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Handbags or Hat-Tricks? An Exploration into Female Footballers' Experiences of Stereotype Threat

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ABSTRACT

Recent quantitative studies have found that stereotype threat can negatively impact female footballers' performance. The purpose of the current research was to explore how female footballers experience and process stereotype threat. By focusing on participants personal experiential accounts, the internalisation and effects of stereotypes were studied. Five participants were interviewed with a semi-structured interview schedule. The research was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Super-ordinate themes of Assumptions, Process of Marginalisation, and Personal Reaction to Stereotypes emerged. The poor treatment of participants from youth level up to present day was demonstrated. Participants experienced stereotypes from multiple sources, which can negatively affect performance focus and outcome. The findings indicate that education courses around inclusivity for parents, coaches, teachers and male footballers, and mental toughness training for female footballers may be beneficial.

KEY WORDS:	STEREOTYPE THREAT	INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS	FEMALE FOOTBALL		

Introduction

Female participation in sports and physical activities has increased in recent years, however, gender differences in interest, participation and performance still exist (Chalabaev et al., 2008). Starting from early childhood, more boys participate in sports than girls do, and parents actively encourage their participation. On the other hand, girls receive less support (Fredricks and Eccles, 2005). Several studies have found that males practice sports more often than females (Fredricks and Eccles, 2005). When exploring sex differences within sport, in addition to biological factors, psychosocial determinants such as stereotyping should be considered (Chalabaev et al., 2013). Stereotypes are shared beliefs about the general personality traits, personal characteristics, and behaviours of a certain group of people (Leyens et al., 1994). Typically, women are stereotyped as physically inferior to men (Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015). Gender stereotypes such as this are evident when looking at the funding of athletic programs (Hardin et al., 2007) and treatment of females within sport. This difference of treatment can start as early as school, as physical education teachers and parents are more encouraging of boys' participation in sport (Fredrick and Eccles, 2005). Girls report that they receive more teasing when participating in sport than boys, therefore there is little surprise that girls tend to rate their physical abilities lower than boys and place less value on sport (Slater and Tiggemann, 2011; Fredricks and Eccles, 2005). This socialisation process creates the societal norm that sport is a male domain and that females are less adequate.

Negative beliefs regarding female athleticism may stop females from not only participating in sport, but also from performing to their full potential in sports contexts (Chalabaev at al., 2013). An example of the types of stereotypes that females within sport are subject to comes from a statement by ex-footballer Gerd Muller; he famously noted that women's football will never be as popular as men's, and that women belong in the kitchen (Utler and Schulz, 2011). Comments such as these emphasise the stereotype that women are expected to be inferior to men in certain 'masculine' sports. Mulvey and Killen (2015) found that 82% of 13 to 14 year olds associated boys with football, and 83% associated girls with ballet. These stereotypes and gender roles associated with females within sport are highly shared in Western countries (Chalabaev et al., 2013), and amongst South American countries (Knijnik, 2015). Stereotype threat theory (Steele and Aronson, 1995) argues that the discrepancies within participation and performance are attributable to prevalent stereotypes stating the incompetence of a certain group (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016). These negative expectations can hinder females; women may fear evaluation based on stereotypes, which in turn creates an extra pressure that can hamper their performance (Chalabaev et al., 2008). They fear that if their performance is poor, they may verify the negative stereotype of their group. Consequentially, the stereotyped group member may become motivated to disprove the label placed on them. The excessive concern about their performance can impair their actual performance outcomes, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hivley and El-Alayli, 2014).

Most studies conducted on stereotype threat have been focused in the academic domain (Chalabaev et al, 2013). However, sports, like the areas of maths and engineering have historically conveyed the message that women are less capable than men are. This has led to an increasing amount of research carried out around the effects of stereotype threat on females in sport. Stone and McWhinnie (2008) investigated stereotype threat effects on novice female participants using a golf-putting task as a measure of performance. They told participants that either gender or racial differences on the task had been found in previous studies. Results showed that female participants in the gender differences group performed more poorly on the task than those in the racial differences or control groups. The subtle stereotype cue, the out-group gender of the experimenter, caused participants' performance to drop on the final putt. This study importantly demonstrates that both subtle and blatant stereotype threat cues can affect female athletic performance; subtle cues that may not be recognised by coaches, organisers or the athletes themselves may actually be impacting performance. Therefore, extra research should be conducted to identify and eventually eradicate such performance inhibitors. As well as blatant and subtle cues, the difficulty of tasks may have differing impacts on performance under stereotype threat. Hivley and El-Alayli (2014) compared the performance of female athletes' and male athletes in both difficult and easy basketball and tennis tasks. It was found that on difficult tasks, women performed worse than men, but only when the task was introduced as assessing natural athletic ability. However, when the same task was introduced as assessing visual ability, women performed at the same level as the male athletes. This research also found that stereotype threat might have positive effects; performance on easy tasks can be enhanced in the presence of stereotype threat information, even under timed conditions. However, the positive effects of stereotype threat may not be salient at high-level athletic competition; the tasks that female athletes must complete are more difficult and require high levels of concentration, making them susceptible to declines in performance.

Football culture in particular is hostile to women, and females must fight the barriers they face in order to become successful footballers (Deutsch, 2007; Knijnik, 2015). Stereotype threat effect was first investigated specifically in women's football by Chalabaev et al. (2008). They found that stereotypes regarding female's poor athletic abilities had a negative impact on participants' football performance and a marginal effect on performance when stereotypes regarding female's poor technical footballing abilities were activated. It was also found that participants in the stereotype threat condition generated a performance avoidance focus; their goal was to avoid performing worse than others. These findings showed that stereotype threat can have detrimental effects on expert female athletes; individuals affected by stereotype threat do not necessarily have to internalise the stereotype in order to be influenced (Aronson et al., 1998). People who strongly identify with the stereotyped domain, in this case, female footballers, seem to be the most effected by stereotype threat (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016). The individual does not need to perceive their abilities in accordance with the existing stereotypes, simply knowing they exist

can be enough to detract from performance (Chalabaev et al., 2013). Female athletes are regularly bombarded with stereotypes regarding their sexuality and poor athleticism; female footballers are regularly labelled as macho, dykes, or socially maladjusted (Caudwell, 2009; Goellner, 2005). Due to stereotypes, the athletes may feel particularly pressured to perform. This pressure in turn can impede them from performing to their true potential. These effects are damaging, as female athletes have more at stake in the real world if negative stereotypes influenced their athletic performance (Hivley and El-Alayli, 2014).

Heidrich and Chiviacowsky (2015) conducted further research into stereotype threat within women's football; female participants placed under stereotype threat performed worse in both practice and retention dribbling tasks than the women in the non-stereotype threat condition. The research suggests that both expert (Chalabaev et al., 2008) and novice females (Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015) engaging in stereotyped activities such as football are susceptible to negative effects on performance due to stereotype threat. Novice participators of a sport require more attention to execute tasks; therefore, stereotype threat cues can affect their performance through distraction processes. However, the performance of such tasks by experts is automatic, therefore negative stereotypes may reduce their performance through increasing their attention to the task, or 'choking under pressure' processes (Stone and McWhinnie, 2008). Furthermore, Heidrich and Chiviacowsky (2015) findings demonstrated how stereotype threat phenomenon could affect both immediate performance and learning itself. Even when individuals had the same opportunities to practice their dribbling, the group under stereotype threat still did not show the same amount of learning as the participants in the non-stereotype threat group. These results show that stereotype threat can affect female soccer players that are currently playing at a high level, but also that girls and women who are learning the game may learn slower than their male counterparts, even with the same quality and quantity of training. A recent study by Hermann and Vollmeyer (2016) added to the previous research by demonstrating that girls can be influenced by stereotype threat as early as their teen years, emphasising that early intervention is important, and showing that females are susceptible to stereotype threat effects at any stage of life (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016).

As far as we know, only the three previously mentioned studies (Chalabaev et al., 2008; Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015; Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016) and have previously focused on stereotype threat within women's football (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016). All three of these studies found negative consequences of stereotype threat on female's football performance. However, all the previous studies measured football performance using a dribbling task and the time taken to complete the task. The seconds taken to complete a dribbling task assesses only a single aspect of football, which is a team sport (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016). Many other skills are crucial to football performance that do not involve dribbling, such as passing, vision, shooting and crossing. It is also noted that the social settings of the

practice and timed trial environment could interact with the results (Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015). The low pressure, practice situations in front of only a researcher are very different to a real game in which performance is expected in front of a crowd, fellow teammates and coaches. Measuring performance at team level or in a real game may have provided different results (Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016).

Researchers are currently only scratching the surface in investigating the effects of stereotype threat on women's athletic performance (Hivley and El-Alayli, 2014). The three previous studies conducted on stereotype threat in women's football all used quantitative methods, with very basic stereotypes explored. Chalabaev et al. (2008) stated that future research should examine a larger variety of stereotypes more extensively, including stereotypes associated with aggressiveness and aesthetics. The current research will attempt to achieve this by exploring detailed accounts of female footballers' personal experiences of stereotypes. Examining the variety of stereotypes female footballers are subjected to, how they are treated, and the effects on performance could provide details as to why stereotype threat effects occur. By identifying how, when and why these stereotypes have negative effects on female performance, we can take measures to prevent or minimize their consequences (Hivley and El-Alayli, 2014). Real life implications may follow, as it could assist teachers, sports instructors and coaches in identifying and avoiding such stereotypes, and thus reduce their negative effects on performance (Chalabaev et al., 2008).

Although the negative effects of stereotype threat on females' dribbling times is well documented (Chalabaev et al., 2008; Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015; Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016), there is a lack of research and understanding around how stereotypes effect female footballers in-depth. The current study aims to explore the internalisation and effect of negative stereotypes on females who play football. This research extends the previous studies in the area by exploring the impact of specific stereotypes experienced by participants on performance. Qualitative methods will be used to gain an individual, experiential account of how stereotype threat has affected players. The current research will explore how female footballers experience and process stereotype threat.

Method

Participants

The current study is qualitative and places focus on the participant's life-world experiences. The priority of experiential research is to gain rich accounts of participant's experiences of the phenomenon (Malhotra, 2015) and analyse detailed individual transcripts. Studies of this nature are conducted with relatively small,

purposive samples (Lyons and Coyle, 2007; Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). There is congruence that in qualitative psychological research, six to eight participants are an appropriate and optimal sample number (Turpin et al., 1997).

Participants should be free agents whom choose whether they want to participate in the research or not (Lyons and Coyle, 2007). If potential participants are known to the researcher, they may feel pressured to participate (Hugh-Jones, 2010). This issue presented itself within the current study, as participants are known to the researcher. However, this was countered by recruiting participants by means of a volunteer sample. The study was advertised by posters that were presented in the clubhouse of a football team (Appendix 6); the clubhouse is used by the twenty-eight members of the women's first team squad and the eighteen members of the women's reserve team. The criteria listed on the advertisement included that participants needed to be female, currently play competitive football with considerable experience, and be available for interview in person or by Skype.

Six female participants were recruited aged between 18 and 28 whom currently play at a high level of women's football. Due to unforeseen circumstances, one participant withdrew very late in the process. The five remaining participants shall be known by the pseudonyms 'Anna-J', 'Amy', 'Hollie', 'Ciara', and 'Ellie'.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the chosen method of analysis for this research. The clearest defining characteristic of IPA is the focus on how phenomena are experienced, thus, IPA is suitable when the research aims to explore how people have personally experienced a phenomena (Howitt, 2016) such as the current study. IPA does not aim to test hypotheses, but aims to understand how participants make sense of their own social world (Lyons and Coyle, 2007). IPA is an idiographic, qualitative method that is influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, providing an emphasis on subjective perception and individual interpretation. The current research is focused on how the individuals construct their social reality and experiences, rather than looking for a universal 'truth'.

The preferential method of data collection for IPA researchers are semi-structured, qualitative interviews, as they provide in-depth experiential accounts about issues that are too complex to investigate through quantitative means (Burman, 1994). During IPA, a dual interpretative process is at work; double hermeneutic gives the researcher a dual role. The researcher participates in the research by drawing on mental faculties that they share with the participants, however, they also differ in that they engage in second order sense making of someone else's experiences (Lyons and Coyle, 2007; Shaw, 2010). IPA is dependent on and complicated by the researcher's own conceptions which attempt to make sense of the participants'

personal world through a process of interpretation (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). The current research does not aim to produce a generalisable theory to whole populations (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012), but rather provide an examination of stereotype threat and how this has impacted the lives of certain individuals.

Data collection

The method of data collection in the present study is semi-structured interviewing. This type of interviewing focuses on the subjective accounts of individual experience (Hugh-Jones, 2010); it involves questions and probes by the interviewer, which are designed to encourage the participants to extensively and freely talk about the phenomena (Howitt, 2016). The participant is the experiential expert; semi-structured interviewing allows them the maximum opportunity to tell their own story (Lyons and Coyle, 2007). The field of research concerning stereotype threat is not developed with in-depth accounts; the research is generally quantitatively measured. In-depth interviews of people's personal experiences of stereotype threat are appropriate and required to shed light on this phenomena.

The four principle topic areas were produced after reading the previous literature around female sportspeople and stereotype threat, which suggested that more specific stereotypes need to be explored in future research (Chalabaev et al., 2008). The topic guide (Appendix 4) begun with two introductory questions before moving into the four key areas.

1) Personal socialisation experiences into football when they were younger. Including questions about parents, teachers, and coaches' influence.
2) Stereotypes and their influence. Questions were firstly asked at a general stance, for example 'What do you think comes to people's minds?', then begun to focus more on a personal level, 'Can you tell me about a time you have encountered stereotypes?'
3) Aesthetic appearance of players.
4) How aggression is perceived. An article was discussed which gave examples of encounters of stereotypes around both aesthetics and aggression. Prompting questions focused on participants experiences around these stereotypes and their effects.

Procedure

Participants were asked to read an information sheet (Appendix 2) regarding the study, and completed a consent form (Appendix 3) prior to their participation. The interviews were conducted by the researcher themselves, which promoted familiarity with the data and allowed them to follow up any important issues that may have arisen (Howitt, 2016). Four interviews were conducted in the team's clubhouse.

Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes and were recorded using an iPhone. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher, producing five transcripts (Appendix 7). Due to the researcher having a good relationship with key members of the organisation, quiet corner rooms in the clubhouse were available and thus, interviews were conducted in there to minimise distractions. As one of the recruited participants was not available for face-to-face interview at the time of data collection, this interview was conducted using Skype video call. Video calling over Skype ensured that non-verbal features of communication were not lost during the interview, as these may have been lost over voice call.

Data analysis

The five individual transcripts were read several times to familiarise the researcher with the data. The left-hand margin of the transcript was used by the researcher to make notes of initial impressions. Themes were identified in the right-hand margin of the transcription. The next step involved attempting to establish connections between the initial impressions, and to cluster them to further reduce the data (Shaw, 2010). This produced a set of clusters for each interview, which then compared across all interviews, in turn assembling together as sub-themes. Finally, super-ordinate themes were derived from these sub-themes (Shaw, 2010).

The current research will attempt to adhere to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four quality criteria of qualitative research. Firstly, credibility, in terms of the confidence in the 'truth' of the findings. Transferability, in that there is sufficient data for the audience to judge if the findings can be applied to other contexts. Dependability, ensuring that sufficient details and documentation of the methods employed in the study are provided, so the findings are consistent and could be repeated. Finally, assessing confirmability, in that the findings are a result of the participants' experiences, rather than the preference or bias of the researcher. The dependability of the current research has already been demonstrated, with the researcher being completely transparent with the procedure and analysis, documenting every stage of the process clearly. The remaining quality criteria are discussed in the 'concluding remarks' section.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the interviews, the researcher completed the Application for Ethics Approval Form (AEAF) and was granted ethical approval (Appendix 1). No sensitive questions were asked around gender. No deception took place, and participants had the right to withdraw up until 16th February 2018. Confidentiality could not be promised as if the participant posed a risk of harm the researcher would have to contact a university staff member. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms. After the interview, the files were encrypted on a password protected computer in which only the researcher had access. Participants were fully debriefed (Appendix 5).

Results and Discussion

Three super-ordinate themes were drawn from the analysis, Assumptions, The Process of Marginalisation, and Personal Reaction to Stereotypes.

Assumptions

The presence of females within sport has led to stereotypical assumptions around their sexuality, gender identity, and aesthetic appearance. Personal experiences indicated that female footballers begin to be questioned at a young age,

Ellie "I have had people call me a boy… when I was younger it really got to me 'cos I just couldn't get my head around it, what was I doing wrong to be called a boy?" (Lines 285-286)

It is seen out of normality for a girl to want to participate in a 'male activity', leading to 'Ellie' being labelled as "boy" due to the association between gender and football. Confusion arose, as 'Ellie' did not see the sport as belonging or appropriate to a certain gender, and was "unable to get her head around it". However, previous research shows that football is regularly associated with males, with girls being associated with more traditionally feminine activities, such as dancing (Mulvey and Killen, 2015). Furthermore, participants indicated that more specific characteristics of female footballers are stigmatized,

Hollie "…female athletes get shamed for being feminine like wearing make-up… but also for being masculine, like being aggressive and athletic." (Lines 156-158)

As 'Ellie' and 'Hollie' show, women are cast in a negative light when seen as taking part in masculine activities. However, 'Hollie' states that displays of femininity whilst competing is also seen as wrong, growing the sense of futility in that no matter what characteristics female athletes display, they will not receive respect.

Ciara "People tend to think that…it's just full of lesbians…" (Line 33)

Not only do female footballers have assumptions made around their gender identities, their sexualities are also assumed. Previous research demonstrates that female footballers do not fit into the feminine heterosexual category expected by society; women footballers are regularly labelled as macho, dykes, or socially maladaptive (Caudwell, 2009; Goellner, 2005). Some of the major characteristics of a high-level footballer, such as looking athletic and being an aggressive competitor being associated by society with masculinity or being a lesbian. Outsiders are focusing on players aesthetically,

Anna-J "Men would be praised for a fight…it's off-putting, it's like they're not watching us actually play, they're not interested in the score line… just how we look…" (Lines 533-538)

The implications of stereotypical assumptions are shown by ‘Anna-J’, who became distracted from the game due to “off-putting” comments. Subtle stereotypes such as focusing on females’ aesthetic appearance, even if given in a complimentary manner can have negative consequences on performance (Stone and McWhinnie, 2008).

The Process of Marginalisation

Female footballers are marginalised in society through the lack of opportunities available to them and the abusive culture towards women’s footballers. Responses showed that the effects of marginalisation can be softened by having a strong support system.

It soon emerged that all participants suffered from a lack of opportunities to engage in the sport. Similar experiences were shared when attempting to start out in the footballing world. The process of marginalisation begun when they were young,

Ciara “I just played in the play-ground with the boys, but they got to play for teams too, whereas I didn’t.” (Lines 27-28)

Due to a lack of information available for the footballers, their development considerably suffered as they could not get game experience due to their gender. There is a sense of injustice, a feeling that the girls had to battle to simply be allowed to play in a team. This is echoed by ‘Hollie’,

Hollie “Girls were finally allowed to join the school’s football club in year 5…” (Line 105)

There are barriers that girls must overcome to be allowed to play football, whereas boys of the same age do not face such challenges. There is an acknowledgement by professional players that if a young girl is not strong enough to fight these barriers, she will never become a footballer (Knijnik, 2015). This is further demonstrated by ‘Anna-J’,

Anna-J “…we had tried for years, but there was no local teams taking girls on so we kind of gave up…” (Lines 435-436)

Females are not only marginalised through lack of opportunity, but also directly through abuse. As the girls pushed past the barriers and continued to play football, they then become socialised into society’s abusive culture towards women’s football. This is congruent with previous research which indicated that football culture is hostile to women (Deutsch, 2007). ‘Anna-J’ reflected on a recent encounter with a stranger,

Anna-J “…he then went on to say “you shouldn’t have been playing footy, it’s a blokes game, you should’ve been in the kitchen”…” (Lines 492-493)

Furthermore, ‘Amy’ demonstrates that this derogatory comment can expand not only from face-to-face encounters, but to social media abuse too,

Amy "…a lot of people on twitter will reply to posts on women's football and say "get back in the kitchen"..." (Lines 362-363)

The repetition of the phrase "get back in the kitchen" shows that speaking about female footballers in belittling terms is common. It is therefore unsurprising that ex-footballer Gerd Muller stated to the mass media that women belong in the kitchen with no punishment (Utler and Schulz, 2011). Abuse is a regular occurrence, being received in everyday situations, on social media and during competition. The abusive bullying can occur as an adult, or as a child,

Anna-J "When I was younger I got bullied a lot because all I wanted to do was play football and obviously it's not seen as the best job for girls…" (Lines 458-459)

The comment by 'Anna-J', that football is "obviously" not seen for girls demonstrates the deep impression made on her by society. The regularity of the abuse over time has caused the societal norm that "obviously" females should not play football. All participants experienced bullying when they were younger, reiterating Slater and Tiggemann (2011) findings that girls reported more teasing from classmates when participating in sport than boys. The teasing and bullying that young girls face comes from not only fellow children, but by adults too, demonstrated by 'Ellie',

Ellie "…I was only seven or eight playing for my local boys' team…one of the boys from the other team shouted "haha they have a girl playing" which lead to everyone, including managers and parents of the opposite team laughing at me." (Lines 231-234)

Previous research notes that girls within sport receive less support than boys do (Fredricks and Eccles, 2005). However, it is shown that as well as lack of support from adult figures, girls are actively being discouraged to participate in sport. The humour found through a female attempting to play football in a boys' league indicates that the stereotype that women are biologically and physically inferior to men is still prevalent (Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015). Although, if a good support system is in place for the child, it can serve as a protection to players. When 'Ellie' was faced with the abusive situation, her dad provided support,

Ellie "…I got the ball…and scored which led to my dad shouting out "come on boys she's only a girl isn't she?"…" (Lines 234-235)

Much of the sexist abuse suffered is occurring when the individual is beginning to play football as a child. It is therefore, of benefit to the footballer that their parents or guardians provide a strong voice of support even in the face of adversity, as,

Hollie "…casual sexism, especially around kids, is still going strong and girls are growing up with negative perceptions of themselves…" (Lines 170-172)

This claim is emphasised by Fredricks and Eccles (2005), who found that girls rated their own physical abilities as lower than boys. The marginalisation of girls in sporting contexts is lowering their self-confidence.

Personal Reaction to Stereotypes

The sub-category of defiance was made evident by participants' personal reactions to the stereotypes they had experienced. Participants discussed their thoughts and emotions associated with such experiences,

Amy "It makes you angry… but then it just made me play better to prove them wrong. I don't play football to please other people…" (Lines 378-379)

This response suggests that being subjected to stereotypes can have positive effects. 'Amy' demonstrates a strong self-identity, which had grown stronger in the face of adversity. She does what she enjoys for herself and her own enjoyment, regardless of the opinions and abuse she faces from the out-group. Not only did 'Amy' disregard the stereotypes given to her during a game, but used them as an extra source of motivation. Research by Hivley and El-Alayli (2014) found that stereotype threat can have positive effects on performance in sport. Expanding on this, the stereotypes experienced by 'Amy' had positive effects in that they were used explicitly as a motivational tool to push her performance to the next level,

Ellie "It makes me more determined to prove them wrong…" (Line 241)

Whilst using the abuse as motivation, 'Amy' and 'Ellie' appear to struggle between wanting to ignore outsider opinions, but also attempting to change the outsiders' negative views about women footballers into positive ones. Paradoxically, they are defiant and will not let the negative outsiders stop them doing what they love, yet there is also a desire to prove themselves and be accepted by the outsiders.

Anna-J "…It takes a lot for a girl who has grown up playing football to still want to play…" (Lines 514-515)

There is an acknowledgement that when identifying as a female footballer, the mental resilience as shown by 'Amy' and 'Ellie' is an essential part of their armour. Although participants were defiant in that the stereotypes motivated performance and produced an added desire, the frustrations of being poorly treated became apparent,

Ellie "…no one would make a comment on a boy playing, they would only comment on how they were playing, whereas the girls get comments towards them about everything." (Lines 292-294)

Contrasting with her earlier statement that she would "just ignore" stereotyping, 'Ellie' begins to show her resentment around how women are spoken about and treated differently to men. Thus, the second sub-category of resignation started to appear. Although the stereotypes associated with female athletes are widely shared and common in Western countries (Chalabaev et al., 2013), the athletes still find them hard to ignore. When asked about a stereotype, 'Amy' produced an emotional reaction,

Amy "It makes me feel sick…men and only men for some reason take offence to it…" (Line 360)

As discussed earlier, the participants possess a strong female footballer self-identity. Such an identity could be enhanced further by their negative experiences, leading

them to distance themselves even more from the out-group and thus resent men. There is a sense of injustice, seeing no difference between themselves and male footballers,

Anna-J "…so why are women treated differently?" (Line 534)

Feelings of resignation were apparent throughout the interviews; participants seemed resigned to the fact that they always will be the subjects of stereotyping. Participants' dense past encounters of stereotypes filled them with a sense of futility,

Amy "…I can look past it because I am so used to it…" (Lines 380-381)

For the participants, the source of resignation often comes from those who are in a position of power to help marginalised groups. There is concern regarding reporting incidents to referees, following previous personal incidences,

Ciara "…My old manager made a comment about an opposition player who was acting aggressively, saying it was because her tampon had fallen out… our players made complaints about our manager to the referee but nothing was done…" (Lines 45-49)

Those in authoritative positions appear to be letting the female athletes down. The players have no trust in those they are told to report incidents to, with the overwhelming feeling that nobody cares about the issues they must face. In turn, players will be less likely to report the abuse as it will not be addressed adequately. 'Hollie' acknowledges that,

Hollie "…everything is played down in women's football. Women are made to feel bad for being unhappy with the way they are being spoken about and are made to think it's not a big deal." (Lines 164-165)

The defiance mentioned previously may be a by-product of the 'playing things down' culture that exists within women's football. Women are just expected to get on with things regardless of what they have been subjected to, it is just good fortune in 'Amy' and 'Ellie's' cases that they have found a way to use the abuse to their advantage. Many other footballers are simply resigned to the fact that stereotypes will always exist in the game,

Anna-J "…stereotypes are something which can't really be changed though, no matter what we do…" (Lines 482-483)

The third sub-category identified was effects on performance. Numerous studies have demonstrated the detrimental effects that stereotypes can have on football performance through the stereotype threat phenomenon (Chalabaev et al., 2008; Heidrich and Chiviacowsky, 2015; Hermann and Vollmeyer, 2016). Furthermore, when faced with stereotypes in a game situation, 'Ciara's' performance suffered,

Ciara "…It makes you very nervous… you cannot play as you would do regularly…" (Lines 68-69)

Female athletes may feel particularly pressured to perform (Hivley and El-Alayli, 2014), and this pressure created due to stereotype threat creates the nervousness

that ‘Ciara’ reported. It appears that stereotypes can serve as a boundary to players, blocking them from their regular performance that they show when they are not under scrutiny. The focus of the individual’s performance changes when they are placed under stereotype threat, ‘Ciara’ acknowledges that,

Ciara “…normally I just play off instinct… When you know people are judging you, you play not to make mistakes…” (Lines 87-89)

This response is congruent with stereotype threat theory, in that female players attempt to disprove their stereotype by trying to avoid negative performance, rather than striving towards a positive performance. Similarly, Chalabaev et al. (2008) demonstrated that participants placed under stereotype threat generated a performance-avoidance focus, in that their ultimate goal was to avoid performing worse than others. However, the stereotype does not have to be actively engaged with at the current occasion; just being part of the stereotyped in-group can have effects,

Hollie “When you play you feel like you have a label on your back…” (Line 160-161)

There is a sense that when stereotyped individuals step out onto the pitch, they are playing not only for their team, manager, or themselves but they are representing women’s footballers everywhere,

Ciara “…Otherwise they would think I’m bad because I am a girl.” (Lines 74-75)

This creates pressure on the athlete in that if they play badly, the out-group will assume that all female footballers are incompetent. They fear that they could verify the stereotype that their group are placed under (Chalabaev et al., 2008).

Concluding remarks

The findings demonstrate that overall, participants’ experiences of stereotypes had negative effects on their footballing performance. This is congruent with the previous research investigating stereotype threat effects within women’s football. The footballers undergo a process of marginalisation when younger, internalising their lower status in the footballing world through a lack of opportunities and abuse from a plethora of groups such as footballing officials, fellow children and adults. A good support system, however, can lessen the adverse effects that marginalization can have on individuals. The abusive culture towards footballing females is a societal norm in England. Assumptions are made regarding footballers’ gender identities, sexualities and aesthetic appearances which can be detrimental to the females’ confidence. When stereotyped, participants’ performance suffered in that they felt an added pressure to perform, nervousness, and created failure-avoidance goals. However, it was evident that stereotypes can be used as a motivational tool to boost performance in some cases.

This qualitative research provides the first step into exploration of stereotype threat within women’s football. To strengthen the evidence base further, future research

should use triangulation of methods, for example interviews, focus groups, and participants keeping a diary. This may provide more in-depth information than interviews alone, which is the case of the current research. In terms of transferability, qualitative research as with the current study explores in-depth the personal experiences of the five individuals interviewed. This design makes the transferability of these results to other female footballers impossible. However, the majority of the themes highlighted in this research were presented amongst all five participants, which indicates they are may be relevant to all female footballers. IPA is potentially biased by the views of the researcher, as analysis is dependent upon their views (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Therefore, to enhance the research in terms of credibility and confirmability, as part of the iterative process, follwing interviews the emerging themes were discussed with participants following initial analysis, and these themes were then either confirmed or disputed by participants. These themes were then discussed further with formative feedback from another researcher (supervisor).

Although the current research is based on personal experiences, it has emerged that there is still a lack of understanding, information and action taken to stop the abuse of female footballers at a societal level. Therefore, to combat this, education courses around inclusivity delivered to footballer parents who attend games, officials, teachers and fellow treatment could be beneficial. Additionally, female footballers may benefit from mental toughness training demonstrating how they can use the abuse as a motivational tool. The FA could use the previous and current research to identify the ongoing issues female footballers face and produce plans to nullify these problems in the future. The current research findings provide impetus for further research exploring the similar or different effects that stereotype threat can produce across of variety of cultures and footballing levels (grassroots to professional), as the participants from the current study were all currently competing at the same level, white and were born and raised in England.

Reflexive Analysis

When conducting IPA, it is acknowledged that there is a dependency on the researcher's own interpretations of the participant's personal world. The researcher can never fully know a person's phenomenological world (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012) due to the dual interpretative process at work. There is a subjective interaction between the participant's account and researcher's interpretation. The researcher has attempted to interpret how the participant makes sense of their experience; the themes therefore reflect the researcher's interpretations. These interpretations may be subjected to bias, as the researcher has her own understanding of the explored phenomenon. The researcher is a female footballer herself, and thus has a large emotional investment and her own experiences within the topic, which may have influenced interpretations. Due to her own personal experiences concerning the phenomena, she held the belief that all participants would have been negatively affected by stereotypes at least once in their careers. The researcher holds personal

values that society is unequal and unfair in their treatment of female footballers, however, the researcher's awareness of her own personal moral standpoint meant that her personal reflexivity was taken into account. In terms of inter-subjectivity, the researcher acknowledged that her prior existing personal relationships with the participants might have affected results.

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