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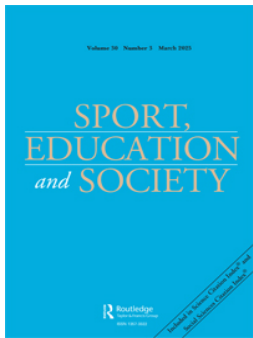
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# **Behind-the-scenes insights from undertaking intersectional research in the field of sport and physical activity**

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# Behind-the-scenes insights from undertaking intersectional research in the field of sport and physical activity

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## ABSTRACT

Undertaking intersectional research in sport and physical activity is necessarily complex. This paper offers a collaborative self-study (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014) of the authors' collective fieldwork experiences of conducting intersectional research at the post-graduate/early career research (ECR) stage in sport and physical activity. The authors' reflections are grounded in personal and theoretical insights, consisting of data from multiple sources including: (1) authors' field notes and reflective journal entries; and (2) collaborative meetings between authors' who acted as *critical friends* during these discussions. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The paper presents a creative nonfiction account that reflects the methodological complexities encountered by the authors' during their intersectional research. Three prominent themes were generated from data analysis: (1) research reality; (2) space and place; and (3) emotion. We conclude by offering some recommendations and opportunities for future intersectional research in sport and physical activity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; postgraduate; collaborative self-study; physical activity; space; place; emotion; research reality

## Introduction

### Theoretical lens

Conducting intersectional research is fraught with complexity and it continues to challenge researchers across academic disciplines. Historically, much of the scholarly work in sport and physical activity has conceptualised identity in a static way, often inadvertently reinforcing hierarchies of oppression or focussing on 'single issues' (Penney, 2002), rather than viewing identities in combination and without fully exploring the researcher's role in this complexity. In addition to this, the commonly used 'additive' approach to identity research – which suggests the idea that one identity plus another identity results in a certain experience – has been accused of being reductive. Moreover, key theorists such as Brah (1996) and Crenshaw (1989) argue that we should not lose sight of the structural arrangements in which minoritised groups are held. Therefore, in this paper, we draw out the importance of considering social identities, social groups and social structures together. In doing so, we contest the view that intersectionality 'is primarily about how things work rather than who people are' (Chun et al., 2013, p. 923). Instead, we suggest that it is about subjects, subjectivities and structural conditions; about lives that are complexly constructed, lived, intermeshed, challenged and resisted. This approach is closer to Nash's argument which emphasises that

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intersectionality is about understanding how ‘experiences of embodiment; projects of self-making and self performing; sensations of pleasure, pain, injury, desire and so on are always fundamentally altered, shaped and constituted by social location, experiences of power and disempowerment’ (Nash, 2019, p. 75).

Rooted in the Black, Latina, Indigenous and Global South feminist movements (see Bastia et al., 2023; Kuppam, 2024) intersectionality has been used widely in academic scholarship and is viewed as a valuable theoretical resource (Anzaldúa, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality theory recognises that individuals embody a multitude of identities and social categories – ethnicity, race, gender, social class, sexuality, religion, culture, (dis)ability to name a few – that interact and intersect in fluid, multifaceted, and complex ways, to influence access to opportunities (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). For example, access to sport and physical activity (Flintoff et al., 2008; Ratna, 2024; Ratna & Samie, 2017). Importantly, intersectionality not only illuminates how these identity categories intersect, but also examines how they interact with broader social structures to shape daily lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality has been understood in a variety of ways, as a theory, framework, notion, praxis or concept and the flexibility intersectionality affords has caused lively debate considering what does and does not constitute intersectionality (Davis, 2008). Whilst acknowledging these critiques, the authors continue to grapple with intersectionality as a flexible critical lens to theorise new opportunities for understanding identity, structure, power and oppression (Bilge, 2013; Nash, 2019).

### ***Rationale and aim and objectives***

The operationalisation and mobilisation of intersectionality theory presents significant challenges and complexities, as has been well-documented in existing literature (Flintoff et al., 2008). More recently, a systematic scoping review has brought to light some of the methodological intricacies associated with using and applying intersectionality in sport and physical activity research (Lim et al., 2021). For instance, Bowleg and Bauer (2016) found that intersectionality is not inherently designed to be tested, measured, or operationalised within a quantitative framework. Similarly, in qualitative circles, debate continues about the most appropriate ways to operationalise intersectionality, questioning whether it is a theory, a concept or a heuristic device (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). This paper aims to offer a novel insight into researching with intersectionality by employing a collaborative self-study approach (Luguetti et al., 2022), a method recognised for its value in enabling practitioners – including researchers and educators – to engage in a critical reflection of their own practice(s) (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014). Taking this approach, this paper aims to explore how researchers negotiate the complex nature of undertaking intersectional research in sport and physical activity. To explore this further, three supplementary objectives are adumbrated and addressed: (1) to utilise a collaborative self-study to reflect on the researchers experiences of conducting intersectional research; (2) to explore the ways operationalising intersectionality engenders methodological complexities; and (3) to provide experientially informed recommendations for future intersectional research in sport and physical activity.

### ***Context: intersectionality and our postgraduate research projects***

This paper draws on data generated from both Abby and Toby’s funded PhD studies at [Institution Name]. In addition, the article also draws on discussions with Krish, an ECR who completed his funded intersectional PhD at [Institution]. All authors acknowledged the importance of researcher positionality and the different degrees to which individual biographies and experiences influenced their research (Watson, 2018). As such, Abby, Toby, and Krish approached their respective research from very different places.

Abby is a White, female, PhD student researching the intersectional experiences of women in rugby union leadership roles. She has taken a critical interpretivist approach informed by feminist

theory and narrative methodologies. Abby conducted photo elicitation interviews with twenty-two women who volunteer in rugby leadership. Abby has over a decade of experience volunteering in rugby and is embedded in this community. She has experienced joy through volunteering opportunities but has simultaneously encountered incidents of sexism which inspired her research contribution in this area.

Toby is a White, male PhD student, whose PhD explores the experiences of 'care-experienced' children and young people seeking asylum in sport and physical activity and influences on their lives. Toby's research considered how issues of identity intersect with different spaces in these young people's lives. To build rapport, he spent significant time with a local football team founded for these young people. Toby used creative, qualitative methods to gather meaningful insights from participants. He then broadened the focus of his study to include adults who work with/for care-experienced children and young people seeking asylum, conducting semi-structured interviews. Toby continues to engage with the team, where he has witnessed firsthand the important role that football plays in the lives of these young people, providing them with a space to escape their day-to-day lives and previous traumatic experiences. Observing this impact has strengthened his passion to understand the potential benefits that sport and physical activity may present.

Krish is an older, Brown, disabled man who was motivated to return to education in order to turn 'personal troubles' into 'public issues' (Mills, 1959, p. 8). His doctoral research (Kuppan, 2022) explored the intersections of race, disability and gender in men's professional football fan culture. His study operationalised Critical Race Theory (CRT), Disability Studies and Black Feminism highlighting the intersectional, interdisciplinary and practice of narrative voice, characteristic of a CRT approach. The study also generated a complementary framework: affect, discourse and materiality (ADM), to further explicate the embodied racialised, disabled and gendered processes at play in football fan culture. The findings were written using an auto/ethnographic storytelling style, in which minoritised voices were given legitimacy and authority.

Full ethical clearance for all the authors' research projects was received from (institution's) Ethics Committee, prior to data generation. All participants signed written consent forms (or assent forms for participants under 18) at the start of their participation in each research project. In addition to this, participants' iterative consent was negotiated at regular intervals in the form of oral consent during both studies.

## Methods

### *Study design*

Like Luguetti et al. (2022), we decided to use a collaborative self-study to help understand the methodological complexities and opportunities of conducting intersectional research. The purpose of a collaborative self-study is to share ideas and reflections on the complex nature of practice (i.e. of undertaking intersectional research) (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014). Through discussion with a critical friend (or friends), collaborative self-studies can lead to new understandings of practice and of the self (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). As such, collaborative self-studies can support mutual learning as critical friends can learn from each other (O'Dwyer et al., 2019). Such an approach may sound straightforward but in practice was full of emotional labour and struggle. For example, early on in the group's critical friendship, Krish encouraged Abby and Toby to pay more attention to their racialised and gendered narrative accounts and analysis. Although Abby and Toby reassured Krish that his insights were important and valuable, Krish still experienced self-doubt. Moreover, he did not want to come across as overbearing. He felt Abby had pushed back at one moment, stating that they were 'doing a good job with writing and reflexivity'. In reality, writing is an iterative process that becomes clearer with reflection and practice, but this interaction created emotional tension which was experienced differently by particular members of the collaborative study. Simultaneously, Krish felt anxious about being critical of the work, whilst Abby wanted to appear confident about the paper, to

assuage her own sense of insecurity at being a younger woman and inexperienced in academic publishing (Ressler & Richards, 2017).

Overcoming our emotional tensions (Fletcher & Hordvik, 2023), however minimal, required repeatedly showing up for each other, being prepared to share openly, take risks, receive critique and understand the intersectional ebbs and flows of power between us. Some of the topics discussed as critical friends included insecurities during data collection and moments of self-doubt. This fostered mutual support in our collaborative self-study project and enabled us to generate insights into the interconnected nature of practice and of the self (LaBoskey, 2004). It provides us with a method to name, interpret, and critique our own intersectional research practices (Luguetti et al., 2022). By sharing our experiences, we hope that this paper can contribute to the work of other intersectional researchers. We have chosen to present the findings in the form of creative non-fiction to offer sufficient clarity whilst elucidating the complex reality of intersectional work (Frank, 2010).

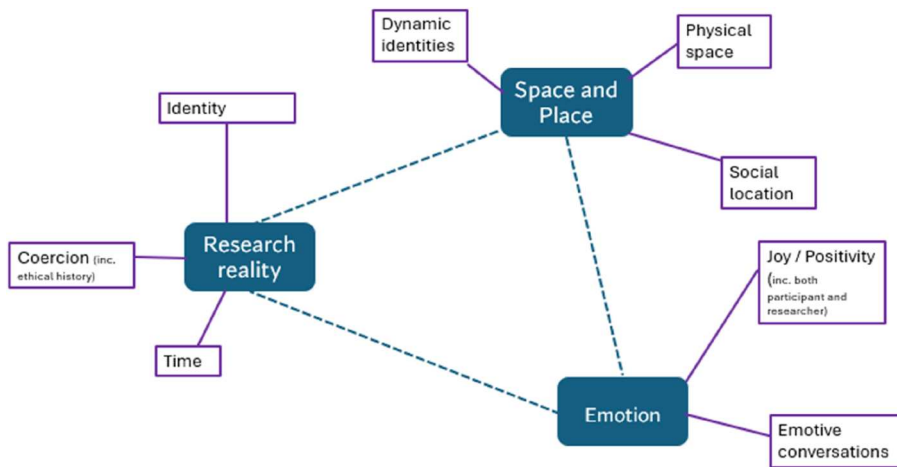
### **Data generation**

Multiple sources of data were generated in both Abby and Toby's doctoral research projects, including interview transcripts, photographs, and artefacts (such as drawings). Similarly to other critical scholars, we both documented our experiences throughout data generation using reflective journals (e.g. Fitzgerald et al., 2020). Our reflective journals included both personal thoughts and observations from the field, for example, considerations of our privilege as White doctoral students in a predominantly White university. At times their journal entries were akin to 'confessional tales' which helped in exploring moments that would otherwise get lost in the wider research process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Both Abby and Toby found that their research journals highlighted the 'messiness' of the research process (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). These reflective journals were used to inform the main data source for the self-study reported in this paper. The collaborative meetings allowed the authors to generate new insights and share common experiences in undertaking intersectional research in sport and physical activity. In addition, we debriefed with one another after each collaborative meeting, referred back to our individual reflective journals, and planned upcoming meetings. All meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Reflexive thematic analysis**

The collaborative meeting recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Abby and Toby familiarised themselves with the data, independently reading and annotating the transcripts with initial thoughts (Smith, 2016). The data were coded systematically both inductively and deductively based on our own understanding of their research projects and intersectionality theory (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Taking this approach allowed us to embrace the theoretically flexible nature of RTA and supported deep reflection on, and engagement with, both theory and data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Abby and Toby then critically discussed their individual interpretations, cognisant of the fact that 'data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). We then collaboratively generated initial themes and subthemes by grouping data that had similar patterns, meaning or concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following the initial generation of themes, Abby and Toby reviewed the themes using a series of key questions including asking, 'What are the boundaries of this theme (what does it include and exclude)?' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 65). At this point, the themes were defined and named. This reflexive thematic analysis of the meeting data generated three overarching themes, each of which had between two and three concurrent sub themes as follows: (1) Research reality; (2) Space and Place; (3) Emotion. A visual overview of these themes and subthemes is presented here in Figure 1.

This reflexive thematic analysis was conducted within a relativist ontology, acknowledging the existence of multiple perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This relativist ontological approach was



**Figure 1.** Visual overview of themes and subthemes.

underpinned by a constructionist epistemology, which recognises that knowledge is socially constructed (Smith, 2016). We adopted a critical interpretivist stance, with an emphasis on the exploration of emotions, diversity, and individual lived experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In stemming from feminist scholarship, intersectionality is considered as a critical interpretivist paradigm (Dowling, 2012). That is because knowledge is thought to be socially constructed, and that reality cannot be separated from our own subjective engagement and understanding of reality (Dowling, 2012). Throughout our analysis, we transitioned from a story analyst position (i.e. where we centralised the themes) to a storyteller approach (i.e. where we integrated the analysis within the narrative itself), to then ultimately convey our findings through a creative nonfiction narrative (Smith, 2016). Taking a creative nonfiction approach offered the authors a chance to capture the specifically complex, emotional, messy and difficult nature of intersectional research beyond the scope of a conventional report (Cavallerio, 2021). Stories grounded in personal and collective experiences have the capacity to provoke new ways of seeing, to resist norms and to provide an immersive voice to articulate the coexisting multiple realities of everyday life (Joseph, 2024). Our creative non-fiction story is intended to encourage the reader to reflect on their own research practice and to reassure them that intersectional research is complex but has significant value when approached in a reflexive manner.

The creative non-fiction story *'Nothing can ever prepare you for stuff like this'* was shaped by the three key themes resulting from the reflective thematic analysis; research reality, space and place, and emotion. Abby and Toby threaded these themes throughout the creative non-fiction account to shed light on their experiences of doing intersectional research. They also drew on their understanding of intersectional theory to add depth to the story (Richardson & Motl, 2021). Taking on the role of storyteller, Abby and Toby adopted the method of 'story capture' (Mueller, 2019), directly using parts of the collaborative meeting transcripts within the story itself. Through the use of fictional literary techniques such as vivid description, internal dialogue and metaphor, Abby and Toby transitioned from the themes to build the storyline. Abby and Toby reflected on the characters, their voices, and the story they tell as a refining process to develop a more evocative narrative (Richardson & Motl, 2021). Next, we offer the creative nonfiction narrative.

### ***'Nothing can ever prepare you for stuff like this': intersectionality in action***

Hoads of fresh-faced undergraduate students swarm across every inch of the open, sprawling university cafe, wide eyed and looking slightly lost. Highlight reels of athletic prowess as football scenes roll on the television screens which are plastered across every inch of wall space. The sports department

publicly demonstrates its students' achievements. What stands out, but is often regarded as unremarkable, is its White, masculine and 'able-bodied' composition. It is Monday morning, and everyone is rushing around, desperately searching for something, a revitalising caffeine kick from the paper cups of bitter university issue coffee, or the correct lecture theatre to avoid being late for their first class. Others are glued to their high-end branded laptops, frantically typing, headphones firmly in place, nodding to a silent tune. Hand aching from writing copious notes, Toby slowly lifts his head from his journal rapidly filling up with his reflections of his football match the day before. Despite his prior apprehension, Sunday afternoon football where he volunteers and plays is something he looks forward to now. He's surprised how much he has learned about his teammates who turn up, whatever the weather; their journeys as young people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. As he casts his gaze over the constantly jostling bodies in the cafe, he spots Abby making her way through a crowd of young men casually throwing a rugby ball in a loosely formed circle. He waves wildly, trying to save her the effort of wading through the sea of undergraduates, knowing she will struggle to spot him at the back table. His efforts are rewarded when her face brightens with a wide grin as she spots him and alters her course in his direction.

Abby throws herself into the one spare chair at the white circular table, lobs a brown paper bag onto the surface, heaves her rucksack off her back and issues a deep sigh, *'God I'm exhausted'*.

Toby nods slowly in agreement, 'I know how you feel' and they both slump back into the hard plastic chairs. As she takes a long drink from her water bottle, Abby spots Toby's once brightly coloured now faded and dog-eared research journal, his constant companion for the last two years. *'Ooo, the research journal is back, interesting! How's it going? How was football yesterday?'*

Her rapid-fire questions catch him off guard, but he's pleased she's asked, it's nice to have someone take an interest. *'Oh, it was fine, you know? Yeah good fun actually, yeah all fine!'*

Kate can tell he is withholding something and as she tries to make eye contact. Toby shifts uncomfortably and lowers his gaze to the open journal page crammed with his reflections. He takes a moment, gathering his thoughts as he launches into an explanation, *'Well, to tell you the truth, yesterday was great but it was a bit of a tough one'*. As he speaks his fingers sweep from left to right across the freshly written page of notes, looking for the entry he wishes to share. Having found the right bit of the entry, he starts to read,

We had a match down at Ivyvale. I drove some of the lads and thought it would be a great chance to ask them a few questions. They were a bit nervous chatting to start with and they've never really opened up. Even the fact I was the one driving the car made me feel a bit awkward ... It didn't dawn on me till then that they can't afford a car, they have to rely on public transport which must be a challenge with all the journeys they have to make.

Toby stops reading, looks up and continues,

To be honest, I don't think the guys really trust me yet. They have history with home office interviews, and I guess to them I'm just another White adult male, turning up and asking questions. The football manager warned me not to ask questions about their families or their journey to the United Kingdom in case I retraumatised them. I definitely don't want to do that.

Toby pauses, fingers now lightly resting on a small cartoon sketch scribbled next to the journal entry.

Abby fills the growing silence between them as students begin to dart around them, dashing off for their 9am lectures,

I know what you mean. I'm interviewing women in rugby volunteering roles, they're all leaders in some capacity. I know a lot of them already, which is great, but it's a bit tough sometimes for all the opposite reasons. It's not that they don't trust me, it's almost that they trust me completely so they will do anything I say. I mean, I know they won't do literally anything but ... it makes me worry. Basically I don't want any of them to feel like they HAVE to participate ... Do you know what I mean?

But Toby appears to have drifted off into a world of his own before lifting his hand apologetically, shaking his head and giving Abby a wry smile *'Sorry, I zoned out for a second then'*.



*'No worries, where were you? It looked stressful', she claimed, keen to keep him talking about the messy world of data generation.*

*'Well, yes, it was stressful, I was just thinking about all that stress we both had this time last year trying to get our ethics sorted'.*

Abby rolls her eyes, *'Yep, so necessary but such a pain. Form after form. It's not like the forms tell you how to deal with some of the situations you end up in!'*

Toby pensively continues,

Hmmmm, well, you'll remember, getting everything sorted was such a long-winded process, because of the guys I was going to be working with, and the trauma they'd witnessed. My gatekeeper, Derek, was constantly asking me 'are you not starting yet?' I was popping along week after week trying to get myself known, build up trust. I'd seen some of the guys I thought would be great to chat to leave the team before ethics was approved. I was so scared I'd missed my opportunity.

Abby feels the familiar sense of comfort that she always gets from her conversations with Toby. He just gets it, they have been in the same boat since starting their PhD journeys together. She responds thoughtfully,

Yeah, it's funny really isn't it, it's so intense the whole ethics process, and then once you've passed its not brought up again. To tell you the truth, I was quite dissatisfied with the process. I've tried to take an 'ethics of care' approach, it's something Audre Lorde talks about. I can lend you her book sometime if you want?

As hunger kicks in, Abby abruptly stops talking and grabs the brown paper pulling out one half of a toasted bagel. As she bites down, hot melted butter drips onto the plastic table top.

Abby speaks between mouthfuls, *'Well, next week I'm heading down to Featherdale again. Don't really fancy it but I'm determined I will go wherever the participants feel comfortable to do these interviews'.* She thinks of the countless local cafes, rugby clubs, and family homes she has visited over the last few months, not to mention all the virtual rooms in online calls.

His brows furrowed, Toby looks confused by this, *'How come you don't fancy going? I thought you liked all the trips and meeting the participants?'*

*'Yup, great fun. But that's not the point. It's all the things along the way'.* Abby mutters the last bit cautiously. They haven't really talked about this before.

*'Hmm, what do you mean?'* says Toby, struggling to keep the note of curiosity out of his voice.

Abby sharply exhales. She thinks she might as well tell him, it's in her reflective journal so it's probably going to end up in her PhD thesis anyway.

Okay, so this happened last time I went to Featherdale. It's a big city, one that I don't really know very well, and I was walking around at about 4:30 or 5 o'clock. It was a Friday evening, and I was going to meet one of my participants at their house after work. I had just got off the train and I got my phone out to use Google maps.

*'Bet you looked like a tourist!'* Toby quips.

Abby rolls her eyes again. *'Yeah, yeah, probably, I was trying to navigate through all these busy, winding streets, and I came across one of those old fashioned city pubs'.* Abby's mind is transported back to that warm spring day as she recounts her story. The noise spills out from the pub at the end of the alley where customers flow out onto the street. As she slowly approaches, the bustling throng of overwhelmingly White non-disabled men, in their grey business suits and shiny shoes. Loud voices, interspersed with even louder laughter, as they joked and pushed and shoved each other, lifting pint glasses to their mouths taking large gulps of the amber liquid; a sea of empty pint glasses gathered on the tables. *'As I walked past one bunch of the guys, this one had clearly had too much to drink, face all red, swaying on the spot, and he shouts at me, "Smile love, it might not happen!"'*

Toby takes it all in, aware of the distress in Abby's voice. He knows these kinds of things happen, but he hadn't thought about it happening during his research. He knows instinctively that is because it probably would not happen to him. Regardless of anything else about his identity, in those moments he could easily be seen as 'one of the lads'.

Abby continues, words flying out,

I started to question how I'd drawn attention to myself. I felt like I'd worn the wrong outfit, like it was my fault. They didn't know who I was. They didn't care who I was. It felt like they were just trying to scare me, intimidate me. And it worked. At that moment I was really aware of my gender and my appearance as a young, small, woman.

After a pause, Abby continues, voice quieter, eyes not quite meeting Toby's gaze,

It's not like it was a 'big thing', or even a 'bad thing', that he said. It's just when I get these kinds of comments day in and day out, it's exhausting. I know I should have called the man out, but I didn't, I just shuffled on past as quickly as I could. I didn't know I was doing it at the time, but it was a subconscious strategic decision, to let that sexist comment go. I guess it's a survival strategy. You know that to say something could create a worse situation. But the words are bad enough, you know? They make me feel insignificant, powerless, small and worthless.

Abby knows she could go on and on and on, reciting the endless incidents that she encounters on a daily basis – catcalling, wolf whistling, staring, men standing too close on public transport. But she pauses, exhausted with the emotional effort of having to revisit feeling vulnerable in that maze of alleys in Featherdale. She could tell him how the misogynistic words she has heard over the years stay with you, nestled in your bones, sat at the back of your mind waiting for you to feel insecure and then reappearing with renewed intent, adding to your sense of vulnerability.

Toby nods slowly. He knows he can't fully understand but he can relate to the idea of being made to feel different. Buoyed with confidence he offers his own story,

Well, yesterday during the game, I was made to feel so aware of my race. Not because of anything my team did but because of the opposition. My team was short on numbers, so I played and the things the opposition were saying, like, 'You're the only White guy on this team aren't you?' or 'How many languages do you speak?', some of them started calling me 'manager's son' because I was the only other White person there. It made me feel really awkward. I just didn't know how to react and then one of my teammates came over, threw an arm around my shoulder and said, 'Toby, my friend, just say you're from Ukraine, or Romania, or South Africa'.

Abby's eyes shift to the table where the crumbs and butter now congealed sit pronounced on the table's surface. Her tone softer now, she asks, *'Were the opposition also asylum seeking young people?'*

Toby shakes his head vigorously, *'Oh no, these were a local team, all White guys, older. Probably working class ... they called me "posh boy" too ... probably because I have a southern accent. It was ... interesting!'*

Abby scrunches up her face in disapproval. Daringly, she asks, *'How did that make you feel?'*

Toby considers this for a moment, *'I had no time to think about it at the time, too wrapped up in the game if I'm honest. Although, it felt great when my teammate made me feel a part of the club, an insider'.* He taps his journal, still open on the table. *'But since writing about it I'm thinking in other ways it made me feel like an outsider again. I sort of felt stuck between both teams, not really belonging to either'.* As his voice trails off they sit in comfortable silence, both mulling over what Toby has shared.

Chewing her lip Abby continues their train of thought, *'I guess we're so used to being part of this community, fitting in with the majority'.* She waves her arms around to gesture to the crowded tables filled with other students.

Like we're the same as loads of these students, we're White, young, able-bodied, insiders ... we have so much privilege. We're sitting here with our fancy laptops, Nike trainers. We can afford to pay silly prices for a bagel at the café, on our feet. I feel like you, we, are genuinely confronting all that privilege at the moment.

Toby nods his face set with intention, *'I think so and I want to channel some of my privilege into action. These lads at football, their stories are important, and I'm learning about who I am through them, if that makes sense?'*

Abby can see the emotion etched on Toby's face. She knows how hard it can be to talk about these feelings, particularly for men. As Toby absently rubs his eyes with the back of his hand,

Abby reaches down into the depths of her rucksack, searching amongst the contents until her fingers clasp onto her worn, dog-eared notebook. Toby, intrigued, watches her open the notebook as she says, *'Talking of trying to keep learning, I had a go at something new last week, I tried writing a reflective poem after my interview with a participant. Do you want to see what you think?'*

Abby flicks through pages containing a multitude of sketches, quotes, a patchwork of words and phrases. An old train ticket tumbles out and floats to the cafe floor. Eventually, she arrives at the page she is searching for, one covered with her handwritten scrawl. Abby points out the section she wants him to read and his eyes dart from left to right as he takes in the words.

*Friends, catching up,*

*Laughter, lots,*

*Coffee, brewing,*

*Letting things go,*

*Adapting, sharing,*

*On-track, off-track, what is the track?*

*Is the track the same for everyone?*

In the ensuing silence, Abby's eyes widen in apprehension, a little concerned she has been too hasty in sharing her innermost thoughts.

*'This is good ... I can see what you're trying to say'.* Toby leans forward, enthusiastic. He reads it again, more slowly this time.

Abby's voice interrupts his reading,

I guess I was trying to express how the unstructured moments of a conversation feel so authentic. If I was to do it all again, maybe I wouldn't even use an interview guide ... although at times it was like a safety blanket when I didn't know how to respond which did happen a few times, particularly when we talked about more emotional topics like microaggressions they had experienced. But I'm also trying to capture a bit of the joyful side of doing intersectional research. Those cups of tea, chats and shared memories were so much fun.

*'Yeah, I get that'.* Toby is smiling again. He wants her to know he sometimes feels 'off-track' too. *'My version of what you've called "on-track and off-track" was when I tried to create this obscure data generation method "Identities Bingo", to get the guys to think about their identities. It did **not** work'.* Understatement of the century he thinks to himself. *'I'd been so driven by my aims and objectives that sometimes I think I missed the track the participants were leading me down ... like about their broader lives, not just sport. I've had to change my methods so many times!'*

*'Trying to "do" intersectionality is pretty tough isn't it'.* As she says 'do', Abby throws her hands up in the air forming invisible quotation marks.

*'Yeah, it's hard but it's worth it, it's valuable'.* Toby replies with a smile. *'I genuinely feel that'.*

His words hang in the air as she nods in agreement.

He continues,

The smiles on the lads' faces at football, the pure joy of immersing themselves in the beautiful game. The friendships they build and the memories they share. Then, learning about their stories in such a nuanced way; it's deeply moving. I wouldn't change it for the world.

Abby nods again, *'Agreed. I still don't think any amount of reading can prepare us for doing intersectional work. But I suppose we can only get better at it by doing it. Small steps are better than no steps, right?'*

*'I definitely think so'.* agrees Toby.

Abby jumps in, *'Perhaps some of the other post-graduate students or people doing intersectional research feel like this too'.*

*'We should definitely talk about this stuff more ...'* Toby replies sitting forward on the edge of his chair.

They catch each other's eye as they see an older, Brown, disabled man approaching the table. They have heard about his intersectional research. With a shared glance at each other, they know they are thinking the same thing. *'Perhaps ... he'd like to be a part of this conversation too?'*

## Discussion

Three themes were identified during data analysis and are depicted in the narrative. These were: research reality; space and place; and emotion.

### Research reality

Throughout the narrative, our intention was to draw the reader to acknowledging the underlying complex power relations that affect the research process and the society within which the participants live (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Toby and Abby demonstrate that power moves in multi-directional ways across different levels of society and significantly influences their intersectional research (Hill Collins, 2000). They both encountered significant challenges from university structures when seeking institutional ethical approval. The focus of the intersectional research projects amplified the intersecting identities and compounded oppressions of participants. In turn, this heightened ethical concerns associated with risk and vulnerability. For instance, Toby explained the difficulty of gaining ethical approval as a student due to researching with a group deemed to be vulnerable – asylum seeking, care experienced children and young people who have complex identity histories and traumatic experiences. This meant Toby needed to gain support from gatekeepers, social workers, and Local Authority council professionals who mediated access to participants.

Due to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of power relations, at other points in the research process, Toby and Abby felt more empowered, which entailed different challenges. They both felt at times they held more power than their participants yet sought to equalise power as far as possible. This was complex as shown in Toby's account where he felt like an insider and an outsider, both empowered and disempowered, within the space of a few minutes due to interactions on the football pitch. He felt disempowered and like an outsider because of the opposition's negative comments toward him, whilst also empowered and an insider with the support of his teammates. This underscores the dynamic nature of power, the ways in which identities change according to context, and how we can all feel minoritised in certain situations. Nevertheless, Toby is acutely aware that to be a White, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgendered man gives him ongoing power and privilege that his racially Othered participants do not possess. As they recount their story, both Abby and Toby sought to address the balance of power through their data generation methods. For Abby, this involved using photo elicitation approaches and travelling to the participants to do the interviews in places they felt most comfortable. For Toby, this included designing novel creative and arts-based methods to gather rich, unique data, similar to other researchers (e.g. Luguetti et al., 2022; Middleton et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

One of the other issues Abby and Toby discussed frequently in relation to research reality was the difficulty of conducting intersectional research in different spaces and places.

### Space and place

Hill Collins and Bilge (2020) identify 'social context' as a principle of intersectionality. This draws attention to the places people occupy and the way these places interconnect with the identity of individuals resulting in unique and context-specific experiences. Similar to others' findings (Stride, 2016; Valentine, 2007), the physical and metaphorical space within which the research took place was evident in the feeling of safety, security, and a sense of belonging. For instance, the narrative

highlights a moment in which Abby's gender in conjunction with the space of the street outside a city pub resulted in an unpleasant experience. This experience led to considerable distress and had a lasting effect on Abby. Toby reflects that he would not have had the same experience due to his racialised, non-disabled and gender identity, and would have likely been identified as part of a community of men and/or ignored by the men at the pub.

A further example of space and place within our narrative was Toby's experience of discrimination and Othering based on his racialised identity. Due to being the only White player in a predominantly Black football team made up of people seeking asylum, he was subjected to inappropriate comments from the opposition team, such as being called the 'manager's son'. Although Toby was White in a predominantly White space (i.e. where the opposing team were also mostly White men) these comments left him feeling out of place and a sense of non-belonging due to his racialised identity within his own team. Spaaij (2015) similarly found that Somali Australian refugee youth and their African Australian teammates experienced racial discrimination from opposing football players due to their visible racial difference, further reinforcing their exclusion in the football sporting space. Toby's teammates – who had likely faced similar experiences of discrimination and Othering – offered support by using humour, as they playfully suggested that he responded by stating that he was from 'Ukraine, Romania, or South Africa'. In so doing, this moment of solidarity and team spirit helped to ease Toby's discomfort in this space, reinforcing a sense of belonging within his team despite the exclusionary comments from the opposition team. The experiences of both Abby and Toby highlight the interaction between gender and space and race and space, demonstrating the way that researchers' own identities are an integral part of intersectional research, inflecting with the research process.

Aligned closely with the theme of space and place were feelings of emotion experienced during the intersectional research projects.

## **Emotion**

Conducting intersectional research is challenging and necessarily complex (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). By offering an insight in the form of a creative nonfiction narrative both Toby and Abby sought to highlight the individual-level concerns and inner thoughts of both themselves and their participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). For example, in the narrative, they discussed their own emotional responses to data generation. Both had to respond to moments of discrimination or times when emotionally loaded language had been directed at them. Abby's experience of male hostility outside the city pub reveals 'how the ordinary is a shifting assemblage' of 'things that happen' (Stewart, 2007, pp. 1–2). It is a reminder of how misogyny, in this instance, in the form of gendered ridicule 'stick' to women's bodies in certain social spaces (Ahmed, 2004), suggesting how difficult 'feelings might be how structures get under our skin' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2016). During the narrative dialogue, they also discuss general feelings of uncertainty in relation to the future of their research. These emotional moments were included intentionally to offer the reader a chance to explore their own ambivalent feelings when conducting intersectional research. We wanted to show and tell the ways in which feelings reside within and between different bodies; focusing on emotional encounters, the unpleasant affects they sometimes generate, and their complex negotiation within public spaces (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010).

Within the theme of emotion, the authors also hoped to highlight the potential for journaling and critical friend support in navigating the emotional toll of research. Relationships with critical friends are necessarily fraught with the messiness of power dynamics as researchers approach projects from different career stages and their own embodied identities (Ressler & Richards, 2017). Conversations with critical friends throughout this project worked towards alleviating the emotional toll of intersectionality research, by first challenging individuals to dwell on, and explore their own emotions, and then discussing this in ways that worked towards deeper understanding. They were attentive to the flows of power between members, for example trying to hold the silence rather than jumping in to speak. However, they were also acutely aware that in other projects this was not

always the case. Researchers may feel the need to control or hold back their emotions, understating how they feel, or may not be afforded the space to share openly.

Additionally, each researcher’s project provoked a range of emotions for the participants. Historical trauma, generational displacement, abuse, and microaggressions frequently inflected with the topics that arose through the research. For example, in Toby’s research the gatekeepers he liaised with prohibited him asking the asylum-seeking young people questions relating to their families. For these young people, discussing their identities with Toby had the potential to re-evolve trauma or strong emotions. Whilst this may be a challenge in any research project, we suggest it was particularly pronounced when conducting intersectional research due to an intensified focus on identities, structures and social justice.

Conclusion/recommendations

This paper has sought to foreground the challenges and opportunities encountered by undertaking intersectional research. Indeed, using an intersectional lens seemed to heighten the challenges inherent in the research process. We found that institutional research ethics processes became more complex due to our intersectional research projects highlighting the identities and oppressions of our participants, thus intensifying research ethics concerns. Similarly, our intersectional research frequently evoked strong emotional responses from participants. By researching intersectionally we also experienced a heightened sense of self, where aspects of our intersectional selfhood came to the forefront. This meant that we had to confront our own intersectional identities and positionality, including any past or recent experiences of discrimination. As such, we experienced added emotional labour that we had to manage as we conducted intersectional work. Alongside this, we discovered that intersectional research demands flexibility, as it necessitates responsiveness to the dynamics of people, places, and spaces, thus it requires open-minded and agile researcher(s) that are willing to embrace change throughout the research process.

We bring the paper to a close by offering some practical strategies and recommendations that post-graduate students, ECRs, and those working on intersectionality-based projects in sport and physical activity can implement to support them throughout the research process (see Table 1).

First, the challenging realities of working within academia are a key feature with time, ethics, and funding at the heart of considerations. We propose that institutional ethics processes can be utilised in an iterative way to enable research to be conducted within the university guidelines, whilst also remaining attentive to the intricate and dynamic needs of participants in intersectional research projects. This could involve developing formal ethics board applications that are more open to change and contain a nuanced perspective with participant care at its heart.

Table 1. Recommended strategies for conducting intersectional research.

1	Flexible and responsive research design	Researchers should adopt a flexible design with unstructured moments allowing participants to direct the flow of the data generation. A flexible design facilitates the researcher to use different methods at different moments to best adapt to the dynamic nature of data generation.
2	Iterative ethics	Researchers should take an iterative approach to ethics even when they have met the requirements of institutional ethics. Routinely checking in with the participants can help minimise power dynamics and ensure everyone involved is comfortable with the research at every step.
3	Creative dissemination strategies	Using creative approaches to share the findings of the research can help to alleviate any potential issues surrounding ethics and anonymity. Narrative approaches can be useful for telling rich stories, conveying the depth of emotion the participants share throughout data generation.
4	Reflection	Efforts should be made to undertake continued reflection throughout the research process. This could be through a variety of means, including reflective journals or conversations with a critical friend to share experiences, stories and concerns.
5	Micro steps	Researchers should continue to take small steps to adopt more intersectional approaches where possible. Both authors felt strongly that small changes in their research processes facilitated big differences for the participants.

The need to consider the space and place within which intersectional research is conducted necessitates a well-thought-out research design and implementation. Such is the nature of these research imperatives that they go unquestioned. They are assumed to provide a level of ethical grounding, participant safety, and institutional rigour that maintains the standards of post-graduate research and education. Therefore, we advocate for a flexible approach to research design (see Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020) that can accommodate unstructured moments (e.g. considering researcher positionality and 'scrapping the interview schedule'), using creative dissemination strategies (e.g. narrative analyses such as creative non-fiction), and/or engaging in critical reflection on research processes (e.g. keeping a reflective journal or having conversations with critical friends).

While intersectional research presents a range of complex challenges and opportunities, as highlighted throughout this paper, we suggest that through careful consideration, taking an intersectional approach can offer a rewarding, uniquely insightful experience in sport and physical activity research, offering an intellectually stimulating experience for both researchers and participants.

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