Prejudice in “inclusive” spaces: Cisgenderist collusion in the interview context

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Abstract
Feminist reflexivity aims to (re)consider and challenge power differentials that exist in the research process. This activity is well represented in, for example, research into heterosexism. In this article we expand feminist reflexive practice in relation to cisgenderism through a (re)examination of interview transcripts conducted by a cisgender researcher on the topic of cisgenderism in media representations of trans and intersex sportspeople. Drawing on interviews with 18 cisgender and trans and non-binary participants, we analyse three forms of researcher collusion in cisgenderism, namely: 1) perpetuating cisgenderism in the selection of media materials; 2) assuming trans women are the referent; and 3) disunifying assumptions about trans sportspeople. This reflexive analysis is discussed with regard to how analytical insights can be generated into the operation and functioning of prejudice. In so doing, we further the conception of prejudice as a ubiquitous and latent activity in research practices.

Keywords
Cisgenderism, feminism, interviews, prejudice, reflexivity

Research into prejudice and discrimination toward marginalised groups is fraught with potential power imbalances, particularly when the research is conducted by “outsiders” (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). Reflexivity, insofar as it aims to make “explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process” (Ramazanoglu &

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Holland, 2002, p. 118), allows for a potential redressing of such imbalances. While fruitful examples of such reflexivity exist in relation to, for example, heterosexism (e.g., Braun, 2000, 2004), fewer are evident in relation to cisgenderism. In this article, we draw on Braun’s (2000, 2004) reflexive engagement with the ways that, as a heterosexual feminist social psychologist researching gay and lesbian “topics”, she sometimes reproduces and colludes in heterosexism. We critically examine cisgenderist collusion in our own work as cisgender researchers researching trans “topics”.

In research on trans “topics”, the potential for power imbalances and cisgenderist impositions by outsider researchers is realised in the “problematic history of trans research and the marginalised status of trans communities worldwide” (Vincent, 2018, p. 102). Consequently, as cisgender researchers, reflexive engagement in, and with, our work is vital.

Christina Richards et al. (2014) argue that if academics want to engage in trans research “then they are asked not to use trans people’s bodies and lives … but to start with themselves, and to privilege reflexivity in their accounts and theories” (p. 256). Similarly, Riggs (2014) argues for a “move away from a research agenda that treats trans people as objects, and towards one that treats transphobia and gender-normative practice as objects warranting attention” (p. 169). Here, we seek to do both by centring the lead author (Gabe) and incidents of cisgenderist collusion in research interviews on the topic of cisgenderism in media representations of trans and gender diverse sportspeople. In so doing, we heed calls for outsider researchers and practitioners to decentre trans lives and bodies to avoid objectification.

As well as (or, as a result of) challenging power imbalances and biases, our reflexive analysis here also adds to understandings of the (re)production and enactment of cisgenderism. Indeed, effective reflexivity functions not just as an important check on power differentials “but as a springboard for interpretations and more general insight” (Finlay, 2003, p. 8). Research, including the researcher and the research process, is not distinct from that which it studies, but is rather a part of it. Feminist researchers taking this position have thus paid attention to the reciprocal relationship between how life influences research and vice versa (Wilkinson, 1988).

In this instance, drawing on discursive psychological understandings of prejudice as an ideological activity rather than an individually held belief (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Billig, 2012; Clarke, 2019; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), we consider the research in question an example of the pervasive and mundane ways that cisgenderism manifests. We have written previously of “mundane heterosexism” (Peel, 2001) to conceptualise the, often subtle, manifestations of heterosexism. Riggs (2014) has expanded this concept in his analyses of trans discrimination, particularly in the media, by developing the concept of “mundane transphobia” to conceptualise the “banal, indeed routine, ways in which normative assumptions are made that makes … transphobia both speakable and difficult to challenge” (p. 159). Thus, prejudice is often expressed in ambivalent ways with actors and utterances that appear to be inclusive, relying on discriminatory discursive resources that (re)produce, in this case, cisgenderism.

Cisgenderism is “the ideology that delegitimises people’s own designations of their genders and bodies” (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014, p. 260). This conceptual framework
supports the ethical, methodological and analytical facets of this article. Firstly, it decen-
tres trans people as objects of study, instead focusing on the discursive production of prejudice by cisgender actors. Secondly, cisgenderism moves away from an understand-
ing of trans discrimination as an individualised fear or attitude towards one of a prejudi-
cial ideology (Ansara, 2015; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012, 2014; Ellis et al., 2020; Lennon &
Mistler, 2014; Peel & Newman, 2020).²

Following an outline of the methods and materials, we continue under three headings that encapsulate the key activities of cisgenderist collusion: “perpetuating cisgenderism in
the selection of media materials”; “assuming trans women are the referent”; and “disuni-
fying assumptions about trans sportspeople”. In so doing, we both explore the discursive instantiation of cisgenderism in (research) contexts designed to be inclusive and demon-
strate the benefits of such an exploration.

**Methods and materials**

These data were gathered between January 2020 and June 2020 as part of Gabe’s doctoral research. The interviews were with cisgender and transgender (binary and non-
binary) participants and focused on the representation of trans and gender diverse people in (particularly women’s) sports. This discursive context is important
because sport is rife with cisgenderism in the form of attempts to (re)assert dimorphic conceptions of sex (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013; Pieper, 2014) and medicalised understandings of bodies and identities (Fischer & McClearen, 2020; Krieger et al., 2019; Pieper, 2014). Multiple authors have highlighted the rampant discrimination in sports media of sex and gender identities that are situated outside of the norm (Cooky et al., 2013; Lucas & Newhall, 2019; McClearen, 2015; Sloop, 2012). This being the case, the interviews took place in a context in which ample cisgenderist discursive resources are available to speakers. Consequently, Gabe had to manage
this discursive context with such cisgenderist resources representing the focus of his analysis but also, as a result of their pervasiveness, something to be careful not to
(re)produce uncritically.

Limitations on social interactions due to COVID-19 meant initial plans to collect data through focus groups were switched to one-to-one online interviews. In total, one focus group and 14 one-to-one online interviews were conducted. The following analysis is not representative of this dataset overall but of the key moments where cisgenderist assumptions were (re)produced or challenged. Despite the limited appearance of cisgenderist collusion, it is important to note that the infrequency of apparent collusion does not signal its non-existence. Taking seriously the power differential between cisgender researcher and trans and gender diverse participants, it is probable that there were other moments where challenges were left unsaid by the interviewees.

**Participants**

Cisgender participants comprised most of the interviewees because the analytical focus of the project was on how cisgenderism is discursively constructed in sports talk. In part,
this decision was made to avoid reproducing objectifying trans research by making discriminatory discourse the analytical focus. However, as parts of our analysis will show here, the construction of a cisgender dominated research environment facilitated the generation of some cisgenderist assumptions. In hindsight, the choice to decentre in this way goes against some best practice advice for “[p]articipant/community involvement in a project’s formulation” (Vincent, 2018, p. 106) – something this article attempts to redress, albeit retrospectively.

By revisiting the transcripts of trans and gender diverse participants not as data sources but as active knowledge producers, we utilise, to a certain extent, the co-constructedness of meaning in interviews. Haraway (1988) expresses concern that in the recognition of the epistemic knowledge of marginalised groups “there also lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position” (p. 584). Whilst this cannot be fully refuted, the aim is to shift the research up the “insider-outsider research staircase” (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020), from no trans participation in research design to the bottom step defined by consultancy roles for people with lived experiences. This, admittedly, does not map perfectly with this bottom step and we are using reflexivity to generate this post hoc. However, it is comparable insofar as it goes some way to involving trans and gender diverse “perspectives[s] on some aspects of a study otherwise run by outsiders” (Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020, p. 5).

In total there were 18 participants: 13 cisgender people, four non-binary people, and one transgender person – a trans man. The mean age of participants was 29 years, with an age range of 21 years to 46 years. Participants’ sexualities were comprised of ten heterosexual people, five pansexual and two bisexual people, as well as one asexual person and one gay man. Ethnicity represents the most significant shortcoming with 17 participants identifying as white, white British, or white Irish and only one participant identifying as mixed race. Twelve participants’ highest qualification was a postgraduate qualification, four an undergraduate and one A-levels. Ten participants identified as middle class, two as lower middle class and two as upper middle class. Two identified as working class and one as upper working class. Participants engaged in a wide range of sports and physical activities at various competitive and recreational levels.

In this analysis, we draw mainly on three one-to-one online interviews in which cisgenderism was colluded in and/or challenged. These interviews were two with non-binary participants, Ali³ (age 22, Olympic-style⁴ weightlifter and coach) and Sacha (age 46, previously socially engaged in all-women football teams), who presented challenges to cisgenderist collusion, and one with a cisgender man, Kyle (age 41, cyclist and long-distance runner), in which collusion was apparent. We also make reference to other interviews, such as Shain’s (age 26, cisgender man, kickboxer and runner), to augment points drawn out in the analysis of the main three interviews.

As Richards et al. (2014) describe of much problematic trans research, there is a tendency to universalise based on limited sample sizes and diversity; “[g]eneralizations from such small and biased samples should be avoided” (p. 251). Bearing this in mind, our aim in this analysis is not to make universalising claims about trans and gender diverse experiences from such a limited sample size but rather to elucidate how situated cisgenderism
was expressed in the context of Gabe’s interviews which, indeed, may be indicative of broader patterns of anti-trans discrimination in ostensibly inclusive spaces.

**Researcher positioning**

Wilkinson (1988) describes three forms of reflexivity, “personal”, “functional” and “disciplinary”. Personal reflexivity asks questions of the researcher’s identity, acknowledging that “[f]or the individual, his or her research is often an expression of personal interests and values” (p. 494). Functional reflexivity considers how research design, methods and analyses are shaped by our personal values and position. Disciplinary reflexivity “involves a critical stance towards the place and function of the particular research project within broader debates around theory and method” (Gough, 2003, p. 24). Although Wilkinson is clear that these are, in fact, inseparable considerations, the distinction can provide clarity in relation to this article’s analysis. Whilst the main body of the analysis focuses primarily on functional and disciplinary considerations, it is underpinned by reflexive engagement with Gabe’s personal positionality as a cisgender man, conducting trans-inclusive feminist research into cisgenderism in sport. Gabe’s research interest stems from personal experience with sport as a source of both physical and mental (ill) health, as well as the enforced masculinity and sexuality propagated in many men’s team sports. A desire to produce critical research in allyship with trans and gender diverse communities who are marginalised in society, but also particularly in sporting spaces, further underpinned the research. This personal reflexivity is important to lay bare as an “outing” of the researcher (Finlay, 2002) which underpins the functional and disciplinary reflexive concerns of research design, moderation, and analysis.

**Data analysis**

The data were analysed using a discursive psychological approach, specifically the synthetic approach as explicated by Margaret Wetherell (Seymour-Smith & Wetherell, 2006; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). This approach deploys fine-grained analytical tools, developed in conversation analysis (Antaki, 1988; Schegloff, 1997; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), with the idea that “[w]hen people speak, their talk reflects not only the local pragmatics of the particular conversational context, but also much broader or more global patterns in collective sense-making and understanding” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 338). In other words, discursive psychology is concerned with how broader ideological currents are (re)constituted in contextual interactions. In this article, this means looking at how cisgenderism is reproduced within the interviews’ interactions.

The data, which had already been coded for cisgenderist practices as part of Gabe’s doctoral research, were (re)examined for this analysis, paying particular attention to challenges made by trans and non-binary participants. Understanding meaning to be co-constructed between interviewer and participant, we inductively coded the data based on the participants’ notable challenges. In so doing, we produced the three headings that encapsulate the cisgenderist collusion. Below we explore these practices.
Analysis

Three prominent forms of cisgenderist collusion stood out in our reflexive analysis focused on participant challenges and a re-engagement with the data focusing on Gabe’s moderation and questioning: “perpetuating cisgenderism in the selection of media materials”; “assuming trans women are the referent”; and “disunifying assumptions about trans sportspeople”. We proceed by examining each practice in detail.

Perpetuating cisgenderism in the selection of media materials

Sports media materials were used in the interviews as discussion prompts. The aim was to elicit responses and generate conversation that would be analysed in relation to the broader social conversation. Specific attention was paid to cisgenderist media because cisgenderism was the focus of the project. However, this impacted the production of the conversation and how Gabe and the participants were orientated relative to that conversation. This produced cisgenderist subject positions and footing shifts, as well as the production of “balanced” media which omitted trans voices and destabilised some trans identities.

Subject position and footing. Positioning and footing shifts refer to how speakers orient themselves and others to what is being said (both the topic and talk itself), most commonly through pronoun use (Wiggins, 2017). Although the interviews focused on cisgenderism which justified the use of cisgenderist media, there were times when this generated an issue of orientation to the media and available subject positions. Consider the following extract in which Sacha, a non-binary participant, responds to the question about media representations with a reorientation to the materials:

Gabe: 01 Do- do you think that ahm non-cisgender, in whatever guise that- that-
02 that might be, do you think ah say trans, intersex, non-binary people are
03 .hhh ahm well represented, misrepresented or h- how do you feel like
04 they’re represented in the media?
Sacha: 05 Yeah .hh hh I feel m- (0.4) it depends: like often I see that ahh (0.5) it
06 depends of course where the article comes out, it depends if there are-
07 there is a wide amount of media .hh but u:sually I don’t think they are
08 represented very fairly
Gabe: 09 mmm
Sacha: 10 so::: yeah especially because the media gives a lot of voice to people like
11 Martina Navratilova and whoever is a critic about us::: because I am
12 non-binary as well.

What stands out in this passage is the construction of (cis)/us(trans) them categorisation, notably expressed in the term “non-cisgender” (line 01), and an ensuing production of the research space as one inhabited by “us”, that is, cisgender actors. Gabe’s question uses the pronoun “you” (line 02), referring to the expected respondent Sacha, then “they” (line 05), anaphorically referring to trans, intersex and non-binary people mentioned in line 03. This pronoun use separates Sacha from “trans, intersex, non-binary” people
despite their being non-binary. This indicates an implicit construction of participants as cisgender in comparison to the “they” of trans people. In other words, there is an active, speaking cisgender “us”, and passive, trans object, “them”. The reification of a cis/trans binary is itself highlighted to be a cisgenderist activity (Ansara & Berger, 2016; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Here, it forces Sacha to navigate their interpolation into a cisgender subject position as a result of the construction of a distinct cisgender research space encompassing the interview context, and an objectified trans object of study.

Sacha’s response demonstrates this difficult interactional negotiation as they initially mirror the question’s orientation, stating, “I don’t think they are represented very fairly” (lines 10–11). On the one hand, Sacha may be referring to the “they” of trans athletes in the media, a group to which Sacha does not belong. On the other hand, this may indicate the pervasiveness of the cisgender norm with a non-binary participant initially using that same orientation. The latter seems to be evidenced in lines 10–12 when Sacha states, “the media gives a lot of voice to people like Martina Navratilova and whoever is a critic of us because I am non-binary as well”. Here Sacha presents an “embedded correction” in which a correction is “accomplished without emerging to the conversational surface” (Jefferson, 1987, p. 86). Sacha’s emphasised and elongated “us” indicates their challenging of the cisgenderist orientation to the media materials with Sacha shifting the footing from talking about another group, “them”, to locating themselves within it. This embedded correction does emerge on the conversational surface somewhat with Sacha explaining “because I am non-binary as well” (lines 15–16). Sacha’s deliberate reorientation indicates that the initial use of “they” was a problematic cisgenderist subject position that they had to challenge.

Reflecting cisgenderism typical of sports media, Gabe’s footing somewhat objectifies trans athletes. Such a footing has costs for trans and gender diverse participants. For Sacha, participation involves navigating an implicit misgendering as part of the interview interactions. Navigating this cisgenderist interpolation is made more difficult because of the fundamental reification of a trans/cis binary in the us/them logic of the question. This distinction is cisgenderist insofar as it assumes not only that trans and cis people are both essentially distinct and opposing categories of people, ignoring the possibility of identity fluidity and further reasserting rigid understandings of identity, but also that all people are encompassed by this simplistic binary categorisation (Ansara & Berger, 2016; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Demonstrating the interactional costs of this cisgenderist practice, Sacha’s reorientation to the materials requires traversing discrete identity categories forcing them to either accept an incongruent subject position or engage in potentially difficult or conflictual challenges.

The production of “balance”. If the focus on cisgenderist media offsets some criticism of cisgenderist collusion, this mitigation is lessened in the instances where Gabe attempted to present media as a balanced example of the debate. One such attempt was through the use of a clip from the documentary The Trans Woman Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova (aired 26 June 2019 on BBC One). The documentary itself has been critiqued as an example of Riggs’ (2014) concept of “mundane transphobia” (Barras, 2019). In the clip in question, Navratilova speaks with Dr Seema Patel, an academic and cisgender woman. Dr Patel articulately and forcefully challenges
Navratilova’s objections to transgender participation in women’s sports. Consequently, Gabe commonly presented it as an example of balance in the debate. For example, after playing the clip in question for Shain, Gabe explicitly frames it as an example of the different argument around trans inclusion in sports:

Gabe: 01 so:: the reason I picked that clip is because it sort of ahh in 02 quite a short amount of time you see: .hhh kind of a few different- a few 03 different- a couple of- both sides of the argument being articulated in 04 relatively ahm .hh you know relatively:: clear ways.

Here the justification of the use of the clip explicitly hinges upon it being an example of “a few different” (lines 03–04) sides of the debate. Although this expression of multiplicity is downgraded through a repair to “a couple of- both sides of the argument” (line 04), the clip is still presented as evidence of the generic “for” and “against” arguments around trans inclusion in women’s sports. In light of the cisgenderism in the documentary, the uncritical use of a clip from it as an example of balance in the debate reproduces cisgenderist sport media ideologies in multiple ways.

To begin with, the presentation of the clip as denoting “both sides of the argument” (line 03) constructs them as equitable positions on the topic of trans athlete inclusion. That one of these positions, that espoused by Navratilova, delegitimises trans women athletes is thus not critically engaged with in this instance. Instead, whilst Gabe does not endorse the position, he legitimises it here, as an acceptable stance to take. This materialises a problem with the idea of “balance” in the media more broadly. What is presented as a tactic to prevent bias actually functions to legitimise discriminatory positions against marginalised groups – in this case trans women athletes.

Another stark cisgenderist practice in Gabe’s choice and use of the clip is the omission of trans and gender diverse voices in the material. Critiquing the “mundane transphobia” (Riggs, 2014) of The Trans Woman Athlete Dispute with Martina Navratilova documentary, Barras (2019) describes Navratilova’s refusal to use the term cisgender women as “flexing her desire to dominate and control the language” (p. 7) – something that Barras also points out is “a tactic frequently employed by those in positions of power” (p. 7). Barras’ critique alludes to the problem of privileging cisgender voices in (sports) media spaces and the exclusion of trans voices – exemplifying broader trans erasure in society (Namaste, 2000). Indeed, Ansara and Hegarty (2012) note how “cisgenderist language can function to dehumanise, silence and erase” (p. 152). Consequently, Gabe’s use of the material as a discussion prompt replicates broader cisgenderist practices within the interview context.

Sacha, in fact, points out this problematic practice:

Sacha: 01 Y-you have to- perhaps this is just the start and then: (0.4) we can have 02 some other kind of interviews with real trans people because there is no 03 trans person there who is kind of defending themselves and saying no this 04 is not what happens .hhh there isn’t a trans activist there it’s a- it’s a 05 dialogue between two women- cisgender women =
Gabe: 06 = mmm [yeah]
Sacha: 07 [so y-] you don’t get a: defence from someone who is ah directly
08 involved in the matter.

The referent here of “we” (line 01) is unclear. It may be a generic “we” of society, or
the more situated “us”: interviewer and interviewee. As such, whether Sacha is criticising
the omission of trans voices in society as a whole or in the interview context is not clear.
However, from a synthetic discursive psychology position this ambiguity is not detrimen-
tal but rather indicative of how situated talk reflects “local pragmatics … but also much
broader or more global patterns” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 338). In other words, it is
not necessary to be definitive on Sacha’s referent but rather understand it to be an inter-
personal (re)production of the broader societal and ideological debates. If it is a critique of
the broader conversation, then it is also reproduced in the interview context – and vice
versa. Regardless, taking seriously the active role that researchers play in constructing
their research, rather than simply being objective independent observers, then the lack
of trans visibility in the media materials here is an oversight that reproduces the
mundane transphobia of the documentary and sports media system more broadly
within the interview context.

The reproduction of cisgenderism instantiated by the use of the clip in question legit-
imised and prompted the expression of cisgenderist ideas by some cisgender participants.
For example, after the clip is played for Kyle, he goes on to make the following argument:

Kyle: 01 °I don’t know° there’s a flip side to an argument is someone being against
02 trans may not be (...) uh trans in sport not- heh if s(h)omeone’s against
03 trans then obviously th- th- there is an issue >but I mean< trans in sport

Gabe: 04 Yeah
Kyle: 05 Then i- (...) it may not be: (...) with the stance that they are uhm (0.5) th-
06 they’ve got a strong opinion about that aspect of their argument
07 they might have a very strong opinion h about uhm about the position of
08 women a:nd indeed whether or not biological women hh are being forced
09 out not just within sport but their voices being (.) forced out in (.) in terms
10 of many coming back to the social

In this extract, Kyle expresses several cisgenderist ideas which are substantiated, at
least in part, by the use of the documentary clip. Firstly, in lines 01–02, Kyle expresses
the idea of an equitable two-sided argument in which trans-exclusive and trans-inclusive
arguments are presented as of equal footing and legitimacy. This mirrors the cisgenderist
idea of “balance” introduced using the clip. Secondly, Kyle matches the cisgenderist lan-
guage use that Barras criticises the documentary for in lines 07–08. In line 07, Kyle states
that anti-trans sentiment is driven by a concern “about the position of women”. Here,
Kyle follows Navratilova’s suit by refusing to use the term “cis” when referring to cis-
gender women, thus discursively excluding trans women from the category “woman”.
This cisgenderism is further entrenched by his use of “biological women” (line 08) to
emphasise the rejection of trans women’s identities based on assumed biological and physiological characteristics – expressing a form of “objectifying biological language” (Ansara, 2015, p. 15). Finally, the fundamental framing that trans-exclusion is rooted in a concern for cis women’s rights is one heavily espoused by actors in many cisgenderist arguments, including Navratilova in the clip in question. Consequently, Kyle’s argument reproduces and reasserts many of the cisgenderist assumptions and linguistic moves legitimised in the interview context by Gabe’s use of this clip.

If the choice of the media represents cisgenderist collusion, then arguably the failure to challenge it displays further complicity in the production of cisgenderism. Although the lack of a challenge might well have been the result of a consideration over whether it is the job of an interviewer to engage in disputation (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), this inevitably created an ambiguity from which we, in fact, may have benefitted in terms of eliciting cisgenderist statements for analysis. Gough (2002) noted a similar potential of benefitting from holding a dominant-group identity in his own reflexive analysis of all-male, heterosexual group interviews against a backdrop of a perceived feminist and emasculating society; Gough comments:

“If this is the case, then the all-male gatherings such as this research context (but more typically in the pub or club) could be regarded as ‘safe’ places where men revert to traditional gender displays felt to be frowned upon by wider society” (p. 234).

Here, a similar dynamic is likely to occur through, and encourage, cisgenderist collusion. It is also clear that this engenders an interview environment in which the participant, interviewer and interview materials are all cisgender. Consequently, the lack of challenge generates an interactional context in which all actors are reproducing cisgenderist assumptions.

**Assuming trans women are the referent**

In their recommendations for ethical research on trans topics, Vincent (2018) expresses that due to “an entwined relationship between language deployment and history” one should “study language carefully” (p. 106). Vincent notes of this recommendation that “questions can be ambiguous if lacking suitable nuance” (p. 106). Similarly, it has been posited that “[r]esearch involving transgender people who identify as a particular gender must attend to these differences” (Labuski & Keo-Meier, 2015, p. 23). In our data, “trans athlete” or “trans person” was occasionally used by Gabe to refer specifically to trans women athletes. The costs of failing to provide suitable linguistic nuance played out in the interactions.

With sporting regulations around trans inclusion so heavily focused upon the women’s sporting category, the debate on the topic of trans inclusion largely refers solely to trans women. Consequently, in sporting contexts, media tends to typically assume that trans women are the referent of “transgender athlete”. This is problematic insofar as it collapses trans experiences into singularity and erases the existence of trans men and non-binary athletes. Where this discursive activity was drawn upon in the interview context, it created ambiguities which (re)produced a cisgenderist destabilisation of trans identities,
specifically that of Laurel Hubbard – a relatively successful weightlifter at international level, who is also a trans woman.6

In the following extract, Gabe is talking with Sacha about how different media compare in their discourse around trans athlete inclusion, specifically in relation to Hubbard. In this discussion there is a clear example of the assumption that “trans” refers to “trans women”:

Gabe: 01 Yeah .hh w- when- when- you’re on Twitter ahm and say there’s an
02 event- so I’m not sure if you’re aware- say in 2018 there was a
03 transgender weightlifter ahm Laurel Hubbard =
Sacha: 04 = Yeah
Gabe: 05 and that generated sort of quite a lot of discussion in- online .h and so
06 for example when that kind of online discussion is happening ahm do-
07 h- how do you- how do you see- (0.5) how do you see trans people rep-
08 trans athletes represented in that- in that instance?
Sacha: 09 yeah: I don’t think it- that it was that bad compared to trans women,
10 trans women are bashed or intersex women they are also attacked quite
11 heavily
Gabe: 12 mmm
Sacha: 13 but trans men (. ) yeah: they- there might be the u:usual people that ahh
14 are against .hh just as a principle so whatever they do- what trans
15 people do: they are against them that is it, they will point it out
16 everywhere on social media, everywhere.

In this extract, Gabe assumes that Hubbard’s identity is known. This is demonstrated in lines 07–08 when he asks, “how do you see trans people rep- trans athletes represented?”. The “trans people” and “trans athletes” mentioned here are anaphoric references to the coverage of Hubbard. Yet, this is not made particularly clear. Even in the introduction of Hubbard, Gabe does not use identity specific language, stating simply “transgender weightlifter Laurel Hubbard” (line 03). Therefore, even in the first instance, a gender-neutral reference to Hubbard’s identity is used to reference a trans woman. Taking seriously Vincent’s (2018) expression of the need for nuanced and specific language, this phrasing introduces ambiguity into the interaction. Such specificity is also necessary for intelligible discussion because of the different regulations and discourses around trans participation in men’s and women’s sporting categories. Sacha’s response demonstrates the cisgenderist effects of Gabe’s introduction of this ambiguity. In particular, their response makes apparent that the introduction of ambiguity around Hubbard’s identity reflects a broader production of cisgenderist unintelligibility in sports media and society in general.

Sacha’s response begins by parsing out the specificities between coverage of trans men and trans women athletes. This occurs in line 09, when they state, “I don’t think it was that bad compared to trans women”, particularising between the more negative coverage of trans women relative to trans men. They further highlight this distinction stating “but trans men” (line 13), introducing the related but lesser opposition that trans men face in
the media. This initial response may be read as an embedded challenge to the ambiguity resulting from Gabe’s non-specific language use with Sacha underlining the heterogeneity of the experience of, and reaction to, trans people and trans athletes. It is also demonstrative of how the lack of nuanced language in Gabe’s question precipitates cisgenderist practices of destabilising trans people’s self-determination.

This destabilisation manifests interactionally in Sacha’s statement, “I don’t think that it- that it was that bad compared to trans women” (line 09). This exhibits a misunderstanding over Hubbard’s identity. The “it” referred to by Sacha is presumably the coverage of Hubbard which was the grounding of the question. Then their “compared to trans women” indicates that they are comparing and distinguishing “it”, the coverage of Hubbard, to the coverage of trans women. This comparison would not be possible if Hubbard was endogenously recognised as a trans woman in the interaction. Additionally, Sacha’s description of the vehement opposition to trans women who are “bashed” and “attacked” is contrasted with trans men by the “but trans men” in line 13. Thus, there is a clear distinction between Hubbard and trans women in Sacha’s response which indicates that their understanding is that she is a trans male athlete. This misunderstanding is symptomatic of the linguistic ambiguity expressed in Gabe’s question, resulting from the assumption that trans women were the understood referent of “trans” or “trans athlete”.

This interaction is not simply a benign misunderstanding but a local manifestation of broader cisgenderist ideological trends – that is, the production of trans identities as incoherent, unintelligible and unspeakable. Within the context of the interview, broader practices of misgendering and identity incoherence that plague many trans and gender diverse people are thus (re)produced. Within the logic of the interview exchange, Gabe’s lack of linguistic nuance provokes a misunderstanding which introduces ambiguity and incongruity around Hubbard’s identity – a practice rife in much of the media coverage of Hubbard. Again, taking seriously the discursive psychological concern with local and global discursive patterns, this situated production of incoherence highlights the complex relationship between these discursive levels. The rampant cisgenderist incongruity that is ascribed to trans women athletes, such as Hubbard, in media coverage is instantiated as a situated reproduction exemplifying the localised manifestation of broader prejudicial discursive resources.

**Disunifying assumptions about trans sportspeople**

Through assumptions about participants’ participation in sport and engagement with sports media, differing identity membership categories were produced. This generated seemingly opposing membership categories: those that foregrounded the implicitly cisgender athlete identity by ignoring the specificities of trans and gender diverse experiences, and those that removed or devalued the athlete identity through a fixation on trans narratives. Although seemingly oppositional, both activities present ways that the interview moderation drew on “potentially inconsistent … expectations and associations” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 133) to construct occasioned identity categories that disallowed full recognition of trans athletes’ identities. That is, both the erasure and
enforcement of trans and gender diverse identities in relation to sporting engagement dis-
unifies the trans sportsperson’s identity. Problematic trans research has been critiqued for
failing to “acknowledge the multiplicity of identities most people inhabit” and for the
“fixing [of] a participant as one aspect of their being” (Richards et al., 2014, p. 250).
In other words, trans participants may have their trans identity foregrounded without
full consideration of the complex ways that it does (or does not) relate to the topic of
research. Here we consider two extracts in which this cisgenderist reductionism is
enacted in different ways, beginning with the overlooking of trans experiences, then
the enforcing of cisgender narratives.

Overlooking trans and gender diverse experiences. Overlooking trans and gender
diverse experiences imposes a cisgender perspective on sports engagement and neglects
the forms of distress and erasure that engagement with sport or sports media can create.
This was apparent at times in the interview moderation. In the following extract, Gabe is
discussing sports media consumption with Ali. Based on their active participation in
weightlifting, an assumption is made about their engagement with sports media in
general:

Gabe: 01 and do you think that (0.4) d- I mea:n d’you follow- I mean I a- I
02 assume as a weight- being engaged in weightlifting you follow kind of
03 sport- other sport or sports media in general or- or d’you-
Ali: 04 I try. I’m- hhh I’m not very good at kind of following (0.4) sport, just
05 general media in general because it’s always so:- like unless you
06 follow very specific people that you know are =
Gabe: 07 = yeah
Ali: 08 = not problematic it’s gonna be .hhh “oh look this big trans thing where
09 we hate trans people” or “oh there’s blah blah blah” .hhh you for my
10 own mental health I don’t want to engage with that.

In lines 01–05, Gabe explicitly expresses an assumption that Ali will follow sports in
general based on their specific participation in weightlifting, stating, “I assume as a
weight- being engaged in weightlifting you follow kind of sport- other sport or sports
media in general” (lines 02–03). This is a leading question which imbibes cisgenderist
assumptions by assuming that Ali’s sporting activity signals unproblematic engagement
with sports in general. This presupposition is rooted in a cisgender subjectivity in which
sport does not present potential challenges to Gabe’s identity and, as a result, is free to
browse and consume sports media mostly free from worry. That is not to say that, as cis-
gender media consumers, we are not impacted by cisgenderism.7 Indeed, this assumption
may itself be a cisgenderist one insofar as it reifies the trans/cis binary by assuming that
cisgender audiences are unaffected by cisgenderist enactments of gender performance
disciplining in sports media and, vice versa, that all trans and gender diverse people
are affected. However, it is reasonable to assume that, in general, cisgenderism more
directly challenges the existence of trans audiences’ identities than cisgender ones – some-
thing that is borne out in Ali’s response.
This leading question expects a positive response from Ali, that is, that they do indeed follow other sports. In order to negotiate this, the participant has to engage in a more explicit challenge which provokes a degree of interactional conflict not experienced by cisgender participants. As a result, Ali’s initial response is a mitigated agreement, “I try” (line 04) followed by a self-critical assessment, “I’m not very good at kind of following sport just general media” (lines 04–05). The expectation of a positive response forces Ali, as a non-binary participant, to either provide that response, which retrenches the overlooked experience, or explicitly challenge it. This being the case, and rooted as it is in the overlooking of trans experiences, the production of an expected positive response is a cisgenderist activity in this situation.

Initially, then, Ali negotiates their negative response. From line 05 their explanation functions like an embedded correction. Ali confronts the assumption that they should follow sports media, expressing the difficulties that trans people might face in sports media consumption. Ali expresses the need to be careful in their sports media consumption, stating that they must “follow very specific people that you know are not problematic” (lines 05–06 and 08). This problematic behaviour is described in lines 08–10 as expressing transphobic and cisgenderist ideas. That, for Ali, there are only “very specific” places where they can safely consume media free from prejudicial views indicates how pervasive their experience of cisgenderism in sports communication is. Thus, the assumption that sports participation indicates relatively unbridled engagement with sports media more broadly is challenged by Ali’s experience as a non-binary sports media consumer.

Overlooking the experiences of trans sportspeople and sports media audience members enacts a form of erasure. Sporting spaces typically require a binary man/woman categorisation which, although potentially suitable for binary trans people, erases the visibility of many trans and gender diverse people. Furthermore, the men’s and women’s sports categories are implicitly coded as cisgender, discursively erasing all trans athletes. Gabe’s neglect to recognise the potential distressing experience of often cisgenderist sports media for Ali reproduces the erasure of trans experiences. As a result, Ali is forced into an interaction which requires them to navigate an expected positive response and express their own emotional and mental experiences with cisgenderist sports media. At the very least, this retrenches cisnormativity in the research space which has historically been so damaging to trans people in research. As we explore in the next section, coupled with the overlooking of trans experiences was the occasional enforcement of a trans identity at the expense of the athlete identity. This practice similarly mirrors cisgenderist trends in sports media and fails to recognise the multiplicity of identities.

**Enforcing unitary trans narratives.** In contrast to constructing an implicitly cisgender “athlete” identity, there were also incidents of over-emphasising trans identity categories to the detriment of recognising the conventional experiences of sporting engagement. Considered in relation to Richards et al.’s (2014) criticism of research and cisgender researchers’ tendency to reduce trans identities to a homogenous experience, this contrasting practice is representative of another discursive practice of cisgenderism. This is something that sports media have been critiqued for, with, for example, Lucas and Newhall’s (2019) argument about “the forced imperative to always be out” (p. 120) in relation to trans athletes in the media. Consequently, where it occurs in the data, Gabe
reproduces cisgenderist discursive resources prevalent in the sports media under examination.

In the following extract, Ali’s non-binary identity is foregrounded through the assumption that their experiences in weightlifting might be comparable to Hubbard’s. Apart from indicating a degree of conflon between different trans experiences, this assumption demonstrates expectations about trans people’s sporting interests as distinct from cisgender participants:

Gabe: 01 I’d be interested to know w- ahh as someone who’s engaged in
02 Olympic weightlifting (0.4) cuz Laurel Hubbard was an Olympic
03 weightlifter right .hh or Olympic style weightlifter .hh hh how you
04 read the headlines about- about her com- competing and: how that
05 compares to your experience in Olympic weightlifting. I don’t know if
06 people were talking about this () case .h in ahh (0.5) in the sport or not
07 or-

Ali: 08 you see- yeah like the thing is (0.4) that .hhh because I don’t- I don’t
09 actively kind of follow things: online and stuff, I get a lot of my .hh hh
10 kind of (.) information: about (.) things from the communities that I’m
11 in so like I get my kind of weightlifting sport information from- mostly
12 from .h my club and a lot of the time they just wouldn’t even- they
13 sort- they don’t care .h like (0.4) they’d be like this isn’t- they’re not
14 the most amazing weightlifter and I only wanna .hh like follow or .h
15 look at the p- person in China who’s won like ten billion gold medals
16 because they’re ridiculous and they’re like .hhhh their technique’s
17 maybe a little bit interesting.

In lines 01–07, Gabe introduces the idea that Ali may have followed the coverage of Hubbard and that it may be comparable to their own experiences. Although it is expressed that this might have been because Ali is “someone who’s engaged in Olympic weightlifting” (lines 01–02), it is probable that the same assumption would not have been made with a cisgender participant. This is demonstrated by Gabe’s statement, “I don’t know if people were talking about this case in the sport or not” (lines 05–06), which indicates that Gabe does not necessarily consider Hubbard’s case to be well known in the weightlifting world. Despite this, Gabe assumes that Ali knows the case well enough to comment on the likeness of the coverage to their own experiences. Thus, Ali’s non-binary identity is foregrounded and assumed to be relevant – something Ali goes on to challenge.

Ali’s initial response, “you see” (line 08) indicates that they are about to offer a challenge or unexpected turn. This is confirmed as Ali continues, “I only get my kind of weightlifting sport information from- mostly from my club” (lines 11–12), disputing the assumption that their interests would differ from those of their cisgender clubmates. Ali goes on to confirm that their interests are rooted in the sport rather than in gender identity matters, describing that their focus, as with the rest of their club, would be “the person in China who’s won like ten billion gold medals because they’re ridiculous and they’re like- their techniques maybe a little bit interesting” (lines 15–17). In so doing, Ali
confirms their interest in weightlifting to be “conventional”, that is, tied to elite athletes excelling at the sport. This challenges the membership categorisation of Ali as trans over being a weightlifter, by aligning themselves with the broader weightlifting community. Thus, Ali navigates the initial assumption that they will be knowledgeable about Hubbard and that their experience may be in some way comparable. Here, then, Gabe’s production of a unitary trans narrative, one that assumes Ali’s sporting engagement is predicated upon their trans identity rather than sporting interests (and one that is in some way comparable to Hubbard’s experience), created identity categorisations within the interview interactions which trans participants such as Ali had to resist.

**Concluding remarks**

We have demonstrated throughout this article how cisgenderism can, and has, pervaded our supposedly inclusive research space, specifically Gabe’s interviews. The point of this reflexive analysis is twofold. Firstly, we have explored how cisgenderism is enacted in research through implicit and explicit assumptions rooted in our cisgender subjectivities. This is an important activity, if nothing else, as a post hoc critical examination of the research process. However, it also raises important questions about how best to challenge cisgenderism – and who is responsible for these challenges. Indeed, in this re-examination of interview data, trans participants’ challenges were used to better understand the everyday enactment of cisgenderism within our research interviews. Because of this, trans voices are visible, not simply as data sources but as knowledge producers, and (cisgender) researchers are drawn into analytical relevance. At the same time, it further places responsibility for challenging trans-discrimination at the doorstep of trans folks. This runs counter to the belief that we are all accountable for challenging (and colluding in) cisgenderism, and, indeed, discrimination more broadly.

Ultimately, the control that the researcher holds over the research design and analytical process puts the onus on them for how their work (re)produces or confronts discrimination. As cisgender researchers this may mean being responsible for ensuring that trans people are involved in the research process from the start, as recommended by several authors (Richards et al., 2014; Rosenberg & Tilley, 2020; Vincent, 2018). If, for example, trans people had been consulted on the interview guide prior to the interviews, it is likely that some of the cisgenderist assumptions could have been avoided. We did not adopt this approach for a number of reasons, including the logistical limitations of PhD projects in terms of time and resources, and the awareness of overburdening of trans and gender diverse groups and individuals with requests. Additionally, we recognise that, from a discursive psychological point of view, these consultations would also produce more necessarily contestable discourse. Bearing this in mind, as well as Richards et al.’s (2014) call for placing discriminatory talk at the centre of trans research, we focused on recruiting cisgender participants and focusing on prejudicial discourse.

However, as we have highlighted in this article, Gabe still ended up colluding in cisgenderism in various ways. Taking seriously the responsibility that we all have for challenging cisgenderism, the instances in which cisgenderist talk was (re)produced or facilitated are not assuaged by the fact that trans people were not directly present.
Drawing attention to this allows one to improve future practices. Consequently, particularly due to the real obstacles in recruiting trans consultants in some research processes, the post hoc critical examination is an important reflexive tool for feminist social psychologists conducting research as outsiders.

The second benefit of our reflexive analysis here is what it tells us about the pervasiveness of cisgenderism and the “banal” (Billig, 1995) or “mundane” (Peel, 2001; Riggs, 2014) manifestations of prejudice. We also used reflexivity as a springboard for further analytical insights (Finlay, 2003). Highlighting how embedded cisgenderism is in Western (research) culture (or, at least, research carried out by cis people in the West), we saw how our research, which aimed to be inclusive, still, at times, colluded in cisgenderism. Just as many discursive psychologists have highlighted the ways that prejudice is often expressed through, and within, seemingly non-discriminatory processes (Augoustinos & Every, 2010; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), our reflexive engagement further illuminates how cisgenderism is not so much about direct and obvious violence but rather the structural and often invisible (to those who do not experience it) ways that it manifests. This being the case, it is possible, or even likely, that the cisgenderist practices present in our own research are relatively common – particularly in research conducted by cisgender researchers. These are important considerations for feminist researchers who engage with topics that fall outside of our own identity categories – something that is vital in challenging prejudicial ideas and producing effective research in allyship.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the editors and the reviewers for the helpful and constructive feedback on this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Bearing in mind that one is rarely, if ever, purely an insider or an outsider because of the multiplicity of identity facets. Nevertheless, we feel it appropriate to broadly use the term “outsider” in relation to our being cisgender relative to trans participants and topics. Additionally, depending on who one is talking to, one’s status may also change from outsider to insider or vice versa. Therefore, as we have understood it here, the lead author becomes more of an insider when interviewing cisgender participants.

2. Riggs’ (2014) concept of “mundane transphobia” provides a similar account; however, we use the cisgenderism framework here to add to the growing body of literature using the term.
3. All participants are given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
4. “Olympic-style” refers to weightlifting in which the Clean and Jerk and the Snatch lifts are performed.
5. Data is transcribed using a simplified Jeffersonian system to capture turn-taking, overlapping talk, pauses, in- and out-breaths, stops and repairs. For more detail on the Jeffersonian system see, for example, Hepburn and Bolden (2013).
6. In 2021 at the Tokyo Olympics Hubbard became the first openly trans woman at the Olympics to compete in weightlifting. In contrast to anti-trans feminist arguments, Hubbard did not dominate the competition, placing last in the over-87 kg category.
7. Similar arguments have been made about the impact of heterosexism on all sexual identities, with some empirical evidence, for example Norris et al. (2018).

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