Toward a Transgender Inclusive Mixed Martial Arts Program Design

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Developments in gender politics in sport have taken place in recent years. For example, in 2016, the United State Department of Education stated that Title IX protects to transgender students (Department of Education, 2016). However, intolerance towards transgender people continues in sport (Cunningham, 2015; Lucas, 2009; Sykes, 2006). Ultimate Fighting Championship’s (UFC) exclusion of transgender fighter Fallon Fox has illuminated the exclusion of transgender people from mixed martial arts. Even though she fulfills the International Olympic Committee and the Association of Boxing Commissions’ conditions for transgender athletes, Fox is not allowed to fight for the Ultimate Fighting Championship because she is transgender (McClearen, 2014).

The International Olympic Committee, National Collegiate Athletic Association, and public school districts have made changes in attempts to promote transgender participation in sport (Jones et al., 2016). Despite these changes, research shows that the majority of transgender people have a negative experience when participating in sport-related physical activity (Jones et al., 2016). The injustice towards transgender athletes in professional mixed martial arts, and the negative experiences of transgender athletes in sport more generally are the catalysts for this exploratory study on the development of a mixed martial arts program design that is safe and inclusive for transgender people at a recreational level.

Transgender people’s professional and recreational participation in sport has been researched rather vigorously in recent years (Foley, 2016; Travers, 2011; Semerjian and Cohen, 2006). Among these studies, some have specifically focused on transgender athletes’ participation in mixed martial arts (McClearen 2014; Grespan et al., 2014). Additionally, there are some studies that concentrate on the benefits of combative sport for at-risk social identities (Dowdney and Sampson, 2015; Jones and Mattingly, 2016). Alex Channon argues that mixed-sex martial arts training settings challenge the restrictive and hierarchal constructions of gender (2014). Hence, in the present study, the authors seek to: (1) discuss the constraints that prevent transgender people from participating in recreational mixed martial arts and (2) discuss how to develop a safe and inclusive recreational mixed martial arts program design for transgender people based on the identified constraints.

Research shows that including members of the priority population in program development can strengthen the program design (Bodde et al, 2012). Following this line of research, the authors will report on participatory action research through an ongoing collaboration with transgender people who participate or have participated in the combative sport. The project is intended to develop a transgender-friendly mixed martial arts program. Participatory action research is a democratic research method that amalgamates theory, reflection, and action in an effort to facilitate change (Reason & Bradburtt, 2001; Greenwood et al., 1993). The foundation of participatory action research is the acknowledgement that collaboration and action produce knowledge and change (Fine et al., 2004). The aim of this study is to help facilitate inclusion; thus, it is not only fitting, but also essential, that it includes transgender athletes in the development of a more inclusive recreational sport program design.

The authors will recruit participants through posting a Qualtrics survey to social media networks, such as meetup.com, Twitter, Facebook, eventbrite.com, and reddit.com, as well as through snowball sampling with my established contacts in the transgender and mixed martial arts communities. The authors will invite survey respondents to participate in an online focus group about how we can collaboratively formulate a transgender-inclusive mixed martial arts program design. The online format is important for harm-reduction in this study because participants can be anonymous. In addition, the authors will conduct exploratory interviews with mixed martial arts gym owners and trainers. Through in-person and phone interviews with gym owners and trainers, the authors will uncover what, if anything, they currently do to make their gym and program inclusive for transgender people. George Cunningham argues that efforts to include all persons in sport, regardless of their gender identity, are needed.
(2012). Following this research, the authors seek to develop a mixed martial arts program design that is inclusive for transgender people. While this program design will utilize mixed martial arts as a platform, the authors aim for it to be transferable to other contact recreational sports. In addition to transgender people, transgender inclusiveness could be beneficial for gym owners and trainers because external stakeholders tend to prefer businesses that are diverse and inclusive (Cunningham, 2015). The present research has the potential to benefit transgender people, gym owners, and stakeholders.