

## **The Impact of Ethnicity and Gender on Sport and Physical Activity Participation: An Autoethnography.**

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## Original Research

# The Impact of Ethnicity and Gender on Sport and Physical Activity Participation: An Autoethnography

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**Abstract:** Often, UK sport research, policy, and practice refer to “Asians” as a singular population; the term BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) is also used, which leads to the creation of programs lacking the required nuance. To provide a narrative from a seldom heard population to assist academics across sport disciplines, as well as policy writers and practitioners, understand the needs of individuals within disparate groupings, regarding sport and PA (physical activity). The article challenges researchers to reflect on their positionality and privilege, to lessen “othering,” and to embrace the value and legitimacy of autoethnography. This work is based on the autoethnography of one of the authors, a British-Pakistani, Muslim female, to demonstrate how their faith, ethnicity, and community culture shape their experiences of sport and PA. Organizations should disregard the terms BAME and “Asian” and replace them with a nuanced understanding of cultural influences to address participation constraints and to better engage with marginalized participants. Education in communities about the benefits of sport and PA in the context of congruence with faith is also required. Autoethnography produces authentic narrative from those often left out of discourse and should be defended against dismissal by those whose life experiences and methodological approaches differ from the autoethnographer. There is a need to investigate cultural identities beyond Pakistani Muslims to allow more narratives to be captured and more inclusive policy and provision developed.

**Keywords:** Sport and Physical Activity, Ethnicity, Muslim, Gender, Autoethnography

## Introduction

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) recommended that the aggregate term BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) should be dropped as researchers, organizations, and policymakers need to understand disparities and outcomes for *specific* ethnic groups. The lack of efficacy of the term BAME in a sports context can be demonstrated in relation to soccer. While only 0.45 percent of professional male players across England’s top four divisions are from a South Asian background (Trehan 2022), the percentage of BAME players is reported at 25 percent (Poggrund 2021), masking this strikingly low figure. BAME is cited in this article with the rider that it appears in much extant literature, and as sport policy often references the term.

While some researchers, policymakers and practitioners use the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, they should not be used synonymously (Ford and Kelly 2005).

Kagawa-Singer (2001) declares race a scientific myth, defining ethnicity as self-identified membership of a subculture that exists within a power structure in a multicultural society. Flanagin, Frey, and Christiansen (2021) believe ethnicity refers to one's cultural identity, including language, customs, and religion, with norms, such as the (in)appropriateness of sport and PA, being learned and reinforced from childhood through observation, instruction, sanctioning, media, religion, and social institutions. They see race as broader, dividing groups based on ancestral origin and, problematically, physical characteristics. Senior and Bhopal (1994) see ethnicity as involving shared origins or social background, shared culture, and traditions that are distinctive and maintained between generations, leading to a sense of identity; common language and religious traditions are also factors. This is the level of nuance that needs to be applied when understanding the reasons for low participation rates and possibilities for addressing these.

In the United Kingdom (GOV.UK 2019), the chief medical officer (CMO) stipulates that those aged 19 to 64 years should, to maintain good physical and mental health, aim to be physically active every day, achieving at least 150 minutes of moderate/vigorous physical activity (MVPA) across the week. Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) (2019) offers that while 30 percent of UK females participate in sport, the figure for Muslim women is only 18 percent, with Women in Sport (2019) showing that 33 percent of Muslim women respondents were not achieving the CMO's target. The Muslimah Sports Association (MSA) (2014) reported that while 37 percent of their respondents describe themselves as inactive, there is an appetite to increase their participation level, with marked generational differences; 44 percent aged 18 to 24 wishing to increase their physical activity (PA), 34 percent of those aged 25 to 35, and 22 percent aged 36 to 45. In terms of what activities the respondents said they would like to take part in, 44 percent cited swimming, 31 percent martial arts, 30 percent archery, 29 percent badminton, and 17 percent netball. Eighty percent said they would be likely to attend a female-only session if available, 43 percent deeming current facilities/provision unsuitable, and 33 percent citing negative previous experience of participation. Sixty-five percent felt that there are religious/cultural barriers that limit/stop their participation. Concerns around not being able to wear modest attire were cited by 52 percent, fear of encountering discrimination by 28 percent, and parental/caring responsibilities by 19 percent. A lack of time linked to other family commitments was cited by 22 percent as a barrier.

Of those who are active, age is, again, a factor, with 47 percent aged 18 to 25 participating, 30 percent aged 26 to 35, and 23 percent aged 36 to 45. Tallying with MEND's (2019) findings in terms of the nature of participation, 80 percent described their level as "casual," 10 percent reported playing for a local team, and 9 percent defined their level of participation as "competitive." The most popular activities were badminton (18%), running (17%), and swimming (14%). With regard to venues, 42 percent participated at their local leisure center, 30 percent in a park, 29 percent at home, 28 percent at a sport center, 17 percent in

educational settings, 11 percent on local playing fields, and 2 percent in a religious building. This provides useful insight in terms of where initiatives might be best located to gain traction.

Cultural perceptions of sport and PA and barriers to it differ significantly across ethnic groups; Ige-Elegbede et al. (2019) find the most significant barriers in the UK to be mixed-gender facilities, lack of time, women having to take care of the home and children, working long hours, language, lack of confidence, and financial constraints. Brodersen et al. (2007) found that lower levels of participation among South Asians emerge in early life, with both boys and girls exercising less than White peers, girls increasing their sedentary behavior at a faster rate. Barriers reported by South Asian children include their parents being inactive, a lack of parental awareness of PA recommendations, and concerns about the safety of their children (Bhatnagar, Shaw, and Foster 2015). A lack of facilities, cost, lack of independence, and not prioritizing PA are cited by Smith et al. (2018), the latter due to older family members placing a relative lack of importance on PA. Norms around what is not culturally appropriate (Darr, Astin, and Atkin 2008) shape the notion that females should not engage in PA alone in public or in the presence of males, a blurring of lines between religious and cultural beliefs stemming from countries of origin. It is also common for people of South Asian backgrounds to believe in fate and that illness is outside a person's direct control despite evidence supporting PA and exercise interventions (Darr, Astin, and Atkin 2008).

It is common for researchers, policy writers, and those who deliver sport and PA to generalize those from multiple ethnic groups as "(South) Asian," when that category is comprised of descendants and migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, with varying migration histories, languages, and faiths (Fischbacher, Hunt, and Alexander 2004). Pakistan encompasses different faiths and languages (Bashir and Tang 2018), and it is therefore important to acknowledge the existence of a plethora of experiences within this category too. Ali et al. (2011) claim Pakistani culture places men at the head of society, with women subordinate, older community members, in particular, seeing the role of women as stay-at-home mother and housewife (Qaiser 2022). However, traditional gender roles have been challenged by younger Pakistanis, especially those who are British born, something which can be positively utilized in terms of shaping wider community attitudes to sport and PA.

Ninety percent (National Archives, n.d.) of British Pakistanis state their religion as Islam, faith playing a crucial role in Pakistani culture and everyday conduct and activities. Kay (2006) examined the significance of family influences on young women in England from Muslim communities and their participation within sport. Of seven participants, six wore hijab, and all required gender-segregated facilities to participate. One participant's sibling was critical of them for their lack of engagement, stating, "Muslim young women just don't do enough sport" (Kay 2006, 365), while some mothers were keen that their daughters take advantage of sporting opportunities that had not been available to them in their own

countries of origin. These positive views of sport and PA are reflective of various hadiths and the words of the Prophet Muhammad, which encourage Muslims to participate in sport to alleviate sadness (Kizar 2018). Verses in the Quran instruct Muslims to protect their bodies and preserve them in the way Allah has fashioned them, the Prophet Muhammad emphasizing that well-being is a blessing (*Voice of Unity* 2017). Regarding constraints, it was clear that sport was acceptable only if activities were female-only with a female coach and appropriate clothing, i.e., that the environment is one that fulfills the Islamic requirement for modesty. Bichi (2018) also found that a lack of role models within families and the wider community was a barrier for many girls and young women in terms of beginning and sustaining engagement in sport and PA.

Examining sports science in academia, there is rarely a full recognition of the importance of the cultural identities outlined earlier (Blodgett et al. 2014). Butryn (2009) highlighted White privilege in sport psychology, for example, and the importance of confronting how whiteness relates to that field and to the culture of sport. Cultural sport psychology (CSP) researchers attempt to understand marginalized cultural identities through contextual factors (McGannon and Smith 2015), encouraging dialogues to create insights and solutions to the challenges faced in terms of both participation and performance. With an emphasis on religion, gender, personal space, and social structure (Schinke and Moore 2011), CSP can do something sport psychology research has traditionally infrequently done, that is, account for the role played by culture and social identity (Peter and Williams 2006). Globalization has led to more diversified cultural identities, with those in the sport and PA fields working with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Blodgett et al. 2014), yet it was only in 2015 that the Association for Applied Sport Psychology mandated a universal form of cultural training within its accreditation (Schinke et al. 2019). There is, therefore, a need to develop multicultural competencies for practitioners to support people whose identities are nuanced and also for researchers to develop their understanding of cultural identity. In order to translate research into policy and practice, CSP's agenda is to move from the production of academic knowledge toward social justice and change (Blodgett et al. 2014). Autoethnography was selected here as the method of accessing data that an outsider may not have been able to, recognizing the importance of cultural identity, amplifying minoritized voices, and leading to a greater understanding of those whose contexts are underexamined or misunderstood by practitioners and researchers (McGannon and Smith 2015).

The first author's identity is something they have had trouble defining. Having lived in England since birth, British is a key identifier; however, being ethnically Pakistani is also significant in terms of their development and character. Their faith also impacts on their identity. However, despite knowing many others who identify as British-Pakistani Muslim and female, the first author struggled to find representation within academic sport literature. While we do not mean to single out one discipline, as UK universities begin to address the need to decolonize curricula and research more broadly, the authors *do* operate within the

sphere of sport psychology (although the second author's background is in cultural studies/sociology, their teaching and research is cross-disciplinary), a subject area Butryn (2009) highlights the whiteness of. There have been special issues of *The Sport Psychologist*, focusing on working with "special populations," but that terminology itself is othering. Ryba and Wright (2005) also encourage sport psychologists to acknowledge intersectionality, to recognize that those participating (or not) in sport and PA have *various* identifications, e.g. class, gender and sexual orientation, as well as understanding how faith, ethnicity, and cultural dynamics can impact participation. The combination of faith and gender means that Muslim females have to contend with intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) barriers to participation and, if they do take part in PA, also intersectional judgments about their decision to do so. Focusing on intersectionality and sport, Calow (2022) uses the example of US shot-putter Raven Saunders, a lesbian of color who uses they/them and he/him pronouns, who at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, raised their arms in an "X" as they stood on the rostrum, to highlight the intersectional oppression that is a daily reality for many minoritized people, limiting choices and ambitions. Using an intersectional lens helps to avoid oversimplifications of groups and their lived experiences and encourages us to think about how lives are impacted via multiple systems of oppression, sport, culture, and society being intertwined. This lens provides a more nuanced insight into people's lives that can better inform policy and practice to address barriers. Research such as this autoethnography aims to play a part in the necessary decolonization of sport research, policy and practice, with the term ethnicity used to reflect how culture, tradition, and religion have impacted experiences of sport and PA.

## **Autoethnography**

Much autoethnographic research has focused on being *evocative*, authors allowing readers to find emotional resonance with their work (Denzin 1998). In terms of *analytic* autoethnography, Anderson (2006) proposes five key features: complete member researcher status; analytic reflexivity; narrative visibility of the researcher's self; dialogue with informants beyond the self; and, in contrast to evocative autoethnography, a commitment to theoretical analysis, which moves past solely evoking emotional resonance to focus on developing theoretical explanations of social phenomena. This autoethnography utilizes elements of analytic autoethnography such as complete member research status and narrative visibility, and also evocative autoethnography, with readers encouraged to empathize with and understand the distinct population with which one of the authors identifies.

In terms of ethics, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) highlight the importance of relational ethics for autoethnographers, recognizing the difficulty of masking the identities of people referred to without altering meaning and purpose. Researchers such as Carter (2002) use pseudonyms, while others edit out details, fearing they are too personal and would

change the dynamics of intimate relationships (Adams and Manning 2015). Although anonymity is maintained as much as possible, those who know the first author will recognize who is referred to when family members or educational settings are mentioned, so while best efforts are made to avoid hurt, the impossibility of this is acknowledged.

## The Role of Ethnicity

The gendered migration of Pakistanis involved males moving to fill jobs in declining UK industries in the 1960s, settling, and then bringing their wives and families to the UK (Wang and Coulter 2018). Gender roles among the British-Pakistani community are influenced by patriarchal culture and adherence to Islamic beliefs (Heath et al. 2013) with males working, while females manage households and children. With a father migrating to England in the late 1990s and marrying a British-born Pakistani woman, the first author's household adhered to the "normal" cultural pattern, her mother returning to work part-time once the children started school and her father then joining the family business. Their grandparents never worked in the UK, and their aunts, post marriage, either gave up work completely or switched to part-time, while uncles worked full-time.

These cultural beliefs and practices extend to many aspects of life, including sport and PA, British-Pakistani women participants describing that being responsible for domestic labor leaves little time for exercise (Iqbal et al. 2022). Participants expressed concern regarding the expectation that women should remain indoors, another norm in Pakistan embedded into British-Pakistani life. The narrative that Pakistani women should be stay-at-home parents who carry out housework is slowly changing; the lead author determined that they would not give up on a career to become a stay-at-home parent, a stance she shares with many of her graduate peers, who, encouragingly, may then feel more able to engage with sport and PA.

Patel et al. (2016) found among British South Asians and Pakistanis that social norms and cultural expectations around clothing, language, mixed-gendered facilities and fears regarding safety and abuse were key barriers to sport and PA. These barriers are anchored in stereotypes, and unreflective of changes, for example, language is now a much less common barrier to participation, as younger females are educated in the UK, and to a high level. Exercising in mixed-gendered facilities is not problematic for many, the lead author *preferring* to attend a mixed-gender gym while wearing leggings and an oversized T-shirt to preserve modesty. She has seen other Pakistani women at the gym dressed in leggings, jumpers, and oversized jogging bottoms. She knows many Pakistani women who participate in structured, competitive sport, mostly cricket, thriving in a single gender playing environment but with male coaches, this being acceptable because females outnumbering males in that environment provides a sense of security, something organizations struggling to find female coaches because they feel this is essential are often unaware of.

Jepson et al. (2012) found social interaction contributes significantly to the enjoyment of sport and PA, many females known to the first author walking in groups or attending team sport and activities, bonding with family and friends. While some participants in Jepson's study referred to the physical benefits of PA, psychological positives such as increases in self-esteem and confidence were also mentioned. The first author's academic training increased their knowledge of the physical, mental, and social benefits of PA, and they see it as their duty to consistently tell their wider family about the benefits of exercise. However, since moving back home during the COVID-19 pandemic, they no longer participate in structured sport. They are keen to join a local sports club but have not expressed this desire to their family, as they feel there will be a lack of support for the ambition, expecting responses along the lines of "Pakistani girls don't do that," or "you're wasting your time and money," so life has become more sedentary because of the responses they have heard before, which stem from ingrained cultural beliefs. This points to the importance of researchers, policy writers, and sport and PA practitioners acknowledging the importance of the life cycle (Rapoport and Rapoport 1974) that engagement is not linear, not once and for all, and must be fought for if it is to be sustained.

## Culture and Faith

The 2011 Census revealed that 90 percent of people identifying as Pakistani by origin living in England and Wales followed Islam; the 2021 Census reported a 3 percent rise in that figure (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2021), with Islam the third largest religion after Christianity and no religion, respectively. While many practitioners may feel that faith dictates behaviors, Jacobson's (1997) work on religious and ethnic identity among young British Pakistanis reports that people often use their "culture" to justify a *lack* of adherence to the demands/freedoms afforded by faith, such as long-standing traditions regarding arranged marriages, the caste system, Mehr (dowry), and gender hierarchy. Conversely, for many years, the first author believed that, *culturally*, Pakistani girls should not show their legs or participate in mixed-gender sport; however, they now know that these positions were due to *religious* beliefs. It was not until quite recently that the first author learned how being Pakistani *and* Muslim impacted distinctly on their sport and PA participation due to the attitudes of their family and community toward exercise. If this is the case for someone deeply embedded in their community, this indicates the need for a greater appreciation of such nuance among those not of that world who are involved in the field of sport and PA.

From an early age, the lack of encouragement they experienced to participate in after-school sport was largely because it would impact attendance at Quran classes, which were part of life from the age of five. Many assume classes take place at a mosque or Islamic center; however, learning often happens in someone's home. Children would walk together to the teacher's house and sit cross-legged for one hour in a circle on the carpet, practice, read to the



teacher, be told what to practice for the next day, go home and practice, and repeat the cycle each weekday. Attendance at after-school sport clubs would mean there would be no time to attend Quran class, so their requests were refused; as Bhatnagar, Shaw, and Foster (2015) reported, after-school Quran classes are a barrier to PA for Muslim children. For parents, their child finishing the Quran is a milestone to share within the community, a source of pride, and an opportunity to boast of. While Islam advocates humbleness, culturally, boasting about achievements, to family and the local and wider community, is *de rigueur*, a young person completing the Quran and achieving academic success at the top of a hierarchy of what parents consider important, sport ranking much lower, if being recognized at all.

In Islam, there are various hadiths where the Prophet Muhammad encourages sport, including swimming, shooting, running, and horseback riding (Kizar 2018), the belief being that strengthening the body and soul is vital for both men and women (Bichi 2018). However, it has been reported that many Muslims believe sport is haram (forbidden) for women and children (Marwat et al. 2014). The role of the Imam was originally to provide religious teaching and spiritual guidance, but those who hold this station are also often approached to clarify what behaviors are permissible (Ederer 2020) and, unsurprisingly, there is inconsistency in terms of how texts are interpreted. While one Imam may believe all Muslims should have the opportunity to play sport because the Prophet encouraged it (Kizar 2018), another may believe Muslims should engage in PA only if the sole reason is to maintain a healthy lifestyle (Bichi 2018), i.e., the concept of “sport for sport’s sake” would be an alien one. Factors, such as modesty, may also be interpreted differently; additionally, females may feel uncomfortable asking for guidance from an Imam, or may not be permitted to speak to males from outside their immediate family on a one-to-one basis. There are very few female Imams, although the Quran does not explicitly prohibit women from leading prayer, viewing men and women as spiritual equals. Language may also be a barrier to participation for some younger females (and males) in terms of their understanding of precepts, if sermons are delivered in Urdu or Punjabi, as younger Pakistani Muslims may not be fluent.

During migration to the UK, many Pakistani Muslims settled, and remain, in concentrated pockets, close to those who share their faith. Young women living in close-knit communities often feel they are under surveillance (Green and Singleton 2006), and Muslim communities are no exception. Kay (2006) found young Muslim women estimated they were related to forty to sixty-five people in their town, at times feeling they could not carry out quotidian activities without being monitored. When the first author was younger, she valued living in an area with a strong community, with close and distant relatives; however, as she grew older, she realized that this environment can be damaging. She often felt that there was no privacy, that going shopping with friends would lead to someone they were related to telling their mother or aunties what they had been doing. Going for a walk in the park or driving would lead to people commenting to their family that they had been wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt or playing music too loudly. They still hear comments in the community that

young Muslim females are too westernized, that they should dress in “Asian” clothes, which is a cultural, rather than a religious, standpoint. Blackshaw (2010) refers to this dark side of community, with not only outsiders viewed with suspicion, but also those within the community who do not share the same values or adhere to the same behaviors, portrayed as a threat. Countless times, the lead author felt unable to express their true feelings on a range of issues, fearing they would be viewed as a threat, a pariah in their own community.

In terms of the absence of role models who might inspire uptake and counter the idea of PA as haram, the lead author reports that she didn’t have a familial role model in terms of sport and PA or see any media coverage of females from the same ethnic background performing at the highest level of sport. They had a number of female role models, including the England Women’s football team, and while watching them perform, they were able to feel proud to be female and British. When they watched the 2002 film *Bend It Like Beckham*, they connected with Parminder Nagra’s character, a young British woman whose milieu meant she had to join a football team without her parents’ knowledge. Although her family was portrayed as British-Indian Sikh, not British-Pakistani Muslim, many females from South Asian backgrounds related to aspects of the movie, but how galling it was, reports the first author, that the only time she saw a young South Asian female attain success in sport was in a work of fiction.

There are now, however, a small number of female elite role models such as fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad and ultra-athlete Manal Rostom who compete while wearing a hijab, providing media representation for many young Muslim females. Barbie created a doll in the likeness of Ibtihaj Muhammed wearing a hijab and fencing kit as part of their Shero range, aimed at providing positive female role models. In terms of higher education in the UK, Brunel University (MEND 2019) became the first to offer a sports hijab as part of their university sport kit, the initiative stemming from a student union investigation that found that female students were “participating in sports on their own and in private, but they weren’t really going out to competitions or using sport as a social tool to get involved in activities.” MEND also references work by Women in Sport, which highlights a lack of modest dress and a lack of role models among a number of barriers facing Muslim women who have ambitions to participate.

Many clothing brands are expanding their modest collections, which Omar (2023) identifies as a lucrative market and Ratna (2011) reports on in relation to soccer. FIFA’s banning of the hijab, in 2007, led to females speaking out about the right to express their faith while playing (Walseth and Strandbu 2014); the ban was lifted in 2012 when FIFA’s medical committee found no evidence of the previously cited danger of injury. In 2023, Morocco’s Nouhaila Benzina, became the first player to wear a hijab at a senior women’s international tournament, the Women’s World Cup (*BBC Sport* 2023). Although the first author doesn’t know anyone who owns a sport hijab, they have seen an increase in the number of Muslim women in their area attending fitness classes, walking in the park in

groups or alone, and attending a local women's-only gym where they can wear a regular hijab or remove it, as no males are present. A number of older women attend these gym sessions, having found a comfortable environment to exercise in, and this should be drawn on by practitioners as an example when attempting to engage Muslim women in sport and PA.

### **Conflict Stemming from Participation in Sport and PA**

Once a young woman understands that the lack of encouragement to engage in sport and PA is embedded in the culture that they are part of, they know they will be judged if they participate. Post completion of Quran classes, the lead author's parents were still not supportive of her attending after-school sport. However, when she began staying after school for academic revision sessions, there *was* parental support, this activity being valued. While there was agreement between daughter and parents about the value of education, her parents were unable to see that sport contributed to the author's well-being, providing respite from academic stresses, her parents aligning themselves with the wider community's attitude of privileging academic achievement. The emphasis on education saw sport and PA relegated within, or excluded from, the hierarchy of activities that might provide a young woman with fulfillment; in fact, they were seen as a distraction and as detrimental to academic success and, therefore, not to be facilitated. The lesson that can be drawn here by those designing and delivering programs is that they must target gatekeepers, such as Imams, but also families, specifically those who are essential in terms of blocking and enabling sustained participation. Here, the use of role model advocates such as Amna Rafiq at Leicester and latterly Yorkshire County Cricket Clubs, who, in her work with schools (*Valvekar* 2017) as well as inspiring young females to play, liaises with families to convince them of the appropriateness of PA environments and the health and wider benefits of sport and exercise, cricket for example combined with dance, providing a rounded package of a relatively sedate team sport and aerobic exercise, which contributes to government PA targets (Sport England, n.d.).

When moving to secondary school, the first author became aware of the sporting opportunities available to peers from outside of her close community. Conversations were about netball clubs attended, soccer team wins, county-level rowing, water polo, and some sports the author had never heard of. It was also around this time that gender differences regarding what sports school offered became more apparent to them. Two hours of physical education (PE) were compulsory for students until the age of 16, a diet of netball and rounders for girls, boys playing rugby and football. The National Curriculum did not specify the sports that pupils were required to participate in; instead, the recommendations were based on aims, e.g. the range of tactics and strategies required to overcome opponents in direct competitions. Previous research around girls' participation in PE highlights how norms around masculinity and femininity shape the curriculum, gendering opportunities (Roberts, Gray, and Camacho Miñano 2019). Being brought up to believe football was a boy's

sport and netball a girl's limited the lead author's experiences of sport and left her yearning for PE teachers to announce that today, she would be playing soccer, basketball, cricket; anything other than netball.

Because of the diet of sports deemed to be appropriate for females (Scruton 2018) offered in school, the lead author decided to pursue a "male" sport at university, where a broader spectrum of activities was available. Attending the freshers' sports fair was eye-opening; there were clubs for more of those sports they had no idea existed: korfbal and squash, and ones they longed to try, such as American football and snow-sports. There was a realization that some students had sports scholarships, although only a handful were not White and non-South Asian. They hadn't realized it was possible in the UK to pursue a career in sport while studying; that in America they knew this was feasible is a testament to the potential of the media in terms of helping people see the field of the possible (Bordieu 1984). This is important for those charged with widening participation to remember in terms of inspiring and promoting sport and PA among marginalized communities.

When moving away from their home city to attend university was broached with parents, the lead author was told "girls don't do that," and that to wish to move away was rebellious and would bring dishonor to the family name, lowering the status of the family within the community (Ratna 2011). There were young women locally whose parents *did* encourage them to move away to university and experience the "real world," some undertaking international placement years, suggesting that attitudes are not uniform. She made the decision not to appease her family by commuting to a university and remaining at home, instead moving farther afield, risking both community judgment of her and her family. Acknowledgment of the price some young females feel they might (and do) have to pay, in order to enjoy the access to sport and PA many take for granted is required by those involved in promoting sport and should be borne in mind before frustration or disappointment is expressed with those who cannot commit to sport and PA or who do but then cannot sustain that involvement.

Promised weekly visits to the family home did not happen, as extra training sessions were attended or fixtures were fulfilled by the first author. Saying the reason for staying at university was because of the need to use software accessible only on campus was acceptable; any reason involving sport was not. The message was that university is a place to study, not play. No other female from their immediate family had attended university, so the family did not know what the experience of higher education would be like or understand the popularity and impact of university sport. Involvement in sport was a highlight of their time at university, enabled by a determined yet emotionally draining decision to attend training or fixtures instead of visiting home. University was the first taste of challenge and freedom, living away from home comforts, dinner on the table, no financial worries, but where there was a thriving social life, sport central to invigorating experiences, experiences that would have been less available or even unavailable to an undergraduate living at home.

## Conclusion

The irony of a White academic helping facilitate an article where the authorial voice is that of a British-Pakistani is not lost on the authors. That versions of this article were rejected by other journals is also ironic given one of the issues discussed is the need to reflect on disciplinary gatekeeping. The lead author had faced barriers to their participation in sport and PA and also went on to feel somewhat out of place in academia. They opted to engage with autoethnography, feeling it was an accurate and credible way of reporting and reflecting on their own experiences both with regard to sport, and also study, meaning that they risked marginalization in a disciplinary context. Sparkes (2000) reports that autoethnography's status within academia remains problematic. It has been criticized as indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized (Méndez 2013); however, the purpose of the method *is to be individualized* and offer insight into a specific population. The traditional research criteria of validity, reliability, and generalizability may not be met within this methodology (Sparkes 1998), but the purpose of autoethnography is not to be generalizable but rather to provide an opportunity for those often left out of discourse to be heard (Campbell 2017). This allows for the creation of an authentic narrative and is, therefore, an approach we should defend fiercely against dismissal by those whose life experiences and methodological approaches are different.

The intention of this research was to express lived experiences, using both the evocative and the analytical. If others from the same population have different experiences, it is important that researchers, policy writers, and those who deliver sport and PA discover and enable and believe their narratives. It's also vital that future research recognizes and studies the lived experiences of those of different faiths and also beyond the British-Pakistani category focused on here. That work will not be easy, the first author describing it as the hardest (yet most rewarding) work they have carried out. There were times when a different method was considered, partly for ethical reasons but also because of the fear that the work would not be deemed "worthy" by some academics in the field of sport and exercise, that they would dismiss it as too specific, rather than acknowledging its richness and its credibility in terms of providing insight into a marginalized and often disregarded population, insight that could lead to the development of new initiatives to increase participation in sport and PA. The research identifies the need to educate communities about the benefits of sport and PA in the context of congruence with faith, alongside better and more widespread acknowledgment by academics, policy writers and those who deliver sport and PA of the nuances that operate under the outmoded umbrellas of BAME and "Asian." Governing bodies and delivery organizations may utilize the research to develop a deeper understanding of barriers and constraints among populations where participant numbers are low in order to encourage and sustain the involvement of what some still call "special populations."

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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