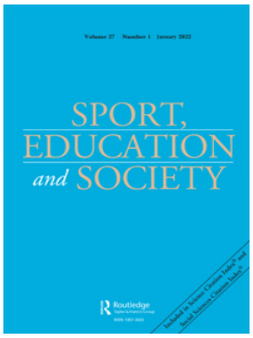

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The space between two closets: Erin Parisi mountaineering and changing the trans* narrative

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ABSTRACT

Erin Parisi is attempting to become the first trans* person to ascent the highest mountain on each of the seven continents, through her project TranSending 7. Erin seeks to create alternative trans* narratives that are based on the possibility of positive futures, as opposed to negative tropes of a limited life from the decision to transition. Multiple semi-structured interviews were conducted with Erin to understand her experiences and how narratives she hopes to present, not only impact upon her own sense of self, health and well-being but also present opportunities for others. Data were analysed via *reflexive* thematic analysis. Analysis highlights for Erin a paradox for many trans* people in moving from one closet to another, where being *invisible* as a trans* person is the ultimate goal. Erin's desire to shape positive trans* narratives acknowledge the gendering practices that take place within the climbing community and a sense of her having to 'earn the right to climb'. Erin's endeavours demonstrate an alternative way individuals can be situated 'in the sunshine' between these two spaces, where personal growth is not only possible but rich, meaningful, and progressive. In drawing upon theoretical concepts informed by possible selves theory, this research seeks to untangle the gendered space of the mountain for shaping positive and transformational trans* narratives for individuals positioned within these gendered boundaries. It also seeks to identify stronger and more positive possible futures for other trans* people and youth.

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Introduction

Erin Parisi is attempting to become the first trans* person to complete the Seven Summits, where climbers ascend the highest mountain in each of the seven continents. Her project TranSending 7 (https://www.transending7.org/) is 'dedicated to the advancement of transgender rights throughout all aspects of society by promoting athletics as a platform of transgender awareness and inclusion'. As this special edition seeks to open up dialogue around LGBTQIA+ issues in health, well-being and education, the authors employ possible selves theory to offer Erin's story as transformative in these areas.

Trans* individuals are those whose gender identity differs from the sex category they were assigned at birth. By contrast, a cisgender person does not experience this incongruence

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(Aultman, 2014). The term trans* goes beyond previous terminologies of trans or transgender which commonly represent only binary notions of gender such as trans-man or trans-woman (Killermann, 2012). Those in favour of the asterisk argue it allows a textual representation of the 'capaciousness of the trans* community' (Nicolazzo, 2021, p. 532), including identities such as non-binary, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, two-spirit and other gender identities that do not align with assigned birth sex.

Research into participation of trans* individuals in elite sport tend to focus on debates concerning inclusion and policies regarding sex testing for competitions such as the Olympics (Heggie, 2017; Ingram & Thomas, 2019). Contestation over the notion of a 'level playing field' appear to be targeted towards trans* athletes competing in women-only events amid fears over additional 'competitive' (physiological) advantage (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2015; Travers, 2018).

Research has identified fears of being denied access to gender-aligned changing rooms and facilities all negatively impact trans* people's use of sports centres in the UK (Keogh et al., 2006; Whittle et al., 2007) and participation in competitive sport and recreational activities (Jones et al., 2017). Hargie et al. (2016) note how being perceived as 'neither one or the other' whilst transitioning creates challenges to being present in a changing room with other exercisers. Identity disclosure was also important in López-Cañada et al.'s (2020) work, who found trans* individuals avoided victimisation by applying strategies to conceal gender identity and were more likely to take up non-organised physical activity post-transition. Although Elling-Machartzki (2017) found similar challenges to engaging in physical activity around body exposure, they also found a positive connection of being active in supporting the transition for trans* individuals. Sport and physical activity is widely acknowledged as having a positive role in good mental well-being, so the ability to engage freely, without fear, and with a more hopeful future-oriented perspective could be particularly beneficial for the trans* community, who have a higher risk of a range of mental health problems (Newcomb et al., 2020).

In line with Hargie et al. (2016), other researchers (Ferguson & Russell, 2021; Herrick & Duncan, 2020) found roots of transphobic concern emerging from earlier school experiences of physical education, where there was even less awareness of the needs of trans* youth (Landi et al., 2020). This may lead to questions regarding the visibility of potential trans* role models and how they are accessed by young people; a scenario of 'if you can't see it, you can't be it'. The internalised trans-negativity (Rood et al., 2017) from years of experiencing social stigma attached to a trans* identity can be difficult to shift without the possibility of an alternative possible self. Barber and Krane (2007) highlight one of the main ways to create a positive and inclusive environment in sport and physical activity for LGBT youth is to have discussions about LGBT-related issues as they arise in the media. This opens up the possibility to explore language use, prejudgments, perceptions, and how to be an ally. While these strategies are relevant to all LGBT groups, it becomes increasingly important to have access to trans* specific role models so trans* youth can feel visible and heard. Erin's own pursuit does just this and our aim for this article to amplify her story further.

Trans* experiences of sport and physical activity are usually explored within the wider LGBTQ+ community and as such, are often conflated with LGB ones (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011). This often results in the erasure of trans* voices (Caudwell, 2014) assuming sexual orientation and gender identity to be 'the same'. Trans* individuals may also identify as sexuality diverse, and research has highlighted the complex intersection of this in relation to youth and their sporting participation (Storr et al., 2021). As such, athletes who identify as trans* may have the best chance to challenge existing hierarchies around definitions of sex and gender and promote 'cultural change' in in how sport is structured and managed overall (Anderson & Travers, 2017).

Whilst the possibility of a trans* person contesting physical activity spaces is important, there is also an awareness that some trans* people could be described as 'gender conformers' rather than 'gender transformers' (Travers, 2006). Conformers would pursue an identity that fitted into the gender binary; a body that could be altered through hormonal/surgical approaches to match their body to their sense of who they are. This could enable gender identity to be 'inscribed' onto

their bodies, helping to alleviate experiences of gender dysphoria (Ferguson & Russell, 2021). Gender transformers would reject the binary itself and find alternative ways to 'be with' their body without adaptation. This binarism has been criticised for simplifying what is often a complex and ongoing negotiation of gender identity. In Caudwell's (2014) ontological discussion of transgender, they discuss the temporal and spatial factors that impact on identity; how trans* individuals may identify at different times, in certain places, with particular people. Caudwell's (2020) exploration of transgender and non-binary swimming experiences shows how public swimming spaces were deemed unsafe by participants due to the constant fear of bodily surveillance and lack of inclusive facilities. However, this same swimming space could become one of joy, empowerment and 'amazing freedom' in an exclusive trans swimming session (Caudwell, 2020, p. 6). Clearly, different spaces and times allow for alternative representations of gender and how notions of safety for trans* individuals are experienced.

Elling-Machartzki (2017) highlights how sport/physical activity can promote greater body awareness and pride when an individual feels connected to their 'right' body. Storr et al. (2021) note how participants found sport and exercise as a useful strategy to manage medical transition, creating a space for expression: something especially valuable for individuals previously competitive in sport. Likewise, in non-traditional sports such as men's roller derby, Fletcher's (2020) work indicates how the inclusion of non-binary and gender queer participants allows for a greater awareness and embracing of a wider understanding of masculinities. This created a more supportive space for gender diversity and trans* inclusion. While research into sport and more formalised physical activity is growing, less is known regarding trans* peoples' engagement in recreational and outdoor spaces such as climbing or mountaineering.

Activities encompassed in the broad field of outdoor education are widely recognised as gendered and represent strong ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Gray, 2018; Newbery, 2004; Warren, 2016). This reflects not only participation levels across activities but in those who lead groups, run organisations, and who ultimately gets to determine 'what is' outdoor education (Gray & Mitten, 2018; Rogers & Rose, 2019). Research also suggests additional risks for girls and women around misogyny and sexual harassment when participating in some of these activities (Clark, 2015; Davies et al., 2019). Bell et al.'s (2018) work in New Zealand also identify outdoor spaces as gendered through expectations of competency, strength, safety, and knowledge of equipment. Their work demonstrates the tension between what is both a 'nourishing' and 'troubling' terrain, something we see in Erin's story.

While some research focuses on LGBTQ+ experiences in this arena, with LGBTQ+ Girl Scouts (Argus, 2018), lesbian and gay outdoor education practitioners (Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008), women in outdoor leadership (Rogers & Rose, 2019), and how outdoor adventures spaces might be supportive of trans* youth (Wilson & Lewis, 2012), the experiences are often conflated. Little peer-reviewed work is available that focuses solely on the experiences of trans* individuals navigating these highly gendered spaces. Oakleaf and Richmond (2017) do explore the experiences of trans* individuals using public park and recreational facilities in the US. They found that while all participants valued the park spaces and generally felt safe, they still had to negotiate their safety within recreational spaces. Uniquely, this article has the possibility to explore notions of how gender was/is experienced and lived by Erin before and after her medical transition. The article also explores how the mountain space may shape the possibilities for a new narrative of a trans* life; one with hopes, expectations, and prospect for a rich and full life.

Theoretical framework

Possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) was developed to understand the influence of imagined futures on the construction of present identities. Possible selves conceptualise the interrelated nature of past and present temporalities, representing how an imagined and personalised future is inherently connected to the present (Henderson, 2019). Rather than being considered abstract and generic postulations, possible selves represent personalised and specific versions of the self: 'The

good selves (the ones we remember fondly), the bad selves (the ones we would just as soon forget), the hoped-for selves, the feared selves, the not-me selves, the ideal selves, the ought selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 957).

Possible selves provide *information* to assess and evaluate present behaviour determining whether current actions help direct individuals towards what they would like to become or what they aim to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2004). Possible selves also function as a *motivational influence,* deemed an 'incentive to act in order to achieve a hoped-for possible self, or avoid realizing a feared possible self' (Hamman et al., 2013, p. 309).

More recently, the theory has been used to understand perceptions of sporting bodies (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007), career transitions in sport (Hickey & Roderick, 2017) and formation of teacher identities (Hamman et al., 2013). Henderson's (2019), work explores how LGBT teachers negotiate their identities within a temporal matrix of past and present imaginings of future teaching identities, negotiated alongside contextual experiences of schools and identifying as LGBT. Projections of the self are likely to be structured by comparisons to normative values and beliefs within an individual's specific social milieu (Henderson, 2019; Hickey & Roderick, 2017); with socially constructed expectations, desires and fears about the kind of self an individual might become (Oyserman et al., 1995). Within the context of this research, we examine how the sense of a possible self evolves from Erin's previous experiences of climbing being carried through, adjusted, adapted, ignored and rejected, in the summits climbed so far.

Methodology

Erin Parisi

Erin has been involved in outdoor sports (climbing/hiking/exploring/snowsports/mountain biking and so on) for most of her adult life and is attempting to become the first trans* person to ascend the Seven Summits (see https://www.transending7.org/). To date, Erin has climbed: Elbrus (Europe); Kosciuszko (mainland Australia); Aconcagua (South America); and Kilimanjaro (Africa). Over the next two years (COVID-19-dependent), she intends to complete the final three summits: Everest (Asia); Denali (North America) and Vinson (Antarctica). Erin presents herself as having always been in 'transition' but began her physical and medical transition at 38 (she is now in her mid-40s) and uses the pronouns she/her/hers.

Whilst we situate this research within the wider understanding of trans* identity and experience, Erin's experience represents only one way of being trans*, generally aligning to the gender binary. We understand that this experience may not be generalised to broader trans* communities but hope her story provides hope and possibilities of a positive life for all in the LGBTQ+ community.

Researcher positionality

The authors acknowledge our own identities in terms of transparency in the research process: the first author identifies as a white cisgender gay woman; one author identifies as a white cisgender heterosexual woman; and two authors identify as white cisgender heterosexual men. Whilst we have made every attempt to interpret and convey Erin's story accurately, we cannot assume to fully understand the trans* experience when we ourselves do not identify in this way. To address this, we have sought to stay close to Erin's story through a narrative approach, as well as reflecting on the potential impacts to the research due to personal subjectivities (Finlay & Gough, 2008).

Research design and procedures

Contact was prompted by previous work completed by two of the authors in relation to trans* youth experiences of school based physical education and how this impacted on future choices to

participate in physical activity/sport in general (author & author). Key to this was an explicit connection to Erin's desire to promote greater visibility and accessibility for members of the trans* community in physical activity contexts. A series of email/online meetings were held to explore how this collaboration could be supportive of Erin as an individual and for her TranSending 7 project. The focus on changing the trans* narrative became the core of our work together and guided the shaping of the interviews. While we explicitly explore Erin's personal journey, in line with much qualitative research this study has the potential for naturalistic (e.g. findings resonate with readers' experiences), transferability (e.g. to another context), and analytical (e.g. findings connect to possible selves theory) forms of generalisability (Smith, 2018).

Ethical approval for the study was granted from the first author's institution. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with Erin over a one-month period. Interviews were conducted online using the videoconferencing system Zoom (Archibald et al., 2019) and lasted a total of 4 hours and 25 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. A semi-structured interview guide was utilised to enable predetermined topic areas to be explored (Patton, 2015). Topic areas were initiated by the first author but led primarily by Erin and areas she wanted to share: Erin's lived experience of the trans* narrative, experiences of climbing both before and after her transition, and the development of the TranSending 7 project.

Data analysis

A *reflexive* thematic analysis procedure was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2019), building upon Braun and Clarkes' (2006) original six-phase model: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up in a recursive manner. A *reflexive* thematic analysis process is not tied to a specified theoretical framework, therefore, enabling Markus and Nurius' (1986) possible selves theory to be integrated throughout as a lens through which to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Initially, the authors became immersed in the data's content by reading/re-reading interview transcripts to familiarise themselves with all data items. Data were then inductively and deductively coded with the intention of identifying passages of interest that adhered to both theoretical and content relevance (Braun et al., 2016). Codes were collated and organised into developing themes, with 'higher-level' candidate patterns capturing significant aspects of the data set (Braun et al., 2016). Owing to the flexibility and adaptability of *reflexive* thematic analysis, possible selves theory supported the coding process at this stage and represented the deductive element of the analytical process. The last stage, reviewing and refining the developed themes, established an analytic narrative and data extracts to form the final write up.

Throughout the process of collecting and analysing data, each member of the research team acted as a 'critical friend' to one another, encouraging reflection and acknowledgement of the existence of multiple interpretations, rather than attempting to reach a consensus (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Moreover, interview transcripts were shared with Erin as a form of member reflection, considered as 'a *practical opportunity* to acknowledge and/or explore with participants the existence of contradictions and differences in knowing' (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 108), to help generate additional insight.

Results

Three themes were developed to represent Erin's experiences and interpretations of her possible selves: (1) Internalising the struggle – Erin's invisible and feared self; (2) The mountain – Transitioning between possible selves; and (3) Changing the narrative – Erin's visible and ideal self. We use 'trans' in Erin's extracts to be true to Erin's voice rather than the research informed use of trans* in other sections. We refer to before and after 'transition' in this context to relate to Erin's pre- and post-*medical* transition.

Internalising the struggle: Erin's invisible and feared self

Before Erin's transition, she described her experience of internalising transphobia and stigma which significantly structured the development of her possible selves:

> I had internalised the trans struggle and what that meant. I had never known a trans person other than myself … my parents didn't know anyone who was trans, my friends didn't know anyone who was trans … my colleagues, for the most part, don't know any, they're taking their cues from that … narrative as well.

Possible selves are socially constructed, influenced by normative values and beliefs existing within an individual's social context. Thus, Erin was not exposed to significant others pre-transition who were able to model and demonstrate resistance towards the trans* struggle or even the absence of it. Consequently, Erin outlined her desire to remain invisible as an embodied feared self:

> I grew up without a positive example of what it was like to be trans and … I was taught how detrimental it was … if you're constantly being told your whole life to hide otherwise, you'll be seen as some sort of weird [sexual] predator, it's hard to associate anything beyond that.

> I very much believed the classic narrative which was: 'you're going to lose your job, you're gonna lose your friends, you're gonna lose your family, you're gonna lose your church, you're gonna lose your home, and hope it's worth it!'.

> I remember the times when I felt so alone, and I couldn't find other people who were like me. I couldn't find positive stories and I couldn't find any sort of reassurance and positivity that … things were going to be okay … that I could be myself and do the things I loved.

Even within outdoor spaces and the climbing community pre-transition, Erin was exposed to transphobic and homophobic microaggressions, which reinforced her feared self and the need to remain hidden:

> I was in those spaces, I heard what people were saying … I know what my climbing friends think about trans people, I know what my climbing friends think about gay men … When you're in my space as a trans person who's not manifested yet you're seeing it, you're seeing all that homophobia, all of that sexism and all of that transphobia … around you and saying 'God, I better keep hiding because this is … how the world will receive me'. As soon as I came out, all those people said 'we weren't sexist, we weren't' … but, I mean, I was there, I heard it … they just didn't know I was there.

Erin's internalisation of her feared self and need to remain invisible was derived from her past experiences, alongside negative images of being trans* she was exposed to and urged to avoid. Moreover, Erin's sense of inevitability regarding the need to hide was associated to concerns about her own safety. Erin described her fears associated with becoming her authentic self, whilst highlighting safety concerns climbing Mount Elbrus in Russia:

> What if my family outright rejects me and my friends completely walk away? What if I lose my job? What if I lose my health care? What if I lose … my partner? With all of those things there are … huge trade-offs.

> If you're LGBT … go there but hide, don't be known. Don't put yourself out, no public displays of affection … I knew that the rainbow flag is considered anti-family propaganda in Russia, so the display of the rainbow colours in the public forum is against the law in Russia.

The sense of possible loss was a powerful presence in Erin's life pre-transition; what would be the consequences of this decision and how to reconcile the enormity of that. This encompasses an additional emotional and mental load that most non-trans* people would not have to face:

> … you think about every aspect of your life before transition … gender feels very fixed for most people … when you think about what would it mean to transition … would I be able to work in an office and how would it change my … experience in the mountains and recreation … and ultimately my friendships because your … friendships and those activities are so tightly connected at that point.

> Losing your friends and being marginalized or stigmatized by … the people closest to you … that's heartbreaking … to be openly rejected by the people that you love and care about the most is this extraordinarily scary thing to think about.

The mountain space: transitioning between possible selves

Having initially internalised a trans* struggle associated with hiding and remaining invisible, during climbs on Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kosciuszko Erin was able to enact her hoped-for self, becoming someone who could openly celebrate achievements by flying the trans* flag, both physically and metaphorically:

> I got to the top and I just busted … the flag out and said you know; I came here to be proud of who I am. I've been beaten up in the last couple of weeks … I've been excluded from the conversation; I got food sickness down there and I've overcome all these things yeah so, this sun is rising up again in Africa seven years later in a completely different manifestation … so I'm not going to let the opportunity get past me (Mount Kilimanjaro).

> I busted the flag out, I figured … I've never seen these people before; I'll never see them again (Mount Kosciuszko).

However, when climbing Mount Elbrus, Erin still needed to engage in the strategy of passing for her own safety, remaining stealth primarily due to the cultural and political situation in Russia. However, when waiting for the flight home in Moscow airport, Erin described the positive sensation of disclosing her trans* identity, through accepting friend requests from climbers within her group on Facebook:

> … accepting the friend requests was pretty much admitting that … people are going to go and see my past, and that's the point … I started getting messages from people that were on the team that were like 'oh my god your story is crazy I had no idea what you were doing' … I got all these messages, and everyone was super supportive and super nice.

Disclosing her trans* identity after conquering Mount Elbrus proved positive for Erin, demonstrating a progression away from her feared self and desire for invisibility. When climbing Mount Aconcagua, Erin explained the internal conflict as to whether to remain stealth (feared self) or be transparent about her trans* history with her fellow climbers (hoped-for self). This situation once again demonstrates a resistance towards and transition away from Erin's feared self, creating a dilemma regarding the perceived benefits of disclosing her trans* identity:

> I was in this place where … sometimes you just feel this pressure to let people know who you are and then really it comes down to … what benefit is there to telling somebody that you're trans? … is it for me? Do I feel like I need to? Or do I feel like I want to? Is this something that I need to do to feel safe on the mountain?

This tension between disclosure and remaining stealth was complicated further by the gendered mountaineering space. Erin discussed her experience of climbing Mount Aconcagua and the inherent pressure she felt to 'prove' herself as both a woman (climber) and as a trans* person. This was a stark contrast to how she felt pre-transition, where her 'right to climb' was seemingly bestowed, rather than earned, as a male:

> … the tents were just getting crushed on the mountains and it ended up being that only a third of our team ended up making summit, and I was one of them … I felt strong and I felt like I had earned my place on the mountain at that point but … a lot of the time what happens is, I'm just kind of working a little bit harder and training a little bit harder and just trying to know a little bit more and have a little bit more technical knowledge so I can feel like I actually belong in teams

> … the narrative and the uphill … fight that trans people have faced and the uphill fight that women have faced as well … it's perpetuated by … all of these things that people say and these things that people build up and not even realise at some point that you've built this narrative … It's great sometimes because you don't have any sort of expectation or pressure to beat [anyone] … you're going in and the expectation is that, you know, you're weaker than the rest of the team or you haven't done this, you don't necessarily belong there … when I went out on the mountain … presenting as a man, the presumption was that I belonged there. And I think when I go out now, it's the presumption is that I have to earn the spot.

Changing the narrative: Erin's visible and ideal self

Erin articulated her euphoria connected with embracing what it means to be trans* on the world's highest peaks:

> The last thing I would have thought before was … that I would even come out to five people in my life, let alone … climb the highest mountain … you can stand on the highest point and be proud and have all this, like you're not making a choice between … hiding in the shadows, or living in the shadows because society won't accept you. You can have all of those things and stand in the highest light that you can find … I think the … cathartic … moment that nobody prepared me for was that you can be happy and live a happy life.

> To stand on that highest place really carries now that meaning … to me is superseding … all of the things that the world has told me about trans people, that it's embracing the exact opposite of what I was taught to embrace about the trans experience and that it can be a narrative of pride and a narrative of strength, rather than kind of what the world assigned to it.

Erin highlighted her motivation to continue becoming her ideal self, indirectly acting as a positive role model for other trans* persons across sporting cultures and beyond, to attack the negative trans narrative:

> I've been successful in … seeding that story into enough places that … the person that finds themselves in that situation where they're really just looking for positive experiences and a positive role model … I hate the word role model and I don't like to use it, but just a positive story of what can be accomplished, even in taking this risk of being your true self … I think I have attacked that narrative … I have changed some minds. I think that narrative is closely aligned with the violence that trans people face so I think I've been successful there … I didn't really ever want to be visible, you know, the whole goal was to be invisible all along, and I'm now … doing something that makes me very visible … I … feel good about … what we've done. I think that it's working.

> I think a lot of people … in society have that same image – you can't have a trans person occupy this space. Why not? Why can't they be trans and occupy this space?

> I guess, I'll just climb high enough that I can't hear them anymore … I always like to just climb high enough that I can't hear … my critics anymore … the higher you climb … the quieter they get.

Having never encountered a positive trans* role model pre-transition, Erin has now changed the trans* narrative for herself and others:

> I have people reach out to me even today that say, 'I saw you with your partner' and … to me that's super inspirational because … I know the world taught me how to be loved like this and as long as I continue that, the world will continue to love me.

> This is … what our mission needs to be … to share. We always hear about … people whose parents turn their back on them when they come out as gay, or … never invited again to a wedding or a family event because they come out as trans, but you never get the story of like what if it was different? So, it became … my mission to kind of cut down that narrative … I had to kind of find a conduit to do that with, but not just for me because … I'm not the only one … They're just stories that aren't told so … I decided that the best way to do that was to … look into the outdoor industry and … the allies that were out there and figure out a way that we can connect.

Throughout the process of establishing and enacting the TranSending7 project, Erin reflected on what it means to be trans* and outlined two 'positions' within opposing closets:

> I think as trans people we spend our whole lives trying to either live in one of two closets … we either want to hide forever and never be seen and then die, or we decide to be like 'okay I'm going to do this'. What I think a lot of people are saying is they want to … run across to another closet on the other side of the room where nobody sees them as a trans person.

For Erin, the closets represent distinct constructions of her visibility and have evolved in and through her experiences of TranSending 7. Having seen invisibility as a necessity and inevitable possible self, Erin now identifies with the possibility and desire to move beyond that fear, challenging the stigma and embracing the 'space' between:

> I changed my attitude on how I view being visible to the world through this experience because it was the scariest thing when I first came out, and I had no one to tell me what it would be like or that it would be okay. And then I said, I'll be the person that … looks at it and figures it's okay. I'm gonna say, 'it's okay to do this' … there's that whole space of like between those two closets. And I think that … if you only focus on the beginning and the end of your journey, like you don't get some of that space in between and the sunshine in between, when you're not in one of two closets you know, you're actually out in the sunshine at that point. And I think I've … learned to appreciate that. I shouldn't need to have to hide, no matter where I'm at in my journey or no matter where my journey takes me.

There was an awareness of the somewhat cruel irony of wanting to be able to live a life free of judgement as a trans* identifying woman, and yet, to do this, she felt she had to explicitly go out there and shout it from the world's highest summits.

Discussion

Erin's early internalisation of the trans* struggle represents what Markus and Nurius (1986) would articulate as the embodied feared-self. While an individual is free to create a diverse range of possible selves, these are informed and shaped, understood as valued and respected, by the social and cultural spaces we inhabit. The absence of anyone 'like her' meant Erin was only able to generate possible selves that indicated inevitable losses: friends, family, work, health, the outdoors, or the pathologizing as a sexual predator. As such, it is possible to see both the *informational* and *motivational* influences of the possible selves theory at play for Erin's choices to advance towards or avoid (Hamman et al., 2013) being visible as trans*. Consequently, Erin displayed a reluctant acceptance towards needing to hide, representing an incarnation of a socially constructed feared-self (Oyserman et al., 1995), derived from what she had already 'experienced' from her pre-transition social and climbing encounters. The absence of any similar social comparisons, to act as a significant other to show who you could 'become' (Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Oyserman et al., 1995) creates limited and restrictive possible selves.

The mountain as an unsafe, safe or 'earned' place to be, was a main theme in Erin's narrative and certainly connects to Henderson's (2019) reflection of the interrelated nature of past and present temporalities of possible selves. For Erin, whilst her previous experiences as a male climber showed her the levels of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia that the mountain/outdoor space could foster (Bell et al., 2018; Gray, 2018; Newbery, 2004), there were also moments of resistance, contestation, and reward. We know that countries such as Tanzania and Russia required Erin to operate in stealth, hiding her identity to ensure her safety whilst travelling to and from, alongside climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Elbrus.[1] As such this acknowledges the feared-self, of what you could lose by being openly trans*. We would also argue, however, that this is a courageous and open expression of challenging the limitations about what could be possible for Erin. As Phoenix and Sparkes (2007, p. 3) have alluded to 'such, possible selves are intimately connected to and shaped by the narrative maps made available to individuals and groups within specific cultural settings'. Her decision to undertake these two climbs shows an explicit use of possible selves as a *motivational* force (Hamman et al., 2013; Markus & Nurius, 1986); the act of 'busting out' the trans* flag as a powerful physical and metaphorical representation of being 'present' was a nourishing element of the climb itself (Bell et al., 2018). It is also an example of the temporal evolution of what are possible selves for future trans* climbers and beyond. Erin's efforts have forever shifted what Oyserman et al. (1995) and Hickey and Roderick (2017) have highlighted regarding the normative values/significant others within the social milieu that influence future imaginings. Receiving positive support from other climbers and the subsequent openness of Erin about her identity showed how a direct experience and the inherent negotiations, e.g. 'is this something that I need to do to feel safe on the mountain?' and 'earning' her spot, moves the possible selves for Erin in any future climb but also for those who follow her.

However, it is evident that there is still work to do. While Erin was generally 'read' as a woman on her trips to date, this brings with it a level of hegemonic masculinity that is still 'troubling' (Bell et al.,

2018). Her unique experience of presenting as a man in previous expeditions that accessed the presumption of belonging, versus now, presenting as a woman and having to 'earn my spot', is as clear an indication of one of the most explicit, direct and deliberate gendering practices we may be able to find in the sporting and physical activity world. We would also argue that Erin's attempts to initially move from 'one closet to the other' connects strongly to Travers' (2006) articulation of a trans* individual as a 'gender conformer', in which an individual would seek to fit into the pre-existing gender binary, rather than as a 'gender trans-former', who would reject the binary altogether. For Erin, having a body that allowed her gender to be 'inscribed' in ways that was 'read' solely as female certainly protected her from the most violent forms of gender discrimination in countries such as Tanzania and Russia. This does, however, demonstrate the precarious relationship between trans* identity and space, revealing how certain trans* bodies in particular spaces may not have such outcomes. This resonates with Caudwell's (2014, 2020) debate on the constant negotiations and choices trans* people must make to seek safe, affirming sport and physical activity environments. Oakleaf and Richmond (2017) also found the privilege of being able to 'pass' in recreational settings enabled some to avoid and manage risk of being 'read' as transgender.

We argue, in line with Storr et al. (2021), that 'passive assimilation approaches' (p. 2) to encourage the inclusion and participation of trans* people in sport and physical activity is not enough; direct action is required to alter these spaces. Wigglesworth (2021) notes that sexist, transphobic and misogynistic climbing route names are beginning to be re-named to create a more inclusive and welcoming culture in the climbing community. Erin's shift towards the 'sunshine in between the closets' where she explicitly recognises and identifies as a trans* woman for her work in TranSending 7, also seeks to alter the mountain and outdoor spaces. Her focus on embracing the 'space between' shows how important it is to celebrate the positive trans* experience. It is these positive and possible representations and role models that are likely to encourage cultural changes within the climbing community and to support the further development of health and well-being for all.

Conclusion

The journey Erin is on, through her TranSending 7 project, provides a clear example of how possible selves develop and evolve throughout life experiences. The marked shift in Erin's own assessment of what is possible reflects her achievements to date but also the power of being 'visible', showing others that there is a 'trans* me' that is recognisable to others. While Erin would not use the term 'role model' when describing herself, it is evident that is what she has and will continue to become for many. Attacking the negative narrative of her past, going 'high enough' to block out her critics, and seeing the possibility of the 'sunshine' in between her two closets, brings an overriding motivational quality to her own and others' possible selves. Regardless of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community or not, the courage to show her true self to promote a positive trans* narrative to all those who may have never seen or heard one before, is powerful.

As Rogers and Rose (2019) suggest, having more visible LGBTQ+ practitioners, participants and leaders within outdoor spaces would encourage more individuals within the LGBTQ+ community to participate in what is acknowledged to be a very rewarding experience, when gender diversity is accepted and valued (Wilson & Lewis, 2012). Increasing visibility of trans* individuals in all (outdoor) activities, could function as an impetus to promote 'cultural change' in the provision, management and promotion of sport and physical activity generally (Anderson & Travers, 2017). This could ultimately challenge existing hierarchies about 'who' should be there; a goal that was central to Erin's aim to promote trans* awareness and inclusion. Erin was asked to read this article, partly to ensure this was the story she wanted to tell but also to best represent her ideals about changing the trans* narrative. Her 'approval' in this sense becomes part of the wider focus on changing the trans* narrative in research and wider public discourse more broadly, to have a focus on a possible/positive future that moves away from pathologizing of trans* individuals that

Erin was overwhelmed with as a younger person. For her, the research process was/is somewhat transformative in that this is now a reality for others too.

From a theoretical perspective, we would argue that possible selves theory has great potential for research exploring the dynamic nature of identity and life transitions, whether physical, social, geographical or in gendered ways. Possible selves theory enables us to understand how identity is nuanced, while structured by a complex mix of past, present and future temporalities (Henderson, 2019; Markus & Nurius, 1986). The conceptualisation of self is underpinned in this article by the assumption that identities are influenced by social contexts, which are represented and enacted in relationships with others (Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Oyserman et al., 1995). Indeed, Erin's story demonstrates that personalised and 'imagined' future possible selves, in addition to past experiences and conceptualisations, are very much active in the present, impacting upon both her behaviours and beliefs (Henderson, 2019). However, Erin's position of 'power' and relative influence enables her to give form, meaning and direction to the possible selves of others, through her promotion and advocacy for trans* inclusion. We encourage researchers working across sport, exercise and physical culture disciplines to consider the richness of possible selves theory, and how it could be applied to bring 'forth the temporal and future-oriented dimensions of self-knowledge and meaning making … to identity exploration and formation throughout the life span' (Packard & Conway, 2006, p. 267).

Consequently, we close this article by drawing on Markus and Nurius' (1986) possible selves theory for future trans* youth, who can now believe 'what others are now, I could become' (p. 954). For Erin, she now has the narrative of strength to support her on the rest of her TranSending 7 journey but also for her personal life – the possibility of a happy and fulfilling life in the 'space between two closets'.

Note

1. Tanzania does not have any laws that protect against LGBT discrimination and identifying as homosexual is illegal. In Russia, the showing of the 'rainbow' or other LGBTQ+ flags would be regarded as an outward expression of 'support' for LGBT relationships and is illegal.

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