Sport and social exclusion: a qualitative study of transgender experiences in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

The intersections of gender, sexuality and sport have produced voluminous empirical research and theoretical reflection, though there remains a lack of focused, qualitative research on transgender experiences of sport and physical activity. The present study contributes to filling this gap by examining the everyday experiences of sport and leisure of a sample of transgender people, setting the research in the theoretical context of the wider phenomenon of social exclusion. Employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the article presents findings from in-depth interviews with ten transgender persons. Four interconnected themes emerged: the impact of alienating sports experiences at school; the intimidating nature of the changing room environment; the fear of public space and how this drastically constrained their ability to engage in sport and physical activity; and, the overall impact of their exclusion in terms of being denied the social, health and well-being aspects of sport. The concluding discussion examines how transgender experiences of sport and physical activity contribute to our understanding of the nature of social exclusion.

Introduction

The intersections of gender, sexuality and sport have produced voluminous empirical research and theoretical reflection (for example, Hargreaves and Anderson, 2014; Caudwell and Browne, 2013; Caudwell, 2006; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). More specifically, the multi-faceted practical, political and philosophical dimensions and difficulties surrounding transgender participation in sport and leisure are increasingly recognized (Caudwell, 2014; Smith, Cuthbertson & Gale, 2012; Symons, Sbaraglia, Hillier, & Mitchell, 2010), though there is a conspicuous lack of focused, qualitative research in this area. Much of the research on transgender and sport is preoccupied with issues related to transgender individuals' participation in mainstream competitive and elite sport (Teetzer, 2014; Wahlert & Fiester, 2012; Buzuvis, 2011; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011; Reeser, 2005) or in very specific contexts such as lesbian softball leagues (Travers and Deri, 2011; Travers, 2006) or the Gay Games (Symons and Hemphill, 2006)

By contrast, the present study adopts a detailed focus on the everyday experiences of sport and physical activity of a sample of transgender people. This study formed part of a wider research project, funded by the Northern Ireland Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and conducted by the authors, on barriers to sport and leisure participation, and thus the chief interest of the researchers was not in transgender *per se*, but rather the nature and extent of the exclusion of a small and hidden social group from what is for most people an important and taken-for-granted means of personal and social wellbeing. Accordingly, the article begins by setting the study primarily in the context of the meaning of social exclusion and the nature and impact of exclusion from sport and physical activity.

Then, employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the article presents findings from in-depth interviews with ten transgender persons. Four interconnected themes in their testimonies are identified and discussed. These are: the impact of alienating sports

experiences at school; the intimidating nature of the changing room environment; the fear of public space and how this drastically constrained their ability to engage in sport and physical activity; and, the overall impact of their exclusion in terms of being denied the social, health and well-being aspects of sport. The concluding discussion examines transgender experiences of sport and physical activity in light of some key conceptual debates on social exclusion. In particular, the article emphasizes: firstly, how transgender exclusion from sport is a prime example of exclusion from social participation which has little to do with a lack of employment or financial resources; secondly, the interconnected and self-sustaining nature of social exclusion; and thirdly, how people may involuntarily self-exclude from key activities in society.

Literature review

Systemic segregation based upon conventional notions of gender and sexuality, with designated exclusionary identity groups, has long been part of the organizational and cultural fabric of sport. Symons et al., (2010) note that, "sexuality is mostly coded as heterosexuality and there is little positive room for alternate sexualities. Generally, transgression from these norms around gender and sexuality is punished in sport, and particularly in team sport" (p. 7). The rigid division of sport into male or female, based upon bio-genetic sex differences, would seem to have been driven by an ideological and political heterosexual imperative that privileges masculinity (Brackenridge, Alldred, Jarvis, Maddocks, & Rivers, 2008). Most sports have therefore traditionally tended to be heteronormative and homonegative (Kauer & Krane, 2013). The imposition of a deterministic gender bifurcation makes it especially

difficult for those who fall outside of the perceived 'normality', such as transgender people, to live their true gender identities when participating in formal sports activities (Sykes, 2011).

However, the experiences, emotions, needs and difficulties of transgender people in relation to sport and leisure remain under-researched and poorly understood. Guidelines on transgender inclusion for national sports governing bodies published by the UK Sports Councils in October 2013 acknowledge that this was a response to the widespread confusion, misunderstanding and ignorance within the sports community on how to handle transgender issues (Sports Council Equality Group, 2013). Transgender people are usually subsumed within a single LGBT collective and so most research into the views of transgender people and sport has been incorporated within this frame (Caudwell, 2014; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011). Nevertheless, some studies have shed light on ordinary, non-athlete transgender views and experiences of sport and physical activity.

For example, a survey of transgender people in London (Whittle, Turner, and Al-Alami, 2007) found that almost one half of respondents would not use sports centers due to concerns that they would not be permitted to utilize changing rooms reflective of their acquired gender. Indeed, 6.5 per cent of respondents said they had actually been instructed to use changing rooms or toilets contrary to their true gender. These findings were supported by the results of another London survey which confirmed that transgender people were reluctant to use their local sporting facilities (Keogh, Reid, & Weatherburn, 2006). Again, the problems of toilets and changing areas were highlighted, with one respondent pointing out that often the only viable option was to use the disabled toilet. Halberstam (1998) identifies the "the bathroom problem" as a central concern of transgender people in public spaces because it is here that they frequently encounter fellow citizens who regard them as "having violated a cardinal rule of gender: one must be readable at a glance". (p. 23). It is clear that

"the bathroom problem" becomes "the changing room problem" whenever a transgender person attempts to participate in sport.

Keogh et al. found a further problem related to concerns surrounding the binary gender nature of sports activities and related expectations therein, since "fitness classes etc. are often single gender and trans people fear the reception they will get if they enrol" (p. 38). A survey investigating the sports experiences of transgender people in Scotland (Smith et al., 2012) identified a range of barriers to participation. Some 80 per cent of respondents had experienced or witnessed transphobic or homophobic abuse in sport, with 96 per cent of this group having witnessed verbal abuse, and 16 per cent physical abuse. One of the main stated barriers to participation in sport was the lack of private changing facilities to meet the needs of transgender people. Survey research by Symons et al. (2010) regarding LGBT experiences of sport in Australia briefly includes some transgender responses; it concentrates on the challenges of finding acceptance within existing sports cultures.

The exclusion of transgender people from sport may be instructively set in the context of the broader phenomenon of social exclusion, a concept which has attracted considerable research and debate, especially in relation to its relevance for government policy (von Braun & Gatweiler, 2014). Numerous reviews of the evolution and meaning of the term exist (including Spaaij, Magee & Jeanes, 2014; Pierson, 2010; Barnes, 2005; Burchardt, LeGrand, & Piachaud, 2002a). They agree that the term was popularized by the publication in 1974 of the text *Les Exclus* ("The Excluded") by the then French Secretary of State for Social Action, René Lenoir, with the idea subsequently embraced by the European Union, United Nations and other national governments. In UK policy circles, the term has fallen out of vogue since its heyday in the late 1990s under the New Labour government of Tony Blair which set up a dedicated Social Exclusion Unit to examine how tackle a variety of interconnected social problems in Britain's most deprived areas (Collins with Kay, 2014). Nevertheless, the term is

still widely used in academia and by non-governmental organisations and, of course, the reality which the term denotes persists. One of the strategic priorities of the 2011 research call of the Northern Ireland government which led to the funding of the present research was assisting "our understanding of the extent, distribution and causes of inequality and social exclusion in Northern Ireland society and the consequences of policies and actions aimed at their reduction" (OFMDFM, 2011). Although a range of definitions and discourses regarding social exclusion exist in academic and policy literature, there is consistency that social exclusion is closely linked to poverty but, at the same time, refers to more than poverty.

Thus, one influential academic definition is as follows: "An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives" (Burchardt, LeGrand and Piachaud, 2002b, p. 30). The four key activities identified by the authors are social interaction (having close relationships with family, friends and the wider community), production (being employed), consumption (purchasing power), and political engagement (being able to participate in local or national governance). Social exclusion, then, entails a shift away from the uni-dimensional, financial connotation of poverty (Berghman, 1995). Silver and Miller (2003) capture the complexity and elasticity of the concept through their delineation of five key features of social exclusion. It is: multidimensional, involving a range of interconnected factors; relative and varying across contexts; dynamic, since it spans a continuum from complete exclusion to full integration; relational, in that it incorporates facets such as lack of participation, rejection, and isolation; and, active, since someone or something causes the exclusion. Social exclusion thus encapsulates the psychological effects of being isolated from or rejected by others through, for example, prejudice or discrimination (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005). In this way, social exclusion "incorporates non-material states and processes of disadvantage, including those created through others' opinions" (Tunstall, 2011, p. 3).

The relationship between social exclusion and sport and physical activity has come under increasing scrutiny by researchers and policy makers in recent decades for three reasons. At the most basic level, exclusion from sport is recognised as constituting social exclusion. If social exclusion is understood as the inability to take part in the key aspects of society as do the majority in that society, then to experience constraints on participation on sport and physical activity is to experience a degree of social exclusion (Collins with Kay, 2014). Secondly, social exclusion – manifested in poverty, isolation and the experience of prejudice – hinders the ability of individuals to participate in sport and leisure. Hence, a voluminous body of research has emerged examining the specific barriers to sports participation faced by marginalised groups around the world, especially poorer people, females, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBT people (for example Collins with Kay, 2014; Dagkas & Armour, 2012; Smith et al., 2012; Federico, Falese, Marandola, & Capelli, 2013; Stalsberg & Pedersen, 2010; Long, Hylton, Spracklen, Ratna, & Bailey, 2009; Dionigi, 2006).

Thirdly, sport is widely viewed as having the capacity to help combat social exclusion/promote social inclusion. The plethora of benefits commonly attributed to sport include: physical fitness and improved health; improved psychological wellbeing; positive personality development via improved self-concept, physical and global self-esteem/confidence; social psychological benefits such as empathy, integrity, tolerance, cooperation, trustworthiness and the development of social skills (Coalter, 2007, p. 19-20). As Coalter notes, arguments for the social benefits of sport, particularly popular among policy makers, are based on the presumption that these individual impacts will have a broader influence through changed behaviour and attitudes, leading to stronger community identity, social coherence and integration i.e. social capital.

Much of the literature on sport and exclusion focuses on sport's potential as an agent of social capital (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Coalter, 2007; Perks, 2007; Bailey, 2005). While sports clubs and cultures may be exclusive (for example Lake, 2013), and hard evidence for the social benefits of sport can be difficult to obtain (Coalter, 2007), nonetheless, "Since sport participation provides a focus for social activity, an opportunity to make friends, develop networks and reduce social isolation, it seems well placed to support the development of social capital" (Bailey, 2005, p. 76). Hence, the advantages denied to individuals, such as transgender people, facing significant barriers to sport and leisure, are considerable, a matter which we explore further below.

In summary, it is clear that both the public understanding of, and policy responses to, transgender issues remain in their infancy, particularly in relation to sport and physical activity. General acknowledgment of certain barriers to transgender participation is yet to be enriched with deep understanding of how transgender people experience (or indeed avoid experiencing) everyday sport and physical activity settings. Such experiences are, for many people whose participation is unproblematic, significant contributors to personal health and wellbeing, as well as, potentially, building wider social cohesion. As Symons et al. (2010) stress, there is a need for "more substantial research of these [transgender] experiences" in sport (p. 59). Accordingly, the present research adopts a phenomenological approach in order to probe in depth the perspectives of a group of transgender individuals in relation to feelings and experiences about sport and leisure and their views about exclusion/inclusion therein.

Methodology

Phenomenological approaches give primacy to the perceptions of respondents, since the objective is to generate knowledge in relation to their lived experience of a phenomenon (Langdridge, 2007). The framework adopted in this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Originally developed by Smith (1996), and influenced by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA has become a widely employed qualitative analysis system (Walker & Burgess, 2011).

This approach is especially relevant for research which focuses upon personal meaning and sense-making in relation to a specific context and with respondents who have similar experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, for gauging the perspectives of transgender people in relation to their experiences of exclusion/inclusion from sport, IPA was an apposite methodological and analytical approach. It is rooted in hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation. Smith et al. (2009) point out that it involves, "a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them" (p. 3). Through adopting an approach of empathic hermeneutics, the primary objective of the researcher is to garner insight into and make sense of the meanings being communicated by respondents. A critical hermeneutic can then be utilized to move beyond the surface level of respondent accounts, to interpret and make sense of their narratives (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

This study is concerned with "what it is like" to be transgender and engage (or attempt to engage) in sport and leisure. It gives primacy to the ways in which respondents make sense of their own experiences, and so provides insight into their personal and social worlds (Smith & Eatough, 2007). While accepting the individual meanings allocated to events by individuals, IPA enables various perspectives about similar events to be compared. By combining and interpreting narratives, common themes emerge which can inform our overall understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Since IPA is an idiographic

approach, research studies in this field involve small samples (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, our sample was 10 transgender people, 6 females and 4 males, with ages ranging between 25 and 62. All were living as their desired gender though not all had undergone physical transition. Participants were recruited through Focus: The Identity Trust, a support group in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for those who have been referred from a gender identity clinic or registered medical practitioner. Prior to the interviews taking place, a member of the research team met with two leaders from this group to explain the research goals and secure their participation.

Following recommended guidelines for IPA research (Hefferon, and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011), we utilized open-ended semi-structured interviews and a brief interview schedule to encourage respondents to tell their stories and reflect upon their experiences. Key topic areas discussed included: the level of participants' interest and participation in sport; participants' experiences of playing sport; perceived barriers to playing sport and specific instances of exclusion; the impact of the gender reassignment process on their involvement; and, related challenges facing transgender people in everyday life. An outline of these topics was provided at the outset. Interviewees were initially asked broad questions that provided maximum freedom for them to select their responses. It was emphasized that the purpose of the interview was to enable them to openly and freely express their views, as the aim was to gain a complete understanding of their perceptions of sport and exclusion/inclusion. Participants were asked for their permission for the interview to be recorded on a digital audio-recorder. In line with the University ethical approval process for the research, interviewees completed and signed written consent forms. They were given guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, and were assured that recordings would be deleted and transcripts destroyed at the end of the research process.

Interviews were transcribed for analysis, which, in line with recommended IPA analytic procedures, was inductive in nature with themes emerging from the narratives

(Clarke, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). This involved the process of "close reading" wherein a detailed reading and re-reading of the text is conducted (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Thus, one of the researchers (DM) read the transcript of each interview to identify sections that addressed the causes of and feelings about inclusion/ exclusion from sport. The content was then coded to identify and delineate themes. Exclusion/inclusion causes were mapped and detailed examples of each were compiled. Flowing from this, samples of interviewee accounts containing discussion of inclusion/exclusion were grouped under the most suitable theme that had emerged. The final thematic structure was agreed following detailed collaboration with the other two authors, who checked the transcripts to confirm themes and ensure that the selected quotes were reflective of the themes.

Results

From the narratives of this group, four main interconnected themes emerged. These were: negative sports experiences at school and the distinct sense of alienation and exclusion that these engendered; the particular problems experienced when using changing rooms; the problems of appearing in public and the specific ways in which this affected their ability to engage in sport; and, the overall impact of their exclusion in terms of being denied the social, health and well-being aspects of sport, which caused problems in terms of physical and mental well-being. Interviewees are identified by pseudonyms. In line with IPA, we include several instances of apposite quotations from interviewees to exemplify the themes under discussion, offer a grounding in examples and allow the reader to engage with the interpretations (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

'Why am I not over there?': negative sports experiences at school

The role of school sport in reproducing gender stereotypes and excluding people who do not fit or identify with those stereotypes is well known (for example, Dagkas and Armour, 2012; Sykes, 2011; Clark and Paechter, 2007). Interviewees' earliest memories of sport were at school, and it emerged that school sports provoked particularly acute feelings of gender discrepancy. As stated by Paul, "I was friends with all the boys and I was going, why am I not over there? And I kept getting put over here with this lot and you know it's just not right." This problem of gender mis-designation was further heightened by having to change and shower in front of others who were, of course, viewed as being from the opposite gender.

In addition, females felt that they were at a disadvantage, in terms of ability level, compared to the males with whom they were required to compete at school. This resulted in related problems, such as negative evaluations from the peer group and not being chosen for school teams. In turn, this reinforced their feelings of being different, and developed in them alienation from team sports. Given how team sports are often dominated by expectations of stereotypically masculine behavior (Anderson, 2013), this was a particular problem for the female interviewees. By contrast, Paul, who had attended an all-girls school, recalled that he had been quite skilled in sport and so had positive experience therein. However, he, too, recalled negative memories in relation to the gender designated dimensions of the activity: "I mean I wasn't the only one that didn't wanna wear a skirt playing hockey."

For some, their alienation from team games turned them towards individual sporting activities. Thus Conor stated: "so when I started this process [transition] I've sort of had to ... shift my focus away from team sports to individual sports". Niamh expressed similar views

and explained how she felt both less fear of gender exposure and a sense of being able to be oneself when competing individually: "The first time that I ever felt comfortable in a sport was athletics and that's because it was individual and I could be me in here and no one could guess, you know, what's going on inside."

This perspective, that the team environment was problematic, intolerant and alienating, was raised by other interviewees. The depth of abhorrence engendered by the experience was exemplified by Sandra who expressed the stark view that, "It felt like going to a concentration camp when I had to do PE". She further underlined the central role played by teachers in shaping and enforcing this unpleasant and exclusionary sports environment: "Teachers exclude you in a way when you're younger, because they're like 'oh you're useless at this' or, or they try and force you to do a sport or force you to do PE. I mean like it should be optional 'cause there's a plethora of different reasons why people wouldn't want to go in to a changing room." Similarly, Joanne recalled: "One of my very early memories was disliking masculine sport and wanting to play feminine sports and one of my very early memories from school is asking the Headmaster if I could play netball with the girls rather than football with the boys and it was met with a rather curt refusal, a very intense refusal. That established very early on in my life that what I was feeling inside was wrong."

Sandra and Joanne are expressing three themes here. Firstly, the exclusionary power of teachers, who take no cognizance of the possible presence of gender difference among pupils. Secondly, the fact that it is wrong for young people to be "forced" by teachers to engage in sport, and their related failure to recognize the variety of reasons as to why pupils may not wish to participate; transgender young people are not the only people who are likely to feel rejected by the heavily gendered and regimented culture of school sport. Thirdly, teachers strengthen transgender pupils' estrangement from sport through negative comments, such as telling them that they are "useless at this". These testimonies resonate with previous research

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on how taken-for-granted, hegemonic discourses regarding physical athleticism and attractiveness, heteronormativity, and masculinity act to marginalize many young people in physical education, stifling confidence in their sporting ability (for example Sykes, 2011).

'We're neither one thing nor the other': the changing room problem

Discomfort with communal changing rooms was by far the greatest barrier to respondents taking part in sport. Any activity that required using communal changing rooms/showers entailed huge barriers. Thus, Mary pointed out that "Sport is something that we are particularly excluded from, from a young age because of the body dysphoria for a start. You know, you don't want to take your clothes off in front of other kids." There were three elements to the discomfort felt by interviewees.

Firstly, if the person had not yet transitioned and was required to use the changing room of their natal sex, they felt that by being forced to reject their true identity they were then "effectively excluded" from that environment: "The biggest issue was changing. You know, because before that I was attempting to be someone that I never was. But once you actually made the decision that you can't do that anymore, then you are effectively excluded because you're neither one nor the other and you can't, you know, access appropriate changing facilities." Colin, who had been living as a man for many years but had yet to undergo a physical transformation, also expressed the feeling of being caught 'in between' provoked by the changing situation: "Even at school if I was getting changed with lots of girls it was embarrassing because I knew I didn't have the body I wanted to have, and at the minute I'm looking at guys and going, 'right, that's the body I want to have but I don't have it'. I just want to leave."

Secondly, they felt that it was "wrong" to use the communal changing room as this may cause serious problems for other users – that it could actually "violate" them. Thus, Paul pointed out that: "I got to the stage I wouldn't, couldn't go to the gym anymore because I felt I was violating everybody else in the changing room 'cause I'm a guy and like everybody else, a woman. And I thought I was violating them, I felt wrong, it totally put me off going to the gym (…) I want to join a gym at the moment and I'm looking at gyms and going, 'does that have communal showers in it', you know it's a big thing". During transition, the physical issue of gender appearance and related concerns regarding attire, prosthetics etc., mean that undressing in communal changing rooms can cause embarrassment to the transgender person and/or discomfort or shock in others. Participants highlighted the particular problem of children seeing them during this period of transitioning: "You see there's the child issue in that, you know, if someone sees someone during transition or who hasn't really transitioned very well and they start screaming … staff aren't trained to deal with it properly…" (Roger)

A third barrier to using the changing rooms of their true gender was that they had no experience or expertise in what was acceptable behavior therein; there was a sense of "mystery" surrounding them and a lack of knowledge of the sub-cultural etiquette of how to behave: "Then there's the fact as well that we've never been socialized in them changing rooms. So after, after everything's over and all that, we'd still feel uncomfortable going in there because we've never, we've never had that like. The guys changing rooms at school you know, we've never experienced that" (Paul).

Although the focus of our research was sport, Roger pointed out that a more frequently experienced problem for transgender people than changing rooms was public toilets. Experience in such places did not encourage transgender people to venture into sports changing facilities: "Without even having to go to the changing room, people know what will happen because they'll go to the bathroom, a public bathroom, and when a woman screams

and runs out and shouts 'there's a man in here', you know, well forget about the changing room, I can't even go to the bathroom. And when you go and someone has a, a look, if you're trying to go to the gents, so you, you know before you even need to go to the changing room [there will likely be a problem]."

Transgender people are in essence placed in a "Catch 22" situation by the demands of the transitioning process. They are required to live as their desired gender for two years in order to 'prove' themselves, before physical changes – hormones, surgery – take place, yet the risk of embarrassment and/or complaints (or being banned by staff) make this very difficult and so they feel vulnerable: "That period of my actual transition, it's called the 'real life experience', where you have to live totally in role, as they call it for, for that period. But that's our most vulnerable period really because we're neither one thing nor the other. Because we can't get officially recognized" (Niamh). Indeed, participants said that the challenges of the two-year transition period meant that people often simply withdrew from many activities, including sport and exercise.

Given that, like bathrooms, they are a crucial site for the social policing of the gender binary (Halberstam, 1998) it is no surprise that our interviewees unanimously agreed that changing rooms and showers should consist entirely of individual cubicles. They felt that all-cubicle changing rooms would ensure that transgender people did not draw attention to themselves as at present when using one of the small number of cubicles available in some changing areas. They also believed that it would protect other users from experiencing unease at encountering them in the changing area. Unsurprisingly, given the requirements of attire, none of the interviewees had felt confident about using a public swimming pool for many years, a source of considerable regret for some. Indeed, Smith et al. (2012) note that private changing is not a panacea: "many trans people may still be anxious about how to maintain a

clear gender presentation while taking part in sport without the usual clothes, makeup, prosthetics etc. they usually wear" (p. 8).

"It becomes this massive thing": recreation and appearing in public

Given the difficulties that the enclosed environment of a shared changing room present for transgender people, it may be thought that at least they could more readily participate in leisure pursuits that do not require using shared facilities. But the interviewee accounts show that this is not the case since simply venturing out in public can be fraught with difficulty or danger. Caudwell (2011) points to the "the myriad ways in which space is dominated by particular bodies and how space become normative because of the presence of these bodies… public spaces (in many Western cultures) are frequently and obdurately made hereronormative, patriarchal, colonial and able-bodied" (p. 125). Respondents recounted in detail how public space induced feelings of threat and marginalization due to their transgression of these norms. These feelings radically restricted the range of sport and leisure activities available to them.

Roger said: "Even the simplest, gentlest, which is walking, for us can be a problem 'cause you must think where you're gonna walk and who you might meet." For example, on a walk at a well-known beauty spot one of the participants had recently been verbally abused by intoxicated people. Niamh detailed how she had lately hiked up a particular mountain, a climb she had not done for thirty years. The experience had motivated her to try to regain the fitness levels she once had, but, she explained how this was more difficult than it may appear: "The reality is somewhat different. I live in a village and there's no way that I can leave my front door and start to go out walking and there's some beautiful walks around our village.

But I, you know, I just couldn't do that." Interviewees highlighted the large amount of forward-planning required for any outing, and the related fear and worry that they often felt in contemplating it: "It's the fear of something happening that stops you doing it, you know, so you have to think of every scenario and you work through it in your head and it becomes this massive thing" (Paul).

Anxiety around being in public spaces was not simply due to the fear of ridicule or rejection, but also the trepidation of being recognized, publicly outed, and subsequently treated differently. Thus Conor stated that: "The thing about going to public swimming pools or sports, somebody I know could be down there, I don't particularly want them to know, you know." Jud discussed in some detail the dilemma she was facing in relation to the prospect of a family holiday. Here, the desire to have a family holiday with her child, who had special needs, was severely tempered by the very real fear of exposure through appearing to be "female" while being openly labelled as "male" by her child. "There's a big 'if' hanging over it and the 'if' is she can't grasp calling me anything else but daddy … So it would be a bit strange if, if she come out with it in front of the wrong people … and people are looking at me and going, and 'this doesn't tally, something's not right here' … it might cause problems that would be, you know hard to deal with [away from home]."

Respondents also said that they tended to avoid going out as a group of transgender people as this tended to draw attention to them. One reason for this was labelling confirmation, as explained by Roger: "They could maybe go, 'is she or isn't she?' But if she's with someone else, they go, 'oh they are'. That confirms it." They would only feel comfortable going out with other transgender people if there was no fear of recognition, and they felt anonymous and hence safe. Fear of antipathy and being made to feel overtly excluded by fellow spectators also made participants very loath even to attend sporting events, some of which are well known as stages for the performance of masculinity

(Caudwell, 2011), including in Northern Ireland (Bairner, 1999). For example, Sandra said: "I couldn't go to a sports event like going to see football ... People have a knack of making you feel excluded like if they catch on to your difference, they pull their child away like you're a sex offender or something and that makes you feel excluded going to them kind of things."

"I just yearned to commune with people": the impact of sports exclusion

Most respondents avoided sport. "It would be so awkward for us to do it [sport]," said Mary, "we don't really have many experiences to talk from." Thus, while research by Smith et al. (2012) identified transphobia as prevalent in sport, actual experiences of transphobia in sport (as opposed to the fear of transphobia) was not a major theme in our research because our interviewees tended to self-exclude. Nevertheless, Danielle did report that she had been asked to leave her ballet class after she made it known to people that she would be attending as a woman in future. She suspected that some of the younger members had spoken to their parents, precipitating complaints. Being forced to give up an activity that she had pursued for 14 years was not only a painful experience, but provoked intense anxiety about how she should respond to this situation.

She explained: "I've thought about it so much over the last few weeks, talked to all my friends and people who are interested in ballet on social media, asking what should I do? And people are saying, 'Go for it. If people can't handle you, that's their problem'. But they're not me. They're not the ones standing there when someone saying, 'Sorry I'm going to have to ask you to leave the class'. They're not the one suffering the humiliation of one or two people in the class saying, 'We're not happy with that person'. And even though they

might be the one that's being bigoted, if a teacher thinks they are going to lose several people from the class as opposed to one [they will likely ask me to leave]." Other interviewees strongly expected that other people would be uncomfortable and perhaps hostile if their transgender status was revealed – as is particularly likely in sport. As a result, they chose to avoid sporting and leisure settings.

A cumulative effect of the problems faced by transgender people is that they are denied the social, health and wellbeing benefits that are associated with participation in sport. Respondents felt they suffered physical and mental health problems as a result of this exclusion. They pointed out that it is important to be in good physical shape for transition surgery and this can be difficult without options for exercise. Niamh explained how she loved canoeing but felt she could not join a club, and that it was difficult even to get the opportunity to watch the sport: "I went out to [place name] where the canoeing course is because I just yearned to commune with people there. But even there I had to sit in the car because I was frightened to go out and even walk along the tow path and because there were a lot of people there and you know I, I couldn't even get out into the fresh air and you know savor watching people on the river or even you know, that was just sort of by proxy enjoying the sport really. But I couldn't even do that because I felt I was drawing attention to myself."

Respondents described a type of vicious circle they faced, through having to cope with the psychological stress of gender transition; being forced to withdraw from sport/exercise during the transition process; suffering lower levels of fitness; and so experiencing increased levels of stress: "It would be fair to say most of us would want to do sport. And it would be the best thing for us, particularly in that difficult stage [transition] you know. Yeah, you know our life experience really makes us anxious and depressed and the best thing for that is exercise and to release the endorphins and get the serotonin levels up" (Roger).

Their exclusion from sport also had negative social and psychological costs in terms of socializing and forming relationships. Interviewees described how they were denied the camaraderie and enjoyment of playing sport and attending sports events together. Paul cited his fear of accepting invitations to play sports with non-transgender work colleagues for two reasons. Firstly, he worried that he may be "discovered" as transgender and suffer as a result. Secondly, he was aware that his sporting ability would be much lower than the others because he had not played for so long and so: "it would really mark you out". His reluctance was despite the fact that he strongly desired to play football. His testimony chimes with Caudwell's (2014) research which found that transgender men, despite leaving femaleness behind, still feel alienated by 'normal' male sporting cultures due to their equivalence of masculinity with athletic ability, their transphobia and heteronormativity. Spaaij et al. (2014) note that total sports exclusion is rare; marginalised groups who feel rejected in mainstream sports may choose alternative sports settings such as ethnic minority leagues and gay or lesbian sports clubs. But the severity of the obstacles facing transgender people is such that this is not an option. For example, Niamh pointed out that she could never envisage their group being able to book at pitch to play five-a-side football because of their visibility as a group.

It is also worth highlighting the financial dimension of transgender sports exclusion. Niamh commented: "we tend to get very low paid jobs if we're lucky enough to get a job at all. And you know I mean the job that I'm now doing is a lot, lot lower paid and status than I would have had before [transition], so my disposable income to even partake all sports and things is a lot lower than it would be." Interviewees mentioned the expense of make-up and certain prosthetics they required; "There's more important things to be spending your money on that sports," said Joanne.

It is instructive to set these impacts of sports exclusion in the context of Bailey's (2005) characterization of the contribution of sport to four related features of social *in*clusion, namely: spatial, in that participation reduces social and economic distances between groups; relational, in terms of fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging; functional, through increasing knowledge, understanding and skill; and, power, in terms of increasing a sense of personal control. Sport can enhance all of these by bringing together individuals from differing backgrounds to share activities (spatial), foster and create a sense of togetherness and belonging – e.g. to a club or team (relational), offer the potential to develop fitness and acquire valued skills (functional), and grow "social capital" by extending one's existing networks (power). Those who are excluded from sport lose out on the valuable potential to develop along these four domains and, as indicated by the testimonies above, this is demonstrably the case for transgender people.

Concluding discussion

The pattern of causes and impacts of sports exclusion as elucidated in participant narratives is depicted in Figure 1. The sense of being different was confirmed and indeed heightened by their early school experiences, with particular problems occurring in relation to sport. For most respondents, participation in school sports evoked a mixture of emotions including fear, trepidation and loathing. The normative gender expectations of stereotypical male and female behavior, as enforced by teachers and expected by peers, created strong feelings of exclusion and alienation. This male-female bifurcation in school sports intensified their awareness of gender dysphoria. The communal changing rooms and toilet environments were especially difficult. These problems with sport continued after school, and were prevalent before, during

and after transition. In adult life, transgender people find themselves on the sidelines of the sporting world, in which aspects such as teams, competition groups and changing facilities remain characterized by male-female segregation, based upon biological determinism. Furthermore, it is not just sport per se that is difficult, as a lack of public acceptance or understanding means that any form of public recreation or social activity is fraught with difficulty, and possible danger.

Given the considerable and, indeed, unique barriers that transgender people face when contemplating engaging in sport and leisure, it is notable that two major texts on sport and social exclusion (Collins with Kay, 2014; Spaaij et al., 2014) make little mention of transgender people. But the framework proffered by Collins with Kay (2014) does illustrate the depth of difficulty faced by transgender people. He outlines three categories of constraints on sports and leisure participation. The first is 'structural' factors such as inadequate facilities/environment, lack of transport and poor community capacity. The second is 'mediating' factors including societal attitudes that might restrict sport for certain groups and the attitudes/actions of leisure managers and policy makers. The third is 'personal' factors – a lack of money and time, poor confidence and a negative body-image. The testimonies above vividly illustrate how transgender people experience a formidable combination of three levels of barrier: the structural barrier of a lack of appropriate changing facilities; mediating barriers such as the ignorance or hostility of sports teachers, organisers, facility staff, and the general public; personal factors including body self-consciousness and the lack of personal confidence to endure the discomfort or opprobrium that may attend sports participation.

Furthermore, the narratives of the interviewees shed light on the nature of social exclusion more generally in three respects. Firstly, employment and the availability of resources are no guarantee of individuals' ability participate the key activities in their society. Collins with Kay (2014) maintains that poverty is the 'core' of social exclusion because

groups who suffer from the opinions of others tend also to be poor. Moreover, most sport and leisure must be paid for. However, Spaaij et al. (2014) correctly argue that this view is unnecessarily reductive, pointing out that "cultural stigmatization, civil rights violations, institutional discrimination and other social processes all play their part in producing the enforced lack of participation that is experienced by many individuals and groups across the world" (p. 166). As Berghman (1995) points out, poverty is a specific form of social exclusion; the concept of social exclusion "should not necessarily encompass an element of poverty" (p. 20). Moreover, most conceptualisations of social exclusion understand it as a process inflicted *on* people as much as a condition experienced *by* people, an emphasis which is absent when simply financial poverty is prioritised (Levitas, 2006; Barnes, 2005; Silver and Miller, 2003). The interviewees in this study did mention that transgender people tend to, in general, have low incomes, indicating how poverty and exclusion from social participation often go hand in hand. However, lack of money appeared to be the least of their problems in accessing sport and leisure. Instead, they suffered principally from the "moral" dimension of social exclusion, rejected and stigmatized for being outside the norm (Spaaij et al., 2014, p. 24).

Secondly, the multiple facets of social exclusion are both self-sustaining and interconnected (Pierson, 2010; Silver & Miller, 2003; Burchardt et al., 2002b). As Hargie, O'Donnell and McMullan (2011) note, social exclusion is a vicious circle, with aspects of social exclusion such as unemployment, non-participation in social activities, and the experience of prejudice, being both symptoms and causes of social exclusion, and potentially mutually reinforcing. Thus, for transgender people, lack of sporting and leisure opportunities and the experience and fear of rejection compounds existing isolation and the psychological stress of gender dysphoria. Opting, or being forced, out of sport and leisure may reduce fitness and break fitness habits, leading to even lower inclination or ability to participate. The

transition process may impact employment and reduce individuals' capacity to pay for sport and leisure.

Thirdly, transgender experiences impinge on the question of whether voluntary self-exclusion should be classed as social exclusion (Burchardt et al., 2002a), demonstrating how what appears to be voluntary self-exclusion may actually result from wider, hostile social realities beyond people's control. Discussing this point, Barry (2002) highlights that the degree to which an action is voluntary depends on the quality of the choices on offer; if an individual or group chooses to opt out of participation in society after experiencing discrimination or hostility, this cannot be regarded as voluntary exclusion. As noted above, perceived obstacles, levels of fear, and negative experiences in the past, were such that interviewees, in the main, chose not to attempt to take part in sport and leisure. Levitas (2006) argues that although the case of someone not wanting to avail of services, social or shopping opportunities might seem like a clear case of voluntary exclusion, there is evidence that, in actuality, "people learn to be poor, that is, that the habit of limited consumption and/or participation results in people learning to not want what they cannot afford" (p.150). Their choices in this regard cannot be viewed as entirely voluntary. We might say that the interviewees in this study had "learned to not be sporty" due to the lack of sport and leisure options available to them.

These findings validate and add urgency to previous recommendations regarding policy changes that need to be taken to ensure inclusion for this group (Smith et al., 2012a). These include leadership at all levels, from government through to sports bodies, schools and club leaders, to develop and monitor clear policies to support transgender people in sport; strategic action plans with targets and dates to tackle the extant problems of exclusion; capacity building in terms of facilities for transgender people in sports clubs; an awareness campaign to change public attitudes; a zero tolerance policy on abuse or discrimination;

better communication by sports facilities regarding whether changing rooms are private cubicles or open-plan. However, as the participants in this study attested, while measures such as equality policies and appropriate changing facilities ease transgender participation in sport, it is primarily the lack of public understanding regarding transgender people that remains the greatest cause of their exclusion.

Acknowledgements

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