

# Dreaming About Access: The Experiences of Transgender Individuals in Public Recreation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** There has been little research about transgender individuals and their needs, especially within leisure settings (Grossman, O’Connell, & D’Augelli, 2005; Lewis & Johnson, 2011). Nevertheless, public recreation agencies are responsible for ensuring that all of the citizens they serve have equitable access to leisure facilities and programming. Additional research is needed to understand the barriers, needs, and wants of the transgender community. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of transgender adults and their perceptions of public recreation. This study, rooted in transgender theory (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010) and using qualitative research methods (Charmaz, 2006), consisted of semi-structured interviews with adults who self-identified as transgender.

Three major themes emerged from the data: managing risk, negotiating privilege, and embodying gender. Participants stated that they felt parks to be safe places, but also described their struggles to keep themselves safe within public recreation spaces. Participants also discussed their changing access to privilege and the effects of cisnormativity, the presumption that everyone’s gender matches their assigned gender at birth and is immutable. The cisnormative assumptions participants faced affected their daily interactions with others, including encounters they had within public recreation. Finally, participants related ways in which they embodied gender and were able to express themselves more fully through leisure.

Practitioners who wish to translate data from this study into policy should focus on two areas: removing barriers to access, and affirmatively encouraging participation. The barriers discussed most often by participants related to public/private spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers. Practitioners should ensure that all locker rooms, bathrooms, and showers allow for privacy. As is frequently the case with universal design, this will benefit many users who are not transgender. While the best practice would be to provide gender neutral spaces, at a minimum there should be at least one stall with a door in each bathroom and curtains or other barriers in all showers. Policies and procedures should affirmatively include participants across the gender spectrum and should be aimed at increasing participation.

**KEYWORDS:** *Transgender, inclusion, social equity, parks, public recreation*

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“Trans swimming hour. Great. Wouldn’t that be awesome? It’s nice to dream about.”

– Earl

Transgender individuals encounter barriers to full participation in their preferred leisure (Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Lewis & Johnson, 2011). Although there has been recent progress, societal structures remain strongly cisnormative. There is a common assumption that gender is binary in nature, that we are all either male or female, and that we will continue to live in the gender to which we were assigned at birth. Cisnormativity is evident whenever the gender binary is assumed to be real, normal, and universal. The result of cisnormativity is to obscure the presence of transgender people (Bauer et al., 2009). Cisnormative assumptions ensure that leisure scholars neglect to question the gender binary present in their work and that leisure providers fail to consider the likelihood that transgender people live in their community and wish to participate in leisure services.

The research about transgender individuals and their needs, especially within the context of leisure settings, remains limited (Grossman et al., 2005; Lewis & Johnson, 2011). Most leisure research uncritically assumes an unchanging gender binary. This assumption effectively erases the existence of the transgender population. Researchers have gained very little understanding of the needs of the transgender community and practitioners remain largely unaware of the need to provide leisure services that are appropriate and just. Robinett (2014) argued that leisure researchers generally fail to account for diversity in terms of gender identity, and that leisure researchers should conduct emancipatory research that contributes to social justice. Providing equitable access to leisure opportunities is part of a social justice orientation and therefore must be considered by researchers and practitioners alike. It is especially incumbent on researchers to eschew the cisgender and heteronormative assumptions that underlie much of the scholarship on leisure (Robinett, 2014). Providing appropriate services to a given demographic requires an understanding of what members of that group need and want and what structural barriers might make it more difficult to access particular leisure opportunities.

Transgender individuals can be negatively impacted by programming that is targeted for participants of a particular gender, and there is also great potential for transgender participants to express themselves through physical activity and sport (Elling-Machartzki, 2017). Leisure service providers commonly restrict particular sport programs to a single gender (e.g., men’s or women’s softball). When sport teams are co-ed, the rules often require that a certain number of women be on each team so that the team is not “dominated” by men. Practitioners rarely examine the underlying cisnormative assumptions behind these rules. The rules presume that everyone can confidently check a box that says male or female, and that whichever box the participant checks will go unchallenged by other players.

Restricting participation in this manner puts leisure providers in the business of defining gender, whether implicitly or explicitly. The net effect may be to reduce participation in physical activity. While there has not yet been research to either make or dispute a connection between cisnormative policy and physical activity, VanKim et al. (2014) did find that transgender students were less likely than non-transgender students to meet recommendations for strenuous physical activity or engage in strengthening exercise. It is important to learn more about this community and to better understand what kinds of barriers transgender individuals may face and how to facilitate participation in public recreation.

Public recreation agencies are responsible for ensuring that all of the citizens they serve have equitable opportunities to participate in leisure programming. Additional research is needed to more fully understand the barriers, needs, and wants of this community. To that end, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of transgender adults and their perceptions of public recreation. These insights will then be used to create recommendations for practitioners.

### **Terminology**

The preferred terminology used within the transgender community changes over time, and is used differently across different parts of the community. In response to this, we are providing some terms and definitions as they are used in this article. *Transgender* is used here as it is used most commonly—an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity does not match the gender assigned at birth. As with many umbrella terms, there is some controversy about its use, as it is perceived to erase the multiple identities it contains. For instance, some people identify as *transsexual*, especially if they have had surgical procedures. People who identify as *genderqueer* do not accept the gender binary. Rather, they identify somewhere else on the gender spectrum or consider themselves to be without gender. In this paper, all of these concepts reside under the umbrella term *transgender*. *Cisgender* refers to anyone whose gender identity matches the gender assigned at birth. Both of the authors of this article identify as cisgender. Cisgender is generally considered to be the norm within society, and cisnormativity refers to the expectation that everyone's gender identity matches the gender to which they were assigned at birth. Passing is often used to mean living in one's preferred gender while keeping one's transgender identity secret. However, our participants did not use it this way in their interviews, and we chose to reflect their use of the term. Participants primarily used the term *passing* when describing temporary measures they took to conceal their transgender status in situations where they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. When our participants discussed living in their preferred gender without disclosing their status, they used the word *stealth*. Over the course of this article, these terms are used in line with the definitions provided.

### **Leisure, Gender, and Gender Identity**

There is a sizeable body of literature that focuses the analysis of leisure on gender, especially on women's leisure (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Those analyses largely rest on a binary and cisnormative conception of gender and do not allow for the possibility of a spectrum of gender identities in their analysis. We know that leisure can be used to reinforce, resist, or affirm one's gender identity. For instance, Francombe (2014) found that girls can use leisure to express their femininity while also questioning and resisting the bounds that societal assumptions place on girls and women. Gagné and Austin (2010) found that women motorcyclists sometimes had to overcome objections from others who perceived their leisure pursuit to be inappropriate for the female gender. As with cisgender women, it seems likely that transgender individuals can also express, question, and resist ideas about gender identity through leisure. There are some examples of this in the literature. For instance, Lewis and Johnson (2011) found that leisure could provide a space for affirming gender identity. However, Caudwell (2014) interviewed two young transgender men who stated that they could not imagine a future in which they participated in organized men's sport, feeling that the manner in which masculinity is expressed in sport could potentially be dangerous to them. Thus, leisure allows for a range of possibilities in regard to gender. Leisure can offer opportunities for positively affirming one's gender identity or resisting societal ideas about gender. However, leisure can also serve as an arena in which individuals must face discrimination.

Few public recreation agencies in the United States have policies that are expressly inclusive of the transgender community. However, there are some sport leagues outside of public recreation that are inclusive and welcoming of the transgender community. Travers and Deri (2011) examined lesbian softball leagues with what they termed *radical transgender inclusive* policies that did not recognize or depend upon a gender binary. The

result was a women's league that did not exclude "people with a beard and a penis, (p. 504)" since participation in the league was dependent on players' own comfort and self-identity. The authors concluded that leagues with these policies may provide "a window onto a less sex-binary-based sporting future (p. 503)." Other nonprofit and commercial organizations have express policies of inclusion. For instance, there are several roller derby leagues (McManus, 2015) with explicitly inclusive policies, and there is a commercial gym that works with a group of transgender men to help them meet their fitness goals (Eveld, 2015).

### **Transgender Theory**

Transgender theory is comprised of a set of emerging concepts about gender and gender identity. Rather than an either/or conceptualization of gender as either socially constructed or physically embodied, transgender theory views gender as both socially constructed and embodied (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theorists center their understanding of gender on the lived experience of transgender individuals. Unlike other theories of gender, it focuses on the experience of being embodied in a gender as part of one's gender identity but not exclusive to the embodied experience. In transgender theory, the experience of embodiment is integrated with the socially constructed, intersectional nature of one's multiple identities (such as race or ethnicity).

Gender is neither a strict binary based solely in biological sex nor is it merely a social construct with no physical reality. Many in the transgender community report having a felt gender that is different from that which they were assigned at birth. After transitioning, they describe a profound lived experience of an embodied gender that matches their internal sense of gender (Girshick, 2008). Further, transgender individuals relate that others frequently interact with them differently based on how successfully they embody their preferred gender. Transgender theorists argue that gender is both a social construct and an embodied reality (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). This study also relies on a "both/and" instead of an "either/or" view of gender to undergird the analysis.

### **Methods**

Studying people who are trying to "pass" or hide their gender differences in public recreation settings is challenging. Researchers must overcome the barrier of finding participants who are willing to identify themselves as "other" and who feel comfortable in discussing their experiences, which could be distressing for the participant. Public parks and other recreation facilities are commonly thought of as welcome space, but for those whose gender does not match their assigned sex, participation in public recreation can be an intimidating, fearful experience. Deliberate methodical decisions were made during study design, as we endeavored to use caution and only include voices that wanted to be heard. This decision was shaped by the work of Abrahms (2010), who discussed studying "hard-to-reach" populations and Watters and Biernacki (1989), whose analysis of "hidden populations" encouraged thoughtfulness when working with participants from certain groups. The need to respect the wishes of those that want to stay hidden and not get involved in research for fear of repercussions (Watters & Biernacki, 1989) can be a constraint when identifying transgender study participants. There are some groups to which the traditional, accepted rules of research do not and cannot apply. This category includes transient groups, invisible populations, and in the case of this study, transgender park users. The overall purpose of this study was to learn more about the experiences of those who are transgender using public recreation space in order to work toward policies that create a more welcoming environment for all participants.

As Marshall (1996) stated, "An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research questions...this might be in single figures" (p. 523). The goal for qualitative research is to "provide illumination and understanding" (Marshall, 1996, p. 522), and this can be achieved through a large or small participant count. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that saturation could be reached with as few as six interviews. Qualitative research does not endeavor to make generalizations for a whole

population. Rather, it seeks to describe the experiences of study participants and use that information to aid with the creation of more inclusive recreation policies.

In this study, snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Advertisements were initially placed on social media platforms to recruit participants who identify as transgender and who used public recreation facilities. At the conclusion of each semi-structured interview, participants were asked to refer the researchers to other potential participants. This practice can be troublesome to those in the transgender community. As researchers, we were asking our participants to “out” their acquaintances as being transgender. Not all people are willing to discuss their prior gender identity or want others to know that they are transgender. Revealing this deeply personal information on the part of someone else can be harmful. Our snowballing sampling procedures asked participants to reach out to others who might be interested in the study and to provide our contact information rather than to provide the researchers with others’ contact information directly. The lack of direct recruiting by researchers may have limited participation, but was deemed more appropriate to the population.

The study was conducted in the southeast United States, and several participants referred to the deleterious effect on their lives of the conservative political environment in the south. One participant had lived in a large city on the west coast, and explained that it was much more difficult to be transgender in his current, mid-sized, city. We identified five participants in the southeastern United States who were willing to discuss their experiences of being transgender and using public recreation facilities. The interviews lasted between one to two hours, took place in a public location, and were audio recorded and transcribed by the first author. Participants were first asked to describe themselves in terms of gender. They were then asked to describe their past experience with parks, recreation facilities, and sports programs. Finally, they were asked to describe what makes a facility or program welcoming and what they believed could be done to make a program or facility more inclusive (Do you feel safe, comfortable, or welcome in parks? What tells you that there is a welcoming or unwelcoming climate for you?).

Each of the participants was asked if they wished to review the transcripts or edit interviews in any way. They all declined. One participant agreed to be contacted after the initial analysis for a telephone interview, and the resulting interview and multiple email exchanges served to further enlighten and confirm the analysis. While the interview covered recent coverage of transgender issues in the news, additional interview did not result in any new coding, one indicator of saturation of the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data analysis was guided by transgender theory, and this grounding in the socially constructed nature of each person’s reality aided in the development of the main themes. Transgender theory also helped guide and clarify the researcher’s understanding of the data in terms of gender and gender identity. Validity of the analysis was partly assured through the technique of collaborative coding. The researchers individually read and consumed of the transcripts and the eventual development of overall themes by each of the researchers (Creswell, 2007). Once the transcripts were reviewed by both authors, they were then coded using open coding that was later developed into axial and theoretical coding (Creswell, 2009). Most of the analysis focused on memo-writing as the core of the analytic practice (Charmaz, 2006). The researchers then discussed the themes they developed independently and arrived at a consensus around the main themes.

All five participants identified as Caucasian, had at least a bachelor’s degree, and lived in the southeastern United States. All participants stated that they used public recreation facilities, including parks, dog parks, and outdoor recreation spaces such as state and national parks. Participants ranged in age from 25–56 years and had all transitioned and had been living full time presenting as their preferred gender for at least two years. Many of the participants used varied language during their interviews to describe their identity. When asked to describe themselves, one participant identified as a transsexual woman, two identified as transgender women, one identified as a trans guy, and the last as a transgender man. Although their experiences in being transgender varied greatly, data saturation was reached in that the participants discussed similar concerns and fears in accessing public

recreation space. Additional exchanges with one of the participants further affirmed the analysis. Participant concerns, described below in the results section using thick, rich description (Creswell, 2009) as managing risk, negotiating privilege, and embodying gender, serve as reminders to recreation providers that we must work to make our spaces welcoming for all participants.

## Results

Three major themes emerged from the data: managing risk, negotiating privilege, and embodying gender. Participants stated that they felt parks to be safe places, and generally expressed positive feelings about parks and recreation. However, each participant also discussed at some length the actions that they took in order to keep themselves safe within public recreation spaces. In addition, participants described microaggressions that they encountered in many parts of their lives, including public recreation facilities. Participants also discussed how their access to privilege changed as they transitioned and also spoke of the effects of cisnormativity on their daily interactions, including interactions they had within public recreation. Finally, participants related ways in which they embodied gender and in many cases were able to express themselves more fully through leisure. This self-expression included but was not restricted to expressing themselves in terms of their gender identity.

### Managing Risk

Participants discussed the risks that they faced because of being transgender, often in terms of the strategies that they used to manage risk. For example, Earl stated that he did not swim in public pools and tried to avoid locker rooms altogether. He explained,

I went one time in a men's locker room. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown. I was so anxious. I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb. I don't know. I just did not feel good. I went and changed in a stall. It was like, 'This is not worth it.'

Earl was not the only participant to express a high level of fear, especially in locker rooms. While all of the participants, including Earl, stated that they felt safe in park settings, they also all related situations in which they felt unsafe and discussed their strategies for negotiating perceived risks. This contradiction between declaring that parks are safe and yet within minutes recounting instances of real fear was found in some measure across all participants. For instance, Earl both stated that he thought he might have a nervous breakdown in the locker room and also said that he "spends a lot of time in parks, walking, studying in parks, reading in parks. Parks are something I seek out. If I'm near a park, I'm happy." While public recreation facilities in general may feel safe to participants, there were still specific spaces and social situations that Earl perceived as unsafe, such as locker rooms. In response to these perceived risks, participants adopted several negotiation strategies.

Strategies for managing risk included engaging in hypervigilance, increasing efforts to pass, and simply avoiding certain spaces and activities. Participants described a continual process of scanning their environment, looking both for allies and for those who would object to their presence. For example, Erica described watching to see whether others had noted that she was transgender, and trying to divine their reactions if they had. "Typically with one glance you can tell if that person is either completely oblivious, is trying to figure it out, or has figured it out and definitely doesn't like it." In places that they perceived to be particularly dangerous, participants stated that they would increase their efforts to pass and avoid detection. For example Erica stated, "If I am in the restroom, I try not to speak to anybody. A lot of times people don't pick up on it as long as I don't speak," because her appearance did not match what she described as a masculine-sounding voice.

Liminal private/public spaces like restrooms, locker rooms, and pools were identified as the most dangerous places in public recreation facilities, and participants often actively avoided such places. John said, "In spaces that are really gender defined, it can get scary.

Especially if it's gender defined and there's naked people like locker rooms. Let's just avoid that altogether." Being naked left participants exposed to the critical gaze of others, and frequently their bodies did not fully match the cultural norms of their preferred gender. Not all transgender individuals have had surgery to alter their genitals. Some do not wish to do so because of the associated risks. Others do not feel that surgery is a necessary part of being able to fully express their gender identity. Those who do wish to have surgery may be constrained by medical gatekeeping or the largely unreimbursed expenses that would be incurred. After surgery, sometimes scarring develops that may attract unwanted attention or commentary by others. These physical differences are potentially more likely to be detected when the transgender person is not fully dressed. As a result, participants often minimized their use of public restrooms and avoided places such as locker rooms and swimming pools. All participants stated that they would not use a public pool, even if they were pool users before they transitioned. In some cases, avoidance went beyond pools and locker rooms. John said that he avoided sport altogether, "The thing that would absolutely mortify me is if I was playing basketball, and they did shirts vs. skins and I got picked for skins... That would not work... So, maybe that's [why] I'm avoiding sports."

Bathrooms were harder to avoid, but Earl stated, "I don't even think about it, but it's really a part of my planning...I'm not going to a park and spend the day there and take a giant water bottle... I would rather be dehydrated later." Joan similarly planned ahead because of concerns about public restrooms. She served as the organizer for a transgender support group's annual event at a state park. She said that they rented the farthest picnic site to make their members feel more comfortable and also because "the restroom facilities are more isolated in that particular location. We have to be cognizant of the fact that somebody could make an issue of one of our members using the bathroom, so that helps."

In order to negotiate risk, participants first had to assess risk, and it was this continual assessment of risk that most strongly signaled the existence of cisnormative structures. Those who are cisgender and within gendered norms do not need to worry about what people will think when they walk into the bathroom. Even when participants felt that they were largely undetected, they were nonetheless unable to be completely free of this concern, especially in situations that literally uncovered their bodies. Their transgender status meant that they lacked the privilege of being worry-free even long after they had transitioned.

### **Negotiating Privilege**

Transitioning also meant changes in privilege. The most important privilege participants lost was that associated with being cisgender. For someone who is transgender, access to some aspects of cisgender privilege can be revoked at any time, and that's what made changing rooms and showers particularly dangerous places. Or as John put it, "Start taking off all the layers, and you see that I'm not like all the other guys." Some participants stated that they took advantage of cisnormativity to reduce the likelihood that they would be detected as transgender. Since most people assume that gender is unmalleable, participants used that assumption to remain undetected in situations when being revealed would be uncomfortable or dangerous.

Passing successfully still involved a change in privilege. Women in this study reported a loss of male privilege after transitioning, and related how that changed their use of space while men talked about privilege that they had gained. Discussing this loss of male privilege, AC stated that she now had to be concerned about her safety as a woman in ways she had not as a man. Unlike previously, she is now careful about where she walks in the dark, "and that was something I took for granted. I went from almost like predator to prey." Specifically, AC said that she no longer could take walks on the greenway after dark, something that she would have done without thinking about it prior to transitioning. Earl compared his safety in parks to transgender women, saying, "I feel like a lot of MTF [male to female] folks are more likely to feel less safe in parks. I feel like they're probably more likely to be harassed, catcalled, and sexually assaulted." Earl felt that unlike some transgender women who might have a difficult time passing, he would blend in more easily

in most situations and not be singled out because he looks “just like another white dude, a little dude.” The ability to successfully pass as male meant that Earl could access male privilege, but that privilege was fragile and dependent on whether others realized that he was transgender.

As with anyone, transgender participants’ identities were intersectional in nature. Transitioning sometimes affected other dimensions of participants’ identity. For example, at the time of his interview, John was dating the same person that he had prior to transitioning. They had identified as a heterosexual couple but now identify as gay men. As a result, John no longer feels comfortable expressing affection publicly with his partner. “Whenever he and I go to the park and bring our dog, we very much stay separate... You never know who’s going to be at the dog park. You don’t know if they’re bigots or not.” Since John and his partner had once been a straight couple, this change in privilege represented a striking difference from when they used to go to the park, where they would hold hands and “nobody would bat an eye.” In all cases, any access to privilege based on gender norms was dependent on participants’ successful presentation of gender that complied with societal norms.

### **Embodying Gender**

The participants in this study had all transitioned and had been living full time presenting as their preferred gender for at least two years. AC observed that while one could be privately gay, it wasn’t possible to transition privately. Living as one’s preferred gender required the public acknowledgement of one’s friends, family, and co-workers. She said this meant you had to be willing to lose everything, because in the process of transitioning you might lose your friends, your family, or your job. In fact, AC said that she had lost all of those when she transitioned.

Some participants changed physically as well as socially, and these bodily changes sometimes affected their use of public recreation facilities. For instance, John found it necessary to reduce his physical activity because of side effects related to the hormones that he was taking, while Erica decided to increase hers because of the increased risk of stroke caused by her medications. John used the local dog park when symptoms related to the hormones he was taking made walking difficult in the summer. While John was forced to reduce physical activity, Erica increased it, saying, “I have a very large risk of having a blood clot. So it’s really important for me to get a lot of exercise.” Erica’s chosen pastime was roller derby, which was played in rented warehouses rather than within public recreation spaces. She said that she chose roller derby specifically because of their trans-inclusive policies. The public recreation agencies in her area did not have such policies, so she did not consider participating in their programs as a viable way in which to increase her physical activity.

Earl wished that programming at public recreation facilities could have been more helpful in his transition. He somewhat wistfully imagined a transgender-only program that would help him learn athletic skills that hadn’t been part of his upbringing as a female, “It would be really awesome if it was just transmasculine people who were trying to learn our athletic deficits... in a safe space where there weren’t non-trans men watching and rating me and laughing.” He worried that cisgender men would be especially critical of his performance of gender as expressed through sport. However, he considered transgender-only programming at public recreation facilities to be fantastically unlikely, something only to dream of but never expect. Earl only discussed the possibility when the interviewer pushed him to describe programming he might want to participate in that was specifically aimed at the transgender community.

Some participants stated that they enjoyed their leisure experiences in public recreation facilities more after transition than they had before. The difference was that they could now be their most authentic selves, and they reported expressing this through their participation in leisure. Earl said that since transition he had spent more time doing leisure, including at parks because “I enjoy being in my body more. ... I feel more motivated to be out in the world.” For Earl, parks provided an enjoyable place to be once he was more

interested in getting out of the house. Joan also stated that her experience of public space differed post-transition.

“It’s been different in that I can experience as my authentic self. Before it was less enjoyable for me. Just not at a park but in any kind of public space sometimes I would ... think to myself, ‘Well, how would they react if they knew I was transsexual?’”

Once Joan began presenting full time as her preferred gender, she no longer had to worry about a mismatch between her felt reality and the way she was presenting herself. Instead, she could focus on the leisure experience, which improved the quality of her leisure.

Participants often expressed themselves through leisure outside of public recreation settings. AC, for instance, wrote and performed her own poetry, and said that she was able to “get rid of a lot of the anger and anxiety” and eventually began to think of herself as “an activist poet,” because much of her poetry related to her experience as a transgender woman. Erica specifically chose to play roller derby because of their inclusive policies. She said, “aside from being a unique sport, it’s also very progressive and open minded community. I believe it’s probably one of the only sports that actually has an official transgender inclusive policy.” As an example of how supportive her team was, Erica said that she joined her teammates when they stripped down half naked and made molds of their chests as part of a fundraiser for breast cancer. It meant a lot to Erica that her team included her. In both cases, participants were able to express themselves more fully in leisure, both generally and specifically in regards to being transgender.

Although embodying their preferred gender brought risks and altered access to privilege, all participants emphasized the benefits of living life in their chosen gender. The value of these benefits could partly explain the disconnection between participants’ discussions about navigating potential dangers in public recreation spaces and their assertions that they had only minimal difficulties there. Although leisure-based transgender inclusive policies and programming were not available to participants, they expressed enjoyment in their use of public recreation facilities. Participants accessed the benefits of public recreation spaces in spite of, rather than because of, inclusive policies, practices, and facilities.

## Discussion

Three major themes emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews: managing risk, negotiating privilege, and embodying gender. These themes do not exist independently; running throughout the data was a contrast between statements by participants that they felt safe in public recreation space and actions they described that seemed to directly contradict those statements. Participants were not being disingenuous, but rather the comfort they felt while living life as their chosen gender overshadowed the fears and barriers they experienced as transgender individuals. Further, many of the obstacles that participants faced in public recreation facilities were not unique to those spaces. For example, there are public restrooms in many settings, so participants did not view the risks inherent in using the public restroom as particular to public recreation. Instead, their feelings about that space was connected to the particular leisure activities that they sought there.

Participants described positive effects that public recreation had on their lives both before and after transition. Nevertheless, the obstacles they encountered affected how these transgender individuals used public recreation facilities and how they felt about their time there. For instance, all of the participants stated that they would not swim at public pools, where their transgender status would be most easily detected and might put them at risk. Some participants also tried to avoid bathroom use, even refusing to drink water so the use of the restroom would not be necessary. These risk-mitigation strategies might be affecting participants’ overall levels of physical activity. Transgender individuals who avoid locker rooms, changing rooms, pools, and bathrooms have fewer options available for physical activity. The most physically active participant, Erica, managed these potential risks by

playing in a roller derby league, so that she could maintain a high level of physical activity in a league that was explicitly inclusive of transgender participants. Inclusive recreation programming was not available at her local parks.

All of the participants were affected by cisnormative structures within society. As currently constructed, social norms around bathrooms, changing rooms, and showers in particular are dependent on the assumption of a compulsory and unquestioned gender binary. Although cisnormative individuals may be unaware of them, these assumptions are so strong that to violate them puts one in danger of disapproval at the least and physical violence at the worst. Cisnormative assumptions can have the effect of rendering the transgender population invisible. For example, none of the participants could avail themselves of programming specifically set up for the transgender community because it didn't exist within their communities. In these communities, transgender individuals need to go outside of public recreation to find recreational activities and programming that is inclusive of the transgender community. As far as we know, there is no programming specifically for the transgender community offered by public parks and recreation agencies anywhere within the United States, although there is such programming in Vancouver (The trans\* and gender variant inclusion working group, 2014). Few park professionals may even be aware of this lack or the need to provide transgender friendly activities. Summer camps are beginning to become aware of and address the needs of transgender youth at camp (Gillard, Buzuvis, & Bialeschki, 2014). In addition, there is a private gym in Kansas City that is working with a group of transgender men to help them meet their fitness goals (Eveld, 2015). Without equitable access to services, it may be that transgender individuals are missing out on at least some park programming and facilities that would benefit them.

It is incumbent upon researchers to address issues of inequity. *Leisure Sciences* published a special issue that focused on research that furthers social justice (Stewart, 2014). The National Recreation and Park Administration has taken "social equity" as one of the "three pillars" of the organization, although they did not explicitly include the transgender community under the umbrella of social equity (National Recreation and Park Association). If socially just and equitable leisure is the goal of both researchers and leisure providers, then the presence of the transgender community cannot be ignored or rendered invisible through cisnormative practices, policies, and.

Access is about more than the removal of overt and obvious barriers. Cisnormativity renders "neutral" rules and regulations as inequitable. If leisure providers separate programs, bathrooms, and locker rooms by gender (and they do), then it is important to think through how to do so equitably. Henderson (2014) argued that leisure research does not fulfil its promise until research is translated into policy that is both fair and equitable. That means transforming transgender leisure research in to transgender inclusive leisure practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

Practitioners who wish to translate data from this study into policy should focus on two areas: removing barriers to access and affirmatively encouraging participation. It is important to note that while some spaces in public recreation facilities felt unsafe to participants, on the whole they held positive views of these spaces. Nevertheless, all participants discussed obstacles that barred or limited their use of public recreation. The barriers that participants cited most often related to liminal public/private spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers. For instance, none of the participants were willing to swim in public pools, even when they had done so previous to transitioning. Elling-Machartzki (2017) also found that locker rooms and other similarly gendered spaces were dangerous, but also that sport and physical activity often served as a site for empowerment and pride.

One response would be for practitioners to ensure that all locker rooms, bathrooms, and showers allow for privacy. The best practice would be to provide gender neutral spaces such as family bathrooms, locker rooms, and showers. At a minimum there should be at least one stall with a door in each bathroom and curtains in the showers. These

changes have the potential to make these liminal spaces safer for transgender participants. As is frequently the case with universal design, this will benefit many users who are not transgender but who would also benefit from a private space to change, shower, and use the restroom.

Practitioners should also ensure that their policies and procedures affirmatively include participants across the gender spectrum. Erica, the most physically active of the participants, actively sought out a sport with inclusive policies, but not in the park system, because there were no public recreation programs in her area with inclusive policies. If parks and recreation agencies wish to provide equitable access, then their policy needs to explicitly include transgender participants. Inclusion affirms the worth and dignity of participants and conversely exclusion sends a strong message of worthlessness and unimportance. Including transgender participants has the potential to improve participants' quality of life (Travers & Deri, 2011). Agencies should have a written policy of inclusion that allows participants to choose the program and the facilities that best meet their needs. Park administrators should reach out to their local transgender community to help ensure that they are providing equitable access that meets the needs of the community. It is the responsibility of recreation professionals to make their spaces welcome to all participants.

Transgender people should be able to access public recreation safely, but meeting that minimum requirement undersells the potential for leisure to enrich participants' lives. Leisure spaces can provide a platform for expressing oneself and for addressing social wrongs. Equitable treatment by parks and recreation organizations shouldn't be limited to something that transgender people like Earl dream about. It must become a reality.

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