The Role of Exercise in Gender Transition

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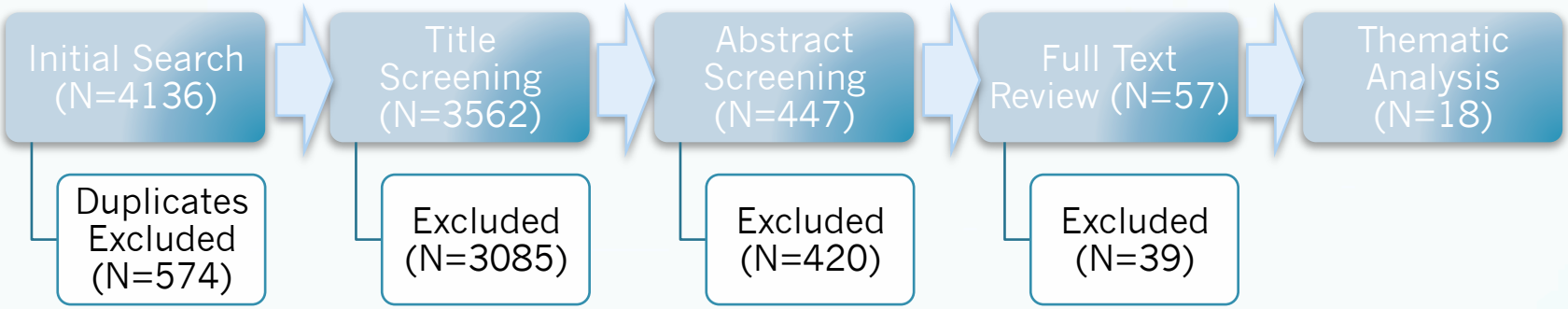
Background

- In Saskatoon, the need for health care specific to transgender individuals was identified by the Saskatoon Community Clinic (SCC) at a meeting of its membership.
- Physiotherapists at the SCC have received referrals for exercise to assist transgender individuals with affirming their gender as they transitioned. The physiotherapists searched but could not identify clinical guidelines or other research indicating the ways in which exercise has been used to affirm gender.
- While guidelines exist, for medical care to support gender transition (WPATH),[1] there are no existing guidelines for physiotherapy, exercise or physical activity during transition.
- Therefore, we determined that a scoping review was the most appropriate method to explore how transgender individuals are using exercise to affirm their gender.

Saskatoon Community Clinic

Methods



- A scoping review was undertaken to locate the available scientific and popular (grey) literature on this topic, identify key themes and outline gaps in the existing knowledge.
- Comprehensive searches of medical, therapeutic and social science databases, as well as popular literature, returned 18 relevant items. These papers were analyzed using a narrative thematic approach.

Results

Strategies to Support Masculine Identity

- Muscle building activities, especially for shoulders, chest, upper back[2,7]
- Cardiovascular activities (running, walking, biking)[2]
- Flexibility routines (yoga, stretching)[2]

Strategies to Support Feminine Identity

- Weight-bearing exercise (jump rope, dance, aerobics)[2]
- Balance and stability training (BOSU, balance disc, Tai Chi, Qigong, Pilates)[2]
- Free-weight training[2]

Benefits of Exercise

- Improved self-esteem and self-image as body changes to more visibly match gender identity[13,15,17]
- Improved somatic/body awareness after modification or treatment[10]
- Gender expression can occur through movements such as posture, gait and body language[10]

Exercise Facilitators

- Increasing body satisfaction and gender congruence[12]
- Co-ed and mixed-gender sports leagues[4]
- Trans-specific leisure settings, inclusive programming[18]
- Supportive online communities[7]

Exercise Barriers

- Hostile public leisure spaces and inadequate changing facilities[3,6]
- Unnecessarily gendered sport-specific uniforms,[3] tight or form-fitting athletic apparel[12]
- Clothing items for gender presentation may be incompatible with strenuous activity[12]

Knowledge Gaps

- Few results discussed healthy strategies for supporting feminine identity; more identified risks of disordered eating and weight control behaviours[9]
- Few results discussed non-binary gender identities[19]
- Few results were specific to physiotherapy practices; those that were discussed how to create a trans-friendly practice, but noted few specific interventions[5,8,11,14]
- Most specific strategies were identified in popular (grey) literature; peer-reviewed sources are lacking[2]
- No safety or exercise prescription guidelines were identified

Discussion

- Five key themes were identified: exercise strategies for masculinizing or feminizing appearance, the benefits of exercise for transgender individuals, and the facilitators and barriers to physical activity in transgender populations. It is worth noting that the strategies to support masculine and feminine identities are based on idealized body types. The masculinized ideal was described as "muscular and lean",[7,15,16,17] while the feminized ideal was described as "toned and slim".[8,11] The degree to which each individual may wish to pursue these ideals is highly personalized.

- While strategies for affirming gender identity through exercise were identified, many gaps in the current knowledge exist. Future steps, including sharing these findings with stakeholders in the SCC and the transgender community, will provide additional feedback and validation of these findings.

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