Opportunities and barriers that females face for study and employment in sport

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate perceptions of sport and exercise career opportunities and barriers among females at different career stages. Focus groups, consisting of high school students (n = 20), university students (n = 8) and graduates (n = 7) studying/working in sport and exercise, were formulated. All groups acknowledged gender discrimination within sport-related employment, with university students seeming to be more apprehensive of how discrimination might be career-limiting. Self-confidence and self-belief were deemed important for success, but external barriers, and tokenistic gender-equality strategies limited progression. In conclusion, efforts are still required to reduce gender inequality in sport-related career and educational settings.

Keywords: Gender; Sex discrimination; Career; Sport; Employment

1 Introduction

Males outnumber females in sport-related employment, especially in graduate-level jobs, senior roles, and in leadership positions (Pfister, 2005). (This should also be Hartmann-Tews & Pfister, 2005)For instance, there are far fewer female head athletic trainers (Mazerolle, Burton, & Cotrufo, 2015), sports physicians (Stern, Gateley, & Barrett, 2013), sport coaches/head coaches (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; Reade, Rodgers, & Norman, 2009; Walker & Bopp, 2010), female sport academics (Whaley & Krane, 2012), and governance executives of organised sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Burton, Grappendorf, & Henderson, 2011a, 2011b; Koca & Öztürk, 2015; Pfister & Radtke, 2009) than there are male. This trend, which has changed little over time (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; Eurostat Employment in sp; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012), might reflect the under-representation of women in managerial and leadership roles in other career domains (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tams & Arthur, 2010), but also might reflect the sex-stereotyping, and marginalisation of females that is specific to sport (Fink, 2016; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Koca & Öztürk, 2015).

The lack of women in graduate-level jobs in sport may be because of a lack of supply. Based on data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service for the UK (UCAS, 2017), the number of females applying and being accepted onto sport and exercise science courses is low. These figures are also decreasing. In 2016, 29% of applicants were female, compared to in 2007, when 34% were female; the same percentages were observed for acceptances (UCAS, 2017). In the US, there is a distinct lack of gender diversity in sport management programmes (as well as disproportion of Faculty/staff members), with nearly 40% of sport management programmes having a female student ratio of less than 20% (Floyd Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008). The low numbers of females completing sport-related degrees may contribute to the inequalities observed in the labour market.

To explore why there are fewer females than males on sport-related courses and in sport-related employment at senior level, researchers have examined perceived barriers through interviews and questionnaires. Some similar theories have emerged from these studies to explain this gender disparity, including: gender stereotyping and gender discrimination; a perceived lack of self-confidence amongst females in achieving career success (Hartmann & Pfister, 2003; Pfister & Radtke, 2009); issues around multiple-role conflict (Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Taylor, Siegele, Smith, & Hardin, 2018); homogenous reproduction or the ‘old boys network’ (where male employees/admissions tutors perpetuate the norm); lack of support from significant others; and lack of networking and role models (Norman, 2012). These theories will be discussed, but will be restricted to the context of education and employment, and at what stage in a female's study/career opportunities and barriers for career maintenance and progression present themselves.

1.1 Gender stereotyping/gender discrimination and having to ‘work harder’ to achieve respect

Several researchers have reported issues around gender discrimination and stereotyping in sport-related employment, in that both men and women have been found to hold adverse, stereotypical attitudes towards women's career progression and job competency (Burton et al., 2011a, 2011b, pp. 36–45; Koca, Arslan, & Aşçı, 2011; Koca & Öztürk, 2015; Madsen, Burton, & Clark, 2017). Females have also reported feeling judged on their professional capability and competence in taking leadership positions (Burton, Borland, & Mazerolle, 2012; Kilty, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2015). Such gender discrimination and stereotyping are subtle, often being embedded in employment roles and practices within sporting organisations (Burton et al., 2012; Kamphoff, 2010; Reade et al., 2009; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Whalen, 2017). As explained by gender role theory (Koca & Öztürk, 2015) and masculine hegemony (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), the gender discrimination that exists in terms of gender role division, has become institutionalised, normal, and natural (Aitchison, 2005; Burton et al., 2012; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), to the extent that women as coaches in men's college basketball are deemed to be so unlikely, that most people cannot imagine it as a possibility (Aitchison, 2005). Furthermore, women feel that they need to compromise on their values and beliefs and to suppress their sexuality, in order to avoid being labelled as too political, too feminist, or too unfeminine (Burton et al., 2011a, 2011b; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kamphoff, 2010; Kane & LaVoi, 2018; Keats, 2017; Kilty, 2006; Koca & Öztürk, 2015; Norman, 2010; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018). Females often feel they have to work harder or prove themselves in a sporting environment (Betzer-Tayar, Zach, Galily, & Henry, 2017; Burton et al., 2012; Kilty, 2006; Norman, 2010; Norman & Rankin-Wright, 2018; Walker & Bopp, 2010). For instance, female sport management students felt that they had to work twice as hard to prove themselves, and to overcome the stereotypical belief that women knew nothing about sport and were better at more nurturing-type roles (Harris et al., 2015). Gender discrimination and stereotyping are, therefore, deeply embedded in employment roles, practices, and beliefs, and have been used to account for the glass-ceiling effect (Harris et al., 2015; Kamphoff, 2010; Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Surujlal, 2015; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Whalen, 2017).

In contrast to the above studies, some researchers have reported no gender discrimination. Respondents from interviews of students on sports courses said that they were not aware of any gender bias (Elliott & Sander, 2011). These students, although interested in sport, were not studying sport at high-school level, so answers might have reflected a general lack of knowledge about the discipline, rather than being gender specific. Feelings of gender discrimination might be unique to the stage in the career process. There is a need to investigate further whether the attitudes and perceptions, reported in the literature, regarding gender stereotyping, gender discrimination, embedded gendered practices, and the notion of having to work harder as a female within study and employment in sport and exercise still prevail, and specifically at what stage in the educational and career process these perceptions and attitudes arise.

1.2 Perceived lack of self-confidence/self-efficacy

Researchers have reported on intention-related behaviours, such as self-efficacy, which may explain gender inequality within sport-related employment (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Gender role theory may explain these findings, in that a lack of self-efficacy is perpetuated by society. Women tend to be more self-critical and state their doubts and weaknesses in the hiring process, as well as being inhibited in promoting their accomplishments (Kilty, 2006). University students have, however, been found to have comparable managerial aspirations and potential compared to men (Steel, Chelladurai, & Brown, 1987), which could suggest that self-confidence and self-belief may differ according to career stage. Moreau and Leathwood (2006) warned that graduates were likely to blame themselves for lack of success in the graduate labour market, when really social inequality was to blame, which the researchers believed could have damaging consequences for graduates in terms of their self-belief. A lack of self-confidence and self-belief, perpetuated by the gender discrimination in society and sports-related employment, might also explain the low numbers studying and working in sport, but may be dependent on career status and stage.

1.3 Networking and role models

Men have been found, on the whole, to use personal contacts and networks to find employment (Harris et al., 2015; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Parks, 1991; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). Women have, however, expressed a need for women-only networks to increase their confidence and employment opportunities (Burton et al., 2012; M'mbaha & Chepyator-Thomson, 2018). Because there are fewer role models in sport, there are also fewer women with whom to network (Walker & Bopp, 2010), and fewer mentors (Kilty, 2006), which could hinder females advancing to management positions in sport (Harris et al., 2015).

1.4 Multiple-role conflict

A barrier to career progression that is often cited is the need to balance or negotiate work with childcare responsibilities (Kamphoff, 2010; Kilty, 2006; Taylor et al., 2018). Often, women feel as though they have a greater share of childcare duties, find it difficult to achieve a work-life balance, and/or feel guilty about spending time away from the family (Harris et al., 2015; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Pfister & Radtke, 2009), all of which can be perceived as being career limiting. Indeed, single women without children are often over-represented in higher positions in sport (Pfister & Radtke, 2009; Reade et al., 2009). Having time to socialise has also been seen as a barrier to success (Pfister & Radtke, 2009). These issues around multiple-role conflict may decrease the numbers of females attracted to sport-related study and employment and may increase dropout as a female's career progresses.

1.5 Homologous reproduction

Homologous reproduction is where there is a tendency for those hiring (usually white, middle-class men) to give employment to those who are the most similar to them, as a means of reducing organisational uncertainty. Homologous reproduction has been found to influence the hiring practices of athletic directors (Lovett & Lowry, 1994), assistant coaches (Darvin & Sagas, 2017), and women in leadership positions (M'mbaha & Chepyator-Thomson, 2018). The 'old boys club' may, therefore, be an external barrier to females' progression in sport-related careers (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Kamphoff, 2010; Lovett & Lowry, 1994; Mazerolle et al., 2015).

1.6 Not valuing/not interested in sport-related careers/study

There are few studies that have attempted to investigate reasons for the male dominance in sport-related academic programmes. Using questionnaires, 170 female high school students said that they did not value a sport-related degree in terms of future career plans, although expressed a greater attraction to programmes that alluded to health, physical education, and psychology (Elliott & Sander, 2011). These internal, intention-based behaviours may be occurring as a result of the lack of opportunities and support available for women, the pressures to conform to societal norms, and opinions may be biased by ideological and structural beliefs entrenched within society and within sport in general (Rapoport & Thibout, 2018; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Further research on the aspects of the curricular that could be most beneficial for females pursuing a career in sport and exercise is warranted.

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate perceptions of study and career choices in sport and exercise for females, so as to provide some additional insight into the factors that influence the under-representation of women working and studying in sport in the UK. In an attempt to investigate at what stage in a female's study/career the opportunities and barriers for employment presented themselves, perceptions were gathered from: 15- to 16-year olds who were contemplating studying/working in sport and exercise; students studying sport and exercise at university; and from former graduates of sport and exercise courses. Careers within sport and exercise are considerably diverse, but it was not possible to confine the study to one particular career, since students would not have been able to predict their future career paths. Given that the focus of the study was on the underrepresentation of women enrolling onto sports courses in UK higher education institutions and then gaining employment within the UK sports sector, the purposive sampling represented a cross-sectional population meeting these characteristics.

Research questions were as follows:

- What are the perceived gender-specific opportunities/barriers regarding studying and working in sport and exercise among female students and graduates?
- Are there differences in perceptions of opportunities/barriers, relating to study/career stage (unique to the stage in which the female is)?
- What elements of the curriculum are deemed most appropriate for females for enhancing employability within sport and exercise?

2 Materials and methods

The study was of qualitative design using focus groups to explore perceptions. It was exploratory in nature. Recruitment was to three focus groups consisting of: students aged 15–16 years ("high school student"); students currently studying for a degree in a discipline related to sport and exercise ("university student"); and students who had previously studied for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in sport and exercise ("graduate"). To recruit the university students and graduates, emails were sent to a database of contacts (consisting of 191 female students from one university in the United Kingdom, and 218 female graduates who had graduated between 1998 and 2016 from across three Universities). Those who expressed an interest were contacted to ensure they met the inclusion criteria (being female, and either a current or former student from sport and exercise) and were invited to participate. For recruitment of the high school students, teachers from 48 colleges and schools were asked to disseminate the study outline to female students aged between 15 and 16 years, who were either studying sport at high school, or who were regularly engaged in sport and exercise and who were thinking of studying/working within this domain. Eligibility (being female, aged between 15 and 16 years old, with an interest in sport and exercise) were checked prior to participation. High school students were deemed to be a suitable cohort to study, since they are, at this age, in the process of making choices regarding their future employment and study, and because dropout from sport is less from this group compared to students studying between the ages of 16 and 18 years (Roberts & Brodie, 1992). All students were studying in UK institutions. Participants gave their written and informed consent having been fully briefed on the study procedures. Parental consent and assent were obtained from all participants under the age of 18 years. The study was approved by the University's research ethics committee.

A total of 35 participants volunteered for the study ($n = 20$ high school students; $n = 8$ University students, and $n = 7$ graduates). The number of participants in each focus group followed recommendations for focus group study (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011). The total number in the high school group was higher than the other groups, since the data from the first focus group conducted were deemed to have not reached data saturation – the students talked more about general discrimination in physical education lessons and sport, rather than perceived discrimination in careers relating to sport; a second focus group was, therefore, formulated. Focus groups lasted between 45 and 60 min and took place at a time and location convenient to the participants. The duration of the focus groups was such that they continued until the researcher felt that data saturation point had been reached. Focus groups were chosen as the predominant method of data collection in order to provide an understanding and deeper exploration of the views and ideas of the specific groups of participants under investigation (Wilkinson, 1998). Employability literature and research have tended to be from the perspective of employers, universities, and government, which have meant that their needs have dominated the debate (McKeown & Lindorff, 2011). There are few studies from the perspective of students and graduates and how they make the transition from higher education to careers (Nyström, Dahlgren, & Dahlgren, 2008); focus was therefore, on students' perceptions.

A topic guide was used to address the research questions, which included the following: a general introduction to what the students currently do (i.e., course being studied, including year of study; type of employment, including duration; when graduated, if appropriate); an exploration of the perceived gender-specific opportunities/barriers for sport/exercise-related study and employment, specific to the stage in their study/career in which they were; an exploration of the elements of the curriculum that were deemed most appropriate for females for enhancing employability within sport and exercise. There were slight modifications to the topics discussed, so that they were relevant for each focus group.

At the end of each focus group, the topic guide was checked to ensure that all areas had been covered. Focus groups were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed to facilitate analysis. Non-verbal participant behaviour was also recorded by the interviewers noting behaviours on paper, whenever they were found to occur. When transcribing data and reporting extracts, a pseudonym was used. The focus groups were conducted by independent researchers, who were recruited specifically because of their experience in focus group conduction and data analysis. The researchers did not know any of the students prior to the investigation, and also had not been part of the study conception; these factors were put in place, in order to reduce bias in how the focus groups were conducted, and also how coding was carried out.

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for exploration and interpretation of the relevant issues more widely (Marks & Yardley, 2004). This method involved two of the researchers familiarising themselves with the transcripts independently and devising their own separate coding, key concepts, and proposed themes. The researchers then met on three separate occasions in the process of generating, reviewing and defining themes, with an audit trail maintained using annotated templates to highlight discussions, reflections and discrepancies (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017)These processes were put in place to ensure reliability and avoid bias; the researchers also challenged each other in terms of their pre-existing opinions, values, thoughts, and theoretical knowledge (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Themes were constructed based on meaningful and coherent patterns in the data, relevant to the research questions. Extracts were selected if they were thought to reflect the themes and subthemes particularly well. The focus group design enabled an exploration and examination of commonality and disparity of views, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences between participants.

3 Results

The two groups of high school students ranged in age from 15 to 16 years and were all either studying sport for examination (GCSE), or had expressed an interest in choosing a career in sport and exercise in the future. The university student group ranged in age from 18 to 30 years, two of them had dependents, and they were studying on one of the following courses: sports therapy, sport and exercise science, strength and conditioning, or sport coaching/teaching. The graduate group ranged in age from 24 to 45 years, and one of them had dependents. Jobs were diverse and included those working in employment related to sport and exercise (for a football-associated charity/organisation, for the English Institute of Sport, as a cardiac physiologist in the National Health Service), outside of sport (a clinical psychologist, and a business development executive for a telephone communications company), and one was doing a PhD related to sport and exercise. All participants were Caucasian; one of the high school students identified as being Portuguese.

Four main themes emerged from the data: gender junction; women as barriers to themselves; importance of role models; and token equality.

3.1 Gender junction

Gender junction was about how the participants felt that they were, had been, or might be in the future, at a junction in their career pathways (Fig. 1). As an example of being put-off a career, one of the participants in the university student group said that, prior to undertaking university study, she had been confronted with the opinion of an employee at a football club, who had made the comment that working as a sports therapist in a male-dominated sport would be extremely difficult:

> *When I was speaking to the kick manager and the masseuse that were down in the bar in the evening and their chef was like … nah you wouldn't get a job in sport; the guys wouldn't take you seriously.* [Emily, university student]

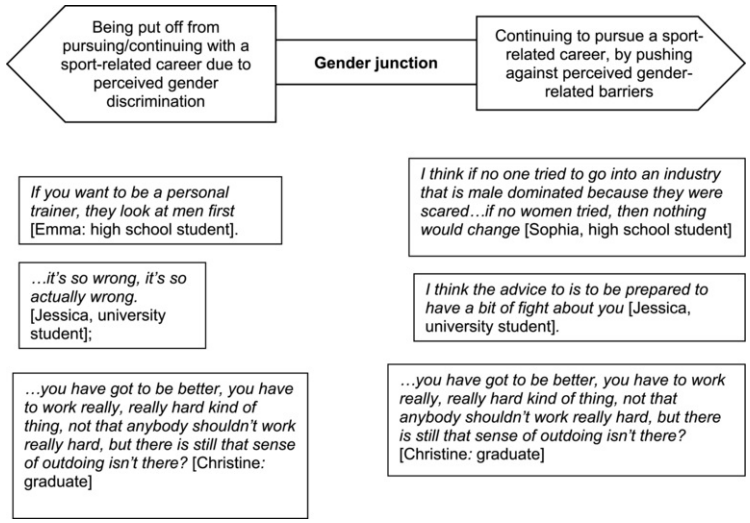

Fig. 1 Theme of gender junction, with supporting extracts from each focus group.

alt-text: Fig. 1

This comment had swayed her opinion as to the type of career she wished to pursue: '*It made me think twice'*. The high school students felt that this gender discrimination had its origins in school, since they felt that they had been discouraged from taking part in sport: *I think the undermining starts even before you think about studying it. It starts in school and then a lot of people are discouraged before they even get to college or Uni*. [Sophia: high school student]. They felt that there were a lack of opportunities and there were barriers in sport, in general. For instance, they talked about being stopped from playing sport with boys as they were a 'distraction' [Chloe, high school student], which, is similar to the issues of sexuality and dressing conservatively that have been previously reported (Burton et al., 2011a, 2011b). These barriers extended into jobs, where they felt that, in certain professions, women had to change their appearance. These gender stereotypes being a barrier to a career in a sport-related area supports previous research on sport management students (Harris et al., 2015), as well as supporting the research on access discrimination as a result of perceived stereotypes and gender discriminative attitudes (Burton et al., 2012; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Whaley & Krane, 2012).

Because of the strength of opinion expressed (such as feeling '*angry', 'irritated', 'frustrated*' and annoyed), many of the participants, in particular the university and high school students felt that they would not allow gender stereotypes and discrimination to put them off pursuing a career in sport and exercise. Despite being '*belittled*' [Caitlin, university student], and having '*jokes made about you'* [Jessica, university student], members of the university student group commented that they would continue to pursue a career:.They talked about having to '*stand your ground*' [Caitlin, University student], about having to '*prove them all wrong*' [Hannah, University student] and '*prove your worth'* [Jessica, university student] Members of the other groups also commented on having to work harder to prove others wrong: '*You've just got to look past it and just go for it because there's always going to be barriers so just go … just keep trying … work for it and you'll get there.'* [Olivia, high school student].

As has been reported previously (Elliott & Sander, 2011; Stern et al., 2013), some of the participants in the graduate focus group did not, however, report any gender discrimination. For instance, one of the graduates worked in a healthcare environment, and did not feel any form of discrimination, feeling instead *'privileged'*; they expressed how the senior roles were dominated by women, and how things were *'almost the opposite way around'* [Rachel, graduate]. Another of the participants in the graduate focus group [Kim] gave a further example of positive discrimination for women, as she had gained a previous job as a researcher, owing to the sensitivity required in taking measures. Although gender stereotypes were perceived to be an issue by most members in the graduate group, the individuals who formed the focus groups tended to be those who had been able to push through these negative opinions, and may have, therefore, been bias regarding their experiences. It may also have been the case that the women have become gendered/normalised, perhaps starting to take on masculine traits (Kane & LaVoi, 2018).

In summary on the theme of gender junction, all groups reported some form of stereotyping which made them feel as though they were, had been or might be in the future at a junction in having to decide on a career path. The decision to pursue a career in sport is most probably dependent on individual circumstances, but generally it seemed that high school students held more positive views of their potential for success, and the graduates, although biased because of having already achieved success, were the least likely to be put off by gender discrimination. The university students seemed to hold stronger, negative emotions in their views, possibly because they were closer to the 'gender junction', having to make more imminent decisions on their career paths.

3.2 Women as barriers to themselves

The theme, with example quotes, of 'women as barriers to themselves' is shown in Fig. 2. The external barrier, multiple-role conflict, expressed by some members of all groups, supports previous research (Harris et al., 2015; Kamphoff, 2010; Kilty, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). For instance, one member of the university student focus group was a single mother [Sarah], who expressed dissatisfaction that courses and job opportunities were in the evening and weekends, times that clashed with childcare responsibilities. These barriers were enough to make participants, even if they did not have children at the time, feel differently about pursuing a sport-related career, which often might mean unsociable hours. Another external barrier, also reported previously (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Norman, 2012; Harris et al., 2015; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017; M'mbaha & Chepyator-Thomson, 2018), was concerned with the perceived relevance of networks for career progression. For instance, the graduate group made comparisons with males, with the view that males were good at networking, *'knowing about roles in sport'* [Megan], and knowing where to look [Nicole; Liz], often because they had always been involved in sport through playing sport; this was an opinion also expressed by the high school students, who talked about how sport-related social networks for male sports were important, and could potentially lead to future employment. Contrary to the finding of Norman (2012), the networks were not viewed as necessarily increasing confidence, but were just acknowledged to exist, with these networks potentially thought to influence hiring practices (as explained by homologous reproduction). Both the high school and university students talked about job application forms also being an external barrier [Jessica and Caitlin, university students]. This perception regarding discrimination, due to having to acknowledge gender in hiring practices, supports the notion of homologous reproduction (Darvin & Sagas, 2017).

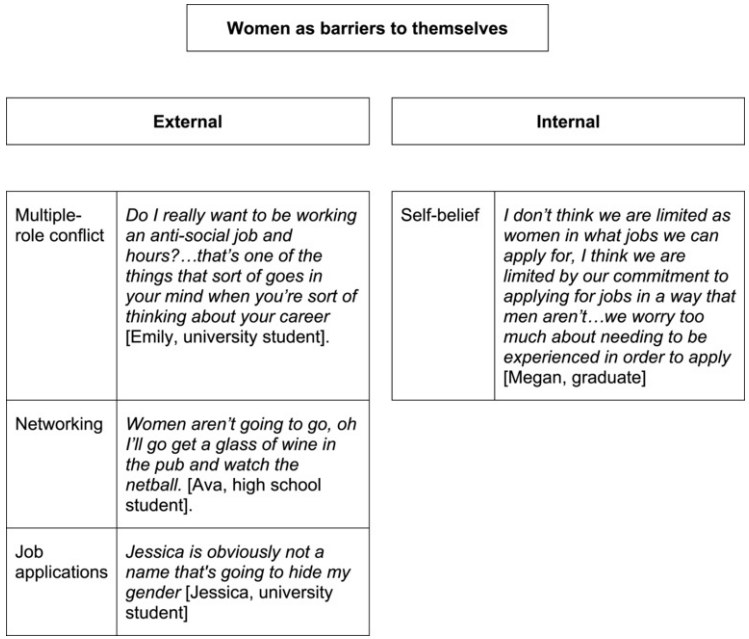

Fig. 2 Women as barriers to themselves.

alt-text: Fig. 2

Regarding the internal barrier of self-belief, the group of graduates talked about how women had to have belief in themselves, be resilient, and to be *'brave enough to put your name down'* [Megan, graduate] and *'put yourself out there'* [Liz, graduate]. They also talked about knowing and appreciating their '*skill set*' and capabilities, at which, they believed, women tended not to be as good as men. These beliefs about the need for having self-confidence, and understanding one's capabilities and identity supports previous research (Fasting, Sand, & Nordstrand, 2017; Kilty, 2006; Mazerolle et al., 2015; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Walker & Bopp, 2010). The lack of self-belief may be explained by gender role theory, in that females socially identify with the roles and expectations deemed appropriate, which are incongruous to the types of skills required in a sport-related environment, or a senior management environment. Females may, therefore, be inadvertently self-limiting due to ideological gender beliefs (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). None of the focus group participants internalised these feelings of self-belief and self-confidence, speaking more about other women or women in general, rather than acknowledging any feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem in themselves; The women who were included in the current study tended to view themselves as not fitting the typical gender stereotype. Self-belief and self-confidence were, therefore, something that the women thought they had already, but were still acknowledged as being required to achieve success.

3.3 Role models

A third theme that emerged was about the importance of role models. The participants either talked about the lack of role models and lack of numbers within sport-related employment and study, or about the importance of having positive role models.

3.3.1 Lack of role models

All groups mentioned the lack of females in their area. For instance, the university students commented on there being no or very few females on the course, no female lectures or coaches, and how examples they had in lectures were mainly of males. Educational materials being dominated by male values and images has been reported previously (Alsarve, 2018; Fasting et al., 2017; Lewis, Roberts, & Andrews, 2018). The high school students also talked about there being a lack of role models, with certain jobs being seen as gendered, such as personal trainers, coaches, physiotherapists, and sports trainers being associated with males, and jobs in nutrition and sports massage being seen as being female. The lack of significant role models has arisen in previous research, and could explain the lack of females studying in sport, and advancing further in their career (Harris et al., 2015; Walker & Bopp, 2010). Participants in the graduate group gave mixed opinions about numbers of females being in senior roles, with some individually naming people in their area of work who had senior roles and were female, with others reporting low numbers of females in senior roles. One of the group members, for instance, stated: '*All the females that are in higher positions are in administrative roles*' [Laura, graduate]. The disparity was most likely to be due to the nature of the participants' employment, or could have been due to the graduates accepting the normalcy of the discrimination, in a form of hegemonic masculinity (Fasting et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2018).

3.3.2 Importance of role models

Participants from all groups reported on how role models were important to them in encouraging them to pursue/continue with a career in sport and exercise: *'… if she can do it, why can't I'* [Georgia, university student, when talking about a physiotherapist employed in a male, professional football team]; '*just observing her in that role in that position is positive for me* [Jessica, university student, when talking about a psychologist working for the English Institute of Sport]. Generally, it seemed that role models were lacking in most areas of sport-related education and employment, but that positive role models were valued and needed to be promoted.

3.4 Token equality

The final theme that emerged from the focus group data was that of token equality Efforts were being made to represent females, but participants in the current study felt that these were the wrong efforts, or that they did not go far enough:

> *In sports like football … it is good that football clubs are employing them, but they are employing them into more typically female roles. It is great to have them as role models, but it is tokenistic*. [Liz, graduate]

Similar conclusions have reached by other researchers regarding educational courses (Fasting et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2014). Participants also said that, although token gestures were being made, there was still a predominance of educational courses and jobs that were more attractive to males such as football coaching, and those more attractive to females such as health. The university students felt that there was not a balance of courses and suggested that courses and topics could be relevant to both sexes. High school students also said that they wanted more equality but that female-only courses could be appropriate, such as when playing contact sport. The data collected suggest that attempts to ensure gender equality were tokenistic and did not go far enough.

4 Discussion

As with previous research (Burton et al., 2012; Koca et al., 2011; Koca & Öztürk, 2015; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Lewis et al., 2018; Mazerolle et al., 2015), gender inequality and discrimination appear to still prevail, being cited, in the current study, as an issue that may force individuals to re-evaluate whether pursuing education and a career in sport and exercise was for them. Participants from all groups reported as having felt that they were, that they had been, or that they might be in the future, at a 'gender junction', whereby gender inequality and discrimination might lead to a re-appraisal of their career choice. This gender junction appeared to occur at all stages of the participants' careers, but opinions seemed to differ as to how participants reacted to the discrimination. In the high school group, participants said that they felt optimistic about being able to work harder or prove themselves enough to oppose gender stereotypes. The graduates, possibly because of their success in their careers to date, or because gender discrimination, for them, has become normalised and accepted, also reported being optimistic in being able to push against discriminative barriers, with some even saying that they had encountered positive sex discrimination towards females in their particular line of work. It was the undergraduate students who tended to be more apprehensive of the gender discrimination that they felt, perhaps because they were closer to their gender junction, as a decision on their career direction was imminent. Willingness to challenge gender discrimination may be age-dependent (Kitching, Grix, & Phillpotts, 2017). Knowing that females at all stages of their career in sport and education appear to be at a gender junction, is relevant as it is not too early to discuss the barriers to career progression, and to ensure females have the tools to push against the barriers. It is also important to appreciate that there may be key periods in an individual's career, such as when entering the job market having graduated, where increased efforts could be made to ensure career continuity.

One idea, that pervaded all focus groups, was having to work harder against gender stereotypes and having to prove capability in male-dominated careers, suggesting that there is gender discrimination and bias to overcome. This finding of having to work harder is similar to those reported by other researchers (Betzer-Tayar et al., 2017; Burton et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2015; Kilty, 2006; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Norman, 2010; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Whaley & Krane, 2012). These opinions prevailed even in the focus groups of graduates, who had, on the whole, achieved success. As suggested by Shaw and Frisby (2006), an alternative frame of gender equality could be developed, whereby females challenge gender-equality and hierarchies, not by 'working harder' to prove themselves, but by facing up to external and internal barriers that may sway their decisions to stay or leave the profession. Particularly relevant are the internal barriers, since these are controllable. The internal barriers that were discussed in the current focus groups included having self-belief and self-confidence to pursue a career in sport and exercise, which were deemed necessary, despite perceived incongruities that may exist between role expectations and skills. Organisations could also help by attempting to remove external barriers, such as providing flexible working hours for female students and employees. Because of how the participants felt about the importance of networking in securing employment, organisations could also encourage female-focused networks; access discrimination has been found to occur with predominately exclusive, male-only networks, many of which occur in sport (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Zdroik & Babiak, 2017). Instead of working harder, females could, therefore, find ways in which to have self-belief, self-confidence, and in developing networks, and organisations need to actively support the removal of external barriers.

Role models were seen as being important, but lacking, and attempts to incorporate females to meet equality aspirations/targets were seen as being tokenistic. It is possible for organisations to be proactive in ensuring that there are equal numbers of males and females in sport-related jobs, to counteract homologous reproduction. Equal numbers of images of males and females should be used when providing educational examples in sport. Females should not marginalised and trivialised through, for instance, media portrayal of a woman's physical attributes over their performance attributes (Walker & Bopp, 2010). It is, however, not a question of token equality. Organisations need to embrace wholeheartedly strategies to recruit gender-equal employment practices, to be actively inclusive, and to strategise on how females can be recruited to organisations through use of terminology, such as balancing courses that are seen as being more attractive to males, such as sport and exercise science, and coaching, with those seen to be more attractive to females, such as nutrition, exercise, and health (Elliott & Sander, 2011). As has previously been suggested (Walker & Bopp, 2010), perhaps organisations should be rewarded financially for hiring females in traditionally male-dominated jobs, and gender assumptions need to be continually challenged (Burton et al., 2012; Shaw & Frisby, 2006).

A limitation of the study was that students who had already dropped out, or students who had not pursued a career in sport were not contacted; participants volunteered to be part of the focus group. In other research, individuals who have left a sport-related profession, have also been questioned. For instance, Weiss and Stevens (1993) found that there were some differences in how individuals viewed costs, benefits, and coaching satisfaction between current and former female coaches, in that former coaches reported time demands and low perceived competence. This finding is similar to the barriers (multiple-role conflict, and self-belief, respectively) found in the current study. It would have been beneficial, though, to find out if there were additional barriers that led to dropout among those who had already chosen not to pursue sport as a career. The study was also geographically limited, restricted to a discrete number of universities in the UK, and racial and ethnic minorities were not represented. Including males in the sample could have also brought further insights into males' perspectives of the opportunities and barriers facing females in employment and work in sport and exercise, especially if males were included who identified themselves as feminine (hence, contesting the male/female binary), or by interviewing male employers with regard to subconscious bias and prejudice in the recruitment practices. These limitations are, however, consistent with other research in this area (M'mbaha & Chepyator-Thomson, 2018), With the study being exploratory, the limitations with regards to lack of diversity in population studied, geographical location, ethnicity, disability, and gender could serve to guide future research, so that a greater and more diverse sample could be included against which the data from the current study could be cross-referenced. One of the benefits of the research, however, was that a cross-section of the population was studied, from high school students to post-university graduates, although more longitudinal research is needed for a better understanding of changes in attitudes and beliefs over time (McLeod & Thomson, 2009).

5 Conclusion

Based on the data, it is recommended that:

- individuals and organisations actively promote positive role models, by including examples of females achieving success, not only in sport, but also in employment.
- organisations should remove external barriers, where possible, by considering flexibility in dealing with childcare issues when running courses, should promote networks, and should ensure nondisclosure of gender on application forms.
- open discussion about gender role stereotyping should be encouraged as part of the education setting.
- females should focus on developing self-confidence, self-belief and networks, rather than thinking they need to work harder to prove themselves capable.

Conflicts of interest

There are no competing interests to declare.

Declaration of interest

None.

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