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REAL WORLD

WORKING IN SPORT: THROUGH AN AUTISTIC LENS

Dr. Kristin McGinty-Minister explores life as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist before and after an autism diagnosis and makes a case for incorporating neuro-affirmative practice into sport and exercise science.



DR KRISTIN MCGINTY-MINISTER

Dr. Kristin McGinty-Minister
Kristin is a Lecturer in Psychology at
Manchester Metropolitan University
and an accredited sport and exercise
psychologist (HCPC, CPsychol).

INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity is increasingly recognised as a natural variation rather than a disorder, and we are still learning how the various neurodiversities are experienced and expressed. For context, the first diagnosed autistic person passed away at 89 this year, and it was not until the 2010's that we recognised that autism and ADHD often co-occur. Girls and women have recently been increasingly considered for autism diagnoses after decades of being misdiagnosed with mood, personality, and anxiety disorders - a gendered delay that is unsurprising against autism's historical backdrop: Grunya Sukhareva first described autism in 1925, though she has been all but erased from its history.

Sport has provided me with platform to learn about the hidden disability that had been masked for over a decade - even to myself. I have come to understand that a foundational characteristic I was not even aware of until recently has always impacted how I interact with the world, and how the world interacts

with me; this awareness has allowed me to construct appropriate support and lean into my strengths, leading to improved well-being, productivity, and performance. In this lived experience piece, I explore life as a sport and exercise psychologist (including training) before and after my autism diagnosis and how my experiences have impacted my development and practice. Following this, I explore the implications for sport and exercise more broadly.

DEVELOPMENT AS A PRACTITIONER AND PERSON

During my viva, I joked "if you had handed my reflective log to any clinician with expertise with autistic women, they would have diagnosed me on the spot!". Despite this, nearly everyone I initially disclosed my autism to was surprised. This is a result of several factors, but chiefly, the pervasive lack of understanding surrounding autism - especially in women and girls (e.g., Milner *et al.*, 2019). This, and the carefully crafted mask that even I only became aware of two years ago, contributed to my late diagnosis.

The National Autistic Society describes autistic masking as “a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic. While this strategy can help them get by at school, work and in social situations, it can have a devastating impact on mental health, sense of self and access to an autism diagnosis”.

Sense of ‘self’ and identity are often conflated, and the terms are both distinct and interrelated, and evolve from individual and societal construction. Essentially, sense of self broadly refers to a general sense of ‘who and what I am,’ while identity is commonly used to describe the more socially constructed aspects of an individual. Late-diagnosed autistic people often discuss a lifelong experience of suppressing their sense of self in favour of their identity(ies). When growing up unaware that one is autistic, one’s interests, needs, and lived experiences are often very different from those around them; this can lead to difficulties interacting with a neurotypical world. To combat this, and often unconsciously, one can start to suppress their sense of self. Over time, a person might form heavy reliance on identity and construct a barrier around who they really are. For me, this involved suppressing the versions of myself that did not ‘fit,’ such as my love for fantasy books (I avoided these for nearly a decade) in favour of my easy-to-craft and prioritise athletic identity.

Pre-diagnosis:

Playing identity catch-up

In the early days of my training, I worked in men’s rugby and football. I felt entirely out of place and put this down to experiences commonly discussed by trainee sport and exercise psychologists such as stigma surrounding psychology, inexperience, and insecurity. To cope with this, I worked hard to craft and master a ‘persona’ that would succeed in those environments. I excessively self-monitored body mannerisms such as stimming and eye contact, hid special interests, and suppressed my justice sensitivity and boundary needs. Despite this, I was penalised by those I worked with when I did not ‘fit’ prescribed norms through demeaning comments and isolation, creating the dual issue of making my job incredibly difficult and diminishing my well-being. Upon reflection, conversations with colleagues, and exploring literature, I concluded that the primary cause of my significant stress and barriers to effective practice might be my gender. Compromised well-being and inability to effectively practice because of gendered

experiences and sexism in sport is supported in the literature (e.g., McGinty-Minister *et al.*, 2024) and anecdotally; I had my solution, and could work to solve the problem!

Unfortunately, this was not necessarily the case. I believed that my sensory challenges, masking, and confusion about social expectations were universal experiences that I was a failure for not being able to cope with. I began to see my autistic traits as flaws and fortified my masks, eventually leading to a shutdown diagnosed as depression and anxiety at the time. Despite engaging in therapy, I still felt something was ‘off,’ prompting a deeper search for answers.



Whether or not you are autistic, awareness of your strengths and support needs enhances professional relationships with stakeholders, athletes, and organisations, and can contribute significantly to well-being.



Post diagnosis:

Developing my sense of self

After learning that I am autistic, I recognised that many of my struggles resulted from experiencing the world as an undiagnosed autistic person. While learning that I am autistic has taken time to process (joke intended), two significant changes have improved my life: authenticity and considering my environments more explicitly.

Alongside exploring who I truly am by learning about my sense of self rather than the identities I had constructed and performed, I have made a conscious effort to unmask where safe and possible.

I am learning how to not excessively self-monitor, which makes socialising less exhausting; additionally, unmasking has allowed me to foster closer relationships with friends, colleagues, athletes, and stakeholders. Despite this, it is still a journey! For example, in a recent role in professional football, one stakeholder mentioned that they “never would have thought” I was autistic. I told them you just need to look closer to see my special interests - that day, it was the Lord of the Rings tattoo on my wrist and Sailor Moon shoes; they laughed, noting that these were “odd”. This is one example of the small moments that when taken together, can be invalidating over time. When an autistic person has spent their life highly masked, they can often be considered too ‘normal’ to be autistic, or a bit ‘odd’ when others are unaware of their neurodivergence. While this can be a challenge, reconnecting with who I truly am has significantly improved my life!

In line with this, I have made comprehensive changes to my scheduling to suit my needs, focusing on working in ways that fit me rather than how I thought I *should* work. One fundamental change has been grouping tasks into ‘social’ days (meetings, consultancy), administrative days, and research days. Autistic individuals can have monotropic thinking, meaning we often struggle to switch between tasks, making the chaotic day of a ‘typical’ sport and exercise psychologist a struggle for me. However, monotropic thinking means that I can hyperfocus! Learning about my neurotype and how to use some facets as a strength has been life-changing; however, I cannot stress enough that this is in combination with necessary support mechanisms (e.g., accommodations).

Despite the positives of unmasking, I am aware that a woman who loves fantasy books and dismantling the patriarchy (and does not mask these traits) does not fit into every environment. While this might change in the future, my current strategy involves making a conscious effort to work where I feel comfortable existing as an autistic woman who is unmasking, which is a vulnerable process. I aim to work with people and organisations that align with my values and are open to change; in particular, I am working alongside rather than suppressing my justice sensitivity (which causes severe cognitive and emotional stress). Giving myself permission to be autistic has been one of the most impactful changes I could have made; in a sporting context, it has allowed me to find those I can best support through my individual strengths while maintaining my love for sport by providing the space to unmask.



IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORT AND EXERCISE

While I have briefly shared the lived experience of just one autistic woman, we can consider broader implications for sport and exercise scientists as we explore and understand neurodiversity. These implications can be understood by reflecting on individual considerations and integrating awareness, education, and pathways for support.

Individual Considerations

First, sport and exercise scientists can take responsibility for self-exploration and development. Individuation and authenticity are key to practitioner development; although not universal for all autistic individuals, I struggled with these concepts until very recently due to masking. Whether or not you are autistic, awareness of your strengths and support needs enhances professional relationships with stakeholders, athletes, and organisations, and can contribute significantly to well-being. Additionally, neurodivergent individuals might consider how their environments and routines affect their well-being and identify spaces where they thrive. Finally, and crucially, self-advocacy and setting boundaries are essential for effective practice and well-being.

Awareness, Education, and Pathways for Support

While the above recommendations are important, they mean nothing if the environment and culture do not support this. Consequently, it is crucial to integrate knowledge of neurodiversity into standard practice. To recognise and support individuals of varying neurotypes, we must engage in education, neuro-affirmative training, and foster a culture that views neurodiversity as a difference, not a deficit. In line with creating neuro-affirmative environments, we should design effective support pathways for neurodivergent individuals. Supervisors, managers, and beyond should listen to requests for accommodations as well as take a proactive approach in offering support to foster an inclusive culture.

SUMMARY

Working in sport has provided me the platform to explore who I am through various challenges and learning opportunities. Due to traits such as an ability to hyperfocus, approaches to routine, creativity, unique mindsets, and more, it is likely that there are far more neurodivergent individuals in sport than we are aware of

(e.g., Hoare *et al.*, 2023)! . We should be prepared to accommodate this through neuro-affirmative practice at individual, organisational, and association levels, ensuring pathways for support to not only make sport non-disabling for all neurotypes but to prioritise and promote each individual's strengths. I would love to see a sporting community that sets the standard for equity across all identities and demonstrates that our strengths are in our differences!

Importantly, every autistic person is different, and we should not apply my story to the autistic community as a universal experience. Finally, for those seeking to learn more about autism or access support, the National Autistic Society offers free educational resources and courses. ■

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