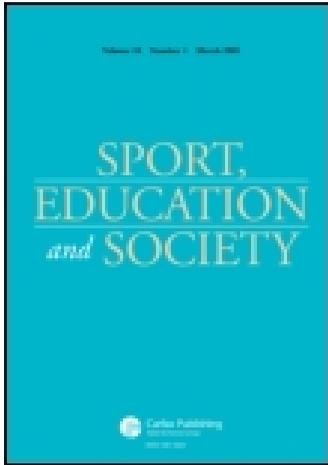


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[Transgender] young men: gendered subjectivities and the physically active body

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

[Transgender] young men: gendered subjectivities and the physically active body

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In this paper, I discuss [transgender] young men’s social, physical and embodied experiences of sport. These discussions draw from interview research with two young people who prefer to self-identify as ‘male’ and not as ‘trans men’, although they do make use of this term. Finn and Ed¹ volunteered to take part in the research following my request for volunteers at a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth group. Their narratives provide valuable testimonies on transgender and transgender and sport: more specifically, their experiences of school sport, their embodied subjectivities, transitioning and sport participation. The focus on transgender and sport also highlights the taken-for-granted assumption that a coherent LGBT collective exists and that transgender is a fixed, definable and agreed-upon category. The paper, therefore, has two aims. First, it intends to privilege and document the views of two young people who identify with a group that is often marginalised. Their narratives raise significant questions in relation to transgender and sport participation in educational and recreational settings. Second, the paper seeks to expose the methodological and ontological complexities surrounding ‘LGBT’ and ‘transgender’ and place these debates within sport and educational studies.

Keywords: *Transgender; Transgender young men; Sport and school sport*

Introduction

Transgender, sport, school sport and physical education (PE) have received limited exclusive coverage in the literature on gender, sexualities and sport. For some time now, contributions from scholars interested in gender and sexualities have tended to centre either gay men’s (Pronger, 1990; Anderson, 2005) or lesbians’ (Griffin, 1998; Caudwell, 2003) experiences of sport and competitive sport. Similarly, within education studies, lesbian (Clarke, 1996), gay and bisexual students (Rivers, 2004) are often the focus for research. Even within more recent contributions from queer studies of sport (Caudwell, 2006; King, 2008), transgender tends to remain largely marginalised.

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Having said that, there are important recent contributions that include discussion of transgender (Symons *et al.*, 2010; Sykes, 2011) as well as analysis of transgender participation and sport policy (Sykes, 2006; Symons and Hemphill, 2006; Travers, 2006; Travers & Deri, 2011). I draw on these works to provide a further contribution to the literature on sport and the intricacies of transgender participation.

Discussions in this paper are not only located within sport and (physical) education studies, they also aim to make a contribution to a broader transgender studies. For instance, I support Judith/Jack Halberstam's (2005) advocacy that transgender, specifically, is highly significant to any analyses of embodiment, space and place. Halberstam convincingly positions the '... transgender figure as a central player...' (p. 21) in contemporary gender debates on issues such as identity, liberation, transgression and activism as well as in critical discussions on institutional gendered practices—exclusion, rejection, abjection. Acknowledging key thinkers of (queer) gender and sexualities (e.g. Berlant & Warner, 1998; Butler, 2000), Halberstam focuses on the liminality of transgender, arguing that transgender subjects are:

... those who are excluded from "the norms that govern the recognizability of the human," [they] are sacrificed to maintain coherence within the category of the human, and for them, style is both the sign of their exclusion and the mode by which they survive nonetheless (p. 153)

Referring to 'human community' and excluded 'subcultural lives' and bringing to the fore a range of popular cultural practices, Halberstam animates the injustices experienced by transgendered peoples. At the same time, recognising the potential productivity of transgender, Halberstam argues that it is transgender's intermediate status that intimates potential gender liberation, transgression and flexibility.

Through a focus on the 'human community' of school sport, this paper locates transgender young people in existing sport, gender, sexualities debates. The testimonies offered by Ed and Finn demonstrate how the maintenance of supposedly coherent binary sex-gender categories in sport and PE impact on their active involvement. Discussion extends existing critique of the compulsory order: sex-gender-desire, in sport (cf. Caudwell, 1999, 2003) and provides further evidence of how the gendered body remains central to processes of exclusion, rejection and abjection. Moreover, I highlight the harmful effects of education and sport systems that rely on an exclusionary two sex-system.

Methodology: researching 'lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)'

The research process

At the beginning of this research project, I set out to complete qualitative interview research with young people from an established and popular once-a-week LGBT youth group (people aged between 16 and 23 years old); the aim was to conduct four focus group interviews, one each with LGBT young people. In this vein, I was

introduced to the group in their scheduled ‘announcements’ meeting as someone who worked at a local University, was interested in sport and wanted to conduct research on LGBT experiences of sport participation. After this initial introduction, I attended four weekly sessions over a six-week period. I sat with the young people and volunteer staff during informal sessions. I contributed to casual conversations when I was included and answered questions that were directed at me. I accepted cups of tea and invites to eat with the young people when it was time to eat food that had been donated by local businesses and restaurants. In this respect, I ‘hung out’ with the young people, albeit as a known/overt academic and researcher.

Following this initial period in which I got to know some of the young people and they got to know me, I formally announced (again in the official ‘announcement’ slot) that I was looking for volunteers to take part in focus group research; that I was interested in how lesbian and bisexual women, gay and bisexual men and transgender people felt about school sport and PE. After my announcement, there was no immediate response from the group. However, later that same evening, a young man approached me; he said he would like to take part in the research. This paper is based on one-to-one interviews with this young man (Finn) as well as his boyfriend (Ed) who—at a later date—also volunteered to be interviewed.

In the discussions that follow, I draw from three semi-structured interviews, two with Finn and one with Ed. The interviews lasted, on average, approximately 50 minutes; they took place at Finn’s home in August 2011. The three interviews were transcribed verbatim, then, they were given to Finn and Ed for their scrutiny, comments and approval. Both young people verbally confirmed their comfort and satisfaction with the interviews and transcriptions. Similarly, at a later date and once this paper had been written, Finn and Ed were given copies of the final draft; they have verbally supported the contents and submission of this paper to an academic journal.

Analysis of the transcripts fits within both a critical paradigm and theory-based analysis (Markula & Silk, 2011). A critical paradigm allows a connection between the voices of Finn and Ed (the ‘empirical material’) and society’s social structures, therefore enabling an explicit and developed connecting of ‘the private world of that researched and the public worlds of wider context’ (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 106). Such an approach, in this instance, encourages a critique of the ways social structures and cultural practices arrange gender and produce dominant gender norms. The theory-based analysis coheres with fidelity towards specific theoretical affiliation. In this case, the interview research with Finn and Ed reflects my commitment to queer theoretical approaches to the body, gender and sexualities. A queer approach—with its emphasis on the celebration of non-normative genders and sexualities and advocacies of fluidity and multiplicity—supports critical engagement with the ways genders and sexualities are produced and fixed in place through discursive practices. A key concept—notably, not the only significant concept—within this approach is heteronormativity.

Researcher reflexivity

Returning to the research project, in practice I was able to organise two focus groups (one with volunteer young women who identified as lesbian and one with volunteer gay and bisexual young men). It was not possible to arrange a transgender focus group because only Finn and Ed came forward as volunteers. In itself, this ‘LGBT’ approach to researching young people, gender, sexualities and sport (namely four focus groups) as well as the actual research, raises important methodological issues. This warrants further analysis under the remit of methodology because it highlights significant epistemological and ontological issues surrounding ‘LGBT’ and ‘transgender’ in research processes.

My original research design adopted the idea that discrete groupings existed within the LGBT community and, as such, could be researched. Hence, the proposal to conduct four separate focus group interviews. This intent formed the application for, and successful awarding of, research monies (a small research grant)² to assist with research costs such as room hire and transcribing. In this way, ‘LGBT’ was recognised—during preparation, bidding for funds, assessment of the bid and at the time of the study—both methodologically and, in turn, ontologically, as a coherent category with four distinct and discrete groups. On reflection, such an assumption is flawed; the LGBT community does not exist in such a clearly defined and discrete way.

The idea that people, in this case young people, can be clustered together under the umbrella term ‘LGBT’ is problematic on many fronts. LGBT suggests artificial alliances between groups of people who have diverse sexual and gendered identities/subjectivities as well as complex social locations of class, ethnicity, disability and age. Even within these individual groups, experiences of sexuality and gender are discontinuous. Additionally, the label (LGBT) frequently becomes synonymous with the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals and communities. It is these two groups that are most often perceived as available and easily accessible, as was the case at the onset of this research. This perception, in part, occurs because as we move along the LGBT collective, ‘B’ (bisexuality) and ‘T’ (transgender) tend to slip from view and, consequently, the needs of these communities often go unanswered and/or ignored, thus, perpetuating the dominant position of ‘L’ (lesbian) and ‘G’ (gay). In short, there exists a hierarchy of (in)visibility. Critical reflection on this hierarchy is a pressing concern for researchers of gender, sexualities and sport. This is because we have limited knowledge of the relationships between bisexuality and sport, and transgender and sport. In comparison, research and writing on lesbian and gay critical issues in sport exists and has done so for three decades.

A further problem with methodologically relying on ‘LGBT’ to guide research design is the ontological status of transgender. In theory, transgender refers to female-to-male (transgender man) and male-to-female (transgender woman) people. However transgender people’s experiences of ‘transitioning’ are not shared and, as Travers (2006) highlights, there has been some recognition of this in the—rather simplistic—binaried differentiating of transgender people as either *gender conformers*

or *gender transformers*. Simply put, so-called conformers are said to take an essentialist view to gender and ‘do not challenge the gender binary but rather attempt to alter their assigned location within it’ (Travers, 2006, p. 434). In other words, they make an absolute transition from the status ‘woman’ to the status ‘man’. This transition might involve surgery. So-called transformers offer a more radical stance by rejecting ‘the binary, either entirely or in favor of a continuum’ (p. 434). Transgender transformers might identify as transgender in order to destabilize the dominant two-sexed system. Perhaps ironically, this ontological model of transgender relies on neat binary opposites: conformers and transformers. It lacks the incompleteness that often accompanies people’s lived experiences of gender.

Naming sex, gender, sexuality

In their individual and separate interviews, the first question I asked Finn and Ed was: *how do you identify?*

I’m technically a trans male but I identify as a male without the trans. The trans is there because it has to be, if that makes sense? (Finn)

Erm ... okay, well, I identify as male, I don’t identify as trans male because my identity isn’t around the fact that I’m trans ... but, because I wasn’t born a man I am a trans man. (Ed)

During the interview research with Finn and Ed, what becomes clear in the subsequent discussion and analysis is that transgender is complex, intricate and often incomplete. Importantly, non-transgender is not the opposite of this and it is worth highlighting at this point that ongoing analyses of gender—and the emergence of numerous sophisticated gender theories within feminist thought and queer perspectives—testifies to the density of *all* genders (and sexualities).

Finn and Ed live their chosen gender in different ways. Ed, because he attends school—a girls’ school—and lives with his parents, sometimes identifies as female but prefers to identify as male. Finn, who has recently graduated and has not lived with his family for several years, identifies as male all the time. What becomes apparent is that gender, for these young people, has involved and continues to involve on-going processes of negotiation. However, despite the sometimes complex nature of their transgender subjectivities and transitioning bodies, both Finn and Ed are clear about their maleness, as the above comments testify.

At this juncture, it is worth introducing the term *cisgender*. Both Finn and Ed use this term during their interviews. The term and their use of the term is important because it allows members of transgender communities to label dominant gender groups and therefore provides challenge to ‘transgender’ remaining the named, and marginalised, ‘other’. For example, Finn talked about ‘... straight identified, cisgendered people...’. According to Schilt and Westbrook (2009), *cisgender* can be explained in this way:

Cis is the Latin prefix for “on the same side.” It compliments *trans*, the prefix for “across” or “over.” “*Cisgender*” replaces the terms “nontransgender” or “bio man/bio woman” to refer to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity (p. 461)

Other terms that are used by Finn and Ed include lesbian and gay when referring to people they meet in the social communities they are a part of. And, Ed uses ‘homo’ when referring to his gender identity being read as lesbian by students at his school. Interestingly, transsexual did not emerge as a category during the interview research. Transsexual tends to denote surgery and reflects individual choices as well as societal constraints, for example, access to expensive medical care.

Transgender, sport and school sport

Sykes (2011) suggests that ‘[t]he implications of intersex, transgender and transsexual subjectivities have not been seriously considered within physical education’ (p. 35). As such, we have few personal accounts from young people, despite awareness that ‘[t]ransgendered people are becoming an increasingly visible presence in western society’ (Travers, 2006, p. 431) and that there is a ‘general ignorance and prejudice concerning transgender issues’ (Symons et al., 2010, p. 56) in most sporting communities.

Finn and Ed have different experiences of school sport and PE. There are several reasons for this. Finn attended a mixed school and played team sports—football and hockey—to a high level (including regular participation at Football Association (FA) ‘centre of excellence’ and county-level hockey). Recently, he graduated from University. Ed continues to attend a state all-girls school. He is younger than Finn and prefers sports such as tennis. Finn has been taking ‘T’ (testosterone) for 7 months. Ed does not, at this point, take ‘T’; he made these comments during the interview:

I’m still not out in my home town ... ‘cause I’m still at the 6th form college that’s connected to a school. I’m in a position of authority at my school, I’m a house captain ... I mean my friends at school know ... the important teachers know. I do psychology ... and ... erm ... and we’re ... doing gender identity this coming year and obviously I had to tell my teacher... (Ed)

As with other non-normative genders and sexualities, ‘outness’ can become a persistent and complex feature of everyday living. ‘Outness’ is not a simple and/or fixed process or social location. It is multi-layered, potentially infinite and exists beyond the individual concerned. For instance, it might include being ‘outed’ by friends and family. Both Finn and Ed have intricate personal narratives surrounding their ‘outness’ as male, man, trans man. This is evidenced in Ed’s comments above and Finn’s comments here:

J: Do you still play football?

F: I stopped playing ... last year, ‘cause I played all through my 1st year for the women’s team and then once I’d hit my 2nd year and started realising actually I

need to transition. I carried on playing. I told a couple of the girls who were closer to me; also those I thought needed to know. And had a kind of [pause] “Well you really need to think whether you should be playing for a women’s team now” and I was like “I’m not even on T or anything. I’m just coming out; it’s all I’m doing”.

School sport, and in Finn’s example, University sport is based on ‘the two sexed/gendered sports model’ (Symons et al., 2010, p. 56). In such a cultural context, which is sharply defined and observed, perniciously, ‘outness’ is an ongoing process of negotiation. And, it is not only the playing fields that are significant. Sykes (2011) argues that: ‘[c]hanging rooms are one of the most traumatic spaces within the built environment of schools for queer and trans students’ (p. 45). She goes on to demonstrate that responses to trans students range from ‘[g]ender fascism ... to brutal public acts of transphobic violence’ (p. 45).

In his story of an intersex young person, Eugenides (2002)—in the award winning book *Middlesex*—captures the distinct ordering of these spaces:

Of all the things I had to get used to at my new school, the most difficult, therefore, was the locker room ... Hierarchies exist everywhere, but especially in the locker rooms ... Let me perform a quick taxonomy of our locker room. Nearest the shower were the Charm Bracelets ... they were the rulers of my new school ... I passed next into the area of the Kilt Pins. The most populous phylum in our locker room ... They were like the devices that held our tartans together, unremarkable, dull, but necessary in their way ... deeper into the locker room ... back to where the tiles were cracked and the plaster yellowing, under the flickering light fixtures ... I hurried to where I belonged ... I waited until they left before I undressed ... I wasn’t naked for a second. (pp. 295–299)

Belonging to a particular space within gender and sexual hierarchies assumes inclusion and participation in the environment. For Finn, mere entry in to these school spaces was, at times, impossible:

F: [I] played for the hockey team and I had short, spiky hair at the time and refused to wear a skirt so was in shorts and a t-shirt, [I] walked in to this other school’s female changing room and basically got shouted out of the changing room ‘cause I wasn’t meant to be in there as I was one of the boys...

J: What did your teachers do?

F: They weren’t in the changing rooms at the time, I never told anyone about it ‘cause I thought it was quite embarrassing really to be told I was a boy when at the time I was female and I had it all kind of instilled in me that I’d try to let it go, deal with it.

Finn’s experience, as Sykes (2011) has shown in her research, demonstrates that ‘... getting changed for physical education was far from fun or safe in emotional or psychic terms’ (p. 25). On another occasion and once inside the changing rooms, Finn recalls being told by a classmate: ‘I can’t get changed ‘cause you’ll be looking at me’. Despite these hostilities, Finn did continue to play sport in school. However, his participation involved constant clashes with normative gendered PE culture, including the now very familiar dislike of the uniform girls are often forced to

wear: 'I don't understand the logic of wearing a skirt to play sport, it just doesn't make any sense (laughs) I just don't get it, I never will' (Finn).

Fortunately, Ed did not suffer the same processes of exclusion, marginalisation, hostility and potential harming. This seems to be because he attends an all-girls school:

E: Erm . . . I didn't actually mind that [changing rooms] much 'cause things weren't split into boys and girls it was just girls and I didn't specifically not identify as female

J: So you didn't have to walk into a changing room . . . And people say "you're in the wrong changing room"

E: Exactly, it was just . . . everyone was in the same place and there weren't specific toilets for different people. It's harder now in 6th form because there is [boys' toilet] . . . whereas the boys have to . . . whenever the boys have to get changed they have to find an empty room.

Ed talks about playing and enjoying tennis at school—he played for several years, but he immediately disliked swimming. However, when asked if swimming related to his embodied gendered subjectivity he suggests that: 'lots of children have, you know, body issues when they're young . . . and lots of children have gender identity issues when they're young . . . doesn't mean they're going to grow up to be trans'.

Finn and Ed have different experiences of their school built environments, especially PE changing rooms. Fundamentally, this appears to relate to the different education systems of co-ed and sex segregation and the concomitant school infrastructure and design. Entering school spaces in an all-girls' school, coupled with Ed's fluid and transitioning gender identity, means he experiences less hostility. In this way, Ed shares similar experiences with some of the transgender players successfully participating in lesbian softball leagues in Travers and Deri's (2011) research.

Finn's experiences, on the other hand, demonstrate the brutality of gender normativity in school (and University) settings. They reflect the close links between sport (PE), built environment, embodiment and exclusion that are significant for young people. These links, especially in relation to changing rooms and people who do not fit into gender (and sexuality) normativity, are familiar and serve to make abject individual participants (Fusco, 2005, 2006). Additionally, Finn's anecdotes highlight the omnipresence of institutional gendered processes of exclusion, rejection and abjection (Halberstam, 2005); it is other students, at an informal level, who are implicated in these processes.

What is most striking in Finn's testimonies is the way he stands alone when facing processes of exclusion, rejection and abjection. I argue that his solitude and isolation is a political issue, which demands due care. In this vein, Sykes (2011) asks: '[w]hat are the effects of . . . social and psychic norms on students whose bodies are lived as or perceived to be different?' (p. 19). In answering this question, she opens the way for a broader and deeper discussion on potential changes within PE contexts.

More specifically, she advocates ‘curriculum reform’ and a keener awareness of ‘body ethics’. She draws from her research findings evidencing ‘the marginalisation of queer bodies’ (p. 105). Thus, she demonstrates the extent of social exclusion and harm ‘queer bodies’ frequently endure within dominant neo-liberal PE curricula and accompanying body ethics: curricula and ethics that purportedly promote ‘fun’, ‘joy’ and good ‘health’ for all participants.

(Transgender) young men and embodied subjectivities

... is it mostly people who identify as male or people who identify as female in the trans group? (Jayne)

... we have quite a few non-binary people actually. (Ed)

... you can't group people into male or female because not everyone identifies as male or female. (Finn)

There is an assumption (which I unwittingly perpetuate in my interview question to Ed), that a stable binary gender system exists and that all people, including transgender people, can be classified within this system (Sykes, 2011). Both Finn and Ed make the point that this is not the case. Their assertions highlight the complicated ontological status of transgender and provide a warning to researchers in the field of LGBT sport participation.

Transgender does not always fit the traditional binary systems, which upholds both gender norms and dominant sport cultures. Sport and PE, as well as governance and policy of sport and PE, fails to recognise multiplicity and the wonderfully messiness of gender and sexuality. Usually, ‘non-binary people’ are rarely permitted access to sport; indeed, in elite competitive sport they are deliberately sought out and their participation is regulated (Caudwell, 2011). Policies of inclusion are medicalised and invariably demand a fixed embodied transition from one sex/gender to the opposite sex/gender (Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006). Since sport depends on such definitive oppositional categories, it ‘makes sports participation particularly difficult for transgender and intersex peoples’ (Symons et al., 2010, p. 56). The difficulties are not simple and static, but change according to social and cultural contexts and shifting ontologies of transgender and intersex. For example, Travers (2006) and Travers and Deri (2011) document the successful inclusion, aided by official transgender inclusion policy, of some self-identified transgender and transsexual men in lesbian softball leagues in the USA.

On several occasions, Finn has had to make significant decisions about his embodied subjectivity in order to participate in sport. Unlike transgender men playing in lesbian softball leagues, sport and school sport policy in the UK has prevented Finn from participating as ‘male’. Finn’s brief biography highlights how central these decisions were to his childhood participation:

J: Before you came to Uni did you identify in any way ... when you were at school, did you identify as female or male?

F: Erm ... I had no choice, 'cause I was so into sport at school I had no choice but to be female...

J: So when you say you had to identify as a female, was that so you could get in the hockey team, and those kinds of things?

F: Yeah. I've been playing football since I was about 6 and my dad started up my home team, so I had no choice but to be female, but I was around a lot of masculine women anyway so it was fine. I had that kind of happy medium.

The rigid categorisation of people by gender is not particular to heteronormative-gendered discourse. Lesbian and gay—the dominant within the LGBT collective—response to transgender also implicates a heteronormative gender presumption. As Symons and Hemphill (2006) point out, '... discrimination does not always come from straight society and organisations' (p. 114). Travers (2006) and Travers and Deri (2011) caution against assuming LGBT sport spaces are open to transgender individuals.

Ed makes the point that '[m]ost of the community (LGBT) is very LG'. He goes on to suggest that '... you're either getting into awkward or sometimes very uncomfortable situations' and he describes such a situation:

I find a lot of the LGBT community, the LG side of it are not, erm ... are not educated in trans issues ... This woman, just couldn't gauge ... she asked if I had a girlfriend and I said I had a boyfriend and he works inside (bar) and they were like "you have a boyfriend?" they obviously perceived me as a lesbian and that if I was a straight woman why was I in a gay bar, that was the thought.

Ed talked about this particular incident for some time. His discomfort stems from the lack of understanding and/or empathy he receives from, in this case, a woman he recognises as lesbian. Her failure to recognise Ed as male developed into an uneasy and difficult situation. Ed's point is that 'a lot of the LGBT community, the LG side of it ...' fail to imagine the transgendered body and transgender romantic/sexual relationships. Instead, some 'LG' people appear to continue with dominant notions of sexuality and gender identity and in this case Ed is recognised as lesbian. The confusion arises when he declares he has a boyfriend, which, for the woman involved, acts to mark him as heterosexual (and not bisexual). These processes of recognition suggest homonormativity (King, 2009) in as much as the lesbian and gay community have constructed, or had constructed for them, dominant (normative) versions of sexuality and gender identity. These dominant versions exclude transgender and transgender romantic/sexual relations. Consequently, Ed is not acknowledged as transgender, a transgender young man and a transgender young man with a boyfriend. In many ways, the refusal to grasp Ed's gender and sexual identity operates to deny him legitimate subjectivity within the LGBT community. Ed concluded that he does not always 'feel comfortable, even in an LGBT situation' and when I asked him: 'Do you feel safe when you are out and about?' he replied:

It depends where I am, to be honest . . . sometimes not so . . . for example on the night of Pride, although I was in an LGBT environment, Finn wanted to go home and I didn't want to be staying without him.

For Finn, entering into a LGBT sport environment raises comparable feelings of apprehension, uncertainty and anxiety. These are similarly based on a desire to be recognised as male by heterosexual men and women, lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men.

I interviewed both Finn and Ed during the week leading up to and week immediately after Brighton Pride (August, 2011). Ed talked about his experiences of leisure activities associated with Pride events. Finn talked about his experiences of a Pride LGBT football tournament. The LGBT sport/football community, as with bar and pub cultures, is similarly dominated by the visibility of lesbian and gay people/footballers. For Finn, as he recounts during his second interview, this raised some issues:

Well I thought it was really good actually to see another trans person there [in the same team at the tournament] because usually it's a bit daunting even though it's LGBT, but the majority are probably going to be gay people, so I was a bit concerned about that. I didn't know if I would be seen as male by the other participants or not; that's why I was quite quiet around them, I worry that things would give me away.

Finn has participated in football frequently and regularly when he was young; he played to a high level. However, he stopped playing during his second year at University. The first interview with Finn was before the Pride LGBT football tournament. In that interview, he admitted: 'Now I don't do anything'. For Finn, attending and participating in the tournament was a major re-engagement with the game. It was only possible because the team he played for, like a handful of other teams in the UK, fielded a mixed team. Fielding mixed teams represents a form of activism. This is because mixed teams and mixed competition are banned by the FA after the age of 13 years. In other countries, such as Germany and Holland, this age is much higher at 18 and 19 years, respectively (Hills et al., 2011). Obviously, adhering to the ban (in this case and other cases) actually excludes footballers from the game. In other words, if the team complied with the FA ruling, Finn and the other transgender player he mentions would not have been able to take part in an LGBT/Pride sport event. When I asked Finn if he enjoyed playing, he said:

Yeah. I mean it was nice to do, but it's difficult to judge what it's going to be like. I think I took a step for myself actually to just say "yeah I'll do it". Cos if I'd have said "no" I'd have just come home and been like "Oh I should have done it and now I just don't know"

Participation and transitioning bodies

J: So, you think you could get involved in sport as long as it was done in a safe. . .

F: Yeah

J: Do you think it would help you with your, sort of, how you feel?

F: I think it might make me feel less self conscious really 'cause I do have a very, I'm lacking in self esteem at the moment I think, due to the whole male – female thing with sport. Right, I love sport. I played sport for years. 4 or 5 times a week, and now I do absolutely nothing... 'cause of this whole trans thing. 'Cause there's no awareness.

Both Finn and Ed talk about previously identifying, for a short time, as lesbian. This identity does not make sense to them now, partially because as they suggested, they are not sexually attracted to women. However, as lesbians they tended to be accepted by school friends. During the interview, Ed uses both the word 'lesbian' and 'homo', he recalls: '[W]hen I told them that I was a, erm, "homo" they were like, "cool, okay"'. Most of them had got a lot of questions'. Despite no longer identifying as lesbian, both Finn and Ed had access to, and were able to participate in, sport. As lesbians, their gendered identities as well as their involvement in sport made sense to those around them. However, at the time of the interviews, their participation levels had significantly dropped. For Finn, this was more noticeable given his previous active involvement with team sports.

In her research on policies of inclusion and transgendered players in lesbian softball leagues in USA, Travers (2006) reveals that in this context it is easier for male-to-female transsexuals to participate compared to female-to-male. This is in spite of the latter usually having 'participated in lesbian spaces for years before transitioning and may therefore be more familiar with the cultural norms and anti-sexist ethos of women-only spaces' (p. 442).

Some of the team members in the lesbian softball league under study were proactively devising policies of transgender inclusion and in a more recent article Travers and Deri (2011) document examples of successful participation by transgender and transsexual players. However, the emergence of these types of policies is relatively recent and rare. Policy documents do exist at International level (e.g. International Olympics Committee) and national level in the UK (e.g. Department for Culture, Media and Sport, England Hockey Board). Regrettably—and as previously mentioned above—policy treats transitioning as a fixed and permanent condition of participation. Such conditions in many instances serve as barriers to participation. Ed made this point when we discussed transgender peoples' participation in sport: '[t]here is basically no access, particularly if you're transitioning; if you're post transition you can sort of do it'. And, when I asked Finn if he thought he would return to his former levels of sport participation, he said:

F: Ironically, I was watching "She's the Man" last night, about football. It's like this American, football, thing and it made me really, really, miss football. But I'm so like, do I play for a women's team, do I play for a men's team? What am I meant to do?

The film *She's the Man* (2006) is a popular USA romantic comedy. It has a similar plot to Shakespeare's classic play *Twelfth Night*. In both *She's the Man* and *Twelfth*

Night, the protagonist is named Viola; she masquerades as a young man after finding herself alone on strange shores. As a result, Viola, in *She's the Man*, gets to play football, albeit as a man in a men's team. Additionally, she, like Viola in *Twelfth Night*, is shown to have complicated emotional/romantic attractions with men whilst appearing to be a male. This subplot obviously necessitates heteronormativity, and in the end, it importantly functions to recuperate heterosexual cisgender. Viola reveals her femaleness, femininity and heterosexuality. For Finn, such resolution is not possible, or even desirable, and this has implications for his future participation in football.

During the interviews, I asked Finn and Ed if they consider sport participation central to their identity as male and if they imagined playing sport in men's teams/clubs. Neither of them viewed sport participation as a way to help produce and bolster their embodied masculine subjectivities. It is for other reasons, including being active and having fun, that they would like to increase their participation in sport. Approaching a men's team or club was not a viable and/or attractive option:

No; erm, I would feel comfortable in the environment if I was just accepted as male, but I don't think I would be, not now anyway; I wouldn't be accepted now, erm . . . that's another problem with sport is that as a trans person transitioning, there isn't a team for you to go on. (Ed)

I don't think I would play for, and I'm using inverted commas, a "straight male team" . . . I think there's a different way of playing and there's a different mentality . . . it's just a very stereotypically strong male, straight male environment . . . the non LGBT teams are, can be, quite damaging to young males whether they're trans or not. I think that the whole mentality is just too stereotypically male; I hate that . . . once you go into a straight cis-male environment and you look like you're quite strong and masculine and you start prancing around, they're not going to have any of it. (Finn)

In their research, which includes an ethnographic study (Southern California and Central Texas, USA) of the workplace and the treatment of employees who have 'socially transitioned from female to male' (p. 441), Schilt and Westbrook (2009) show how 'gender normals, particularly men, can have strong, even violent reactions' (p. 444) to transgender people. In the above narrative, Finn begins to imagine how cisgender men ('gender normals') might react to his [trans]presence in the context of football. Finn understands men's football culture as heteronormative; he talked about the presence of homophobia and transphobia and he makes this point:

I hate to admit it, 'cause my dad was a footballer and a lot of blokes I know play football, but I just, it scares the crap out of me that there's these thoughts and ideologies of what you should be when you go and play football for a men's team and it's just, I don't want to be a part of that. I thought of myself as quite a strong female with values, and would stick up for people, and would be quite strong physically, I don't want to be like that as a male 'cause it's so much more dangerous.

As with workplace cultures, sport cultures—especially men's sport cultures—can be extremely heteronormative. The detailed findings Schilt and Westbrook (2009) provide are easily relatable to sport and sport teams. For example, they argue that

‘male-bodied women and female-bodied men present a challenge to heteronormativity’ (p. 441) and that ‘Cisgender men and women attempt to repair these potential ruptures through the deployment of normatively gendered tactics that reify gender and sexual difference’ (p. 442). Reproducing heteronormativity through gendered rituals in sport requires transgender men to be heterosexual. For Finn, entering into a men’s football team/club not only demands embodied performances of specific masculinities, it also requires him to have a girlfriend, which he does not. This is significant, because as Schilt and Westbrook (2009) highlight, cisgendered heterosexual men relate to transgender men by ‘engaging them in sex talk about women’ (p. 451).

Both Ed’s and Finn’s reluctance to engage with traditional sporting masculinities provides evidence to contest common myths surrounding female-to-male transgender subjectivity. As with the figure of the butch in some lesbian cultures, the move away from female and femininity is often interpreted as gender disloyalty and political betrayal. The move to male and masculinity is often misunderstood as adopting the privileges of the so-called oppressor class—men. This simplistic and stereotypical discourse is evident in transgender policy for sport participation. Currently, policy and governance of sport serves to exclude players, such as Finn and Ed, as well as players who identify as female-to-males. It is evident, from this research, that Finn and Ed receive no benefits (social, symbolic or physical) in sporting contexts for their transitioning to male.

Concluding discussion

As the relatively small amount of previous research on transgender and sport, including school sport, reveals (Travers, 2006; Symons *et al.*, 2010; Sykes, 2011; Travers and Deri, 2011), significant issues emerge as a result of a basic lack of understanding and awareness of the intricacies of transgender and transitioning bodies. To date, much of the work on sport, gender and sexualities privileges accounts of lesbian and gay men’s participation in sport and PE. The general ignorance surrounding transgender participation propels layers of prejudice at both institutional and individual levels. As Halberstam (2005) makes the point, transgender people face multiple exclusions, which function to maintain what Butler (1993) has described as the compulsory and dominant sex-gender-desire order. In sport and PE, these exclusions involve rejection of the transgender body and abjection of transgender participants. This abjection is evident at institutional and policy level as well as at the level of informal individual interactions between students.

It is very difficult for transgender young people to fit in to established and traditional sporting activities and cultures such as those found in PE. In many cases, and of great concern, transgender young people have harmful and potentially harmful experiences of sport and sport participation. As Sykes (2011) has demonstrated in her research, schools’ physical and cultural environments do not

cater to the needs of transgender young people. For Finn and Ed their most supportive environments are outside of the so-called educational settings of school/university. They are active members of a Queer Youth Network and a Trans Youth Network. Their involvement in these groups is through official internet sites and internet social networking. These groups provide a welcoming and supportive community—albeit a largely virtual community. It appears, that it is in these virtual forums where there is potential for ‘gender liberation, transgression and flexibility’ (Halberstam, 2005, p. 153) for transgender young people.

Both Finn and Ed report that ‘LGBT’ matters are not fully or adequately dealt with in the school curriculum. Finn remembers having ‘one lesson ... a talk about gay relationships’ in ‘PSRE’ which he found very patronising because the characters in a video they were shown were ‘clearly acting they’re gay’. Clearly, and in support of Sykes (2011), to help protect transgender students, there is a pressing need for the re-thinking of educational curriculum, specifically sexuality education, and the reform of education [body]ethics. In the UK, we are yet to witness the reach of the recently launched (June 2011) HM Government’s ‘Tackling Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport: A Charter for Action’. At a cursory glance no schools have, as yet, signed up to this Charter for Action. Specifically in relation to transphobia, it is unclear what ‘action’ might entail for school sport. Is mixed sport, although extremely contentious, a possible resolution if managed sensitively?

Returning to Finn’s re-engagement with football, it is apparent that he felt it was ‘good to start playing football again’, ‘nice to have a play’, ‘good to have a run-around and a kick about’ and he was ‘glad it was mixed’. The issue of mixed sport, especially mixed football, is one that, like transgender and transsexual issues, is covered by policy documents that medicalise gender embodiment. These formal discourses create a gap between what some players/athletes would prefer and how PE and sport are organised. When I asked Finn: *What would you like to do?* He replied:

I just want to play (football) for fun. If I just played mixed football it would be fantastic. It would be the best thing ever because I’d have no qualms about anything then ... it’s just finding it.

Those writing on the subject of transgender have called for a reorganising of sport (Travers, 2006; Symons *et al.*, 2010; Travers & Deri, 2011) and PE (Sykes, 2011): for sport and PE to be organised differently ‘away from a traditionally defined gender binary’ (Travers, 2006, p. 437). However, the established, dominant and well ‘defined gender binary’ reduces the possibilities for new sporting configurations and therefore potentiality for transgender people’s participation (e.g. Finn). Those advocating new approaches to the organisation of sport and PE are concerned with improving inclusion and reducing the harmful effects such traditional frameworks of governance and policy engender. It is possible that the HM Government’s ‘Tackling Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport: A Charter for Action’ might help the development of transgender-positive curricula and body ethics in schools. We have to wait and see.

Clearly, more research is required on this important aspect of sport, gender and sexualities: research that considers transgender issues as separate from the LGBT collective and inquiry that accepts transgender as multiple and fluid. As is evident from the discussions above, transgender young people have different physical activity experiences of educational settings and these experiences are not linear. Ed has a relatively smooth school sport experience, seemingly because he attends an all-girls' school. Finn has had a tougher time in mixed/co-ed education environment. He also decided to leave a women's football because of how some players responded to his transitioning body. Both young people found socialising in supposedly 'LGBT' leisure and sport spaces difficult. Responses to them in these communities testify to the operation of homonormativity. This is in addition to the prevailing heteronormativity they experience on a daily basis.

Neither Finn nor Ed imagines participating in organised men's sport. For them, men's sporting masculinities are threatening and potentially dangerous. In this way, heterosexual men's masculinity is not something they aspire to in order to produce their embodied masculinity/masculine subjectivity. They are forging their own sense of maleness and masculinity, and internet Youth Networks appear to be an important influence with potential for significant gender transgression and flexibility. For Finn, sport participation might reemerge as significant to this process. A possible resolution, for him, is participation in mixed LGBT football. In the final instance, school sport and PE are certainly not recognised by Finn and Ed as safe and open arenas to fully explore the potential physicality, and sensuality, of their transitioning and transgender bodies.

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Notes

1. Finn and Ed are pseudonyms.
2. Springboard Grants Programme, University of Brighton.

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