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## Assessing the Lack of Transgender Participation in Sports

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The term transgender refers to the group of people who feel there is a difference between the gender they identify as and the one that was given to them when they were born (Jones, Arcelus, Bouman, & Haycraft, 2017b). Similarly, gender identity, or how an individual internalizes gender on a continuum, may include male, female, neither, or identifying somewhere along the continuum. Trans individuals may choose to affirm their gender through social transition (socially living as their gender identity) and/or through medical transition (hormone therapy and/or gender-confirming surgery) (Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017). The prevalence of trans individuals in the general population varies depending on location (region/country), age, and type of question asked (including “transgender” as well as “other” for identities), and estimates are mostly based on individuals who attend health clinics for trans-related health needs. Even with these limitations, research has found approximately 1 in every 250 adults identify as transgender in the US (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). Many transgender individuals feel persecution for their gender identity and experience transphobia, harassment, and even violence, which causes many transgender people to avoid situations where they are susceptible to emotional and physical abuse, especially sport settings (Jones et al., 2017b). In fact, Smith, Cuthbertson, and Gale (2012) found as many as 80% of transgender participants in their study had experience with transphobia or homophobia in sport, including 16% of them reporting physical abuse, and 7% experiencing some other form of sexual assault in sport.

Given the difficult sociological and psychological persecution and negative experiences many trans people experience, it is no wonder they are also at significantly higher risk of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, as well as suicide (Dhejne, C., Lichtenstein, P., & Boman, M., et al., 2011). Given these risks, it is obvious that physical activity and sport participation should be an appropriate outlet for transgender individuals. However, research has

shown trans individuals participate in less physical activity than cisgender populations (Jones, Haycraft, Boman, & Arcelus, 2018). An estimated number of trans athletes at varying sport levels has not yet been identified in the literature, though it is likely much lower than the already under-represented population, due to stigma, hostility, and transphobia within sport, and lack of appropriate policies (Smith, Cuthbertson, & Gale, 2012). A recent shift has been seen in high-profile elite athletes, as well as several college and high school athletes, coming out to their teams and in the media, as an effort to encourage trans-supportive environments (NBC News, 2019). Despite these efforts, sports and physical activity participation is lower in transgender athletes than participation by cisgender athletes due to sociological and psychological factors, as well as restrictive sport policies.

Research has identified sociological factors in the sport environment that may cause a lower level of sport participation among transgender athletes. The first, and most prevalent, factor that touches on social exclusion is issues with changing facilities. This poses an issue to those individuals who may not be comfortable with their bodies pre-surgery. Many individuals in the pre-surgery stage of transitioning or whom do not intend on transitioning with surgery, often worry about how their presence in certain changing rooms would affect or be perceived by other individuals in those changing facilities. Hargie et al. (2017) points out that individuals who use their preferred changing rooms often experienced a sense of fear of rejection from their peers, as well as an increase of worry of incongruence in chest or genitals from others. Subsequently, Hargie et al. (2017) found about half of transgender individuals interviewed in their study stated they would refrain from using recreational facilities because of social concerns. Hargie et al. also found that transgender people who were told to use a certain gender's changing room were

forced to give up on the gender that they identify with so they could conform to the normality of that specific changing room.

A second sociological factor that may explain lower participation of transgender athletes is related to athletic wear. Trans-athletes may have an issue finding clothes that fit with societal gender roles that are still comfortable to wear (Jones et al., 2017b). Many transgender athletes report that the clothing options that are available to them are either uncomfortable or are revealing in ways that make them and others uncomfortable. This issue was especially prevalent in issues athletes reported regarding swimwear and workout clothes. Historically, these two types of wear fit very snug to a person's body, and a transgender person who may be in the pre-surgery stage of transition may have bulges in places that very often cause other people to become uncomfortable or harass the person wearing the clothing. These sociological factors contribute to the fear that transgender athletes face of being negatively judged, abused, or made fun of (Jones et al., 2017b).

In addition to sociological influences, there are three commonly identified psychological factors that likely play a role in the lack of sport participation of transgender athletes (Hargie et al., 2017). The first factor is past experiences that people have in sports they played in secondary school. Many transgender people may feel as though school sports very clearly reinforce the two-sex binary gender model, as well as forces individuals to fit into the roles that society has in place regarding gender identity (Hargie et al., 2017). This forced conformance into sport-related gender roles can cause transgender athletes to feel turned off from the specific sport they were pressured to initially participate in. Research has shown being pressured to participate in a specific sport also caused transgender people to develop a fear of not being able to be true to who

they feel they truly are, for fear of exposing themselves to people they do not want to expose themselves to (Hargie et al., 2017).

A second psychological factor that may cause a lack of sport participation of transgender athletes is having a feeling of gender incongruence between how they identify and the gender they were assigned at birth (Jones et al., 2017b). For many transgender individuals, this lack of congruence was a major factor that caused them to discontinue with sports. This may stem from feelings that they had not transitioned enough or properly to feel confident enough to participate in athletics in public. Research has suggested that the level of confidence transgender athletes felt was directly correlated with how far along in the transition process they were (Jones et al., 2017b). It was found that if an athlete felt that they could not “pass” for the gender that they identified with, then that individual did not feel comfortable participating in that specific activity at all.

A third psychological factor that contributes to lesser participation in trans-athletes is the fear of appearing in public (Hargie et al., 2017). This fear often caused people to restrict themselves to certain environments in which they chose to venture to. Many transgender people feel as though going out in public, especially in sport settings where there is a high risk of being discovered, required a great deal of planning as to who they were with and the attire they wore. Hargie et al. (2017) also found that many transgender people also felt a very strong feeling of rejection sensitivity, specifically being publicly outed at a time that they were uncomfortable with. Many transgender people must worry about who they might encounter in settings, such as sports, who they may not particularly want to know about their transition. Due to the fear of being exposed, there was a very serious fear of feeling excluded if people who were not open minded about their intentions of transitioning.

In addition to sociological and psychological influential factors, exclusive policies put in place by major sporting organizations make it difficult for transgender athletes to qualify for and participation in certain sports (Jones, 2017a). The first policy that inhibited transgender participation was created and instituted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2004. This policy stated transgender athletes were not allowed to participate in sporting events if they were gender transforming individuals, where they chose not to have reassignment surgery. In 2015, the IOC revised this policy, which showed great improvement in better allowing transgender athletes to participate (IOC, 2015). The updated policy removed reassignment surgery as a requirement, but still placed restrictions on male-to-female (MTF) transgender athletes. MTF trans-athletes are required to demonstrate that total testosterone serum levels are below an arbitrary level (10 nmol/L) for at least a full year before the first Olympic competition. This policy still restricts many transgender athletes, but the IOC points out this policy is a “living document” and that updates will be made in light of any medical or scientific advances. Similarly, another example of a policy that complete excludes transgender athletes is found in the International Federation of Volleyball’s rules (Fédération Internationale de Volleyball, 2015). In this organization, athletes “in question” must provide their birth certificate, as well as potentially undergo a medical examination to prove their gender. These policies hinder participation in sports by transgender athletes as they are intrusive, especially given there is currently no proven medical examination method to conclusively ascertain gender (Jones, 2017a).

Making the transition to one’s identified gender is a very difficult decision, and is an experience that causes trans people to avoid situations where they may be judged. As Jones et al. (2017b) found, significantly fewer transgender athletes participated in sports and physical

activities compared to cis-athletes and other groups of individuals. Sociological and psychological barriers continue to restrict transgender athletes from participation, as do extreme policies that exist across sporting organizations, with little to no scientific foundation. In order to increase the comfort and participation levels of transgender athletes, significantly more research, education and appropriate policy development are necessary in the sports industry.

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