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# Promoting Well-Being and Desistance Through Sport and Physical Activity: The Opportunities and Barriers Experienced by Women in English Prisons

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*Despite an increased focus on the benefits of participation in sport and physical activity for men in custody, little attention has been paid to its potential role in meeting the specific needs of female prisoners. Qualitative data from female offenders ( $n=45$ ) within the English prison estate illustrated that, despite low levels of participation, prison-based sport and physical activities have clear physical and psychological benefits and can be valuable in promoting desistance from crime. Institutional barriers to participation, such as in the provision of activities and the prison regime, coupled with gendered barriers, such as self-presentational and motivational concerns, are identified and explored. Findings are discussed in the context of existing policy and principles of best practice.*

**KEYWORDS** barriers to participation, desistance, physical activity, prison

## INTRODUCTION

Women represent a relatively small proportion of the overall prison population (4,112 women were detained in prisons in England and Wales on October 19, 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2012b), yet recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of women sentenced to custody (Fawcett Society, 2007; Home Office, 2007). Furthermore, reoffending figures

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published in 2012 confirm that 57% of women who served sentences of less than a year and 24% of women who served sentences longer than a year reoffended within a year of release (Ministry of Justice, 2012c). Moreover, 83% of women in custody in comparison to 32% of women in the community report having a long-term illness, and women in custody are 5 times as likely to have experienced mental health problems in comparison to their counterparts in the community (Plugge, Douglas, & Fizpatrick, 2006). Furthermore, although women represent only 5% of the prison population they account for nearly half of all of the self-harm incidents in prison (Hardwick, 2012) and are at increased risk for suicide compared to male prisoners. Such a high level of vulnerability, coupled with the distinct sentence profile of women—more than 20% of women in comparison to 10% of men are sentenced to less than 12 months in custody (Ministry of Justice, 2012a), and 80% of women in comparison to 70% of men in prison have committed nonviolent offenses; Prison Reform Trust, 2012)—presents a real challenge to policymakers and practitioners in a prison system largely designed by men for men (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2011; Home Office, 2007). Consequently, pressure continues to be exerted on policymakers to adopt a holistic and women-centered approach to regimes in women's prisons (Fawcett Society, 2007; Hardwick, 2012; Prison Reform Trust, 2012).

Attention has begun to be paid to the importance of embedding sport and physical activity (SPA) in correctional settings (Meek, 2014) but primarily in the regimes of male prisons in efforts to promote physical and mental health (Buckaloo, Krug, & Nelson, 2009; Nelson, Specian, Tracy, & DeMello, 2006; Verdot, Champely, Clement, & Massarelli, 2010), contribute to social control (Johnsen, 2001; Martos-Garcia, Devis-Devis, & Sparkes, 2009), and reduce reoffending (Andrews & Andrews, 2003; Lewis & Meek, 2012a). To date, however, there has been little exploration of whether SPA offers comparable opportunities to meet female prisoners' needs, the extent to which policy and practice promotes this, and what barriers might constrain women's participation in SPA in custody. Thus, the current article aims to address this gap in the literature by exploring both the benefits of and barriers to women's participation in SPA in English prisons.

## ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SPORT AND PHYSICAL EXERCISE FOR WOMEN IN PRISON

The physical and psychological benefits of exercise for men and women have been well documented in community settings (see Frank & Dahn, 2005), and an accumulated body of evidence has identified the gender-specific gains associated with female participation in sport, including increased confidence, assertiveness, self-worth, and empowerment and improved body image (Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Humberstone, 1990; Richman & Shaffer,

2000). A number of community sports-based interventions have been developed to address a range of social problems among disadvantaged women and girls, including offending behavior (Burdsal & Buel, 1980; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Resnicow et al., 2000; Wichmann, 1990; Women's Sport Foundation, 1998), but despite modest evaluative evidence to suggest the efficacy of these interventions with male populations, the small number of females involved in such programs renders it problematic to assess their efficacy for addressing female offending (Wilson & Lipsey, 2000). Furthermore, findings regarding the potentially protective or detrimental effect of participation in SPA on subsequent offending are mixed: Some studies have concluded that there are few, if any, gender distinctions in the relationship between participation and delinquency (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Sabo, & Farrell, 2007), whereas others have indicated that sport can have a more influential negative effect on girls' delinquency (Begg, Langley, Moffitt, & Marshall, 1996) or minimal effect at all (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Melnick, Vanfossen, & Sabo, 1988). Such inconsistent results may reflect methodological discrepancies in the measurement of physical activity and delinquency but also serve to highlight the complex relationship between SPA and delinquency, in that for both males and females it is only one of a constellation of factors influencing subsequent offending.

Despite a backdrop of contradictory findings, the limited research assessing SPA among female prisoners confirms multiple beneficial outcomes in terms of addressing women's needs in prison. Ozano's (2008) quantitative analysis of nine British female prisoners participating in at least three sessions of physical activity a week identified positive gains in terms of coping with prison life, physical and psychological well-being, and the promotion of rehabilitation. The women in Ozano's study reported that sport served as a coping mechanism in prison, facilitating the release of aggression, stress, and anxiety while improving confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy as well as physical fitness, body image, and motivation toward achieving a healthier lifestyle. Women described how they had developed transferable skills and knowledge through sports-based qualifications, work experience, and participation that would support their rehabilitation in terms of gaining employment, leading healthy lifestyles, and encouraging alternative and constructive uses of leisure time after release. Similarly, Leberman (2007) evaluated the effects of a 20-day experiential adventure-based course completed by 27 female offenders in New Zealand. Qualitative findings revealed positive gains in terms of enhanced self-confidence and self-awareness as well the development of transferable skills in teamwork, conflict resolution, and goal setting. Those nearing the end of their sentences reported the greatest benefits, although the challenge of maintaining positive gains once back in the prison environment were also highlighted. Such research suggests that specific SPA interventions within prisons have the potential to ameliorate some of the negative

psychological and physical effects of incarceration on women as well as to facilitate rehabilitative processes and promote desistance from future offending. Nevertheless, research to date has not explored whether such benefits can be generalized to routine SPA activities in prison or what the particular barriers are that women face in accessing SPA provision in prison.

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY AND IN CUSTODY

Despite sport having the potential to contribute to beneficial outcomes in custody, international data confirm that female prisoners are less likely than their male counterparts to participate in SPA (Goetting & Howsen, 1983; Lewis & Meek, 2012b); however, reasons underpinning this disparity have to date not been identified. Within the community, in spite of the proliferation of national (Sport England, 2012) and international (International Working Group on Women and Sport, 1994, 2002) campaigns and initiatives that have aimed to increase women's participation in sport over the past 20 years, a longstanding gender disparity in sports participation has also remained (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2011). Considerable academic attention has been paid to identifying a range of social, situational, psychological, political, and cultural barriers to participation, and lower levels of participation among women have been explained in terms of women's multiple social roles and responsibilities (Verhoef, Love, & Rose, 1992) and restricted access to sports facilities, particularly in areas of social deprivation (Rutten, Abu-Omer, Frahsa, & Morgan, 2009). Self-presentational concerns (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011) and low levels of motivation (Robbins, Puder, & Kazonis, 2003) have been partially attributed to the social construction of sport as a masculine activity (Eitzen, 2000; Sabo, 1985; Wellard, 2002) as well as to the historic policy impetus to promote women's participation in sport for primary health benefits, which has consequently implied restriction and sacrifice rather than the benefit of sport for intrinsic enjoyment (Deem & Gilroy, 1998). Despite this, research with community samples indicates that women do tend to perceive the benefits of exercise as outweighing barriers to participation (Lovell, El Ansari, & Parker, 2010). Furthermore, strategies targeting the sociopsychological (Segar, Jayaratne, Hanlon, & Richardson, 2002) and situational (Rutten et al., 2009) barriers to participation, and those promoting empowerment and offering women tailored activities and facilities (Kay, 2003), have had some success in increasing levels of participation in community settings in the short term at least and offer some promise for initiatives to increase physical activity among the female prison population. However, barriers identified in the community are likely to be exacerbated in the prison environment, which is widely recognized to epitomize

hegemonic masculinity (Sabo, Kupers, & London, 2001) and in which access to, and empowerment to undertake, physical activity is further constrained. Subsequently, participation among female prisoners is not only lower than that of male prisoners but also typically lower than that of nonincarcerated females (Herbert, Plugge, Foster, & Doll, 2012; Plugge, Foster, Yudkin, & Douglas, 2009).

## THE POLICY CONTEXT IN ENGLAND AND WALES

The Prison Service has acknowledged that female prisoners may be particularly difficult to engage in physical activity: Indeed, gender-specific guidance is outlined in the *Women Prisoners* prison service order (HM Prison Service, 2008), which contains mandatory and discretionary directions to guide the operation of establishments detaining females. The order suggests that staff should promote physical exercise to women and have an awareness of the barriers to women's participation, including issues of age, body consciousness, and self-confidence. The directive also advocates physical activities for women that are integrated into the wider prison regime and meet the needs of women prisoners by fostering self-esteem, health, and fitness and by providing opportunities for social interaction with other women. Activities such as yoga, aerobics, step activities, and weight management programs—as well as specific provision for vulnerable and pregnant/postnatal women—are recommended. Aside from this guidance, physical education (PE) provision for women in prisons is also delivered in line with the PE instruction (Ministry of Justice, 2011), which stipulates that male and female prisoners should be given the opportunity to participate in PE for at least 1 hr per week (extended to 2 hr per week for those younger than 21 years old). The PE instruction outlines how prison PE provision can also incorporate the promotion of health and well-being, education, training and employment, resettlement, and offending behavior programs, although it is acknowledged that the balance between these elements is determined by national and local needs as well as the availability of resources. Lastly, policies relating to substance misuse and healthy living initiatives refer to physical activity as an accompaniment to such programs (HM Prison Service, 2000, 2003). However, although policy directives have aimed to promote women's participation and advocate SPA as one way in which to meet the specific needs of women in prison, there has been no exploration of the extent to which such initiatives have been successfully implemented. In light of this, the aims of the present study were threefold: First, to explore whether and how women in prison perceive SPA to be beneficial; second, to explore the perceived barriers to women prisoners' participation in sport; and third, to explore the extent to which current provision addresses these barriers and meets women's needs.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 44 female offenders aged 17 to 64 years ( $M$  age = 34 years,  $SD = 14.7$ ) participated in a series of focus group discussions ( $n = 39$ ) and individual semistructured interviews ( $n = 5$ ) during Autumn 2012 in three English prisons, two of which were publicly run and one of which was privately run. Because of logistic constraints and in order to ensure a sample representative of the female prison population generally, all focus groups were mixed in terms of the participants' participation in SPA in custody, which varied from never to daily, as did their experience of SPA prior to custody, with some having been frequently involved in SPA and others having not participated in SPA since leaving school. Participants were predominantly White British (80%), with the remainder being Black (9%), Asian (7%), or of mixed race (4%). The time that the women had been in custody ranged from 1 week to 4 years, and interviewees were made up of unconvicted women on remand ( $n = 7$ ) and those serving sentences ranging from 2 months to life. One further interview was carried out with a participant who had been released from prison for 4 months at the time of interview, having served a 6-month custodial sentence.

### Design

Following ethical approval from the relevant university ethics committee, the National Offender Management Service, and the respective establishments, informed consent was granted by the 45 women to participate in interviews to address the research questions of what (if any) benefits women experienced from participation in prison-based SPA in addition to the perceived barriers to participation. Eight focus groups (including those representing women serving life sentences, girls and young adults, and women on a mother and baby unit, as well as women drawn from the general prison population) and six in-depth semistructured interviews were carried out, all without prison staff present. In light of recommendations outlined for constructive prison-based PE (Ministry of Justice, 2011) and policy aimed at tackling barriers to female prisoners' participation (HM Prison Service, 2008), interview questions were structured around current positive experiences of SPA in custody and the perceived opportunities, barriers, and impact of physical activity in prisons. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 min and an hour, and the interview schedules were flexible enough to give the interviewees an opportunity to identify and elaborate on related topics that were important to them. Responses were either digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim or transcribed verbatim *in vivo* by members of the research team. Transcripts were then analyzed

thematically (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to identify the superordinate themes and subthemes relating to the research questions, with illustrative examples being extracted for each.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Benefits of Sport for Women in Prison

With regard to the first research question, the interviews and focus groups revealed several key themes regarding the benefits of SPA for women in prison. In accordance with previous research, physical activity was portrayed as serving an important function in coping with the psychological consequences of imprisonment. Women consistently cited improved self-esteem and mental health as a result of sports participation, and the gym was seen as critical for addressing wider health issues and the promotion of resettlement concerns.

### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT AS A COPING MECHANISM

Consistent with findings from research concerning the role of SPA for men in prison (Johnsen, 2001), many women described how engaging in exercise served as a distraction from the stresses of prison life by providing them with a coping mechanism and allowing for frustrations to be vented: "Everyone suffers from stress here, it [exercise] helps you get rid of that and cope with it" and "It gets rid of tension, like therapy as well as exercise." Another women said the following:

Sport in prison is a massive thing, I was fortunate enough to have no other issues to be tempted with. I went to the gym every single opportunity, and did a huge amount of activities. It really helped make the time go quicker.

Consistent with Ozano's (2008) observation that female prisoners who frequently participate in SPA perceive it as critical in releasing stress and anxiety, our findings also suggested that such benefits extended to those participating more sporadically. In this way, SPA provided not only a distraction and release from such feelings but also a positive psychological focus:

It helps you release frustration, we are locked up a lot and it hits you the hardest when there are extra lock ups, it gets you down. I'd go off my trolley if I didn't have the gym, from a psychological point of view it gives you something to focus on.

Indeed, for some participants, such a focus not only helped them cope with the prison regime but provided a welcome distraction from other problems in their lives: "Whatever problem I've got I go to the gym and workout—it

really works for me." For example, in the following quote, one young woman describes how involvement in sport helped her deal with being separated from family, a factor that is recognized as being particularly detrimental to female prisoners' psychological well-being (Plugge et al., 2006): "You get an hour and a half visiting a week, it's hard not seeing family I lived with my boyfriend and family before so it was a big change. Sport helps me cope, it takes my mind off it." SPA therefore served to offer women escapism from institutional stressors and well as personal problems, thus providing a constructive psychological focus and use of time.

#### SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Both Ozano (2008) and Leberman (2007) reported subjective improvements in self-esteem among small groups of female prisoners involved in intensive interventions based around physical activity. Similarly, our participants frequently described how taking part in SPA in prison had boosted their self-esteem and challenged previous negative views they had held of themselves: "I thought I couldn't achieve anything, but then I did achieve." Improved self-esteem was something that the women recognized not only in themselves as a result of participation but also in those around them, and subsequently in facilitating constructive relationships: "Everyone got on when we did the team sports, it released endorphins, actually made you feel good about yourself—it made us feel better." Furthermore, such subjective changes in mood were translated into tangible positive outcomes for some participants. One woman within an establishment where the Mental Health Team routinely referred individuals suffering with depression to the PE department described how the neurochemical effects of exercise had allowed her to come off antidepressants since being in custody:

When I first came in I honestly didn't think I would last more than a couple of months, I thought I was going to have a breakdown. The nurse encouraged me to go to the gym to help with my depression, it releases serotonin and I have managed to come off antidepressants.

Others reported that attending the gym provided a motivation to overcome depression, something that resonates with research linking physical activity among male prisoners to decreased depressive symptomatology (Buckaloo et al., 2009; Cashin, Potter, & Butler, 2008): "When you are here and you're down you can spend two or three days in bed, the gym is the only thing to give you strength to carry on." However, the limitations of such a positive impact were also acknowledged, characterized in the following quote taken from an interview with a young woman who was awaiting transfer to psychiatric hospital: "Sometimes it helps motivate me when I'm depressed but there's only so much you can do."

The themes identified confirmed that SPA has the potential to boost self-esteem and psychological well-being among women in prison and can offer a simple intervention to help address the elevated levels of depression found among female prisoners (Plugge et al., 2006; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). However, activities evidently need to be varied and carefully planned, particularly considering that previous research has suggested that individuals with low self-esteem are likely to be more susceptible to the potential negative effects of sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Matrie, 2002).

#### WEIGHT MANAGEMENT AND HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

The *Women Prisoners* prison service order (HM Prison Service, 2008) recommends providing weight management programs to women, and where such provision was available and required, women clearly valued being supported to lose weight and develop healthier lifestyles: "I arrived here ten kilos more and now with the officer going 'You can do it, you can do it! Well done, you can do it'; they encouraged me, pushed me and it gives you the spirit." In common with previous research (Herbert et al., 2012; Ozano, 2008), a significant number of women highlighted how imprisonment had resulted in substantial weight gain, which in turn had served to impact negatively on self-esteem. Indeed, many perceived attending the gym to be the only way to ameliorate the effect of the carbohydrate-rich prison diet: "I put on two stone when I first came in but I have almost lost it all now just by coming here [gym]." However, despite the results indicating that women identified weight management and healthier lifestyles as a direct benefit of prison SPA, positive experiences were not consistent across the women's estate. Quotes such as the following further highlight the disparity in PE provision (Condon, Hek, & Harris, 2008; Lewis & Meek, 2012b) and specifically the promotion of health through SPA across establishments (Meek & Lewis, 2012):

There was a letter from a friend of ours who has moved to [prison] saying that she was on a diet together with an exercise plan and she'd lost four pounds and I thought isn't that great because one of the things is that a lot of us put on weight, well I certainly have, and with the normal diet that we have here we don't have the opportunity to buy our own food to sort of go on a diet.

Reflecting concerns in the male estate that, despite health initiatives being available, uptake can be low (Lester, Hamilton-Kirkwood, & Jones, 2003), even in establishments where there were weight loss programs it was acknowledged that women were sometimes put off, or did not want to engage in these: "As you get bigger you find it harder to go to the gym, there are two types though: those who want to do something about it and others who can't be arsed. Women are lazy." Nevertheless, our participant who had been released several months prior to interview explained how she had

succeeded in maintaining the healthy lifestyle developed in prison once released: "I used to run five [kilometers] everyday on the treadmill, and the gym staff would encourage me, run next to me. Now I do five [kilometers] everyday on the road instead—I never did that before."

Such experiences suggest that health behaviors adopted in custody can be translated into healthier lifestyles after release. Indeed, previous research has indicated that prisoners often intend to maintain healthy behaviors after release (Nelson et al., 2006; Ozano, 2008), but intentions alone are often insufficient for behavioral actualization (Ajzen, 1985), and further longitudinal research is required to assess how the benefits of participation in SPA, and in particular healthy living habits initiated in prison, can be maintained in the community.

#### RESETTLEMENT

The findings revealed a further benefit to prison-based SPA for women in terms of promoting women's resettlement, and innovative practice was identified in both of the publicly run prisons where SPA was used to address the resettlement priority of education, training, and employment. One establishment provided blended learning in the form of an outreach teacher coming into the gym to provide literacy support—utilizing sports-themed teaching materials to develop literacy skills among women reluctant to engage in traditional classroom-based education as well as supporting women undertaking SPA-related qualifications with written work. Furthermore, "Individual Learning Plans" were updated collaboratively by staff and women on a fortnightly basis, documenting the knowledge and skills developed in order to support subsequent employment applications. Considering that prisoners often have poor educational backgrounds (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002), that research has demonstrated the perceived value of and positive attitudes toward education among prisoners, and that poor educational status prior to custody is associated with reoffending (Hopkins, 2012), providing innovative ways to learn—such as through sport and the gym—offers the potential to engage those hardest to reach, who are often therefore more vulnerable to reoffending (Meek, Champion, & Klier, 2012). Indeed, our ex-offender interviewee confirmed that for her, the knowledge and skills developed through prison-based sports qualifications had directly contributed to her subsequent success in securing employment: "I got a job as a chiropractic assistant, I learnt a lot of knowledge on the sports course that applies to my job now." For those completing sports-related qualifications in custody, these not only conferred benefits within the immediate prison environment but also contributed to tangible resettlement plans and valued career goals:

Before I had a job and everything but not a career, this has given me a focus, something I want to carry on with, something I can achieve. I can't

drive when I get out I've been banned for five years, but with this I can work in a leisure centre.

Some participants directly attributed their qualifications to an enhanced likelihood of successfully desisting from crime, for instance in overcoming financial motivations for offending:

It will help me not reoffend, it will get me a job where I can earn more money. The reason I ended up here was because I couldn't earn enough money to pay the bills on my own, I couldn't make enough to get by and saw the chance to make some more money, I got caught and ended up here. Now I have a clear goal of what I want to do though.

Indeed, our ex-offender interviewee described how, by working as a prison gym orderly, she had been able to develop skills and experience by being given responsibility for leading exercise classes and mentoring other women. She had received support within prison to use newly developed skills upon her return to the community, and the activities introduced to her in prison and the associated qualifications and experience she gained enabled her to reintegrate into her local community, gain a sense of achievement, and challenge stigma associated with ex-offenders:

I had the opportunity to do spin, I'd never done it before, but now I am a qualified spin instructor—I never thought I would be able to have do that before, now I run spin classes. People come up to me, they know what happened, where I have been and they can't believe what I'm doing now. Sometimes I have to pinch myself, because I just think, wow look what I have achieved.

This specific experience illustrates the powerful effect of women being given the opportunity within prison not only to develop an interest in sport but to gain qualifications at a level that meets employers' needs, gains work experience, and facilitates connections with community organizations and employers, sometimes through opportunities to gain experience through Release on Temporary Licence work placements. Indeed, research has indicated that opportunities for sports-related leave (Gras, 2005) and ongoing support that provides links to employment in the community (Coalter, 2002; Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, & Makkai, 2003; Nichols & Taylor, 1996) are significant elements of successful sports-based interventions with males, and the current findings suggest that women also perceive such opportunities as offering the same benefits.

#### DEVELOPING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STAFF

All of the benefits associated with participation in SPA identified by the women were discussed in the context of an environment with supportive

and enthusiastic staff—echoing Andrews and Andrews (2003) observations regarding the importance of positive reinforcement in successfully motivating change through sports interventions with young people in custody. For example, typical reflections about the prison-based gym provision included the following: “It’s the only thing that works—the team and officers are really helpful. They give you a challenge” and “They are good people and put passion in to try to understand you. It’s excellent, brilliant.” Among the participants, there appeared to be a consensus that relationships with gym staff differed from those with other custodial staff, having a more individualized and empathetic approach:

They [PE officers] are looked at just as prison officers but they are so much more than that, they take your circumstances into consideration. The way they are with you, the rapport, it’s different. They were my rocks, if I had a problem I would go to them rather than my personal officer.

Strong supportive relationships with staff were particularly important in encouraging women to achieve and progress from sports-related qualifications and goals:

It makes a huge difference the people teaching you, they came down to a level so that it suited everybody and taught in a way that was very supportive and explained it well—like every time [name of PE officer] walked past me he would ask me which direction of the body he was facing, dorsal, lateral, etc. It really drilled it in and that’s really helped me in my job now.

Whether promoting participation for enjoyment, for health benefits, to gain qualifications, or to support resettlement, the key to motivating individuals successfully appeared to be the positive approach adopted by gym staff, which helped to foster women’s self-belief: “I never thought it would be possible in prison, but there they push you, they know you can do it.” Such positive approaches are particularly important because they facilitate the psychological processes of adaptation (Dulmen & Ong, 2006) and resilience (Luthar, 2003), which feature in strength-based models of desistance (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). Thus, the development of supportive relationships through SPA for women in prison evidently has the potential to promote resettlement while also increasing well-being while in custody.

### Barriers to Women Participating in Sport in Prison

Although the women we interviewed clearly valued and recognized the benefits of engaging in SPA in prison, the findings confirmed that women also experienced significant barriers to participation. The focus groups and

interviews revealed that extrinsic issues relating to the regime and structure of delivering activities placed practical constraints upon participation for some women, and intrinsic reasons for nonparticipation, such as lack of motivation, were also reported to play a role.

#### STRUCTURE AND DELIVERY

In terms of the delivery of activities, the women's comments echoed guidance in the *Women Prisoners* prison service order (HM Prison Service, 2008), which recommends the provision of a range of activities that offer the opportunity for social interaction in order to increase participation:

It's not just the fitness suite [prison] have there, there is rounders, Zumba. There were women I met who would never go in a gym but would go out and play cricket or rounders. Variation is important, there was always the option of other classes, gym, or activities, inside or outside.

Despite some establishments evidently offering a varied program of SPA, participants identified a range of activities that would appeal to them and their peers, for example badminton, walking, swimming, dance, and yoga, as well as team-based skills, suggesting that a limited variety of activities in custody could be a significant barrier to participation. Consistent with findings within the community (Kay, 2003), activities that the women felt would promote participation were typically those that conformed to traditional notions of femininity. However, access to a range of activities was consistently cited as key to driving up participation, with a focus on any one activity, for example team games, only perceived to constrict participation: "I reckon they should do a different things each evening and then there is more choice for people to choose what they want to do, but they just have netball and football in the evenings." Although a variety of activities and targeted classes (e.g., for older prisoners) were often available, women in some establishments either were entirely unaware of them or did not know when they ran. This was not helped by a lack of resources and sufficient communication: "There is a timetable of what's on but it doesn't often get stuck to which puts some people off and when there is staff shortages the gym is the first place to close." Another woman said the following:

They call it [gym] but it's not always clear, you have to nag them like "Is it on, is it on?" and the officers they don't always know.... Half the time you can't hear what they are saying, so you don't know where to go or what.

Within the community, principles of best practice in promoting female participation in SPA include providing full information about activities and using a personalized form and images (Kay, 2003). Considering the issues relating to a lack of awareness of available activities identified by the women, and in

light of literacy difficulties among prisoners, it is evidently important that sporting participation be promoted through multiple avenues in female establishments.

One establishment had sought to overcome this lack of awareness by promoting the gym timetable on the internal television channel, but other approaches could include utilizing peer mentors or gym orderlies to promote participation because peer mentors are typically perceived positively by female prisoners (NACRO/CfBT Education Trust, 2008; Richie, 2009; Women's Prison Association, 2008). Indeed, informal peer support had succeeded in engaging some women who would not likely have attended otherwise: "I went to join the gym course with a friend, she encouraged me to go. I don't think I would have otherwise." The findings therefore serve to highlight that although identifying a limited range of activities and awareness of activities in custody are primary barriers to participation among women, such issues can also be overcome through innovative practice.

#### SELF-PRESENTATIONAL CONCERNs

As in community settings (Robbins et al., 2003; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), participants reported that self-presentational concerns about exercising were a barrier to participation, with women referring in particular to the intimidating nature of the gym: "Women are conscious about people watching them when they are exercising, they are paranoid about what people think and worry about people standing around chatting and watching, which isn't helpful." This was particularly pertinent for some groups of women, for example those serving life sentences:

People judge everyone on our house block, that they must be whatever and it is quite awkward sometimes 'cause you go there to work out you don't want to feel you gotta keep watching where other people are and what they're doing. In that respect I think they should leave it so that there is separate house blocks, not let other people intrude. I've stopped going because of that.

These findings reflect the way in which the prison environment not only emphasizes existing marginalized and stigmatized groups within society but also introduces new divisions—for example, between those serving differing sentences or those with distinct needs such as substance abuse problems (Plugge, Neale, Davies, Foster, & Wright, 2011). Attention needs to be paid to the type of activities offered to certain groups of women, especially because competitive environments can exacerbate social comparison concerns among those already susceptible to such anxieties (Andrews & Andrews, 2003; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Within a male establishment, tailored separate sporting provision focusing on low-impact activities and

building self-esteem has had success in increasing physical activity among prisoners recovering from substance misuse (National Health Service National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2011). Likewise, providing women with tailored activities, as recommended in prison service policy (HM Prison Service, 2008), may help to overcome barriers to participation.

Finally, for women who have had especially negative relational histories with men, or those with particular cultural beliefs, such as Muslim and Gypsy/Traveller women, a lack of female staff was also thought to prevent some women from participating: "The fact we don't have a female PE officer puts some people off, for example the Muslim women." The finding that there was a dearth of female staff potentially causing a barrier to participation is not surprising considering only approximately 7.5% of PE staff within prisons in England and Wales are female. Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, further research is required to assess the impact of staff gender on women's participation in SPA in custody.

#### MULTIPLE ROLES AND THE PRISON REGIME

Practical barriers to participation in SPA varied among different establishments, but across facilities women's multiple roles in prison—as in the community (Rutten et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 1992)—were reported to reduce levels of engagement. Particular regimes interfered with participation (e.g., "I can't go to the gym because I work in the servery"), a finding that replicates the difficulties identified by Plugge et al. (2006, 2011). Furthermore, women reported feeling forced to make choices between activities and explained how attending the gym could not always be prioritized: "You have to make choices because you're locked up. You have to choose between going to the gym, using the phone, going outside." Similarly, interviewees on a mother and baby unit raised child care issues as a barrier to participation:

I used to go the gym when she [signals to daughter] was out. I used to go to the gym every day but now she's back. L [another mother on the unit] is my friend but I can't leave my child with her and go to the gym for an hour, it's not allowed.

Previous research has identified that female prisoners with dependents (whether they have their children with them in custody or not) are significantly less likely to participate in team sports in prison (Belknap, 1996). Consistent with this, whether women had competing roles in prison or were concerned with commitments they had in the community, it was suggested that multiple responsibilities impinged upon women's ability to take up sport, creating a clear difference between male and females attitudes toward sport in prison:

Men see working out and doing exercise as a way to be a bit more macho, whereas for women its different—for men sport is really central in prison,

whereas for women it is the bottom of the list of what they want to do in here, some have major issues like some have been separated from their children and worry about that, they don't know what is going on with them.

Qualitative reports have suggested that men are primarily motivated to participate in using the prison gym in order to get big, whereas women's motivations typically include weight loss and socialization (Plugge et al., 2011). Thus, SPA for men in prison is consistent with masculine identity concerns and a culture of acting tough and denying weakness (Sabo, 2005) and has consequently been identified as a hook by which to engage men in wider rehabilitative work (Lewis & Meek, 2012a; Nichols, 2007) and to promote control within prison (Johnsen, 2001; Martos-Garcia et al., 2009). Within the female estate, SPA does not appear to have the same allure or offer the same instant rewards, thus raising additional challenges in promoting participation.

#### MOTIVATION

Although many women spoke of conflicting roles, some women who worked in the gym simply felt there was a lack of motivation among the wider population that acted as a barrier to participation in SPA. This contrasts with the high levels of enthusiasm for SPA typically found among male prisoners (Lewis & Meek, 2012a) and corroborates research findings from community settings that have identified a lack of motivation to be active among younger women in particular (Robbins et al., 2003): "I don't know why some women don't want to participate; some just have low motivation and others just want to earn money for tobacco." Previous research with incarcerated women in North America has established that the most popular recreational activities in prison are exercise programs such as aerobics, weightlifting, and gym activities (Belknap, 1996). However, many of our interviewees had not been involved in SPA prior to prison and unless actively encouraged to participate were unlikely to engage: "Lots of people before they came to prison sat around doing nothing, not working and it's really easy here to sit in your cell and do nothing." Those who had gotten involved in SPA during their time in prison—often for the first time since their school years—generally reported finding it rewarding; however, one young woman highlighted the need to vary or rotate activities in order to maintain interest:

When I first came I didn't want to go, then I went and I really enjoyed it, but then it got a bit boring because I was doing gym for four weeks and it just gets a bit tedious same thing all the time.

Although the findings clearly indicate multiple benefits for women participating in SPA in custody, barriers to participation can limit the opportunities for these to be realized. Ensuring that women have the opportunity

to recognize and maximize the benefits of participation by integrating health and resettlement objectives within a diverse PE program may help maintain women's engagement, although further research is required to quantify the impact of changes in practice on women's participation.

## CONCLUSION

Despite women's participation in SPA in prison remaining lower than that of their male counterparts (Lewis & Meek, 2012b), women clearly recognize and value the significant physical, mental, social, and resettlement benefits of participating in physical activity in prison. SPA was seen to ameliorate the negative psychological effects of imprisonment, providing a coping mechanism and boosting self-esteem while offering the opportunity to address health issues such as weight gain. Gym-based learning, qualifications, and work experience in particular were perceived to be highly valuable in facilitating resettlement processes, but the availability of such opportunities was locally contingent and highly variable between establishments, often reflecting the priorities of different prison staff, management teams, and governors. Despite evident benefits and a policy impetus toward tailored women-centered PE provision (HM Prison Service, 2008), our participants identified institutional as well as intrinsic gendered barriers to participation. Extrinsic institutional barriers included poor promotion of sporting activities to women; a lack of choice; conflicts with other aspects of the prison regime, such as work; and a dearth of female PE staff. Women's multiple roles within prison; concerns about dependents; and intrinsic factors, including self-presentational concerns and a lack of motivation, were also identified as barriers to participation. Although women articulated such barriers, the findings also suggested that many of these could potentially be overcome by innovative practice and enthusiastic and supportive staff who promoted women's strengths.

The current research serves to highlight the actual and perceived benefits of and barriers to participating in SPA for women in custody, contributing to a better understanding of the role of SPA in women's prisons. Quantitative evidence of outcomes for SPA programs in terms of their impact on women's quality of life in custody, physical and mental health, and rehabilitation (e.g., assessing postintervention reoffending rates) is also needed in order to quantify these perceived benefits and represents an important future area of research. Further research should also consider what factors differentiate high and low female participants in SPA in order to explore further the specific barriers to participation and how such barriers can be overcome in order to engage those hardest to reach woman in the criminal justice system. Although the sampling approach drew on a diverse range of women and reflected national figures for participation in SPA among women in custody

(Lewis & Meek, 2012b), it should also be noted that the mixed nature of the focus groups may have created self-presentational biases in responses among those with lower levels of participation. Nevertheless, the current study highlights significant opportunities for SPA to be utilized in promoting women prisoners' well-being and desistance from crime.

Principles of best practice in offering SPA to women in prison included providing a diverse program of activities, promoting physical and mental health through SPA as a result of well-developed links between health care and gym departments, embedding literacy and numeracy into PE, offering sports-based qualifications alongside opportunities to gain work experience in the community, and providing through-the-gate support to establish links with potential employers and community groups. Where such practices were evident, sport and PE contributed to meeting the complex well-being and resettlement needs of women in prison, playing a potentially significant role in the promotion of desistance. However, levels of participation and existing practices across the female prison estate may not necessarily fully maximize these opportunities, and further efforts to improving engagement and the processes at play in the role of SPA in facilitating social and psychological change are clearly required.

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