

*'Do full-grown men really play netball?' Stigma and Men's Experiences of Playing for an Elite
London Netball Team*

Keywords

netball, male netballers, stigma, gender relations, Goffman

Abstract

This article draws on Goffman's (1990) work *Stigma* to provide a critical perspective on how elite male players manage their identity in a 'female sport'. Following interviews with players from an all-male netball team in London, England, we critically discuss the different strategies that male netballers use to construct and manage their stigmatised identity(ies), through a variety of stages and strategies associated with stigma management over time, these include; *Passing, Group Alignment, and Normalisation*, strategies which change over time. The article highlights how the individual strategies for stigma management adopted by the male players are a consequence of wider gender relations in sport and the ways in which most sports continue to be organised according to sex segregation. The men in this study experience *stigma* for playing netball because it is perceived as a sport for women, by exploring the experiences of male netballers it emphasises how the continued gender binary approach to sport continues to create *stigma* for male and female athletes.

Introduction

In this article, we draw on Goffman's (1990) work *Stigma*, to outline some of the consequences for men playing netball, a sport which is predominantly played by girls and women. In the netball season of 2019-20, Sport England (2020a) stated that some 265,900 girls and women reported playing netball twice a week in the UK, compared with only 17,800 men and boys (Sport England, 2020a). Despite a growing trend towards more boys and men playing the sport, the national governing body for netball, only receive funding for girls and women's participation. Globally the governing body for netball, the International Netball Federation (INF) continue to maintain their approach against growing pressure that the 'primary focus at international level will remain female only netball' (INF, 2018). Within this context, netball is associated as a sport for women, yet men's association with it is problematic and controversial. As a girls and women's sport, male players are stigmatized for playing netball, and have to manage their sporting and gendered identities in the sport. The significance of this article is threefold. First, Goffman remains under utilised in the sociology of sport as a framework for understanding the ways in which stigma and stigma management are documented (Birrell and Donnelly, 2004), so our research provides a fresh approach to utilising Goffman's (1990) theory in this area. Second, this article provides new data on male netballer's experiences of stigma in a UK context, which has until now remained underresearched in the sociology of sport. Third, drawing on the history of netball in the UK, and how stigma has been constructed right up until the present day, we provide a modern application of Goffman's (1990) *Stigma* that better understands the 'contemporary problems of social decomposition, inequality and injustice' (Tyler and Slater, 2018: 721) of netball. Given that netball is framed within the media as stigmatised activity for men, for example, 'there are a lot of barriers

and stigma that need to change' (The Sunday Times, 5th December 2021), our article provides a more critical contextual analysis of the experiences of male netballers and stigma within the sociology of sport. Focusing on male netballers, and their lived experience we draw on *Stigma* because playing netball is a stigma for men because it is a female sport. This is significant, as in the wider context of sport, men dominate numerically and economically in most sports (Velija and Piggott, 2022). Gender binaries in sport create *Stigma* for male and female athletes who adopt strategies of stigma management to continue playing their sport. After outlining the methods, we sketch out the different coping strategies (passing, group alignment and normalisation) for dealing with stigma, used over time and at different points within male netballers's careers. This reveals the ways in which stigma management changes throughout men's participation in netball. We conclude by highlighting how the stigma management strategies adopted by male netballers can be understood through a broader analysis of gender relations and power in sport.

Netball and Gender

Stigma is always dependent upon social context (Goffman, 1990), thus we start our article by contextualizing men's netball within the broader historical and social constructions of gender in sport, and netball. The construction of netball as a female sport has historic roots, first introduced in England 1895 on a trip by Dr Toll from America to Madame Marina Bergman-Osterberg's Physical Training College in Hampstead (McLachlan, 2016). While outside of the public-school system playing sports remained inaccessible for most girls and women (Hargreaves, 1994), girls in public schools played a variety of sports (Velija, 2015). As netball was similar to basketball and deemed too physical for women, the game underwent a 'de-masculinising' process (Treagus, 2005: 91). This meant eliminating contact between players and alternating centre passes instead of the

‘jump ball’, which enabled netball enthusiasts to illustrate that girls and women were protected from too much physical exertion and damaging their bodies (Andrew, 1997). It was this adaptation to the rules which allowed netball to expand. Netball then expanded from schools to women-only clubs, and became a popular female sport (Nauright and Broomhall, 1994; Tagg, 2014).

While the positioning of netball as a girls and women’s game enabled netball to develop and grow, (Nauright and Broomhall, 1994) netball has never challenged more dominant sports, and this alongside separatism in the physical education system in Britain meant netball was firmly reinforced as a sport for girls, played by girls in the PE curriculum (Clark, 2021, Hargreaves, 1994, Scraton, 2017). This reflects a broader pattern of gender relations in sport, where sex-segregated activities are the norm, and defended based on perceived, socially constructed ideas about the biological capabilities of male and female bodies (McDonagh and Pappano, 2007).

Positioned as a women’s sport means that netball is generally devalued for men *and* women, because it is a female sport (Kessel, 2018). Female sports have historically and presently been considered as less exciting and therefore less profitable because of the ways in which female bodies are socially positioned as weaker and less suited to sports than men, reflecting broader gender relations and power in sport (Bowes and Culvin, 2021). As a predominantly female sport netball receives less media coverage than mainstream male sports, such as football, which are shown on mainstream TV. Consequently, elite female players have few options to earn a living from netball, which undermines the sport at the highest level for women. In the UK, the Netball Superleague have a team salary capped at £75,000 (between ten players) maintaining the notion that it is a peripheral sport (Kessel, 2018). While men have had more economic opportunities in sport more

broadly, because netball is viewed as a female sport, elite players have fewer opportunities for pay and sponsorship compared to other sports (Kessel, 2018). There has been a concern, by netball governing bodies that by opening netball up to men that funds could be redistributed to male netballers. It is in this context of netball as a women's sport, that men playing experience *stigma*. In the following section the theoretical framework which underpins this study and how it is applied to understanding male netballers.

Stigma and the Male Netballer

In his classic sociological text, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1990), Goffman (1990) discusses how we all identify someone's social identity. First appearances of strangers we meet, or indeed of acquaintance's we have, enable us to 'anticipate his category and attributes, his 'social identity'' (Goffman, 1990: 12). In his work, Goffman says that these anticipations that we have of others, are transformed into 'normative expectations, righteously presented demands' (1990: 12). Typically, we 'do not become aware that we have made these demands or aware of what they are until an active question arises as to whether or not they will be fulfilled' (Goffman, 1990: 12). In most situations our expectations and demands of others are met and interactions go smoothly. But, when there is a discrepancy between the expectations of one's social identity, and their actual social identity, a stigma emerges.

Goffman made four claims about *stigma* which are relevant to this article. Firstly, that stigma is generated in social contexts. Secondly, people respond by managing the effects of stigma by employing strategies. Thirdly, stigmatisation is historically specific. And finally, stigma functions as a means of social control (Tyler and Slater, 2018). Goffman (1990) identifies different strategies

that people adopt when managing an individual's stigma association, although these strategies depend on the severity of the stigma. Goffman (1990: 31) distinguishes between those who have easily identifiable attributes, which he calls 'discredited individuals' and those who have attributes which are less easily recognisable – a 'discreditable' stigma – one which can be later found out if information is not controlled. All forms of stigma are relational, and attributes are not stigmatising of themselves (Scambler, 2018). Goffman (1990) explains that when stigma impacts on people's identities and their relations with others, attempts are usually undertaken to control or manage the discrediting attribute. In the male netballer's case, the discrediting attribute is choosing to play a female sport. The stigma develops from a discrepancy between the societal expectations of what kinds of sports men should partake in and the sorts of sports these men actually partake in. The 'failings' (to use Goffman's term) to 'live up to' these masculine expectations brings shame on the male netballer, who 'plays a girl's game' and therefore lacks in his male identity, and this is historically and socially constructed through how netball has developed as a female sport, **thus men who play netball are perceived as feminine and their sexuality is also questioned (Risner, 2002).**

As playing netball is a leisure activity, it is a discreditable stigma which is most associated with control and management of information and the information people give out about themselves (Goffman, 1990). Although Goffman's concepts have been applied in numerous studies which conceptualise stigma and focus on how people manage stigma (Tyler and Slater, 2018), less studies, and especially in the sociology of sport, consider how and where stigma is produced and by whom, and few locate stigma in broader power struggles (Tyler and Slater, 2018).

Other studies that have adopted Goffman's concept of stigma management to understand sexuality in sport include the work of Blinde and Taub, (1992) to explore the stigma of female athletes and lesbianism. They consider the ways in which self-segregation, passing, deflection and normalisation are adopted as management techniques by athletes to deflect the accusation of being a lesbian. In a more recent paper by LaVoi and Glassford (2021) they discuss how female head coaches manage their identities and stigma in relation to their sexuality, exploring impression and stigma management techniques. In their research, they note how Goffman remains underutilised as a framework for analysis in the sociology of sport, highlighting the ways in which homophobia and heteronormativity operate in sport coaching spaces and how lesbian coaches manage stigma-based information in either concealing or sharing their family narratives (LaVoi and Glassford, 2021). In other research on men and netball in Australasia, although not specifically drawing on Goffman, Tagg (2008a, 2016) explores the gendered experiences of men who play netball. This research highlights some of the tensions men experience when playing netball, and as a result the men adopt different approaches to addressing this. Whilst some men do not tell others that they participate in netball (mainly younger or less experienced players), other more experienced male netballers disclose what they do but must 'be up for a wee bit of flack' (Tagg, 2016: 919). In Tagg's later (2014) study, he explores how the image of men's netball in New Zealand has changed to attract a mainstream image. Over time overtly flamboyant transgender and gay players were marginalised, and more heterosexual players dominated the game, with a shift to favour, 'a more hegemonic masculine sporting domain' (Tagg, 2008a: 473).

In this article Goffman's concept of stigma and stigma management are utilised to understand how men involved in netball negotiate their identity in a feminine sport. Concepts of stigma

management such as *passing*, *group alignment*, and *normalisation* to manage their sporting identities. The following research question guided the research: How do men who play netball manage their identities as netballers? In the following section the methods of this study are outlined.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore men's experiences of playing netball. At the time of the research being carried out (2018-2019), there was only one all-male competitive netball team in the UK, and the team was contacted through social media to see if anyone would be interested in participating in the study. All the men were regular players and could talk about their netball journey. The club had two squads who participated weekly in a mixed social friendly league in London. In addition to the mixed social league some of the players were training in the England squad for the South Africa mixed 'nets' tournament. The first author (*name to be inserted at publication stage*) spent six months in and around the club, watching games weekly, talking with the all-male team and understanding their netballing narratives first-hand. Time was spent 'hanging about' (Woodward, 2008: 536) watching them play, seeing how they interacted at quarter time and half times, after the matches finished, plus some social scenarios like 'going to the pub' afterwards. Time spent with the research participants in their 'natural' environments was key to understanding their experiences (Jones, 2014).

During their time spent in the field collecting data, the first author had different conversations with teammates and opponents to grasp the impression of men playing netball. In this study, whilst the first researcher is involved with netball and understands the game, they was still an 'outsider' to

the men's participation in netball (Woodward, 2008). While this meant they witnessed the men's experiences and could understand some of their responses as a co-netball fan and amateur player, but in turn could never truly 'live' their netball experience due to being a non-professional female netball player. However, 'hanging around' at a distance enabled an appreciation of the perspectives from both the male and female players. For example, one finding was that the female players loved playing with the men as they made their own performances stronger and faster. While male players enjoyed playing as it was a different atmosphere to football, and felt it was friendlier and more welcoming. As a weekly observer of the male netball team, author one not only 'walked alongside' (Neale, 2021: 13) the players, but cheered and clapped them on winning match days and commiserated alongside them when they lost. 'Hanging out' was not only used to empathise with the male netball players but also to build trust (Liamputtong, 2019).

The netball team that were part of this study consisted of a 20-person squad, with all members engaging in some form of informal 'chat' or 'interview'. However, six of the male netballers gave unprecedented access to their netballing journeys, in which author one carried out further follow-up interviews. These interviews were carried out over several weekends, in and around two netball tournaments which the players had been training hard for. The interviews were all transcribed and analysed, with the aim of understanding the sporting narratives of these players, and the stigma they encountered playing a 'women's sport'. Follow-up interviews, sometimes called 'serial interviewing' (Crang and Cook, 2008: 43), allowed these six key respondents to be interviewed more extensively, to collect further data as well as to 'build rapport' (Spradley, 1979: 26). Like most sports, netball environments are constantly evolving, so the first author ensured that the

tempo of their research, ‘the number and continuity of visits to the field’ (Neale, 2021: 107) matched the changing dynamics of the team games, training sessions, and upcoming tournaments.

Participants were emailed informed consent forms, which they had to read and send back before attending the interviews. To ensure anonymity, participants were informed that names and team names would be changed, and because of the limited number of players details of those interviewed in our description of players is limited. The key participant's names have been changed to James, 26, Ben, 28, Greg, 31, Phil, 31, Sam, 32, and Lucas, 37 (see table 1). All but one participant lived in London (where the team was based). Before the interviews began, each participant was reminded of the informed consent forms and told they could withdraw at any point if they wished to. The interviews were completed in a chronological life-story manner. The interview questions were designed to cover three sections; 1) early involvement in sport, 2) netball careers, and 3) a section of questions to aid discussion about their participation in netball, including their experience of people’s reaction to their participation in netball. Interviews were between one to two hours long each. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. This was considered crucial in gaining a rich and insightful data on their experiences (Irvine et al., 2013; Shuy, 2002), not least of all because the interviews were asking sensitive questions about feelings of embarrassment, shame, and other emotions connected to stigma. The chronological life story approach aided the thematic analysis. This gave the study a more meaningful understanding to comparing the identities and stigma management approaches adopted by players, and how their sporting identity changed throughout their involvement in netball. Goffman’s concepts of stigma management were utilised as a sensitising approach to analyse the data, the next section of this article will discuss the results of the research, utilising the theoretical concepts of Goffman.

Discussion

The discussion section of this article is based around the key strategic stages the male netball players moved along in the sporting narratives which emerged from the data. Nearly all the research participants started out, in their netball careers, as having to pass as normal (stage one) by concealing the fact they played netball at all. But, as netball became a more constant feature of their everyday lives, concealing it became impossible, and the male netballers turned to other aligning themselves (hanging out) with other male and female netballers to manage the stigma (stage two). Finally, the data from this study shows that the most experienced netball players, feeling tired from years of stigmatisation, become normalised to the stigma and challenge it in ways they can. Whilst we recognise every sporting narrative is different, we identify these key strategies for dealing with stigma as features, of most male netballing journeys.

Stage One: Passing as 'Normal Men': "I just play basketball... I don't say netball"

Male netball stigma is for the main part, not a visible stigma, and can be relatively easily managed by some male netballers through what Goffman (1990: 92) refers to as 'passing' (his reference to passing oneself off as normal). For non-visible stigmas, management involves 'information control' (Goffman, 1990: 57). Male netballers must decide when to 'tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where' (Goffman, 1990: 57). For male netballers, the stigma results from a perceived failing of their masculinity, playing a sport associated with girls and women. One way in which they can manage the information about their stigma is by claiming they are, or passing themselves off as, basketball players instead of netball players. Whilst replacing the term 'netball' with 'basketball' may seem

frivolous, the strategy is significant in managing a stigma which is deeply gendered, whereby male netballers regularly feel shame and embarrassment associated with playing a 'women's sport'. **One research participant Phil, who plays Wing Attack for the netball team says that he can "understand why netball is perceived as a women's sport" but is frustrated by stigmatizing comments made by onlookers,**

You know, they [women] are after all, the main athletes of the sport, but it frustrates me when people make comments when they either haven't played or even watched the game. It's frustrating, even the guys who have played it once and never come back, they have enjoyed it, they haven't walked away and said, 'no I hate that sport', they have actually really enjoyed it. I think people are too quick to judge the sport based on what they think they know. (Phil)

All the male netballers in our study, felt on at least one occasion or another, a propensity to lie, conceal or fabricate information about the netball they played. **Phil said he kept his netball a "low profile", especially whilst at the office in work (Phil is a Commercial Manager).** As Goffman (1990: 95) says of those with a stigma, 'because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are able to pass will do so' (Goffman, 1990: 95). Whilst male netballers cannot always pass as normal, they can avoid uneasy and tough questions by hiding the fact that they play netball, calling the sport something different or making it 'sound' more like a male sport by inferring it is faster or more aggressive – thus making it appear more manly. For example, Greg, a Client Services Director in IT and **Goal Shooter for the team,** explains that many of his teammates explicitly lie about playing netball, by saying they play basketball instead:

I know guys that *have* (lied about playing netball), but I haven't. There are guys who are in different environments and working environments who say, 'I just play basketball' 'I'm going to play basketball tonight'. They don't say netball (Greg)

This strategy was used by the men to protect their sporting identity to avoid any 'stick' they might receive and illuminates the acceptance of basketball over netball.

When Ben first started playing netball, he said he only began disclosing his participation with his friends and family who, overall, were 'extremely supportive'. However, some friends 'initial first reaction was a question of 'are you joking?' and then they were like 'okay cool!'. As Goffman identifies, although a useful strategy, adopting the passing technique may mean individuals are more likely to reinforce the negative stereotype that they are associated with (Barreto et al., 2006). Using a passing strategy does very little to challenge gendered stereotypes about netball (as a women's sport) – in fact it only reinforces these perceptions of the sport and **therefore exacerbates the values of netball attached to women**. Passing as 'normal' male basketball players seemed to mainly be adopted as a strategy at the start of their participation in netball and often used to avoid being stigmatised as 'gay' or being weak through playing a 'girls sport'.

Passing as 'normals', to use Goffman's (1990) terminology, was also accomplished by simply concealing the fact they played any such sport. Male netball is not a visible stigma, thus an individual player 'will occasionally be in a position to elect to conceal crucial information about himself' (Goffman, 1990: 94). Typically, male netballers in our study refrained from using the term 'netball' altogether, with some reluctant to tell others they even participated in a weekend or evening sport. "I'd just tell people I'm going to judo or somewhere else" said Lucas, a School

Teacher from the Northwest. 'Passing' as normal through concealment – hiding the sport altogether – was a frequent strategy used by male netballers. It helped men to avoid having to respond to uncomfortable questions, that particularly came at the start of their netball careers. As Sam explains, 'I couldn't be bothered facing the barrage of questions' – 'queries as to how it can be that a full-grown man plays netball'. Other research participants felt the same. James and Lucas mentioned they received questions like, 'is it real netball?' (James), 'are you gay?' (Lucas), or 'do you play against gay people?' (James). For many research participants, it was easier to simply conceal the fact they played netball altogether. James said that he 'struggled to tell people' about playing netball and regularly concealed this part of his life from others. Concealing is possible because James and the other players do not have to tell people they play netball. As playing netball is something that can be concealed, it is a 'discrediting stigma' (Goffman, 1990: 43).

Passing as 'Straight': The Assumption that 'you're gay if you play'

The male netball players in this study adopt various stigma management strategies to 'exert some control over the prejudiced impressions that others have' (Smart and Wegner, 2000: 220). Although it may not be advantageous for future disclosure, Goffman (1990) explains that concealing a stigmatising identity allows an individual to participate in their present social life and control the aspects of their identity they want others to know. Personal relationships can also be affected because of the stigma associated with male netball. Ben, expressed guilt when not telling his new girlfriend he played netball: 'I didn't say anything about netball at first. I said I was into basketball and other sports – but I didn't say I play netball – I felt bad about lying to her but that's just how it is'. As Goffman (1990: 94) says: 'When an individual could keep an unapparent stigma secret, he will find that intimate relations with others, ratified in our society by mutual confession

of invisible failings, cause him either to admit his situation to the intimate or to feel guilty for not doing so’.

Unlike many types of stigma, such as being disabled, gay or unemployed – to use some examples from Goffman (1990), male netballers could eliminate the stigma by not playing. None of the men had played netball during their schooling which had been dominated more by male sports, and perhaps not surprisingly they all associated netball with girls and women. Sam, James and Lucas started playing netball at university, which was either accidental, or through female family members who played, which reflects the non-standard stigmatized trajectory to playing netball experienced by the men. Lucas, like most male netball players interviewed in this study was heterosexual, yet he talks about his relationship with the female players on the team and the assumption he might be gay,

I remember on one night out a girl turned around to me and said ‘I’m just going to jump on the next boy I see’, and then she said to me ‘Lucas you don’t count, you’re not a boy!’ *laughs* ‘thanks, oh thanks!’... Then there was a phase of ‘is netball Lucas gay?’ which everyone used to ask about. It didn’t bother me at all, every week I was always with the girls and there was some gay guys there like ‘I’m going to try and embarrass him and come onto him’ and all that. They would come up to me and be like ‘how’s it going?...’ and see if I was ‘alright?’, and I was like, if you’re going to try and hit on me, do it properly!

Lucas was no exception. All the players had experienced comments about the assumption that men who play netball were ‘gay’. Sam was the only player interviewed who identified as being gay, the others self-identified as heterosexual. In the interview with Sam, he mentioned,

I think there is that thing of an immediate association because it's a girl's sport that the guys who play it must be gay ... I think a lot of people justify it in their heads 'oh Sam's gay that's why he plays netball' (Sam)

Sam goes on to discuss how he is confident to challenge this,

I have got the internal confidence to turn around and say 'I don't really care what you think', like 'I'm not convinced your opinion is valid because I know that guys play it and I know it's a great sport!' and furthermore don't associate me with being gay and 'look that fairy plays it'. There is only one guy in Eagles out of twenty of us who is gay (Sam).

Sam stresses the other thirteen players are not gay, demonstrating a desire to counter this stereotype and reposition netball as a male heterosexual sport. **Whilst deflecting these stigmatising perceptions against him and declaring he's not gay, Sam unwittingly taps into the discourse of netball as a 'weak', or 'not proper' sport, which does little to change perceptions of netball being an inferior women's sport.**

The issue of gender and sexuality is discussed by Greg,

I mean there are really poor stereotypes out there about sexuality that surrounds it and I've never had an issue about anything like that but I felt people almost put you in a box, as being gay or whatever, for playing netball, which is ridiculous right? It's just a sport and anybody can play it.... . And it's like that because it's instilled from an early age that it's a girls sport and therefore it is only for them and the most feminine males, seen as gay people I suppose.

All the participants in this study had experienced questions about their sexuality *because they play netball*, as well faced questions, and assumptions about the sexuality of all men who play netball.

People are going to have their perceptions and think it is a women's sport and every guy who plays it is gay like something is wrong with them. But I'm at that point where I don't care (Phil).

When men play netball their masculinity, and sexuality is questioned, and because they enjoy female sports, which are perceived as less physical less manly the men were assumed to be gay.

For some of the players, the advertising of the teams and sites like Facebook were a concern as they could no longer conceal their involvement, as Ben explains,

The only time I would say I have ever felt uncomfortable was mainly starting with the Eagles and when things got posted on Facebook and pictures were taken of us with the girls we have played against and that would go on there. I remember the first couple of them being a bit 'oh god, what are people going to think'.

Ben's anxiety of seeing his picture in the netball team, is not merely a result of how he feels *personally* about netball, but is a direct result of the *societal expectations* of the kinds of sports men should play. As Goffman (1990: 11) explains, 'society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories', but when there's 'a discrepancy' between these societal expectations and his actual identity, a stigma emerges.

Stage Two: Group-alignment: Hanging-out with fellow male netballers

Other strategies for dealing with the stigma associated with men playing netball. For example, Ben finds some solace in spending time with other male netballers. Male netball feels more acceptable when hanging out with fellow-suffers, since those others are 'likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as he suffers because of having the same stigma' (Goffman, 1990: 137). Whilst many

of the participants did not specifically mention they socialised with fellow male netballers during the interviews, Ben explained that this was something that happened gradually,

I would say the majority of my friends now who I stay in contact with on a regular basis are from netball and obviously, they are very supportive because they are either playing with me or against me ... The social side is more around the netball side now, and obviously, with the family being so netball I don't get a break from netball (Ben)

Ben has found that there is a shared space and understanding 'among his own kind' (Goffman, 1990: 32) where he is comfortable to interact. In Goffman's terms, the other netballers Ben encounters represent 'the Own' (1990: 31), since they too have the same stigma and can therefore share with each other their problems of stigma management (they are considered 'one of their own'). Thus, as a strategy, group alignment can benefit the social group as it increases inter-group relations and allows individuals to have and interact with their multiple identities. However, this may reinforce the negative stereotype that they face and reproduces social inequality, as such isolating environments while offering support do not always address or challenge the negative stigma. Both Lucas and Greg noted how they openly identified with other leisure activities or their job before they mention their involvement in netball,

Do you know when you first meet some people it's a bit like 'I'm still working you out'.

I'd rather not say I play netball... depending on the situation. My first thing is to say

judo, though it's not an embarrassment but more a 'I'm still figuring you out' (Lucas).

The social interaction between Lucas and others involves Lucas trying to prompt what the response will be before disclosing his involvement in netball. Whilst group alignment is a strategy for creating a 'safe space' where male netball playing is acceptable and accepted, it is also a 'hiding' strategy, since hanging out with your own kind reduces the need to 'come clean' to ordinary folk

about playing netball. Overall, group-alignment does not remove ‘stigma’ but it provides a coping mechanism, for some time at least. In our study we found that male netball players ‘moved on’ from the need to hang out with co-players. Instead, they attempt to normalise their netball playing.

Stage Three: From Belonging to Normalisation: Challenging the Stigma of Male Netball

A third strategy identified is normalisation. As the men became more confident in their netball participation, they felt more able to challenge perceptions to normalise men playing netball. James reflects on this and suggests, ‘we are at a crossroads now where it can be moved into a positive light and getting everyone on board and understanding that’ (James). As pointed out by James, it takes time for people to start understanding netball in a different way from, ‘it’s a girls sport’. For netball to become just ‘a sport’, and not a female sport challenges others perceptions of the game and the men playing,

The immediate association is that it’s a girls sport. It’s because of my colleagues here are used to me talking about it, and obviously, I’m not a girl, and I’m playing netball, that then they’ll ask ‘how is it getting on? How is it going?’ So, I think a lot of the reactions I get are because I’ve laboured the point. That’s why I have to say now, in the confidence that comes in with being 30 too... but a lot of the times, if I can, I try and avoid it which says a lot about my personality (Sam)

Sam, has continually said he plays netball in the hope that playing netball for boys and men becomes normalised. Although it has taken Sam time to accept this identity and develop confidence, by telling people he plays for the England mixed ‘nets’ team, Sam has managed to redirect the stigma and show playing netball is something that all boys and men can do. By continually telling people he plays netball, Sam takes on the position of challenging the stigma.

The ideal outcome for Sam is that netball for men is recognised as just another sport, a similar sentiment is echoed by Phil,

The more the Eagles and men's game is being pushed forward in this country, the more we are probably opening ourselves up to these judgements, if there were no men playing netball, the stigma would be there but wouldn't be spoken about ... and more and more people are judging it based on what they're currently seeing now which is a lot more men playing a women's sport (Phil).

The players noted how they gained confidence through playing netball and over time came more accepting this was a part of their identity and something they wanted to share with others to challenge the idea of netball as a female sport.

The longer the men had been playing netball, the more likely there were to say they 'don't care' what others think. This was also the case in Tagg's (2008b) research as the men who had been playing for a long time were confident within themselves to not care about suggested stereotypes (Tagg, 2008b). The confidence in playing netball developed over time but also related to greater maturity in their lives. These men were still playing and not impacted by this stereotype, but for other boys and men, this may be a reason for limiting their involvement or choosing to play netball.

Sam notes how playing netball at a high level has made a difference,

I think I used to care, and before I had the validation of playing for Eagles and playing for the national team, I feel like I used to have to justify it a little bit. Now since I've had the confidence tip in playing in a semi-elite team, I guess it's something to be proud of?

(Sam)

James discusses a similar sentiment,

I think you'll see that a lot of people get quite comfortable quite quickly when they are around other guys who have played it before I can just be myself and just play the sport.

Yeah, it doesn't affect me personally but just hearing what people say annoys me.

Over time, by the participants being more open about playing netball they are able to raise the visibility of men playing netball. As James reflects, he notes how the newer players that join are becoming more comfortable and confident quicker. In turn, this is helping other male players develop their coping strategies, as they have seen their team-mates talking about it, and stigma management is not as necessary. Here the narrative of acceptance and normalisation begins to disrupt the notion of netball as being solely a women's sport. If others with a similar stigma identify that they play netball, newer players feel a sense of belonging and community. They are more likely to disclose that they play netball too, and the stigma becomes more resisted or challenged.

Conclusion

This article has applied Goffman's concepts of stigma to understand how elite male netballers manage their identity when playing a female sport, highlighting the ways in which involvement in sport remain gendered with binary based policies for inclusion (Tagg, 2018). This article explores how men who play netball move through different stages of dealing with stigma, adopting different strategies along their sporting journey, to counter their involvement in playing a female sport. The men, at least to start with often concealed their involvement in netball, although the way the men managed their stigmatised identity changed over time. The more time they spend playing netball, with their 'own' group, the more likely they were to identify as male netballers. Goffman's work on Stigma provides a useful framework for how men manage their identity in a female sport, these management strategies can only be understood as part of broader power struggles (Tyler, 2020)

and therefore we provide a modern application of Goffman's (1990) *Stigma* that better understands the 'contemporary problems of social decomposition, inequality and injustice' (Tyler and Slater, 2018: 721) of netball, within a broader understanding of power and gender in sport.

These issues can be seen in the media narrative of men playing netball which has focused on how amateur male players are able to beat female semi-professional players, and how male netballers could challenge women elite netballers (Hanrahan, 2019). The England Men's and Mixed Netball Association (EMMNA) has formed with the aim to offer men an opportunity to play netball at domestic and national level. The growth of men's netball represents a double bind, without allowing more boys and men to play, people claim a lack of equity, however, such comments ignore the historical and ongoing power inequalities in sport, in which male netball takes place. It overlooks how men dominate in all other sports, in both governance and participation (Nicholson, 2022, Velija and Piggott, 2022). There is a concern, from women's organisations that men will take over the sport and women will become marginalised in their 'own' sport. Therefore, resistance to men playing netball cannot be understood without understanding the broader gender relations and power in sport, in which men have dominated in nearly all other sporting contexts.

Individual stigma management strategies that the male netballers adopt are therefore reflective of broader ongoing power struggles in sport. Men's involvement in netball does not appear to challenge ideas about dominant gender relations in sport, with men calling for greater recognition in a sport where women have dominated numerically, and with governing bodies reluctant to facilitate men's participation for fear that in doing so women's participation becomes trivialized. These arguments reflect the ongoing gender and power struggles, and how such power struggles

need to be historically located to understand how in contemporary sporting spaces individual stigma management strategies draw on wider dominant power relations in sport. As sport becomes increasingly challenged by issues of participation on transathletes, especially in competitive settings, our article illustrates the ways in which gender binaries in sport continue to create forms of stigma for those who transgress these binaries. As well as the ways in which stigma is created through ongoing debates about gender segregation and sport that are historically and socially (re)created in sporting practices and organisations.

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Table 1

TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

NAME	AGE	OCCUPATION	TIME PLAYING IN NETBALL	PREVIOUS SPORTS PLAYED
PHIL	31	Commerical Manager	6 months	Football
GREG	31	IT Director	3 years	Rugby, Football, Cricket
SAM	32	Menswear Buyer	10 years	Swimming, Gymnastics, Basketball, Tennis
JAMES	26	Operations Administration	5 years	Basketball, Indoor Mixed Nets
BEN	28	Hospitality Manager	18 months	Rugby, Athletics, Squash
LUCAS	37	Teacher	10 years	Judo

END NOTES

1. In the netball season of 2019-20, Sport England (2020a) stated that some 265,900 girls and women reported playing netball twice a week in the UK, compared with only 17,800 men and boys. However, the self-reporting method of this data is questionable, since the stigma associated with males playing netball (as outlined in this article) will itself limit the amount of boys and men who report playing the sport. We note that the true figure of boys and men playing netball is likely much higher.

2. The term ‘righteously’ can be understood in accordance with virtue or morality: a righteous judgment. Note that Goffman’s (1990) notion of ‘morality’ is compatible with Durkheim’s (1858-1917) view that society rests on the basis of morality.
3. We have used the term ‘social identity’ more broadly here, but we wish to note that Goffman extends this to ‘virtual social identity’ to convey the social expectations and demands we have of others we encounter. The idea of a virtual social identity plays into the Durkheimian ideas of ‘collective representations’. Goffman (1990: 31) says that ‘a discrepancy may exist between an individual’s virtual and actual identity’ – this is when a stigma emerges.