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Trans* inclusion and gender equality in sport and exercise – an (im)possible equation?

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ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity and the idea of binary sex constrain sport and exercise as well as many gender equality measures that are implemented in sport and exercise contexts. This strongly affects trans people's opportunities to participate. The purpose of the paper is to explore trans performativity in relation to gender equality efforts in sport and exercise. Through interviews with ten trans individuals, we untangle how trans is, in the words of Karen Barad, produced in and through agential intra-actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production. Our diffractive analysis shows how meaning comes to matter in sport and exercise regarding what trans 'is,' who and how one can identify as 'trans,' and in what ways trans individuals experience inclusion and exclusion. The study demonstrates challenges with reconciling gender equality and trans inclusion in sport and exercise contexts given current conceptualizations of sport and exercise, gender equality, and trans.

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Introduction

Historically, trans*[1] people have largely been excluded from sport and exercise, or at least, they have not felt welcome in such contexts (Bianchi 2017; Oakleaf and Richmond 2017; Pérez-Samaniego et al. 2019; Riseman 2022). Increased efforts to include trans* people in sport and exercise have occurred in many countries in recent decades. While such efforts are commendable, they are sometimes based on simplified understandings of trans* as well as more generally of gender. Efforts to include trans* people seem to fail to take into account the inclusion of non-binary (and intersex) people much due to the strictly binary logic of competitive sports (Amy-Chinn 2012; Barras et al. 2021; Segrave 2016). According to Buzuvis (2012), such efforts apply to transsexuals, and span from 'least-inclusive policies,' where basically no explicit measures are taken to include transgender athletes, to 'most-inclusive policies,' where focus is placed 'not on whether the athletes has transitioned to some degree, but on what gender category that athlete declares as most appropriate for her- or himself' (29; see also Sykes 2006).

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The matter of 'inclusion' is neither simple nor uncontroversial. The right to participate is sometimes also expressed as the right of certain groups to participate without the presence of certain other groups. For example, gender separation is often perceived as necessary to ensure anti-discrimination (Amy-Chinn 2012). This can have unintended consequences for trans* people. Itani (2020), for example, shows how, in Japan, demands for 'women-only' spaces contribute to trans* exclusion from sports. A recent publication by Barras and colleagues (2021) highlights the challenges for transgender people in the United Kingdom to participate in inherently gendered sport and exercise cultures (cf. Buzuvis 2012 for the American context). Parallel to the ambition to include trans* people in sport and exercise, there exists a sometimes-heated discussion about fairness in (elite) competitive sports, where the presence of trans* persons, especially trans women, seems to some extent to create fear of all kinds of unpleasantness (see, e.g. McClearen 2022; Sartore-Baldwin 2012). The question of fairness has been taken up by philosophers of sport, who mainly seem to reason in terms of some competition classes being in need of 'protection' and that gender *identity* cannot justify eligibility of, e.g. trans women in the women's competition class (Martínková, Parry, and Imbrisevic, 2023; Parry and Martínková 2021; see also Loland, 2020, for an example concerning intersex participation in elite competitive sport).

While this study does not specifically focus on fairness, we have noted that the boundaries between the issues of inclusion and fairness are sometimes blurred. McClearen (2022), for example, demonstrate how '[g]irls' sports have become a political battlefield for American lawmakers who insist transgender girls are dangerous to cisgender girls on the field of play' (1). She concludes that 'adultification discourses demonize trans women and girls, falsely accuse them of causing gender inequality, and make them endure extreme emotional and physical duress' (11). Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe (2022) present similar results in their study about media framings of the transgender athlete. They conclude that participants in conversations about trans inclusion are prompted 'to "take a side" in a polarized debate, rather than encouraging more nuanced, ethical and empathetic responses to a complex issue' (12). In the case of Sweden, which is the context for the present study, such heated – and polarised – discussions are not (yet?) strong. The Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) is umbrella organization of Swedish sports. It is a non-government organisation, but which administers government grants and therefore holds a special status when it comes to the regulation of Swedish sports. This special status is probably why SSC policies are close to the Swedish government's more general political objectives. SSC's policy is to work 'trans inclusively.' However, considering what they write on their website, they seem to be aware that gender equality can contribute to making trans* people invisible:

> The equality goals of sports as well as in society more broadly risk making invisible a certain aspect of gender and gender identity, which, in turn, may render certain groups of individuals invisible, transgender people. Therefore, it is important to carry out gender equality work and at the same time work to approach gender from a broader, more trans-inclusive way. (www.rf.se; author translation)

The gender equality policy states, *inter alia*, that:

- There must be equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender, to practice and lead sports.
- Girls and boys, women and men, are given equal opportunities and conditions to practice and lead sports.

- Women's and men's, girls' and boys' sporting activities are equally valued and prioritized in an equal way.
- Women and men have equal influence in decision-making and advisory bodies. No gender shall be represented by less than 40 percent. (SSC 2013; author translation)

Noteworthy, the gender binary is present in the gender equality policy, and it becomes even clearer in some of the sub-goals formulated by the SSC:

- women and men in all decision-making and advisory bodies are represented by at least 40 percent.
- election committees at all levels consist of an equal number of women and men.
- the percentage of women and men respectively in higher positions, for example general secretary/confederation manager, sports/education/development manager or similar, within sports' various organizations amounts to at least 40 percent. (SSC 2013; author translation)

Goals like these require that women and men are clearly distinguishable and separate, which raises questions about how potential tensions between gender equality efforts and aspirations to include trans* persons can be reconciled. Moreover, while anti-discrimination legislation typically assumes a gender-inclusive practice (meaning that people of all genders act in common arenas), sport and exercise is in many ways a gender-segregated practice without this being perceived as problematic for most people, not only in connection with competition but also in connection with exercise and recreational sports.

Gender equality efforts and aspirations to include trans* people (as well as the notion of fairness) are commonly based on the ontological assumption that gender, or at least *sex*, exists before all social, cultural and political influence, and that 'men,' 'women,' and 'trans' are homogenous and mutually exclusive phenomena. Arguably, this constitutes a major challenge for the attempts to reconcile potential tensions between gender equality and trans* (and intersex) inclusion. This tension forms the starting point for our choice to seek out alternative theoretical starting points, where neither trans* nor gender are given ontological phenomena which precede all practice. We have found inspiration in Karen Barad's agential realist perspective (Barad 2003, 2007, 2014), where trans* (and gender, and reality overall) is performed in and through natural-cultural-practical entanglements (Linghede 2018). Thus, trans* is not seen as a homogeneous phenomenon but rather as a *becoming* (Gerdes 2014), that is, as a diverse phenomenon that materialise in and through intra-actions between, in this case, sport and exercise practices and gender equality measures. This perspective will be further outlined in the next section.

The purpose of the paper is to explore trans* performativity in contexts where various gender equality measures contribute to shape, and limit, what trans* can become. Thus, a particular focus is placed not only on how gender binaries of sport and exercise perform trans*, but also how measures that are implemented in the name of *gender equality* shape what trans* in sport can be. Gender equality measures can derive both from government mandates (top-down) and from the sporting grassroots level (bottom-up). Exploration will be based on interviews with ten individuals who volunteered to participate in the project. The questions asked of the interviewees were about how they have experienced sport and exercise cultures and their own participation in these cultures. The research question has

been how sport and exercise that are also in various ways affected by gender equality measures contribute to perform trans*.

Theoretical framework

One of the first to problematise the ontological basis of both sex and gender identity was Judith Butler, who in *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity* (Butler 1990) theorised two important concepts that contribute to interrupt conventional ideas about gender: *heteronormativity* (or what she calls *the heterosexual matrix*) and *performativity*. Heteronormativity means that heterosexuality is the taken for granted sexual disposition among humans (and animals). According to Butler (1990, 151), the heterosexual matrix designates 'that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized'. The 'natural division' highlighted by Laqueur (1990) results from the repeated practice of naming sexual difference. It is 'an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/perceptual construction of bodies in accord with principles of sexual difference', and as such, it is also 'an act of domination and compulsion' (Butler 1990, 115). In sum, heteronormativity is the 'independent variable' which brings into existence heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and all other sexual orientations, as well as bodies, whether cis, trans*, intersex, or something else. These are made intelligible through heteronormativity, that is, the assumed sexual relationship between male and female bodies.

Repeated (or iterative) practice, or the 'performative,' is what produces sexualities and bodies. The notion of performativity was originally coined within language philosophy (Hall 1999), and as such, it was taken to convey a social constructionist epistemology. Butler (1990, 1993; see also Meyerhoff 2015), however, attempted to take the concept beyond the conventional distinction between language and matter. Later Barad (2003) has developed the concept further in terms of 'posthumanist performativity,' which will serve as the theoretical base in this paper. Both Butler and Barad draw heavily on how Foucault theorised the notion of discourse. Unlike in everyday language, where the term discourse denotes 'verbal interchange of ideas' (Merriam-Webster; discourse), Foucault suggested that discourse designates:

> The ensemble of more or less regulated, more or less deliberate, more or less finalized ways of doing things, through which can be seen both what was constituted as real for those who sought to think it and manage it and the way in which the latter constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality. (Foucault 1998, 463)

In this way, Foucault pointed to how regulated ways of doing things at one and the same time constitute objects of reality and subjects of experience. That is, sexed bodies, whether cis, trans*, intersex, or else, as well as sexual identities, whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or else, have no ontological status 'before' or 'outside' the practice in and through which they materialise. In her introduction to the book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) points to a critique she suffered because, according to her critics, she thought that 'words alone had the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance' (x). Arguably, Butler's critics assumed that she advocated a social constructionist standpoint where discourse is taken to mean verbal interchange of ideas. Discursive practice is, however, not only primarily about the ideas of discourse, but about the practice of discourse. What it

does. All repeated practice, including talking, writing, and moving in sport and exercise practices, and researching these practices, contribute to the process of mattering.

Foucault's and Butler's approaches were subsequently criticised by Barad (2003), who contends that Foucault's

> account is constrained by several important factors that severely limit the potential of his analysis and Butler's performative elaboration, thereby forestalling an understanding of precisely how discursive practices produce material bodies. (808)

Barad goes on to state that Foucault 'fails to offer an account of the body's historicity in which its very materiality plays an active role in the workings of power' (809). To steer away more clearly from ideas that it is language viewed as talk and text that produces gendered bodies, Barad formulates an *agential realist* elaboration where 'the primary epistemological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather *phenomena*' (Barad 2003, 815; original emphasis), such as gender and sexual identities, which 'are produced through agential intra-actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production' (Barad 2003, 817). Rather than referring 'to linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conventions', discursive practices, then, are

> *specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted. That is, discursive practices are ongoing agential intra-actions of the world through which local determinacy is enacted within the phenomena produced.* (Barad 2003, 819–821; original emphasis)

Consequently, in this study, Barad's account means that trans* is understood as local determinacies that are enacted in and through discursive practice. Put simple, trans*, just like sex, or gender, does not exist *a priori* to any practice, but is enacted in natural-cultural-practical entanglements (Linghede 2018). In an agential realist perspective sexes, genders, and sexualities do not (as pre-existing entities) *inter*act to produce trans*. Rather, all things *intra*-act to produce each other in ongoing processes of materialisation. This means that trans* phenomena are determined by multiple apparatuses of local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings. In this article we explore trans* enactments through the intra-action of sport, exercise, and gender equality efforts.

Method

The project emanated from the first author's participation as expert in connection with development work carried out by The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Rights (RFSL). The RFSL is a non-profit organization whose goal is that LGBTQI people should have the same rights, possibilities, and obligations as everybody else in society. Having previously mainly worked with gender equality issues and inclusion of LGB people in sport and exercise, this was the first time he worked systematically with the inclusion of trans* people. The first author noted early on a certain tension between gender equality efforts and trans* inclusion, particularly if fixed assumptions about gender served as the, albeit often implicit, starting point. Because he was inspired by a more fluid view of gender, he decided to apply for funding to do a research study on the matter. The application was approved, and the first author used the grant to hire the second author to jointly carry out the project.

Researcher positioning

The first author, who has researched gender and sexualities in sport, exercise, and physical education for several decades, including gender equality efforts, is typically identified as a middle-aged cisgender man with unclear sexual preferences. He is himself still confused by what gender and sexuality norms 'ask' of him, that he cannot – or does not want to – live up to. The ambiguity regarding his sexual identity has been instrumental in his previous research about gender (equality) and sexualities in sport.

The second author identifies as a non-binary queer person. They have a master's degree in gender studies where they primarily focused on trans* and more specifically on the materialisation of non-binary identities through bodily movement in and through the world. The second author has also worked as manager for a LGBTQ youth centre in Sweden and has thus worked closely with many young people in their efforts to make sense of, and find a place in, the world. They are currently doing their PhD in sport science where they are interested in young trans* people's possibilities for daily movements, primarily in school.

Recruitment of research participants and interview procedure

To reach out to people who wanted to participate in the study, we advertised for research participants with the help of RFSL. The advertisement stated that we wanted to meet trans* individuals who have present or past experiences of sport and exercise. Ten people, between about 20 and 60 years of age, contacted us with a wish to participate. Among the participants were individuals who at the time of the interviews identified as non-binary, transwoman, transman, and 'doesn't matter.' Most of the research participants had an ethnic Swedish background, but not all. One of the trans persons were black, and another one had a non-European background. However, we did not ask any specific questions about ethnic origin because the project's ethics application did not include this aspect.

The ten research participants participated in conventional individual research interviews. Originally, to connect better to Barad's agential realism, the project was intended to include so-called go-along interviews (Stiegler 2021), where the research participant and the researcher are 'walking-and-talking' side by side in the environment that was the focus of the study, to possibly evoke experiences, thoughts, emotions, and things that would possibly have been missed in a conventional interview. Unfortunately, the pandemics came in between participant recruitment and interviews, which meant that the interviews, to comply with proximity restrictions, had to take place *via* the videoconferencing application Zoom.

The interviews, which lasted between one hour and two hours and fifteen minutes, can be described as semi-structured. That is, they contained a few open questions about the research participants' personal backgrounds but mainly focused on their sport and exercise experiences, past and present. The research participants were encouraged to describe their experiences of sport and exercise as they remembered them chronologically, from when they were children to the time of the interview. This included what activities they participated in and in which contexts. In connection with this, trans experiences were sometimes brought up by the research participants, among some of them more than among others. Importantly, explicit questions based on trans experiences were only asked towards the end of the interviews. Such questions included: 'what do you think would have helped you in becoming trans in connection with sport and exercise?' The interviews were planned and

analysed jointly by the first and second author, but they were conducted and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the second author.

Analysis

The analysis is based on the premise that the research participants identify in some ways as trans*, but since agential realist analysis assumes that humans are natural-cultural-practical entanglements (Linghede 2018), we did not take for granted what participants meant when identifying as trans*. Rather, the analysis focuses on how trans* is enacted in the agential intra-actions of the practice. Since researchers are not external to the world they study and (re)present, we have, as best we can and without taking up too much space, tried to reflect the conversation in the interviews rather than focusing only on what the research persons said. Moreover, we have endeavoured to follow Lenz-Taguchi's (2012) advice regarding analysing diffractively. According to Barad (2007, 74), 'diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap, and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction'. In this way, the diffractive analysis also includes a specific way of dealing with what Barad calls non-deterministic causality. Barad (2003) holds that '[i]ntra-actions are causally constraining nondeterministic enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations' (822–823). Somewhat simplified, this means that actions have consequences, but much as with the bending and spreading of waves that occurs when they encounter an obstruction you can never know exactly what consequences. Concretely, we have tried to pay attention to how the research participants experience encountering obstructions, such as heteronormative practices, and specifically when these practices seem to relate to gender equality efforts. Thus, the analysis presented in the findings section can be read as displaying a series of waves, where new aspects of trans* performativity come to light as the waves diffract while bumping into obstructions. In this way, we hope to demonstrate what the heteronormative culture, refracted by gender equality policies and efforts, *does*, not what trans 'is', in the context of sport and exercise.

Research ethics

There are many ethical issues to discuss in connection with interviews with a relatively vulnerable group such as trans* people. Participation in the study was voluntary. Responding to advertisement, the research participants contacted the researchers and were then informed about the study both orally and in writing. Before the interviews, the research participants provided written consent about their participation. Specifically, they were informed about that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without providing any reason. The interviews were recorded, and the recordings are stored on a password-protected server at the responsible university. All names used to identify research participants were pseudonyms. The study was approved by The Swedish Ethics Review Authority (2021-01393).

Findings

The notion of performativity (Barad 2003; Butler 1990) highlights how the research participants are not only constrained by gender binary sport and exercise cultures (Barras et al.

2021). In our analysis, participation in sport and exercise practices engenders a gradual discovery among the research participants about that 'they are different.' This does not mean that they immediately know *what* they 'are' – or that they, or anyone at all for that matter, know what they 'are.' The interviews constitute a section in time that contributes to 'a congealing of agency' (Barad, 2003, 828), where the interviewed persons are becoming someone, or something, there and then. This congealing of agency does not prevent them from becoming something else, or someone else, later. Moreover, for those who acknowledge that they 'are' trans*, this does not mean that trans* is performed in the same way by all the research participants, or that trans* is a homogeneous category or identity. Our narrative in this section is based on the notion that waves diffract in various ways as they bend and spread when they encounter obstructions.

First wave: 'I'm not a cis-hetero-person, but what am I?'

We notice the first wave as the research participants speak about how they came to notice that they are not hetero-cis or whatever heteronormativity allows them to be. Coming to this 'conclusion,' however, must be understood not as the final answer to a question about 'who am I?,' but as a temporary one; it just so happens that the research participants answer our questions in this way at the time when we ask them. Bellamy, who, when talking with the researcher about a need to feel safe in training environments, puts it in the following way:

> I was at the gym a couple of times, and that was before I had landed entirely in myself. In what I was. But I knew I'm not a cis-hetero-man, but I'm somewhere on the LGBTQ scale, sort of.

In Bellamy's account, it seems as if the gym experience contributes to their discovery that they are not 'a cis-hetero-man.' This is the first obstruction that throws Bellamy in the direction of understanding themself as 'somewhere on the LGBTQ scale.' Other research participants describe the process even more clearly as a gradual process of discovery where sports participation and its constant gender separation functioned both as catalysts for this insight and, sometimes, as a source of irritation and frustration:

> Hollis: I played basketball in high school […] and during that period, I came out as a lesbian, or first as bisexual and then as a lesbian. Then I started to notice in relation to sports that […] I became more and more trans guy.

However, not everyone frames the process in this way, that is, as a gradually discovery of an identity that was latently present all the time. Gray, for example, who was the only one among the research participants who replied 'doesn't matter' when asked about their preferred pronoun, has more to say about being ascribed a certain identity:

> Researcher: How do you identify yourself?
>
> Gray: I don't. Well, of course, I have an identity, but I refrain from dressing it in one or two words, because it only adds a lot of things to it that I may not agree with. […] In a way, I'm happy that I didn't fall within what was then defined as trans, because I don't identify myself as such. I just said that I'm not a girl.

Gray, who is among the oldest of the ten research participants, never pursued a career in conventional competitive sports, but participated in bodybuilding, a practice that,

according to him, was much more 'forgiving' some decades ago compared to the present-day situation, at least for people who did not really pass as normative women. 'I'm happy that I didn't fall within what was then defined as trans'. This 'in between' position, neither cis nor trans, offered Gray opportunities and a sense of freedom. In relation to his own gratitude for the possibility of being ambiguously defined as a trans-person, he regrets that this has become increasingly difficult given the gradually more gender stereotypical gym environments.

Importantly, as the waves encountered the first obstruction of heteronormativity (i.e. the assumption that all are straight cis persons), the notion of diffraction helps highlight that heteronormativity strongly affected the research participants, but the waves bent and spread in various directions. While Bellamy and others, often when they were young, identified themselves as 'somewhere on the LGBTQ scale,' and sooner or later as trans*, Gray, who were older, had developed a different strategy. Gray preferred to create a space for himself where he sometimes, depending on context, stayed clear of any potentially confining categorisation, while at other times, he could easily pass as a white cis man. The strategic choice was chiefly about sometimes being able to 'fly under the radar' (i.e. passing as a man), while at other times being able to 'use' his transness to queer certain situations.

Second wave: the performativity of dividing practices

To the research participants, the possibility to 'go under the radar' by passing as cis, even if this implies passing as a masculine female, as Gray seems sometimes to have been doing, appears to be, in some ways, more difficult today compared to some decades ago. Rather, some of the research participants, like Indigo, highlight the wearisome situation of constantly being reminded of gender separation:

> Researcher: When you were younger, what would you have needed then?
>
> Indigo: It's hard to know because I didn't even know what trans was, of course. […] Because I played with guys, and no matter how much I tried to look like the others, I was still seen as a girl, so it was a very gendered environment. […] Although they probably thought they were doing the right thing (laughs). But in retrospect, the very, very binary language was highly unnecessary.

In this quote, Indigo articulates that no matter how much he attempted to challenge the dividing practice by playing football with boys – and trying hard to be (like) a boy, he was still identified by others as a girl. It seems as if Indigo was trapped in a situation where he, since he was allowed to participate, was partly accepted, but where he was also excluded by a 'very, very binary language' and the fact that others identified him as a girl.

Similarly, Hollis points to the fact that, at one point, the practice started to become more divided, and that this had grave consequences for their participation:

> Hollis: As I started to become more and more… I started to identify as trans, I stopped boxing. […] But then we had name lists and (a coach) introduced a pink list for girls and green list for boys. And he preferred very much to divide the sparring, dividing girls and boys, and the problem was that there weren't so many girls in the club. […] It bothered me, and I complained about it. […] As I became more, what you would say today, maybe non-binary or something, the more laborious this became.

In the quotes above, both Hollis and Indigo point to a tendency among coaches to separate girls and boys and in this way 'stabilise' the gender categories. Such arrangements are mainstream in competitive youth sports and mean that young people must abide by binary norms. This could obviously constitute a problem for individuals who find themselves in this situation of not belonging to a specific gender category, as was the case for Hollis and Indigo. Understanding that humans are natural-cultural-practical entanglements, Hollis and Indigo articulate how sport environments are apparatuses in their becoming trans* and at the same time constrain the possibilities of becoming intelligible as trans*, or as human, and thus also constrain how they can exist in sport environments. In other words, separatism, and the efforts to stabilise the gender categories both create and make impossible the ways trans* come to matter. This complicates current policies and scholarly reasoning regarding fairness in competitive sports, which assume that sex and trans* are *a priori* categories which exists before all dividing practice, such as the division into different competition classes (Parry and Martínková 2021; Pike 2021). Rather, it is the dividing practice that contributes to the creation of both cis and trans.

Third wave: gender equality measures based on binary gender version 1

The tendency to separate binary genders can, on one hand, be interpreted as a routine measure within a culture that is obsessed with gender difference and heterosexuality (cf. Butler 1990). However, as Svender, Larsson, and Redelius (2012) illustrate, such dividing practices are often done in the name of gender equality (cf. Adriaanse and Schofield 2014) and are frequently requested by participants within sport and exercise. The propensity to form gender separate groups goes hand in hand with the idea that the dominated group needs a 'safe space' which is protected from the impingement of the dominant group. While historically, this measure has often applied to a free zone for girls and women in relation to boys and men (see, e.g. Itani 2020), the same measure can be found in the formation of special groups and associations for LGBTQI + persons who feel a need for safe spaces away from the constant explicit and implicit monitoring and questioning of their being by straight and cis gender people (RFSL 2020).

The research participants gave examples of arrangements that could be seen as coming from gender equality efforts, which sometimes included some sort of separatism. For instance, both Hollis's and Indigo's examples above can be interpreted as a wish among coaches to accommodate for the dominated gender (girls in this case). Another example is provided by Cleo, who was club secretary for a while. In this function, Cleo was responsible for reporting statistics back to the SSC about the number of participants in the club. Information like this forms the justification for financial support to the club. According to Cleo, 'everything you report is based on gender; on how many participants there are in different activities. And it's so stupid'. While this arrangement is experienced as problematic to trans* people, at the same time it contributes to perform trans* in the sense that it establishes who exists and who is important. Someone must make a decision and categorise the members of the club. Seen as a gender equality measure, the arrangement was decreed by the Swedish government, who subsidises sport, since the government wants to keep track of how much funding is allocated to girls/women and boys/men (and thus gain an insight into a different power order). This is not to justify the measure; we merely want to point out that what becomes problematic (i.e. as experienced by trans* persons) may well come

out of an attempt to solve another problem (i.e. equality between, implicitly cis gendered, men and women). More importantly for this study, it concretises how gender equality measures contribute to perform trans*. Most of the research participants problematise gender equality measures that are based on a strictly binary logic, which includes gender separatism. Cleo, for example, says that:

> It's a giant colossus to change the rules. Why does this rule exist? (Referring to gender division in children's sport). When you go to international competitions and those regulations, you can't influence those if the whole world doesn't want to take part. (Referring to gender division in elite sport). […]
>
> Researcher: What do you think would need to change for trans* people to participate in sport and exercise to the same extent?
>
> Cleo: That you have children's sports; that you don't talk about boys' and girls' football, but that it's children's football. That you don't divide in any way, at least not until you're 12. […] In some sports you wouldn't even have to divide at all.

In the above quote, gender separation and the requirement to adapt to binary sex contribute to perform trans* as a problematic category. However, gender separation is not the only form of separatism that is discussed and problematised in the interviews.

Fourth wave: gender equality measures based on binary gender version 2

Three of the research participants have experiences of roller derby, a sport that originated in the USA and whose origins goes back nearly one hundred years, but which was re-established some decades ago as mostly a women's sport. In Sweden and elsewhere, roller derby has become a site for strong gender separatist ideas. As Eddie explain:

> Eddie: I ended up writing and processing a gender policy with all the members (in Swedish roller derby; authors' note). […] And then I had four proposals: one was that cis-women and trans-women [should be included] […]; one was that cis-women, trans-women, and non-binary, so all but men [, should be included]; and one was that the same groups, plus the trans guys [should be included]; and one was that those who thinks that Women's Flat Track Roller Derby is best for them [should be included] (laughs). And we discussed above all the two in the middle, because the exclusion was very important for many. […] And then there was the fundamental question where some thought that "trans guys are men just like other cis-men, so get rid of them", […] and others who: no, but we can have them, they have a different background. They find it very difficult to be in male sports. […] And we have some who are strengthened in this queer space and after a while they come out as trans men, shall we send them out, then? Or should you have to lie to your team about your identity to be able to continue playing, and that issue became crucial. So today, cis women, trans women, non-binary and trans men are welcome. This means that if you look very masculine, uses 'he' as a pronoun and plays, then you are "outed" as trans.

In this long quote, Eddie articulates a complex situation, where both how people do gender/trans*, and who people consider 'eligible' for the practice or not (especially by people who are mandated to 'have a say'), contribute to perform trans*. It is not entirely clear, though, who gets the opportunity to have a say on the issue. That is, (certain kinds of) trans* materialise in the margins, rendering them doubly excluded and with limited opportunities to have influence. The situation highlights that trans*, as well as gender largely, must be performed in certain ways if the person is to be intelligible and, consequently, eligible for

participation in a certain activity. This kind of exclusion from who is intelligible as a person has been strikingly elaborated on by Stryker (1994, 2019) in terms of monstrosity. Stryker contends that sometimes, trans* materialise as monster. Monstrosity can be described as a figuration of the horror that the mere existence of trans* people sometimes evokes. As Alva rants, this may have to do with whether a person 'has a cock' or not:

> Researcher: Is it the case that it becomes a bit like a demarcation, who is masculine, rather than who is … so masculine that you become a man or are still a man. And then you become like a threat, right?
>
> Alva: Yes! Really! Because it's a lot about, like, it's about it [roller derby] should be women separatist, because that's so heavenly good for some reason, don't ask me why […] Now these big men will come and kind of tackle and take over and be much better and we'll be injured. (Said in a sarcastic tone) […] Sometimes good things are emphasised with derby, for example, the fact that you don't have to have a specific body to fit in, but you can sort of find your place regardless of whether you're tall or short or thick or thin or in between. As long as you don't have a cock (laughs).

According to Alva and others (also Eddie and Indigo reason in similar terms), the presence or absence of a penis affects whether a person should be accepted in this practice. The presence of a penis, regardless of whether the person identifies as non-binary (who is not androgynous 'enough' or who is interpreted as a man), trans woman (who is not passing well enough) or trans man (who is passing 'too well'), seems to define the person. To further complicate the situation, it should be added that the penis alone does not make all the difference. Other things, such as other bodily signs, style, demeanour, *et cetera*, intra-act in the materialisation of an individual. Thus, in Swedish roller derby, participants perform trans* not only in relation to separatist measures which are founded in a quest for a room free from male dominance, but also in relation to a certain bodily constitution which involves the presence or absence of a penis and other recognition characters that come to matter in the practice.

Alva goes on to say that in their experience, roller derby 'was very open to trans women and non-binaries, but when it comes to trans men, it's kind of closed'. While this may be somewhat surprising considering that it is often trans women who are stigmatised in competitive sports (McClearen 2022; Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe 2022), it indicates that not only the presence of a penis may become problematic, also the preferred pronoun of a person may constitute a problem. That is, having a penis or calling oneself 'he' may each in its own way be enough to be excluded, and thus contribute to perform trans* as problematic within a roller derby setting (cf. Worthen 2022). Thus, the fourth wave can be understood as different patterns of diffraction that emerge in intra-action of different sport and exercise contexts, specific bodily composition of different trans* materialities, and gender equality and anti-discrimination measures.

Discussion and conclusions

We set out to explore trans* performativity in sport and exercise contexts where various gender equality measures contribute to shape what trans* can become. Because we have a broad approach, including sport and exercise in varying forms, we have focused on issues of inclusion. We have therefore temporarily left questions of fairness and eligibility in certain

(elite) competition classes aside, even though we are aware that these are tightly related to our topic. More generally, we have tried to work based on Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe (2022) conclusion that '[t]oo often, transgender interviewees were treated as merely 'sources' on 'one side' of an argument, rather than centralizing their knowledge' (12). With the help of the interviewed trans* people, rather than how trans* should be treated in relation to issues of, e.g. fairness, we have thus tried to gain insights into how trans* is enacted in and through sport and exercise. Hopefully, this can provide information about how organisations that offer sport and exercise can act trans-inclusively.

The agential realist analysis highlighted a situation where trans* comes to matter in a variety of ways and without clear boundaries. Inevitably, our own research, including what was asked during the interviews and how the analysis was conducted, contributed to this process of mattering. In Barad's (2003) sense, discursive practice contributes to perform specific material (re)configurations which are known to us as trans*. And not only that, rather than existing 'before' engagement with practice, the analysis indicated how ongoing agential intra-actions enact the local determinacies which are known to us as sport, exercise, genders of various kinds, gender equality, anti-discrimination, and more.

The findings of this study were not unique in the light of previous research (Anderson and Travers 2017; Barras et al. 2021; Oakleaf and Richmond 2017; Pérez-Samaniego et al. 2019), but we believe that they contribute to highlight the fluidity of trans*, and how the ways that trans* materialise are created by the conditions of possibility that exist within sport and exercise practices, which are also affected by various kinds of gender equality efforts. Sport and exercise practices, which are sometimes for various reasons characterised by gender separatism, contribute both to enact and constrain possibilities for becoming intelligible as trans*, or as a participant, or even as a human. Clearly, the more people abide to heteronormativity, regardless of whether they 'are' straight or not, and regardless of whether they 'are' cis or not, the more they will also be intelligible to other people and thus be listened to. Monsters (Stryker 1994) can scream all they want but will arguably scare people off more than be listened to.

The findings suggest that separatist ventures are double-edged swords in the pursuit of inclusion. What makes a practice inclusive for some or in some situations may be the same as what makes it exclusive for others or in other situations (cf. Itani 2020). Separatist ventures not only work to make safer spaces, but in the same process also work to control and 'stabilise' gender categories. The first and second waves in the findings indicate how the participants' encounters with heteronormativity pushes them away from a cis-hetero self-understanding, but at the same time contribute to circumscribe what 'otherness' becomes. Based on the narratives of the research participants, it appears that this dual movement has been reinforced over time. Gray, for example, explained how some decades ago, he was more bodily ambiguous, and thus he was able to occupy an 'in-between' position, neither cis nor trans. This was a position that let him to 'go under the radar'. Nowadays, the 'radar' seems to know what it is looking for; it detects deviancy with greater precision than before. In Indigo's and Hollis's accounts, the 'radar' not only identifies deviancy, but contributes to stabilise gender and control the deviancy.

The study demonstrates the challenges of creating sport and exercise settings that are experienced as inclusive for all at the same time as it creates what is considered as fair in competitive situations (Amy-Chinn 2012; Barras et al. 2021; Segrave 2016). In fact, it can prove challenging to reconcile the efforts for, respectively, gender equality and inclusion of

hitherto marginalised social groups, especially if the gender equality efforts are based on binary understandings of gender (Buzuvis 2012; Sykes 2006). Or to put it somewhat differently, it may well be that, if male cis bodies continue to occupy a dominant position in sport and exercise cultures, we must be prepared to make separatist arrangements of various kinds – beyond challenging the primacy of male cis bodies. Moreover, it may also well be that we need to give up the idea that there is an absolute justice in competitive situations that is tied to a strict separation between the binary sexes. At the moment, it looks like the reasoning among the advocates for a more restrictive stance towards trans women competing against cis women is based on an ontological separation between 'sex' and 'gender identity' (Parry and Martínková 2021; Pike 2021). This study suggests that such a distinction is difficult to maintain. Furthermore, since the signs of equality and inclusion can hardly be established once and for all, because realities are always ongoing agential intra-actions that enact local determinacy (Barad 2003), we need to constantly look out for how measures that are implemented in the name of equality, fairness and inclusion come to matter in unintended ways.

Note

1. The asterisk signals that 'trans' is not a homogenous category but may refer to "a diversity of identities" (Phipps, 2021) among people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the gender they were assigned at birth.

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