just once or by chance, but repeatedly throughout the study and in more than one scenario. Moreover, their relationships go beyond activities that are directly related to *pilota*, to the extent of creating a sense of family in some cases.

Over and above everything else, one must bear in mind that the Basque *pilota* played by women is a team sport (Usabiaga & Castellano, 2014). There usually exists some rivalry between the two teams while on the court, but although this is not a structural trait of the

sport, all of the women need and want to bond and continue their relationships off the court. We feel it is important to combine recreational *paleta* with this group vision because this characteristic of the *pilotaris* is highly visible and enriching. The participants rise above the mere aspect of competition. They do not allow the rivalry or confrontation of the game to affect their relationships or their goals, visions or desires. The group is above all of this. Even though they play against each other, they think of themselves as part of the same group and promise to work towards the same goals. The origins, traits, abilities, age or differences in personality are just occurrences or anecdotes, due to the fact that above the social differences they could have the *pilotaris* share their interests related to *pilota* and being women. For this reason, they put all their energy into the enrichment these social networks provide them with even when there is an obvious on-court rivalry implicit in Basque *pilota*. The women *pilotaris* are a group and function as a group by placing their social relationships and fun had while playing the sport at the peak of their power.

The women *pilotari* subculture fosters their empowerment. This enables them to deal with habitual norms and values within sporting contexts and helps them take gender conflicts into account. Thus, in the case of women *pilotaris*, it is essential for this sense of forming part of a community to be based on solid foundations so as to be able to deal with a situation of contempt they may experience. It is a way of claiming their space and a way of fighting in a field in which male hegemony is deep-seated. It is also essential to ensure that equity and social change are possible.

A sense of community is essential because it lies at the core of women *pilotaris*' activity. For many, it constitutes the supporting block for playing *pilota*. It is the source of unity and directly affects the practice of sport.

Notes

1. According to data provided by the GFBP from the 2012-2013 season, only 86 (7.14 %) of the affiliated league *pilotaris* hold a licence out of a total of 1204 league licences. This constitutes the largest amount of *pilotaris* since the start of the *Emakumea Pilotari* project. Prior to this initiative, during the 2003-2004 season, only 25 licences were issued to women - 1.96% of a total of 1274.
2. The first *paleta* course began in the 2005-2006 season with only 9 players in one group. In the 2012-2013 season, 134 *pilotaris* participated in 16 groups (GFBP).

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