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Equality DanceSport doing transgender inclusivity in the United Kingdom: Cultural cisgenderism and transgender experiences

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Abstract

In this article, cultural cisgenderism is adopted to investigate Equality DanceSport, a sporting context emerging out of an LGBT+ community.[1] The study questions the extent to which Equality DanceSport enforces regulations and practices which promote trans-inclusivity. Drawing on a constructivist grounded theory approach, I conducted autoethnography and 35 semi-structured interviews with LGBT+ dancers representing diverse genders and sexualities. I examined the discourses shaping the recent revision of Equality DanceSport competition rules in the United Kingdom and the experiences of transgender dancers in the competitive arena. Findings suggest that despite challenging some cis and heteronormative practices in mainstream DanceSport spaces, essentialist notions of sex and gender continue to feed into the shaping of Equality DanceSport's competition rules. These notions are hinged on debates around fairness and inclusivity and inform the constitution of a binary sex category in the competition rules. Transgender dancers face several challenges within the binary sex system, tending to cope through identity compromise. Such a strategy contributes to transgender erasure and invisibility. Overall, this paper provides a critical understanding of trans-inclusivity in an LGBT+ sporting space in the United Kingdom. It highlights the complexity of achieving inclusivity and calls for a critical interrogation which does not conflate LGB with the T when investigating the inclusivity of LGBT+ sporting contexts. The paper concludes with a proposal for radical regulatory and policy changes that question the epistemological understandings of sex and gender and celebrate other values in competitive sports which de-emphasise the focus on winning.

Keywords

transgender, LGBT+, Equality DanceSport, fairness, inclusivity

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Growing attention has been placed on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies in sporting contexts in recent years (Gardner et al., 2022; Spaaij et al., 2014). In 2021, UK Sport published its ten-year EDI strategic plan to encourage diversity and inclusivity in sports teams, leadership and sporting programmes. On a broader level, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) increased its commitment to the inclusivity of LGBT+ athletes. The IOC's EDI message will be emphasised through the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games Paris slogan 'Games wide open'. Beyond sports institutions and industries, scholars increasingly highlight the failures of EDI sport policies to address structural causes of inequality and promote positive impacts for equity-denied populations (Gardner et al., 2022; Spurdens and Bloyce, 2022). Others (Spaaij et al., 2020) attribute the resistances of leaders in sports institutions against inclusivity to slow progress towards diversity. Yet others (Love, 2014; Norman, 2016; Tink et al., 2020; Kriger et al., 2022) problematise the uncritical use of 'equality' amongst sports organisations as resulting in a lost opportunity to challenge systemic inequalities and intersectional exclusion. Amidst this literature, limited scholarly attention is dedicated to investigating the normalisation of binary gender structures within LGBT+ sporting contexts and its impact on trans-inclusivity. This study seeks to achieve the above through a case investigation of competitive ballroom dancing (known as DanceSport) in the United Kingdom (UK) which emerged from the LGBT+ community, known as Equality DanceSport. The paper provides insights into why change to remove a two-sex system in sporting spaces is slow even within LGBT+ settings which purportedly value EDI. Equality DanceSport's recent regulatory revision to enable transgender dancers to compete in their preferred dance category gender makes it a fertile ground for exploring barriers to promoting trans-inclusivity in sporting contexts.

Transgender is defined in accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2015: 834) guidelines for practice, as gender identity which is 'deeply felt' and 'differs from sex-assigned-at-birth to varying degrees, and may be experienced and expressed outside of the gender binary'. For transgender individuals, participation in sports and leisure activities is often hindered by the persistence of trans-negativity, particularly in community and school-based settings, well-documented as hosts for homophobic and transphobic acts (Sykes, 2011; Devis-Devis et al., 2018). Scholars (Hargie et al., 2017; Piedra et al., 2017; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2019; Braumüller et al., 2020; Caudwell, 2020) highlight discrimination to be more intense for transgender people than their LGB counterparts, contributing to mechanisms of self-exclusion (Cleland, 2018; Scandurra et al., 2019) and feeling unwelcome based on their gender identity (Muchiko et al., 2014). Yet, little is known about the mechanisms behind trans-exclusion. The growing body of scholarship on sports, genders and sexualities is largely centred on gay and lesbian experiences (Wellard, 2006; King, 2008; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Anderson and Bullingham, 2015; Jarvis, 2015; Baiocco et al., 2018; Gaston and Dixon, 2020; Muir et al., 2021) to the marginalisation of transgender concerns (Caudwell, 2014). Fischer and McClearen (2020) draw on the lived experiences of transgender professional mixed-martial arts athlete, Fallon Fox, to highlight trans-exclusion within a sporting system upheld by racist and cissexist assumptions and heteronormative paradigms of success. This article continues Fischer and McClearen's (2020) line of scholarship by interrogating the experiences of transgender dancers in Equality DanceSport.

The paper makes two new contributions. First, it moves beyond examining the more commonly documented, systemic discrimination experienced by LGBT+ individuals in mainstream sports settings (Denison et al., 2021; Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020). It highlights how recreational competitive sport settings created by and for LGBT+ people can maintain practices which exclude transgender people, concluding with a proposal for promoting inclusivity. Second, it contributes to the limited scholarship on inclusivity in creative arts-oriented sport, by questioning the persistence of dichotomous gender performance and aestheticisation in dance couples.

Transgender participation in competitive sports

Competitive sports have been organised around binary understandings of biological differences between male and female bodies (Sloop, 2012), and can present as less welcoming to transgender individuals who do not normatively fit into any of these categories. Policy changes to increase the inclusivity of sporting contexts to transgender people are slow and often medicalised. For example, the IOC's first major change in 2003 allowed only those who have medically transitioned for two years to compete in their legal gender category. A rewriting of its restrictive policies in 2015 removed the requirement for gender-affirming surgery, enabling transgender women who had undergone hormonal treatment to compete in the female category. This change saw several transgender athletes competing in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics in their chosen categories, such as Chelsea Wolfe (BMX Freestyler) and Laurel Hubbard (Weightlifter). The IOC's (2021) updated policy does not require transgender people to undergo surgery or examinations in order to participate. Instead, it authorises sports federations to act as regulatory bodies for the participation of transgender athletes. Regardless of the policy change, whether transgender people should be allowed to compete in accordance with their gender identity remains highly contested amongst athletes, spectators and sports organisations. Disagreements centre around notions of fairness and the construction of transgender bodies as having an athletic advantage (Andersen and Loland, 2015; Fischer and McClearen, 2020), both of which inform a medicalised approach. Transgender people are subjected to transforming their bodies to conform to a predefined notion of fair play (Fischer and McClearen, 2020). Inclusion premised upon gender-affirming medical processes excludes those who choose not to medically transition for personal reasons, fear of risks, or lack of dysphoric experiences (Lucas-Carr and Krane, 2011; Tagg, 2012).

Qualitative studies on the experiences of transgender athletes within a sports policy context which objectifies their bodies are focused on team sports such as ice hockey (Cohen and Semerjian, 2008), netball (Tagg, 2012), softball (Travers and Deri, 2011) or generalised across any sports (Semerjian and Cohen, 2006; Caudwell, 2014; Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Phipps, 2021, 2022; Linghede et al., 2021). Various challenges were reported by transgender athletes. Some found the competition period before their gender-affirming surgery to be challenging due to having to compete in their sex-at-birth category and abide by its gendered dress codes (Cohen and Semerjian, 2008; Tagg, 2012; Phipps, 2021; 2022). Others encountered difficulties choosing between a two-sex binary team during the transition stage (Caudwell, 2014) and hostile experiences in the team

(Travers and Deri, 2011; Phipps, 2021). Despite experiencing barriers due to the binary sex classification and lack of guidance, some transgender athletes in Sweden reported positive experiences with supportive coaches and team members (Linghede et al., 2021). Similarly, Elling-Machartzki's (2017) study in the Netherlands describes the experiences of transgender individuals to vary across life stages, with a spectrum of negative feelings of shame and lack of belonging to positive emotions of pleasure and inclusion. The above documentation of diverse experiences suggests that various factors such as personal circumstances, geographical locations, sports teams, sports organisations and types of sports can influence the challenges encountered by transgender athletes. More studies on creative arts-oriented sports are thus necessary, to better understand the challenges associated with such sporting contexts.

Existing scholarship in the DanceSport context is limited to Kavoura and Rinne's (2020) study on the Rainbow dancing scene in Finland, which reports a resistance against cis and hetero-normative dance roles making the scene more accessible to transgender individuals. However, transphobic politics and competition rules in national and international dance associations continue to present barriers to transgender dancers' participation in DanceSport (Kavoura and Rinne, 2020). Two other studies (Mocarski et al., 2013; Best, 2021) examine the experiences of transgender dancers in performance and recreational dance contexts. Mocarski et al. (2013) analyse the representation of Bono Chaz on *Dancing with the Stars*, reporting that Chaz, a transgender man, was portrayed through a subtle transphobic lens as an unsexed individual in his dance performances. Best's (2021) work reported several barriers including highly gendered dance techniques, roles, dress codes, body expectations and facilities as well as discrimination from instructors. These barriers were faced by transgender individuals across several dance disciplines such as commercial, concert and social (Best, 2021). This paper contributes to the existing scholarship by investigating how binary understandings of sex and gender inform competitive structures within LGBT+ sporting contexts, and the resulting challenges faced by transgender dancers.

Cultural cisgenderism and DanceSport

Cultural cisgenderism is adopted to better understand the challenges transgender dancers encounter in DanceSport. Ansara and Hegarty (2012: 141) describe cultural cisgenderism as 'a prejudicial ideology, rather than an individual attitude' which is systemic, culturally produced and serves to erase transgender identities. Cultural cisgenderism operates at the structural, discursive level to delegitimise identities outside of the binary gender categories (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2019) and privilege cisgender individuals by promoting essentialist notions of what it means to be male or female (Serano, 2014). Such a system is based on the cisnormative idea that gender is binary, fixed and assigned at birth (Ferfolja and Ullman, 2021), and that gender presentation and behaviours should align with the sex assigned at birth labels (Rogers, 2021). Transgender individuals who deviate from conventional gender norms are pathologised as having a mental health condition and stigmatised (Kennedy, 2018). As a concept which focuses on systemic failures and ideological discrimination, cultural cisgenderism shifts attention away from the individual. Cultural cisgenderism is adopted as a theoretical framework

because it facilitates an analysis of broader discourses within DanceSport which uphold mechanisms of trans-exclusion.

DanceSport is traditionally an art form which encourages the gendered cultural articulation of masculinity and femininity (Peters, 1992). Since its inception, DanceSport is often performed through heterosexual partnerships where men and women act out conservative gender roles on the dancefloor (Payne, 2009; Harman 2011, 2013, 2019; Meneau, 2020; Richardson, 2016; Owen and Riley, 2019; Wong et al., 2021; Wong, 2023a, 2023b). Costume and dress are integral aspects of the gender performance (Marion, 2008; Harman, 2013), as dancers adopt appearances which align with the socioculturally conditioned sense of aesthetics (Harman, 2011). Leib and Bulman (2009: 603) aptly described DanceSport as a performance space where 'costumes, songs, and gestures coordinate seamlessly to produce traditional images of aggressive, domineering males and delicate, sexually receptive females'.

Binary sex categorisation in DanceSport confines dancers to the expression of identities reified by the two-sex system. Such an environment perpetuates the policing of gender and the erasure of identities outside of the system (Phipps, 2021). Topping (2014) illustrates an instance where a disciplining of gender was enacted through a proposal to the British Dance Council to ban same-sex couples from mainstream competitions by redefining a dance partnership as one which consists of a man and 'a lady'. Deviations from gender-normative appearances and dance expressions subject dancers to various forms of disciplining. Marion (2008: 143–143) states that dancers perform sexual conventions and gendered metaphors of movement to appease adjudicators who evaluate their performances. Cisgenderist discourses in DanceSport are therefore constructed and maintained by powerful modulators of gender role performance. Outside the competitive dancefloor, cultural cisgenderism pervades training spaces. Dance instruction involves a translation of knowledge for the gendering of the self, such as learning subsets of dance movements, expressions and roles, together with sex-segregated costuming and make-up skills, to enact a binary feminine or masculine persona. Such training begins from a young age and the gender identities of dancers are not taken into consideration in the assignment of binary roles. Transgender dancers can find it challenging when their assigned roles do not align with or invalidate their gender identities.

Heternormative and cisgenderist practices in DanceSport informed the emergence of Equality DanceSport. Created by and for the LGBT+ community to subvert the heterosexual matrix and cisnormative understandings of masculinities and femininities, Equality DanceSport promotes more inclusive participation transcending the gendered and sexualised practices of DanceSport. It enables dancers to transform their bodies into sites of power and knowledge, creatively integrating diverse gender identities into their dancing. Nonetheless, some cisgenderist discourses continue to be translated into the structuring of Equality DanceSport competitions. Competition rules are structured around same-sex partnerships, requiring that 'couples are formed by two individuals of the same gender' and 'shall consist of: (i) two female partners or (ii) two male partners, and where issues arise, an application of the European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation's gender definition' (ESSDA, 2017, p. Rule 1.2; 2.5). Female and male couples dance in separate categories. This requirement to partner someone of the same

sex assigned at birth and dance in binary male/female categories poses challenges to transgender dancers.

In 2019, challenges faced by transgender dancers were recognised by the United Kingdom Equality Dance Council (UKEDC), addressing the issue by revising the rules for Equality competitions in the UK. Dance couples are redefined as 'comprised of two partners of the same dance category gender', and 'female', 'male' and 'non-binary' genders defined as 'people living as and identifying as' female/male/no gender 'or as a gender other than male or female' respectively, 'on a full-time basis' (UKEDC, 2020, p. Rule 2.1). Applying this change will mean that transgender dancers participating in UK-based Equality competitions can self-categorise based on gender identities. This rule revision creates opportunities for interrogating the embeddedness of cultural cisgenderism within sporting contexts and whether change is effectively mobilised by transgender athletes. Drawing attention to the challenges of trans-inclusivity even within LGBT+ sports settings, this paper is guided by two research questions:

1. How persistent is cultural cisgenderism in Equality DanceSport?
2. In what ways has the rule change impacted the challenges faced by transgender dancers in Equality DanceSport?

Methodology

Findings are taken from a larger project exploring LGBT+ dancers' doing of gender and sexuality in Equality DanceSport in the UK. All interviews conducted for the larger project are relevant to this paper. Interviews with LGB dancers provide an understanding of cisgenderist discourses within the field while transgender dancers provide insights into the challenges encountered. The subset of data analysed for this paper relates to perspectives on competition regulations and experiences of choosing and competing in sex-segregated dance events.

Charmaz's (2008) constructivist grounded theory is adopted for two reasons: the limited scholarship on LGBT + Equality dancers and my positionality as an insider researcher. Charmaz (2017: 35) adds that a constructivist approach 'facilitates defining and developing emergent critical questions'. In response to the limited scholarship, a constructivist grounded approach facilitates an expansion of my inquiry based on the lived experiences of LGBT + dancers. I give voice to the diverse narratives of my participants. Charmaz (2008, 2017) advocates reflexivity, relativity and 'self-consciousness', which enables me to reflect on my experiences gathered through embodied fieldwork as a ballroom dancer. I consider my knowledge to be relative, positioning it within the wider experiences of other dancers. I align with Scharp and Thomas's (2019) perspective that social science scholars need to examine how their experiences and positions can influence their interpretation of others' narratives.

Autoethnography was undertaken as a method, drawing on the ethnographic sensitivity I developed through my eight-year involvement in the UK's DanceSport and Equality DanceSport scenes. Tedlock (2000: 467) adds that autoethnography facilitates a shift from participation observation to 'the observation of participation', so researchers can 'reflect on and critically engage with their own participation within the ethnographic

frame'. I observed my participation and others' as a non-binary ballroom dancer, training and taking lessons in London dance studios as well as competing in the UK and internationally. When not competing, I took on the roles of spectator and photographer. My active participation in the field prior to and during data collection meant that I was familiar to participants as a dance competitor, photographer, spectator, friend and insider researcher. I recorded my embodied experiences and observations two to three times weekly across the period of 1.5 years. My field notes and diary entries were included in the collected data (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Integrating interviews into ethnography creates opportunities for multidimensional views to emerge (Törnqvist and Holmberg, 2021). Thirty-five interviews were conducted with LGBT + Equality dancers, each lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. Participants were between the ages of 28 and 68 and represented a diverse range of genders (17 female, 13 male, 4 (trans)non-binary, and 1 edging towards non-binary) and sexualities (13 gay, 12 lesbian, 5 bisexual/pansexual, 2 queer, 1 homosexual, 1 heterosexual and 1 unlabelled). Male/female labels are used to describe participants' gender identity as these were what they self-identified as. All male and female participants are cisgendered, with the five individuals who identified as non-binary falling under the transgender umbrella. All participants are based in the UK, with most largely training and practicing in various dance studios across London. Interviewees had at least a year of competition experience in Equality DanceSport competitions in the UK and represented a diverse range of dance experience from beginner to advanced levels. The University of Surrey's ethics assessment was completed before fieldwork. Being aware of my familiarity with dancers, I emphasised to potential interviewees that participation was not obligatory, allowing adequate time for decisions to be made, so as not to add pressure. Informed consent was taken before interviews, and participants were invited to share personal information such as gender, sexual identity and pronoun to avoid misrepresentation.

Charmaz's (2008) constructivist grounded approach was applied to recruitment which was conducted in two phases, convenience and theoretical sampling. Convenience sampling was first conducted on a sample universe defined by my field knowledge (Richards and Morse, 2007) to establish the boundaries and general direction of the study. Ten interviews were conducted through convenience sampling and data was analysed to identify key concepts which guided theoretical sampling (Chenitz and Swanson, 1986). Twenty-five further interviews were done through theoretical sampling. Data analysis was done simultaneously to question emerging themes and their relationships.

Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility for Patton's (2002:42) 'go with the flow' informal conversational format. Informal dialogues encouraged openness and the emergence of a diverse range of responses (Kvale, 1996: 7). Beginning with broad questions about how participants started dancing, conversations led to follow-up questions which spontaneously emerged from participants' illustrations. A broad range of topics were covered, such as participants' experiences as equality dancers, how they selected dance roles, partners and costumes, notions of masculinity and femininity, perceptions of the revised competition structure and opinions about *Strictly Come Dancing*. My insider status enabled knowledge co-production with interviewees. I employed Guba and Lincoln's (1989) self-disclosure, engaging in reciprocal sharing when participants' narratives struck a chord with my personal experiences. Such engagement facilitated

the co-construction of meaning, making it 'impossible to separate the inquirer from the inquired into' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 88).

Data analysis, conducted using NVivo, involved the development and refinement of themes, concepts and their relationships through comparative analysis of transcribed interviews and fieldnotes (Hodkinson, 2008: 86). Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-step process for grounded theory coding was applied to explain behaviours in relation to actions, structures and subjectivity (Kelle, 2007). Initial line-by-line coding was first conducted for in-depth analysis and grounding of concepts in the data. Eighteen open codes examining competition rules were generated, and further refined through axial coding. The codes were combined and categorised through axial coding into concepts and themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A final selective coding stage highlighted cisgenderist structure which encompassed the concepts of competition rules and trans-inclusivity to be a core category for exploring identity. I applied Charmaz's (2008, 2017) reflexivity throughout coding by reflecting on how my embodiment as a non-binary dancer might impact data interpretation.

Findings

This section illustrates two key themes within the core category of cisgenderist structure. The first theme covers the discourse on inclusion and fairness. Interviewees were asked about their perspectives on the rule revision and sex-segregation of competitive categories. Their opinions revolved around notions of fairness in competitive sports, exploring the extent to which inclusivity can be achieved without compromising fair play and whether the binary structure is a legitimate means of ensuring fairness. The second theme, fitting into the binary, focuses on the experiences of transgender dancers who were invited to discuss their experiences of competing within the binary structure of Equality DanceSport and the impacts of the rule revision. They illustrated challenges across aspects of dance partner and competition category choices, and gender expression on the dancefloor. The focus of their narratives was on trying to fit in with the binary system. Both themes were selected as the focus of this paper as they addressed both the research questions on cultural cisgenderism and transgender experiences in Equality DanceSport.

Inclusion versus fairness

Competitive sport is premised on perceived fairness, often positioned against inclusion (Scovel et al., 2022). Interviewees reflected on fairness in relation to trans-inclusivity in their discussion on UKEDC's move to change the competition rules. Contradictory perspectives on the fairness and inclusion debate were offered about whether Equality DanceSport should continue to adopt a sex-segregated format for its competitive events. Age and gender appeared to be a key factor influencing differences in opinions. Most interviewees expressed conflicting feelings over whether the binary sex system regulating partnerships and dance categories should be removed to promote trans-inclusivity. They raised worries around the perceived athletic advantage of

transgender dancers and questioned how fairness could be maintained to ensure cisgender female dancers can compete on an equal footing.

Age played a role in influencing perspectives around fairness and gender equality. Older female dancers (over 50) were particularly concerned about gender equality on the competition floor. Such a concern emerged from their experiences of Equality DanceSport in its early days where competition categories were not divided into male and female events. Bridget (female, late 60s) recalled a time when female and male couples danced 'against each other', explaining that 'the reason it changed was because the women's standard 20 years ago was lower than the men's standard. So the women never got a look in'. Bridget suggests that the division of competitors into male and female categories was implemented to create equal opportunities for less experienced female dancers to achieve recognition in the field. Rather than attributing the better performance of male dancers to athletic advantage, Bridget reasons that higher male standards was due to gay male dancers having more interest in, and opportunities to dance 'from childhood or teens, so they had the advantage but that didn't happen with the women'. Bridget justified the need for sex-segregated categories to create a level playing field for female couples who did not have the opportunity to train from a young age. She adds that 'you kind of have to wait until the genders, naturally it balances out, then ya, we will be open to changing it maybe' (Bridget, late 60s).

Others suggest that athletic capabilities are key to dancing. Since differently sexed bodies have different abilities, some dancers felt that combining dance categories is likely to disadvantage female-bodied dancers. Aly (female, early 50s) compares DanceSport to tennis, expressing that the differences between male and female tennis players in terms of strength and speed is such that there is 'obviously no chance that you could put them together'. Aly acknowledges that even though sexed differences in physical capacities is not as significant in DanceSport as in tennis, there is adequate difference to justify a categorical split in Equality DanceSport events. Such is so as not to 'put two women to a disadvantage' (Aly, female, early 50s). Highlighting differences in 'the leg power or the leg length' affording for different movement dynamics, Aly adds that since dancers are judged by the speed and strength of their moves, female-bodied dancers with less physical strength and height would be disadvantaged. Aly problematises the adjudication system to create a need for binary sex categories, expressing that 'if judges were actually capable of judging, it might be different'. Aly's narrative relates to a flawed value judgement system emphasising strength and speed over attributes such as flexibility and grace.

Similar concerns about the athletic advantage of male bodies biasing the competition are acknowledged by some transgender dancers. Several highlighted the challenges of creating a system which ensures that fairness and inclusivity are not mutually exclusive. Sasha (trans-non-binary, early 30s) stated that they

> won't want to be in the shoes of those people who are going to do that [makes changes to the structure and the same-sex terminology]. You know, it is a minefield, there are so many layers and dimensions you know, it is really hard to find something that includes everybody. And then how then can you judge it as well. You know, we have to probably end up having

> you know like boxing, those classes, like what kind of body shape, how much you weigh, and how strong you are, because obviously male bodies are more powerful unfortunately, due to evolution.

Sasha proposes a categorisation not premised on binary sex, entailing other means of measuring and policing bodies, to address gender equality concerns alongside trans-inclusivity.

Not all interviewees expressed similar interests in maintaining the binary sex structure. Younger female and male dancers were more supportive of a non-sex-segregated format for competitions. Several advocate a restructuring of competition rules to promote trans-inclusivity. Alan (male, early 40s) identified gendered differences in receptivity towards restructuring:

> 'most of the guys are more relaxed about it possibly than some of the women I have spoken to, who don't like the idea of competing against a, you know, someone who is physically a man, but because they are non-binary, they have chosen to identify, they have chosen to take part in a female couple'.

Such cis-normative understandings of gender as binary and essentialist notions of how female and male dancing bodies in Equality DanceSport should perform, perpetuate a divisive competitive system which excludes transgender identities and bodies. Laura (female, late 20s) disagrees that athletic advantage plays a role in influencing dance performance and competitive ranking, challenging the perception that 'male dancers take up the space on the floor, and they are like domineering the women'. Laura adds that it is 'ridiculous to me that we could have created this like sexist, transphobic thing', because 'it is just about the dancing'. Making a parallel to challenges by Equality DanceSport for same-sex partnerships to compete with mixed-sex couples in mainstream competitions, Laura states that 'in the same way that we can compare same-sex dancers in the mainstream scene with mainstream dancers', sex should not be a determinant for excellence. For Laura, what matters is the dancing, not the make-up of the partnership.

Laura's perspective is supported by several male dancers. Whilst acknowledging physical differences between differently sexed bodies, some male dancers suggest that these are another aspect of diversity between dance couples, and that different couples have different limitations they need to work with and within. Alex (male, early 40s) adds that 'difference in physicality' presents a constraint to all bodies, since men lack the 'natural flexibility that women have', and women have less physical strength to execute 'sharp' movements with 'a bit more staccato dynamic'. Alex suggests that these differences are not disadvantages, but bring about diverse dance stylisations between male and female couples which are comparable to differences across couples in mainstream DanceSport. Alex perceives what sets couples apart to be the ability to identify a 'style' which 'works for you as an individual and as a couple', not physical strength. This means that dissolving the binary sex category is unlikely to disadvantage female couples. The notion of fairness continues to inform the discourse of those supportive of removing the binary sex category, with the rationale for trans-inclusivity discussed against a perceived lack of athletic advantage of male bodies. It appears that essentialist

notions of male and female bodies continue to underpin the perspectives and reasonings of those supportive of promoting trans-inclusivity through dissolving the binary sex categorisation, highlighting the persistence of cultural cisgenderism in DanceSport practice and the binary logic of competitive sports.

Fitting into the binary

In spite of UKEDC's rule revision, a binary system is maintained. The onus is on transgender dancers to fit in if they are to compete in Equality DanceSport. This section explores the impact of UKEDC's rule revision on transgender dancers and their experiences of working within the binary system. The narratives of six transgender dancers, myself included, are examined. All six individuals made a decision to participate in the dance category gender corresponding with their sex-assigned-at-birth, regardless of their gender identities. Various factors influenced why transgender dancers have not mobilised the rule change to select a preferred category reflective of their gender identities.

For myself (early 30s, non-binary), the choice to dance in a category aligning with my sex-assigned-at-birth was informed by my being relatively new to Equality DanceSport. Since I had only been in the scene for four years and was a novice-level dancer, I did not feel bold enough to be the first to disrupt the cisgenderist structure. My reflections and emotions following the rule change were captured in field notes:

> Celebrating the rule change and those sitting in the committee pushing for it. Could this be the first step towards a more trans-inclusive competitive space? Silently wishing that some brave soul will take the first step towards mobilising the change, that will not be me, despite how much I rather dance in the male category. For I fear the judgemental gazes upon me as I step forth onto the dancefloor. Perhaps someday I will …

Various circumstances played to my advantage in enabling me to mobilise the rule change to dance in my preferred category. I identified as non-binary and was fortunate to be dancing with a partner who identified similarly. Personal conversations with my dance partner ascertained that both of us would have preferred to dance in the male category. This is because we felt more comfortable with a masculine presentation on the dancefloor and in our everyday lives. Despite this, I chose not to utilise the rule change to dance in my preferred category. I expressed trepidation over potential resistances, in part informed by my consciousness that the scene was not ready to embrace such restructuring. As a younger and less experienced dancer, I felt I had limited influence to pioneer change. Whilst not actively hiding my identity, my choice not to dance in a category overtly reflective of my gender identity constitutes my perpetuation of transgender invisibility.

For others, hesitancy in mobilising the rule change is informed by persistent feelings about not being able to fit into the binary system. Alex M (early 30s, non-binary) described how the new regulations would still not enable them to embrace their gender identity:

> it still wouldn't be ideal because you are still choosing one or the other. Unless at some point I feel really comfortable in one or the other, which I don't think it is going to happen, but if it does, then problem solved. But yeah, you don't fit, you don't fit. So yes, being able to choose is already better. But I don't think the ballroom dancing community is very ready for that. So going in men's category, which is where people would not put me, I think it would open up more problems. I definitely wouldn't feel like, I would probably feel everyone staring at me, so yes.

For Alex M, being able to choose a preferred category which does not fully align with their gender identity is not the best option. Similar to myself, Alex M expressed anxieties over being judged for challenging the binary sex category. Such is despite being able to legitimately do so due to revisions to the rules. Despite the opportunities afforded by regulatory changes, transgender dancers continue to experience reservations in embracing these changes to disrupt the binary structure. Such resistance to change highlights the limited impacts on trans-inclusivity, of small-scale shifts in policies which maintain the hegemonic status quo of the binary system. The above suggests why transgender dancers chose to fit in with the binary system, rather than mobilise the new rules to transform the competition structure.

Transgender dancers encounter various challenges trying to fit into the binary structure. These challenges can emerge outside of the competitive dancefloor, such as in the partner search, costuming or choreography processes. Since these activities involve the cooperative participation of social others in Equality DanceSport, the gender identities of transgender dancers will emerge as a topic for discussion. For some, this process of 'coming out' to others in the field can be more concerning than not being able to compete in a preferred dance category. Mal (early 40s, non-binary) dances with a female partner and is limited by the regulations to participate in the women's events. Unlike Alex M and myself, Mal was more concerned about being misgendered due to their dance category gender, than about choosing gender categories. Mal described initial anxiety over their dance partner 'assum[ing] me as a woman, be a woman and dance that'. Mal added that they

> needed for her to know that I don't feel like this, and I do respect that she is a gay woman, and that is how she is, because for her to dance in a LGBTQ community with a partner that is more man, and she is gay, it is so complicated.

Dancing in an LGBT+ community often implies that dancers tend to choose partnerships which are not heteronormative, and often expect to be in same-sex dance partnerships. This unspoken expectation aroused some anxiety in Mal, as they felt their partnership did not fit in with the same-sex dance terminology because of their gender identity. Mal was, therefore, more concerned about needing to come out to their dance partner, to achieve a common understanding and give room for her to opt out if she wanted a same-sex dance partnership. Mal's narrative demonstrates the potential negative impacts of cultural cisgenderism on the confidence and psychological well-being of transgender athletes. This is because they are burdened with coming out and facing potential rejection in the process.

Fortunately, Mal did not face rejection, as they described acceptance and support from their dance partner. However, the binary structure remains problematic for Mal, as they expressed that they sometimes 'feel like an imposter, because it is supposed to be same-sex dancing, and it is not'. Not meeting the structural constraints of Equality DanceSport meant that Mal at times felt like 'maybe I am stealing someone's woman' by virtue of dancing as a woman. It appears that even though Mal tried to fit within the binary, they often perceived themselves as outside of the structure and less deserving of the competition opportunities which Equality DanceSport presents to them. Additionally, Mal was worried about expressing their masculine gender identity authentically in the dance partnership. Key concerns relate to whether their gender expression may will make the dance 'look very much like a heteronormative expression, even though our subjective experience like, we are quite different'. Mal is aware of a culture in Equality DanceSport which rejects expressions of uneven power dynamics between a hypermasculine and hyperfeminine dance pair. They described their experience of the dance with their partner to be one of power-sharing and mutual reliance and were concerned about their masculine/feminine presentations distracting spectators from perceiving their equality message. Mal fears their masculine expression may result in rejection from other female couples who 'hate the idea that some women will present themselves in a very male way, because that actually brings the heteronormativity back'.

A binary sex system shapes how other dancers perceive and evaluate the performances of transgender dancers, such that failing to fall in line with expected gendered behaviours may invoke rejection. For Mal, this binary system created fears of their dance being misread as a mirroring of conventional masculine/feminine roles between two women, and that their subtle subversion of heteronormativity will remain unrecognised and unappreciated by others. Nic (early 30s, non-binary) has similar concerns as Mal about how they are perceived by others. Nic adds that 'dancing is a lot about how you are perceived by people around you', and that fear of being perceived negatively can lead transgender dancers to regulate their gender performance to fit in with normative expectations. It makes invisible and negates the authentic gender expression of those who attempt to fit in by dancing in a category not representative of their gender identity.

Discussion of findings

Equality DanceSport is a creative arts-oriented sporting context emerging from the LGBT + community. A recent restructuring of its competition rules enabled transgender dancers to choose dance categories, demonstrating the promotion of trans-inclusivity in Equality DanceSport. However, LGBT+ dancers highlight that cultural cisgenderism persists through the two-sex competitive format. Competition rules continue to operationalise within a gender binary of 'same dance category gender' and sex-segregated competitive events. Transgender dancers need to self-categorise within a binary classification and be limited to selecting dance partners whose gender corresponds to their desired dance category gender. This hegemonic status of gender binaries in Equality DanceSport aligns with existing scholarship (Sloop, 2012; Love, 2014; Plaza et al., 2017) which reports a

prominent binary thought system in competitive sporting contexts normalising the ways athletes are distinguished.

The notion of fairness, juxtaposed against inclusiveness, is used to justify the maintenance of the binary sex system. However, multiple contradictory opinions emerged amongst dancers from the fairness and inclusion debate. These contradictions point to Harper et al.'s (2021) report that the issue of fairness cannot be treated as 'clear cut', since the notion of biological advantage is complex. This paper contributes to existing literature by highlighting how discourse on fairness and inclusivity are gendered and generational. Concerns around the athletic advantage of transgender bodies highlighted by several scholars (Andersen and Loland, 2015; Fischer and McClearen, 2020) should not be understood as universal. Doing so can result in a medicalised view which objectifies transgender bodies. Care needs to be taken to examine the multitude of opinions within the context of the sporting environment.

In LGBT+ cultures, Bitterman and Hess (2020) describe 'generational layering' influencing the worldviews of LGBT+ individuals who often have a 'coming of age' generation in addition to the birth generation. 'Generational layering' emerges in my findings. Generation X and older dancers report a different experience of Equality DanceSport to Millennial Generation and younger dancers, which informed different priorities. Older dancers were more concerned about achieving gender equality through ensuring fair play while younger dancers prioritised trans-inclusivity. This generational dimension interplayed with gender as female dancers were more concerned about the perceived athletic advantage of male bodies. This study contributes a unique perspective in highlighting women are associated with lower levels of support, setting it apart from previous findings which report more exclusionary ideas to be attributable to those who identify as a man (Flores et al., 2020).

Suggestions provided by dancers to ensure fairness while achieving trans-inclusivity point to a need for revisions on a broader scale, such as changing the adjudication system to downplay an emphasis on strength and speed, and adopting other means of categorisation such as weight or body type rather than sex. The experiences of transgender dancers also highlighted the limitations of minor rule revisions, since new affordances were not utilised to achieve more inclusive participation. Transgender dancers report challenges echoing findings in other sports contexts, such as hesitancy in mobilising rule changes (Cohen and Semerjian, 2008; Caudwell, 2014; Tagg, 2012; Phipps, 2021; 2022), difficulties choosing between the binary (Caudwell, 2014), engagement in identity compromise (Neary and McBridge, 2021) and anxiety due to public scrutiny (Pape, 2019).

What remains clear is that a massive overhaul of the system is necessary for a disruption of cultural cisgenderism. Stepped changes currently being implemented through the rule change reinforce rather than disrupt the binary sex system. Butler (1993: 228) envisioned 'queer' to be a state of constant flux,

> in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queer from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.

For Equality DanceSport to maintain an inclusive, queer space in the spirit of Butler (1993), it needs to catch up to the growing, urgent debates surrounding the inclusion

of transgender athletes and redeploy new strategies to disrupt manifestations of cultural cisgenderism. Similar to Fischer and McClearen's (2020: 147, 158) 'queer modes of undoing' which disrupts 'narratives of heteronormative success and progress' in sports, achieving trans-inclusivity in Equality DanceSport needs to begin from a point of disruption and queering. Rather than falling in line with a sporting system which values strength and victory, Equality DanceSport needs to celebrate failures as Fischer and McClearen's (2020: 160) 'site of agency' to challenge heteronormative scripts in DanceSport. Echoing Pape's (2019) call for wider epistemological foundations of sex and gender, I propose that a move away from an emphasis on physiology is necessary. To achieve trans-inclusivity, Equality DanceSport needs to celebrate other values of sport such as its potential to embrace embodied experience and diverse expressions through sport participation. Since this study is focused on the specific context of Equality DanceSport in the UK, whether such a proposal for trans-inclusivity can be generalisable to other dance forms and dance contexts beyond the UK remains questionable. More studies on the experiences of transgender individuals in other creative arts-oriented sporting contexts is necessary to interrogate the generalisability of these findings.

Conclusion

The emergence of a sporting context from the LGBT+ community and the presence of transgender-inclusive regulations say little about the inclusivity of the environment for transgender athletes. Whilst regulatory changes can provide a pathway towards more inclusive practices, the extent to which these changes seek to disrupt cultural cisgenderism is key towards determining its effectiveness. The perceived incompatibility of protecting traditional women-only competitive categories and achieving trans-inclusivity explains the maintenance of cisgenderist discourses in Equality DanceSport. A gender binary structure is upheld to protect women from sexism and violence in the competition arena. This paper highlights that effective implementation of trans-inclusivity requires radical policy and regulatory restructuring. This involves a questioning of the epistemological understandings of sex and gender, and a celebration of other values in competitive sports which de-emphasises the focus on winning.

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Note

1. LGBT+ is used in this article to pertain collectively to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and those with gender identities and sexual orientations outside conventional norms, including questioning, nonbinary, intersex, asexual, pansexual and other queer-identifying people, along with their allies.

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