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Journal of Homosexuality

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjhm20

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To cite this article: Lois Ferguson & Kate Russell (2021): Gender Performance in the Sporting Lives of Young Trans* People, Journal of Homosexuality, DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2021.1996099

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1996099

Published online: 01 Nov 2021.

JOURNAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY
https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1996099

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Gender Performance in the Sporting Lives of Young Trans* People

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored how UK trans* youth experienced Physical Education (PE) during secondary school, and its impact on remaining physically active. Seven self-identified trans* people aged 14–25 took part in semi-structured interviews. Findings show participants' performances of gender were restricted by practices privileging the "natural" gender binary. Following school, medical procedures or other physical changes were desired in order to "pass" as their chosen gender before physical activity could occur. Recommendations are presented for improvements to PE policy for trans* youth.

KEYWORDS

Trans*; physical education; gender performativity; sport; physical activity

Trans* people encompass a wide range of identities that share the commonality of experiencing incongruence between their sex assigned at birth and gender identity (GLAAD, 2014). By contrast, cisgender people are those whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity are aligned. Trans* participation in sport at all levels has been and still is fraught with difficulties. At the professional level, trans* athletes face suspicion and accusation, and many must undergo regular gender testing to prove their eligibility to compete (Wahlert & Fiester, 2012). To compete in the Olympics, trans* athletes must pass medical and legislative criteria in order to validate their gender. This criteria is particularly restrictive for male to female athletes, who must demonstrate specific testosterone levels 12 months prior to competing and are subject to regular testing to confirm these levels whilst competing. Furthermore, they must declare their identity as female for a minimum of four years (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2015). These regulations exclude a whole range of trans* athletes who do not identify within the two-gender binary (e.g. non-binary or gender non-conforming athletes). At the recreational level, public spaces for sport often exclude trans* people, or make their attempts to participate uncomfortable, due to a lack of inclusive leisure settings and facilities (Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017; Keogh, Reid, & Weatherburn, 2006; Muchicko, Leppb, & Barkley, 2014; Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007). A review by Jones, Arcelus, Bouman, and Haycraft (2016)

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found that trans* people's engagement in physical activity within the UK is generally negative, owing to this lack of inclusivity, but additionally due to transphobic behavior, a lack of awareness of the needs of this group in sport, and a range of discriminatory practices. Although we do not have clear statistics on the physical activity levels of trans* people in the UK, there is evidence that many recreational sporting environments are exclusionary and discriminatory and consequently, are a disincentive to trans* participation (HofC, 2016). Furthermore, in a study on treatment-seeking trans* people in the UK, it was found that trans* participants engaged in significantly less physical activity than cisgender participants (Jones, Haycraft, Bouman, & Arcelus, 2018).

Though we are beginning to gain an understanding of the experiences of trans* people in several sport contexts, there is still a lack of understanding on how sport is experienced by trans* youth, especially in schools, and how this might impact their decisions to be physically active. Within the UK, Physical Education (PE) is a mandatory subject for all students in compulsory education (up to 16 years old). The government-produced curriculum requires students to participate in a range of sports and physical activities and cohorts are regularly assessed on their knowledge and ability to apply skills and processes (Department for Education [DfE], 2013). In the US, PE follows a similar approach with a set of National Standards that are used by schools to develop a curriculum, but students are required to participate from kindergarten through to 18 years old (SHAPE, 2013). Considering how influential this time in education is for young people, and the importance of PE and school sport in encouraging lifelong physical activity (Shephard & Trudeau, 2000), it is imperative that it is enjoyable and instills a positive attitude toward lifelong physical activity. This is especially key for trans* youth, who experience higher levels of a variety of mental health issues (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016), many of which could be reduced by participation in physical activity (Bailey, 2005; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Miller, Pigg, & Dodd, 2008).

Research on gender and sport in Western secondary schools concludes that PE is a particularly heteronormative site, with practices favoring those who conform to the dominant (and binary) notions of masculinity and femininity (Larsson, Quennerstedt, & Öhman, 2014; Sykes, 2011). This heteronormative climate is created through a variety of overt and covert practices, such as gender-segregated classes, sanctions on the types of activities deemed gender-appropriate often with gender aligned teachers, and privileging displays of heterosexual masculinity over other forms of bodily expression (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2016). This affects a range of young people, but the prevalence of cisnormativity within education has an acute impact on trans* youth (McBride, 2020). Cisnormativity privileges cisgender people as "normal" and stigmatizes trans* bodies, identities and behaviors as

illegitimate and inferior (Serano, 2016). Across the pond, this can be seen through the lack of trans-inclusive policies and representation within schools, and through the ways in which administrative procedures oppress or silence trans* identities (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Whilst some trans*[1] youth[2] may aim to fit into a heteronormative framework (through transitioning and identifying as heterosexual), a cisnormative climate within schools provides a further challenge as their very identity rejects the notion of "natural binaries" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009) and they are therefore illegitimised. The combination of these normalizing contexts, often referred to as cisheteronormativity, can therefore cause a two-fold exclusion for trans* people in PE.

The impact of a heteronormative PE climate on trans* pupils has been explored in the Spanish school context (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada, Pérez-Samaniego, & Fuentes-Miguel, 2018), with largely adverse findings. The authors found that trans* youth often attempted to transgress heteronormative boundaries by asking to participate in activities with their desired gender group. However, this transgression was regularly impeded by teachers and stigmatized by peers, resulting in feelings of isolation and loneliness. This highlights how heteronormative processes in PE can also be cisnormative, as these pupils were subjected to varying forms of oppression when transgressing existing gender norms in order to express their own version of gender. Perhaps most noteworthy were the participants' accounts of their experiences in changing rooms, these being with the gender that they did not identify with. They centered around feelings of fear, discomfort and vulnerability, and were regarded "the most problematic gender segregated space" (Devís-Devís et al., 2018, p. 113). Herrick and Duncan (2020) suggest that this gendered space is an acute barrier to those who reject the gender binary (e.g. non–binary, gender non-conforming, agender) too, "as locker rooms persistently present … two choices that d[o] not represent them" (p. 234), and consequently, they are open to harassment and violence, and feel like they don't belong.

These findings are reflected in other salient work on trans* experiences in PE settings (Caudwell, 2014; Sykes, 2011), and within the UK setting, the complexities continue. In a small-scale study, Williamson and Sandford (2018) found that 64% of their trans* participants were denied opportunities to participate in certain activities due to their gender identity, which "inhibit[ed] levels of enjoyment and lead to disengagement" (p. 59). Additionally, they found that PE was deemed an unsafe environment by trans* youth, due to fears of bullying or attacks for transgressing normative gender boundaries. Further UK research by Hargie et al. (2017) found that PE was a particularly alienating experience for trans* participants, with PE teachers "shaping and enforcing a stressful and exclusionary sports environment" (p. 231) through their refusal to allow the transgression of gender boundaries. This resulted in heightened feelings of rejection and inadequacy which stayed with participants throughout life.

Although the UK PE curriculum has not enforced gender-segregated activities since the 1980s, PE teachers are often swayed to teach single-sex lessons for certain activities (Lines & Stidder, 2003). This is due to societal "beliefs about differences in boys' and girls' attitudes, behaviours, abilities and experiences" (Hills & Croston, 2012, p. 591), and often these differences raise concerns over the safety and quality of lessons for boys and girls. However, these beliefs follow a cisheteronormative framework that value cisheterosexual identities over others, resulting in an absence of concern for the safety and quality of PE for trans* students. This is clearly illustrated in the aforementioned research, where trans* students have described both unsafe and disengaging experiences.

Whilst this adds to our understanding of the experiences of trans* people in PE, it does not enlighten us as to how these experiences have impacted trans* individuals' decisions to be physically active in the future. The research points to trans* physical activity participation levels being lower than the cisgender population, but how much of this can be attributed to their school experiences? This study aimed to focus on the experiences of trans* youth in PE and how this experience impacted on decisions to be physically active after leaving school. Key research questions centered on identifying the ways in which trans* youth engaged with the PE curriculum, and how later decisions around physical activity were influenced by these early experiences.

Method

Ontological and epistemological considerations

The lead author is a cisgender heterosexual woman who, whilst making every attempt to interpret and convey the stories of the participants in this study truthfully, cannot necessarily fully understand their experiences having not experienced them herself. The second author identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and was not associated with the youth group where participants were recruited. From both perspectives we acknowledge that the interpretations we provide of the participants' experiences may differ from their actual lived experience (Fontes, 1998). To address this issue, we have sought to stay as close to the original participant voices as possible in addition to reflecting on the potential impacts to the research due to personal subjectivities (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

Our research is informed by an interpretivist paradigm, in that we acknowledge the multiplicity and complexity of reality and rely upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p. 8) to make sense of their reality. Though Butler's theoretical work informs our discussion, we did not initially set out to explore our participant's experiences through this lens. Following the initial analysis, an overriding theme around the challenges faced by participants to express their gender became evident. Soon after we felt that

the concept of gender performativity would enable us to articulate our participant's views best, as the framework lends itself to a queer reading of the data due to its rejection of gender as natural or essential. The theoretical framing of the analysis is discussed below.

Participants

The participants for this study were 7 White self-identified trans* people, ranging in age from 14–25 years old. All participants took part in secondary school PE in the UK, and all but one participated in some form of sport or physical activity at the time of the interviews. Two were still in compulsory PE lessons and the rest exercised at home or at the gym. Though most participants had not transitioned during school, all but one participant experienced gender incongruence from an early age and had an internal (or hidden) sense of trans* identity during secondary school. See Table 1 for further information on the profiles of these individuals, including their self-defined identities. Participants names and other personal details such as school names have been changed in order to ensure anonymity, with pseudonyms adopted that reflect the participants' preferred gender. It should be noted that one participant, B, identifies as non-binary so their pseudonym has been chosen so as not to reflect an identity within the gender binary.

Participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling. Firstly, contact was made to a gatekeeper at an LGBTQ+ youth group at which the lead author volunteers, to see if any young trans* people in the group would like to participate in the study. This initial contact resulted in the recruitment of five participants, who were either attendees of the youth group or young adults who volunteered there. The final two participants responded to a post on a social media page for a local university's LGBTQ+ society, expressing their interest to participate.

Ethical considerations

In line with the authors' home institution ethical approval process, participant consent forms and a parental consent form for the participant under 16 years old were completed and signed prior to interviewing. Ethical considerations

Table 1. Participant details.

Name	Age	Self-defined identity:
B	25	Non-binary femme boy
Dom	20	Queer trans man
Tom	20	Trans man
Helen	18	Trans woman
Sam	18	Trans man
Lucy	16	Demi girl
Connor	14	Trans boy

were given to the potential sensitivity of the topic for participants, with a pilot interview completed with a trans* individual to assess the quality and appropriateness of each question. Minor changes to the scope of the questions were subsequently conducted before the main data collection occurred. Appropriate support services (such as those centered around supporting trans* youth or youth mental health) were identified, and resources and contact details were compiled and included in participant information sheets for participants to use if they desired. This ensured an additional layer of support beyond the support system already embedded within the LGBTQ+ youth groups.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (lasting between 20–60 minutes) with participants to explore their general school experiences, their PE and school sport experiences, their current views on participation in physical activity, and what recommendations they had to improve PE lessons for trans* youth. These took place either within the space where the local LGBTQ+ youth groups were held (though not during the youth group sessions themselves) or within private study spaces on the authors' university campus. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and then imported into NVivo 12 (2018) to help store and organize the data for analysis. The authors acknowledge that using software facilitates the *management* and *processing* of the data itself rather than an explicit form of interpretation, which would be informed by our theoretical framework.

Data analysis

Whilst there was an initial research question shaping the interviews and analysis, the analysis was inductive in nature. This being said, "paradigmatic, epistemological and ontological assumptions *inescapably* inform analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 4). As such, we acknowledge that our analytical process (and the subsequent interpretation of that material) was not only influenced by the literature on the heteronormativity of school spaces, as noted in the introduction, but also a wider sense of privileging the young person's viewpoint. In this way we hoped to identify experiences to gain insight into their lives and ways to support that. Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore the data, search for patterns and themes and finalize interpretations. This approach allows for a number of "orientations" to the analytical process, which can be applied to a project, each supporting a way to explore the whole data set before narrowing down the analysis to a specific focus. For this study, while we acknowledge our theoretical sensitivities which inform our researcher subjectivities, we allowed the content of the data itself to frame the coding and theme development itself.

Braun and Clarke (2006) do note a concern that the approach, which is used extensively across a range of contexts, can be guilty of a procedural "baking recipe" (p. 89) without this theoretical reflexivity.

The analysis was initially carried out by the lead author and involved a six step process: 1) Familiarization with the data through transcribing, reading and re-reading transcripts; 2) Generating initial codes from the data based on PE experiences and post-school physical activity experiences. This process mirrors the "open coding" process familiar to the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002) with viewing the transcript and identifying key words, phrases or sections that generate interest; 3) Searching for themes to identify broader patterns of meaning where initial codes are brought together e.g. the impact of gender-specific activities in PE; 4) Reviewing themes that best reflect the data; 5) Defining and naming themes; and finally, 6) Producing the written report by contextualizing the analysis with Butler's performativity conceptual framework and other relevant literature. The second author subsequently analyzed the interviews and theme generation independently, following the same process as identified above. Frequent meetings were held between the authors to discuss the coding process and potential theme generation, and to identify how the theoretical framing supported the contextualization of the data in the final report.

Theoretical framework

Following the analysis identified above, this study applied the concept of gender performativity, theorized by Judith Butler, to explore the sporting experiences of trans* youth in and out of school. Butler (1990) claims that gender is a reified concept in many ways that appears natural through the repetitive enactment of gendered constructions of behavior, appearance and speech. We "perform" these both consciously and subconsciously; they appear *natural* only because we produce them numerous times throughout our daily lives. Rather than regarding them as a performance, which in some ways could imply *choosing* to act a particular part, we could consider them as more appropriately informed *by* society, and in this way the choice element is diminished somewhat. This process produces and reproduces specific (legitimate) gendered practices or roles, that signify to ourselves and others a specific (legitimate) gendered identity that we are able to align ourselves to. For example, a woman may perform gender through adhering to the traditional characteristics of femininity through her mannerisms, speech and appearance. This is a reiteration, a performance of gender, whether knowingly done or based on socially informed understandings. Butler's work is useful in exploring how traditional gendered identities are maintained in our society, but also in studying how individuals perform alternative versions of gender, those that reject traditional gendered identities. This aspect is of

particular importance to this field of research, as trans* people are those who challenge this gender binary and transgress the notion of "naturalness" of gender.

This is, however, not without further complications as Travers (2006) proposes through the notion of "gender conformers" and "gender transformers." Travers suggests that trans* people desire either to conform to the gender binary, or reject it altogether. Gender conformers would therefore wish to perform traditional gendered identities, in order to fit the traditional identities of man/woman and "pass[3]" as their preferred gender. Gender transformers, on the other hand, are unlikely to perform these traditional gendered practices as they do not seek to fit into such simple binary categories. This categorization of trans* identities helps us to understand why some choose to consciously perform in certain ways—to highlight their alignment or conformance to a traditional gender identity or to transgress such distinctions.

Travers' categorization may work to identify some individuals who fall under the term trans*, but Caudwell (2014) argues that this model "lacks the incompleteness that often accompanies people's lived experiences of gender" (p. 402). She finds that these binary opposites cannot always describe trans* identities, as often these identities are changing and negotiating. For example, a trans* man may identify as male to his friends or in the workplace, but is not able to do so with his family. He is not a conformer or transformer, but constantly adapting his identity depending on his surroundings.

We would also argue that there is a certain level of privilege that can be experienced by individuals who are able to "pass" as their preferred gender that is not afforded to all (Billard, 2019). Whilst there are many ways to "do" gender, Butler (1990) argues that there is a "highly rigid regulatory frame" (p. 33) which limits the ways in which it is socially acceptable to *be a gender*. This follows Miller's (2016) argument that trans* individuals experience educational disadvantage due to the "social hierarchy premised on gender anatomy-identity congruence and the binary division of male and female" (p. 1).

A cisheteronormative culture is exemplified in PE through the range of practices that police students into behaving in certain ways (e.g. in masculine or feminine congruent ways) and prevent them from transgressing these traditional practices. Trans* youth may choose to express themselves differently, for example, through their appearance, chosen name or desire to participate in activities that align with their gender. Though all of these are possible options, they are all ways to transgress the normative boundaries in PE. These norms are reflected in sport and physical activity outside of the school setting, in that there are clear ways in which people can *do* accepted versions of gender. Again, for trans* people this can prove difficult as attempts to perform their gender can often be punished, as they destabilize the "naturalness" of the gender binary (Tredway, 2018).

Butler's ideas on the inscription of gender on the body became more relevant to this paper as analysis developed. An extension of gender performativity, this concept focuses on how the performance of gender can "mark" or change the body, associating it to a sex. This concept is theorized by Roth and Basow (2004) who argue that "strength differences are constructed as bodies do femininity and masculinity. That is, doing masculinity builds strength, whereas doing femininity builds weakness" (p. 247). Whilst trans* individuals may perform femininity or masculinity to align themselves with their preferred gender, it could be argued that some trans* identities are formed in a more drastic way, through the decision to make physical changes to their body. In doing so, they are deliberately inscribing their bodies in new ways that "make sense" to a given gender.

Reflexivity

Researchers tend to position their role within the insider/outsider dichotomy; either they are close to or part of the group being researched, or are a stranger to the group being researched. Both roles have varying advantages and disadvantages. However, in this study, the researchers were somewhat "in the middle" (Breen, 2007). The lead author was associated with the LGBTQ+ youth group through their volunteer work there, although they did not attend the youth group as a young person. Their role within the group was as an authoritative, adult figure, therefore, there was a degree of closeness and familiarity with many of the participants. This closeness meant that there was trust and rapport with the participants, which ultimately helped to ensure the trustworthiness of findings (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Another benefit to this position was that participants were not left in the dark after the study, as is the case with many outsider researchers who "parachute into people's lives . . . and then vanish" (Gerrard, 1995, p. 59). Participants were welcomed to approach the researcher in her volunteer role for a talk whenever they wished, which many of them did.

Results

From the analysis two overriding themes became apparent; 1) the impact of school policies and practices on the experiences of participants in PE, and 2) the perceptions of the legitimacy of the physical body in decisions to be physically active after leaving school. Within the first theme, three subthemes explore the impact of gender-segregated activities and gendered uniform on the participants experiences of PE, plus an alternative more positive experience of PE for one participant. The second theme follows on from this and explores participants' perceptions of the body and how these influence their physical activity pursuits. All participants are represented below as their chosen identity at the point of data collection, rather than as determined for them at their time in school i.e. as girl or boy.

Gender-segregated activities

Many of the participants discussed their wishes to participate in particular physical activities during school, many of which displayed dominant forms of masculinity or femininity. For example, Sam, a trans* man, wished to participate in basketball, rugby and tennis, but was required to do activities more typically associated with femininity, such as dance and netball; activities that are (still) based on traditional gender segregated lessons in UK schools. With all but one participant, their experiences in PE were like this; incredibly gendered, with boys and girls participating in single sexed classes, doing activities typically associated with one side of the gender binary. Lucy commented that "they used to make the boys do one thing, the girls do another. They were really sexist, and, they just weren't thoughtful, they weren't concerned for how people were feeling in that aspect."

As most of the participants had not publicly transitioned during their time in school, their experiences in PE were particularly challenging as they were unable to participate in activities consistent with their internal sense of gender identity. Most wished to conform to the gender binary by transgressing the boundaries from one side of the binary to the other, but this was not possible for them at the time. Their reasons for waiting to transition post-secondary school were numerous, but to synopsize, they centered around fears of bullying and non-acceptance by peers. Sam epitomizes this viewpoint when he describes the idea of transitioning during school as "a really scary thing to do." Therefore, many of the participants underwent years of PE in classes that they did not feel comfortable in, resulting in disengagement and with one participant, the decision to drop out of class entirely:

HELEN: I didn't enjoy doing what the boys did cos they all did like football . . . and I hated football so much. And I always wanted to do what the girls did like dance and that but, obviously I wasn't allowed.

DOM: [I]t was . . . even things to do with what sport it was, like the girls would do lacrosse and the boys would do rugby. It was just so stereotypical, down to a T. To the point where I just didn't want to be a part of it.

As participants were forced to conform to the prescribed (legitimate) understanding of what girls and boys sports are, this prevented participants from performing gender in ways that aligned with their gender identity and resulted instead in a reluctant acceptance/compliance to the school's cisnormative structures and particular ways of "doing" gender. Many participants wished to adhere to the gender binary, but simply on the opposing side, though they were not afforded this opportunity. Any wish to transgress was clearly punished by the school's prevention of their participation in opposing gendered activities or lessons. For example, Helen mentioned that the "boys weren't allowed to come to the girl's lessons," with the exception of one occasion where her teacher

allowed her to participate in the girls PE lesson as an "exam time" treat. This highlights the enforcement of rigid gender roles that regulate and police young people's ability to perform gender in ways that are affirming to them. Dom also discussed his attempts to participate in gendered activities that he aligned more closely with: "[in relation to wanting to play rugby with the boys, rather than lacrosse with the girls] I would say . . . 'If you let me on the other team then I'll do it [PE]', but they just would never let me."

The lack of flexibility within the PE context caused the formation of some inherently negative views toward sport and physical activity that resulted in the decision to refrain from, or certainly question, their participation after leaving school. Helen mentions that she "had so many bad memories from (secondary school) that I just didn't want to [take part in sport]" and B explains how PE "probably influenced me negatively . . . because after I left school . . . I didn't do any exercise." The schools' refusal to give young people the option to participate in activities of their own choice, for example, those that align with their internal sense of gender rather than predetermined gender-specific ones, worked to delegitimise their gender identity and reinforced *acceptable* ways of doing gender. Dom, who felt that something was "different" about his gender identity from a very early age, demonstrates this through his experience in gender-segregated PE lessons when he states that "I just remember being like 'I'm definitely being read as female, this is definitely a space which is women only and that's why you're there'." Being read as female and consequently assigned to a female-only lesson invalidated Dom's internal sense of who he was, contributing to his dislike of organized sport and physical activity, and informing his future decisions to exercise at home alone; "I just couldn't be bothered so I . . . got an exercise bike at home and just reverted to that." Though Dom was not openly trans* during this time, this experience illustrates the conflicting nature of how he viewed himself, how others viewed him, and ultimately his preference for being physically active now.

The assumption based on a student's name, appearance, or legal gender; that they belong to one class or the other, to one changing room or the other, enhanced feelings of gender dysphoria and caused severe discomfort in changing rooms:

SAM: It just made me really uncomfortable . . . I didn't want to be around people when I was getting changed . . . I've always been extremely self-conscious of my body, and I didn't realize back then it was dysphoria. . . . being forced into that small room with a whole load of people that I didn't actually like . . . [w]as just a really horrible experience. . . . You just wanna be away from people

Alarmingly, when Sam voiced his discomfort to a staff member at the school, their "solution" was to remove Sam from PE lessons altogether and "to shove me in a room . . . and leave me there." This highlights a perceived lack of concern or awareness of staff in relation to Sam's participation in PE. This "easy option" fails to acknowledge Sam's direct experience of PE and the changing room policy simply intensified that experience.

Connor, the youngest of the participants and one of two to publicly transition in school was, to a degree, an exception as he was permitted to participate in the boys PE lessons, which could be identified as a successful transgression. However, there was one particularly problematic incident that highlights the resistance to, or lack of understanding, on the part of the PE staff about his participation:

CONNOR: My mum received a letter … saying I can't do the rest of rugby because they're concerned for my welfare … So I just had to coach because they were then going into more rugby tackling, games and stuff, when I'd already been tackled multiple times.

That the school felt he would be unsafe to participate in this activity but had no concerns for any other boys in the group, suggests some resistance to, or an inability to fully understand his preferred gender identity. Regardless of his inclusion in this "new" domain, there are still times where he is viewed as weak and vulnerable, and, therefore, read as female. As Connor describes later:

> Well the PE department came together and kind of talked about the letter … and addressed it and basically said 'we'd love for you to do it but … ' cos they're given guidelines that they have to follow, they're just concerned for our safety.

Connor, who would be described as a gender conformer, not only felt misread, but totally excluded: "I don't want to feel excluded cos that's where I belong." For Connor, his internal sense of gender identity is clear; he belongs in that class because he is a boy. While the school accommodates some of his needs by allowing him to perform his self-assigned gender in some ways, and perhaps we could argue fairly unproblematically, by simply allowing him to take part in the boys PE lessons, this was still policed. As he described further "I wasn't allowed to use the girl's toilets or changing rooms anymore … I would get changed in a disabled toilet." His transgression into this realm is, therefore, ultimately punished, a part of a broader policing practice where only specific forms of gender expression is considered acceptable. The school adopts a clear cisgendered approach to his participation and rejects Connor's version of maleness. This issue was also apparent in the way in which some of Connor's peers viewed him; "the kids are more like "well you've technically still got female body parts, you're more feminine."

Uniform

The uniform that participants had to wear during PE was another gendered practice that highlighted the differences between boys and girls, adding to the discomfort of many in PE. Whilst some PE kits were what the participants described as gender neutral, for others there was a specific PE kit for boys and girls. For example, Sam stated that "the girls had to wear these skirts with shorts

underneath [skorts], and the boys just had to wear shorts." The enforcement of skirts or skorts particularly affected those who now identify as male but were, at the time, participating in girls PE lessons. These participants felt major discomfort in wearing clothing associated with femininity, as this was not how they wished to express themselves outwardly. This can be argued as representing rigid definitions and outward expressions of acceptable and legitimate forms of gender.

Additionally, there was a common theme around the practicality of PE kits. Those that discussed gendered PE kits all expressed bewilderment over the impracticality of skirts or skorts when attempting to be physically active. For example, Ben stated that gendered kits were "kind of impractical really (laughs). Generally, from an exercise point of view there's a lot of things you can't do . . . if you're wearing a skirt." Dom reciprocates this viewpoint below:

> The girls would have to wear this ugly skort, so it wasn't even practical. It was just breaching the boundaries of like, where femininity stops, and it just becomes impractical. Because you'd have this like, weird tight little skirt going around shorts, and . . . you just couldn't even run much.

At Sam's school, wearing a skirt was not compulsory, but an option that many of his peers chose to wear in PE. Due to his discomfort in wearing something associated with femininity whilst he identified internally as a boy, he chose not to wear this uniform. However, this raised concern about standing out amongst his peers, which only added to his discomfort in PE; "I felt a bit weird cos I didn't have one and I didn't want one . . . I felt like, well should I get one? If everyone else is. But I really didn't want one." This exemplifies the effects of reinforced gender roles and normative boundaries within PE, that prevent trans* youth from expressing themselves in ways that make sense to them. A more positive account with regards to uniforms came from Lucy. She attended an alternative secondary school after experiencing some severe bullying at mainstream schools, and the general ethos of this school seemed relaxed and inclusive. This approach clearly alleviated potential concerns about changing rooms for PE:

> We're all so lucky cos we don't have a school uniform so we don't have to get changed into PE clothes, so it's, so we don't have that fear of, where do I go? Do I go in that one? Do I go in this one? Do I not?

Alternative experiences of PE

The majority of participants strongly disliked the gendered aspects of PE, but there was one who had a slightly better experience. Tom, who enjoys being active, described his overall PE experience as "positive" and "good for me." During his secondary school years, he identified as female, and whilst his PE

lessons were segregated by gender, this was not viewed negatively by him. Whereas other participants felt like they were missing out on, or prohibited from certain gendered activities, Tom enjoyed the activities he did. He did, however, feel that "boys would really be into playing games . . . [whereas] the girls . . . weren't into it, and it felt like a waste." Nonetheless, due to his high sporting ability he ended up participating with other high ability girls, which was "good because then we didn't have the girls that squealed and wouldn't play." It's likely that his experience in PE was more positive because for him, the "gender stuff" began after secondary school and therefore his identification and participation as a girl at school was not fraught with feelings of discomfort or dysphoria. In fact, he alludes to this when he says "I would not be surprised if, had I had gender stuff earlier, that would have been an issue for me."

His comments about girls in PE suggests that femininity was emphasized in a variety of ways by his peers, ultimately adhering to the heteronormative culture of PE; "I remember in PE, girls and their kind of girlyness was just kind of heightened. [If] we were playing like a game with a ball they would squeal and run away from it." Though Tom did not behave in this feminine manner and instead performed gender in the form of more masculine sporting behaviors, he was not punished for this transgression. This suggests, perhaps, that in some small way it is possible for the boundaries of hegemonic femininity and masculinity to be transgressed. While we would argue that the boundaries can be rigid and often policed by teachers and other students, there is space for the beginnings of shifting ideals of gender and what can be possible. However, as is evident from the experiences of other participants, there are still strict limits on the extent of transgression, particularly when it comes to those experiencing gender incongruence. Their "alternative" performances of gender are still regularly prohibited.

The body

For many participants, decisions around being physically active after leaving school centered around their body. Whilst PE was a negative environment for most, it was not necessarily a deterrent for future participation. For some, being physically active allowed them to explore and connect with their body and shape it into one which was more desirable to them. For example, Tom felt that by attending the gym he could work on increasing his muscle mass and widening his shoulders, which would benefit him in "passing . . . [and] looking more masculine."

B also chose to attend the gym in order to "help shape [their] body." However, similarly to other participants, medical changes to the body were a key motivator in decisions to be physically active. It was not until B had undergone certain medical processes [which were not disclosed] did they then feel able to take part in physical activity; "those medical changes, and seeing

that it [body] could change, and that there was hope for it to look different, was really important in encouraging me into better exercise practices." Other participants' accounts reflected this need to undergo a medical transition first before participating in physical activity; "I have full intentions of doing more when I have surgery" (Sam) and "when I'm fully a girl, like after all the surgery" (Helen).

Participants who were yet to medically transition expressed excitement to be physically active again once medical changes had occurred. Helen mentions "I'd love to get involved in swimming . . . Yeah I think quite a lot of sports like dance, tennis . . . volleyball, even rounders actually." Sam, who finds "the idea of going out without [his] binder[4] . . . a horrifying thought" and has "confidence issues" with regards to his body, felt he could do all manner of activities once he had undergone certain medical procedures:

> That's one of the things I'm most excited about, about getting surgery. I wanna go swimming again, I used to love going swimming with friends. . . . I wanna go to the park and play tennis, maybe basketball. Cos I have always been a sporty person, but I'm now restricted from doing that, quite a lot.

For these participants, there is a clear desire for their body to physically embody their sense of gender through medical changes. This physical embodiment helps to inscribe gender on the body, and was regarded as important to complete before they can participate in certain physical activities, particularly those in public or where the body is more exposed.

For others, a medical transition was not expressed as a necessity before physical activity could occur, but certain public spaces for exercise did cause discomfort. Tom described his struggles with the gym dress code and being misread:

> There's a big split . . . between, clothing that girls can wear and guys can wear, fitness-wise . . . I used to have . . . very tight fitting leggings that I will not wear now . . . because they make me feel uncomfortable, . . . dysphoric, . . . [s]o now I wear shorts. But . . . I fear walking out and people noting that I'm not cis[.] . . . [I]t makes me uncomfortable knowing that other people will look at me and assume I'm a girl and see me as a girl. [B]ut at the same time I know there's not much I can do to make them see me as a guy.

Whilst Tom is attempting to perform gender in alignment with the gendered characteristics of a man, and with accepted notions of what it is to be masculine, his experience is still an uncomfortable one. He, like many other participants, wishes to fit into the gender binary but is aware of how his current gender expression may not currently align with societal expectations of masculinity. This creates a specific concern for Tom when participating in physical activity, and he suggests that the introduction of more "androgynous clothing" may be a solution. Interestingly he doesn't point to wearing more "masculine" attire, perhaps noting how his body as male is still in development.

For Dom, this gendered "split" was experienced through the physical space in gyms, with neither available option being one that he felt comfortable in:

> Because . . . in the gym, it's quite . . . a toxic masculine environment, so you don't wanna go into women only spaces because I don't really fit in there, but then . . . you kind of notice that most of the women will go to a women only space so it kind of . . . like it accidently segregates, gender segregates itself. And then that environment with men is like, beyond toxic masculinity, it's just really amped up like 'ughhh I'm gonna go and get on the weights' . . .

Dom also felt that this space resulted in unwanted attention; "then you just kind of catch people staring at you all the time," which factored into his decision to exercise in private at home.

Discussion

The experiences noted by the participants highlight the rarity of opportunities to transgress gender boundaries and resonate strongly with Devís-Devís et al.'s (2018) findings. The teachers' inability (or perhaps more generously a lack of awareness) to consider (and accommodate) the possible range of gender identities present in their class prevented many of the participants a chance to engage in PE in comfortable ways. When there is no clear indication that a school is accepting of trans* identities, as demonstrated through the teacher's lack of awareness and continued exclusive practices, it is understandable that trans* youth may feel uncomfortable being open about their gender identity. This could, perhaps, exemplify why most participants chose not to transition during secondary school, because there were no options within PE (or broader educational practices) to participate in ways that aligned with their desired performance of gender. Butler states that to perform gender as we choose to, is to "have greater freedoms to define and pursue our lives" (The Trans Advocate, n.d., unpaged) without detriment. It could be suggested, then, that the exclusive nature of PE for these participants, prevents them from performing gender in ways that are consistent with a view of themselves, consequently taking away their freedom and livability as a legitimate human being. That said, Tom's experience of PE highlights the individuality of trans* experience. Though for many in this study PE was fraught with discomfort, as Tom's "gender stuff" began later in life, his experience was one of enjoyment. It showed how certain normative boundaries could be transgressed, to a degree, in order to participate in ways that moved away from hegemonic femininity. Halberstam (1998) has argued that these transgressions are more accepted in girls gendered expression than boys, which could explain Tom's ease in participating in more masculine activities whilst identifying as a girl. Whilst there is no singular experience, it's clear from other participants that much work is required for PE to become fully inclusive of trans* youth.

Research has shown (Caudwell, 2014; Ullman, 2014) that uniforms based on binary gender are especially problematic as they force trans* youth to perform cisheteronormative versions of gender and deny any freedom of expression in relation to gendered identity. The same could be said of the enforcement of girls having to wear skirts (and skorts) more generally as the school reinforces particular norms that are expected of girls; to be feminine, appropriate, and modest. As our findings demonstrate, by conditioning students on the clothes schools feel are legitimate in that they adhere to typical gender norms, those experiencing gender incongruence feel singled out for rejecting the norms of the gender others perceive them to be. As Butler (1988) could argue, this enforced gender performativity is a conscious and direct reproduction of a gender role with the deliberate intent to have a specific outcome. As such, this policy becomes political, acting as a deterrent to trans* people in PE and preventing them from performing their gender successfully in this space. This begs the larger question as to why some schools are still enforcing such macroaggressions that prevent individuals from expressing themselves freely. Not only are they detrimental to trans* youth, but totally impractical for physical activity. In 2001, Flintoff and Scraton said "it seems almost unbelievable … that after at least a decade of research pointing to the compulsory PE uniform as being a key factor in girls' discomfort and dislike of PE, this practice continues in many schools today" (p. 13). And, yet, nearly 20 years after this paper, the situation is still very much the same.

Connor's accounts of PE provide a snapshot of the current PE culture in UK schools, and are vital in understanding the particular pressures faced by those who choose to transition publicly from one category of the gender binary, to the other. Whilst other participants transitioned after leaving school, or did not desire to transition (i.e. Lucy, who identified in a gender non-conforming way), Connor transitioned in school from girl-to-boy. His experiences in rugby lessons demonstrated a cisnormative culture within his school, with teachers privileging cisgender boys, and viewing his gender as illegitimate. As Butler argues, "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (1990, p. 140) and in Connor's instance the teachers' lack of understanding about his identity creates a paternalistic framing for Connor that is not afforded to other "legitimate" boys. Through reinforcing this sense that Connor is not a "legitimate" boy, capable of withstanding tackling, his teachers take away Connor's opportunities to fit in and feel accepted as his true self. Butler (1990) would argue teachers here use "compulsory frames that … police the social appearance of gender" (p. 33), making it difficult to represent as anything other. Additionally, this situation enforces the idea that displays of aggression, dominance and power are integral to the sport and consequently privileges hegemonic masculinity (Light & Kirk, 2000). Connor experiences both institutional macroaggressions (see O'Flynn,

2016) and interpersonal microaggressions (see Caudwell, 2014). In the former, the systemic exclusionary nature of schools and PE lessons to operate in gender segregated ways negatively impacts on the expectations of all non-male participants; Connor fitting into this category as an illegitimate boy. He also experiences interpersonal microaggressions when his peers disaffirm his trans* identity because of their application of binary norms of "body parts" to gender. These findings align with others (McBride & Neary, 2021; McBride, Neary, Gray, & Lacey, 2020) who identify that schools' cisnormative cultures and policies legitimize cisgender bodies, resulting in the invalidation and disregard of trans* bodies. This impacts directly on trans* youth's educational opportunities and ability to participate in meaningful activities (McBride et al., 2020), leaving no room for them to comfortably negotiate their own gender and participate freely in school sport and physical activity without judgment.

Butler's ideas around the inscription of gender on the body are central to this discussion. Whilst cisgender individuals unconsciously perform a traditional gender identity which in turn may help shape their physical body and clearly signify their gender, for trans* individuals it is not as straightforward. They must make conscious, and more complex decisions about their behaviors and their body in order to express their gender identity. Many physical signifiers of gender (such as breasts and genitals) are more visible and it is this visibility that is often problematic for participating in physical activity. For the participants in this study, sport creates a space where the physical body is exposed and "on show," leaving little room to hide these signifiers from the public gaze. If Butler (1988) argues that we perform gender by *doing* it, the body's physical representations of this become very important.

In line with this, the desire to pass whilst being physically active was a significant theme in this study, with fears of being misread exemplifying this issue. Understandably so, as failure to pass could increase one's level of social risk and vulnerability, and be emotionally and psychologically harmful (Nicolazzo, 2016). Our findings resonate with Elling-Marchartzki's (2017), who found that pre-transition, trans* participants would typically avoid physical activity due to feelings of shame about having the "wrong" body. Once fully transitioned, these participants felt confident in their new bodies, regularly wanting to display it in public spaces. In this sense these participants were *doing* gender correctly (Butler, 1988), affording them the privilege of passing and engaging in physical activity freely. This finding is in contrast with Jones et al. (2018) who found that young trans* people who had medically transitioned became physically inactive, due to not seeing the desired bodily changes from medical treatment. Butler suggests that there is "no necessary relationship between one's body and one's gender" (as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 46) as sex (the body) and gender (the internal sense of identity) are not the same. However, these participants, and evidently many others within this body

of research, saw one as the same—they most desired a body that represented a particular traditional gender identity in order to "pass" and be considered a legitimate man or woman. In this way, bodies that "pass" are afforded privileges that bodies that do not are not. We see this is other contexts, such as teaching, in which "passing" provides access to and an engagement with education in ways that being "visible" does not (Russell, 2021).

Although these body ideals are socially constructed, these individuals desired to adhere to these norms, and felt severe discomfort in their lack of alignment. This is demonstrated in society's reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality; individuals must neatly fit into the binary sex/gender norms (Butler, 1990; Gill, 2007; Namaste, 2000) in order to be accepted. The participants' need to adhere to these specific norms before participating in sport and physical activity are likely to have manifested because this is what is expected of them by society, to fit into these categories (Gill, 2007). For gender conformers, our research confirms that the body must show the physical characteristics of a binary sex (Travers, 2006). Interestingly, B would be described as a gender transformer; they reject the gender binary, favoring a continuum and like to express themselves in both feminine and masculine ways. The theorization of gender performativity in this case is more complex, and more research is required to explore how non-binary people negotiate their gender identity in sport settings, and how their body comes to represent their version of identity.

We acknowledge that our findings are not representative to the entire UK PE context as our sample is based in one region of the UK. Further study is required to increase our understanding of how the PE environment may differ for trans* youth in different schooling contexts (e.g. regionally, rural vs. urban, state vs. private). We also recognize that the age range of our participants (11 years between youngest and oldest) impacts our findings as the PE context, and education more broadly, has evolved considerably and the experiences of older participants may not reflect the current PE environment. We argue that their experiences are still vital in developing our understanding of how trans* people experience PE, and why aspects of the educational setting may be (or may have been) conducive with the avoidance of coming out as trans* during school. Furthermore, the contrasting experiences of Connor and the older participants are helpful in highlighting the generational differences experienced by trans* people. Halberstam (2016) and Meadow (2014) argue that older trans* people typically faced prejudice and difficulty in coming out, with many unable to transition until adulthood, as many in this study did. Conversely, for the new generation of trans* people it is conceivable for them to "grow up trans rather than struggling through long periods of enforced gender normativity" (Halberstam, 2016, p. 367), and Connor's PE experience, though problematic in other ways, highlights this change with his openly trans* status in school and ability to participate (largely) in activities that align with his gender identity.

Recommendations

One aspect of the interview process involved asking participants to describe their ideal PE environment. Though some of these aspects have been unpacked in our discussion, we include them all here as recommendations to schools, educators and policy-makers. As discussed, participants spoke of their desire for PE lessons to be mixed, so that all students have the same opportunities to participate and are not segregated based on assumptions about gender. Additionally, many felt that lessons should be less focused on sporting ability or competition, and instead on the "taking part" and enjoyment of physical activity. Lucy suggested that this could be facilitated through the introduction of some unconventional (and arguably ungendered) activities to the curriculum, such as cycling, rollerskating, skateboarding and hiking. Helen felt that an LGBTQ+ sports club would have encouraged her to participate in more sports, particularly in swimming, which was found to be an area of particular discomfort for many participants due to increased body exposure. On this note, the removal of gendered PE kits was important to all participants, and some felt that there should be more options in terms of the style or fit of kits too. For example, Connor felt self-conscious and exposed in his PE kit as it highlighted bodily curves and that he wore a sports bra underneath—signifiers of a gender that he did not want to be aligned with. In assent with Herrick and Duncan's (2020) findings on LGBTQ+ lock room experiences, our participants wished for increased privacy in PE changing rooms through the use of private cubicles, and some called for gender-neutral spaces too. More broadly, participants desired to see more awareness and understanding of trans* experiences in their school, from both teachers and students, and it was suggested that LGBTQ+-specific training for teachers, and the introduction of LGBTQ+ matters to the curriculum, would be an effective way for cisgender people to understand the complexities of trans* lives in the school and PE context.

Concluding remarks

Butler (1988) has argued that gender has been and is continuously shaped, by the activities we participate in and the people we participate in those activities with. As our understanding of gender continues to grow so does our need to bring trans* experiences into the conversation, not only about the binary defined nature of PE and its associated gender-aligned activities, but into a broader conversation about the values we attach to individual human bodies and how we legitimate some and exclude others. We also have to acknowledge that our existing schooling and PE structures are inherently gender biased and based from within a cisheteronormative framework. By exploring the sporting experiences of trans* people both in and after leaving school, it is evident that there are issues in accessing and positively engaging

in sport and physical activity. A cisheteronormative culture dictates the practices and policies that are at work in schools, and PE's habitual organization by gender intensifies this by legitimizing the "natural" gender binary and consequently presents few opportunities for individuals to transgress these boundaries to any alternative framework.

The issue remains that trans* youth experience the societal pressure to be read in an instant as their true gender (Halberstam, 1998), and go to great lengths to ensure this happens, as well as avoiding spaces where suspicion may arise. Researchers have suggested that a reorganization of school sport and PE away from the gender binary would improve these experiences (Caudwell, 2014; Sykes, 2011; Travers, 2006), for example by eradicating single-gender classes and activities, but so far little has changed in that respect. What is clear from the current study is that the PE climate is still restrictive, privileging particular bodies and identities that exclude trans* people. Our role as educators must be to challenge this otherwise all pupils will be subject to restricted patterns of understanding about gender, sex, sexuality, and identity and have limited options to experience anything other than the norm.

Notes

1. Trans* (with an asterisk) is used throughout this paper to recognize the broad range of gender identities that it represents (Nicolazzo, 2021).
2. The United Nations (n.d.) defines "youth" as the transitional period between finishing compulsory education and finding employment. They acknowledge that this category is fluid, but for statistical purposes they define this as people between the ages of 15-24 years old.
3. Goffman describes passing as the idea that a social identity deemed socially abnormal is "'nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it" (1963, p. 73).
4. A binder is used to flatten the breasts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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