Examining Ableism Through the Physical Activity Experiences of Blind and Visually Impaired Women

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Purpose: This study examined how ableism influences blind and visually impaired women’s experiences accessing and engaging in exercise, physical activity, and sport. Methods: Ten women between the ages of 27 and 45 years completed a one-on-one audio-recorded virtual interview where they reflected on the meaningfulness of their exercise, physical activity, and/or sport experiences, as well as described any experiences related to direct, indirect, systemic, or internalized ableism within or when attempting to access those physical activity experiences. The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings: The analysis resulted in the construction of 2 themes that depicted the participants’ experiences: (1) “It’s exhausting”: navigating inaccessibility and (2) “You feel like a fish out of water”: internalized ableism. Discussion: The themes highlight the participants’ experiences which were largely focused on being forced to navigate inaccessible environments which resulted in exhaustion and expressions of internalized ableism. These findings provide insight into what makes and does not make a physical activity space accessible and welcoming for blind and visually impaired adults.

Keywords: exercise, sport, disability, accessibility

Engaging in regular physical activity as an adult may improve sleep, bone health, balance, and coordination, as well as reduce anxiety, depression, and the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, cancer, dementia, and obesity. Furthermore, physical activity has been found to have psychological and social benefits for disabled individuals including enhanced self-perception and the development of friendships. As such, the US Department of Health and Human Services recommends for adults to be physically active for at least 150 minutes weekly. Within recent decades, the identification of barriers to physical activity for disabled people has been a focus of much adapted physical activity scholarship. Substantial barriers include those related to the built environment, attitudes, and policies. For example, several studies have found that fitness facilities across the United States do not meet accessibility guidelines outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Furthermore, facility policies, inaccessible equipment, routes, and signs have been identified as barriers found to limit access within fitness facilities. Social barriers to physical activity commonly reported by disabled individuals consist of feeling othered, or being the target of oppressive behaviors, such as being ignored, dismissed, and stared at by nondisabled bystanders. These social barriers may limit access or desire for disabled persons to enter physical activity spaces.

The needs and challenges associated with accessing physical activity for disabled people tends to be impairment specific, where some disabled people, such as blind or visually impaired people, may experience more considerable barriers to access than others. Following this, Ross et al recently found that only 59.3% of blind and visually impaired adults are meeting physical activity guidelines, with only 22.7% of physical activity minutes coming from leisure activities. To date, there are just a few inquiries that have investigated barriers to physical activity unique to blind and visually impaired persons. For example, Shaw et al found that structural (ie, environmental) barriers such as access to transportation and financial means were perceived by Canadian visually impaired youth and adults to restrict physical activity engagement. Similarly, Jaarsma et al examined personal and environmental barriers to sports participation among blind and visually impaired adults in the Netherlands. Frequently reported environmental barriers included transportation, lack of exercising with peers, and lack of opportunities, whereas their visual impairment and dependence on others were common personal barriers. More recently, in their qualitative exploration of expectancy value beliefs, identity beliefs, and physical activity engagement among visually impaired adults, Kirk and Haegele identified transportation, lack of accessible equipment and facilities, and interpersonal interactions as barriers to physical activity for their participants.

Several barriers to community recreation and fitness facilities have been identified despite being a viable option for blind and visually impaired individuals to meet physical activity recommendations. The combination of social, structural, and personal barriers may influence physical activity participation for blind and visually impaired individuals. To compound this effect, physical activity spaces are concerned with normative expectations, and those who deviate from those norms run the risk of exclusion and marginalization. As such, researchers suggest that ableism may serve as an appropriate framework to examine the physical activity experiences of disabled people. Furthermore, ableism considers the oppressive influence of the environment and societal attitudes that manifest as barriers to physical activity participation. To this point, and to the researchers’ knowledge, only one study has utilized ableism as a framework to specifically explore the motivators and barriers to physical activity for disabled people who self-disclosed a number of different impairment types. In this study,
Ives et al. explored the experiences of and attitudes toward sport and physical activity of disabled people in the United Kingdom and noted, among other things, that barriers influenced by ableism were a pretext for a lack of enjoyment and engagement within these sporting contexts. To expand upon these findings, as well as prior research centered on the experiences of blind and visually impaired people within physical activity, we follow Ives et al.’s lead by utilizing ableism as a conceptual grounding to explore experiences within these contexts.

Conceptual Framework

Ableism served as the conceptual lens that guided methodological and interpretative decisions throughout this study. Campbell argues that a core component of ableism is “a belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of ‘type’) is inherently negative and, should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured, or indeed eliminated” (p. 5). Further, an ableist perspective views disability as a lesser state of being human. In this way, ableism is analogous to sexism, racism, or homophobia, where the exclusion of certain groups of people is based on real or perceived ability or differences.

Ableism can present itself in several forms including indirect, direct, systemic, or internalized. Indirect or normalized ableism is unconscious behavior that communicates negative assumptions regarding disability, though the intent was not to cause harm. Direct or overt ableism is a conscious and oppressive action directed toward a disabled person or people. Systemic ableism, also known as institutional ableism, is where physical barriers, laws, policies, regulations, or practices restrict the access, equity, and freedom of disabled individuals. Internalized ableism is defined as the process of projecting negative thoughts and feelings onto oneself based on societal stereotypes surrounding disability.

In instances of internalized ableism, disabled people internalize society’s beliefs that being disabled is an inferior form of being and can result in self-loathing behaviors or attempts to emulate societal norms. Ableism is embedded within our societal systems where nondisabled bodies are supported and nonnormative bodies are merely tolerated. This, in turn, may result in ableism serving as a social regulatory mechanism that keeps societal power in the hands of nondisabled people.

Ableism can be understood as an ideology, a web of hegemonic ideas and beliefs, as well as a specific research perspective influenced by and within disability studies, which permits researchers to explore implicit and explicit exclusionary processes. In this research, ableism was used to help us to critically explore, as Ives et al. noted, blind and visually impaired people’s experiences from a position of exclusion, or from the standpoint that the world does not value or is not designed for them. That is, we explored our participants’ experiences to understand if they were shaped or influenced by what they perceived to be forms of systemic, direct, or indirect forms of exclusion. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine how ableism influences blind and visually impaired women’s experiences accessing and engaging in exercise, physical activity, and sport.

Methods

For this study, an experiential qualitative research approach was used to explore the participants’ thoughts and experiences, as well as their interpretations of the world around them. An experiential orientation aims to explore and provide meaning to the perceptions and understandings had by people. More specifically, experiential research is a way to communicate people’s feelings, thoughts, and realities based on their experiences. This study sought to articulate meaning related to ableism in exercise, physical activity, and sport for blind or visually impaired women. Within the experiential research approach, we ascribed to a relativist ontology where we believe there is no singular reality, and that meaning is explored through human interaction and a subjective epistemology, meaning that the findings described in this study are specific to our thinking and interactions with participants. Furthermore, the researchers recognize that their own beliefs, experiences, and values influenced their research decisions throughout the execution of this project; therefore, it is important to disclose their positionality for others to understand how it impacted the research process. Ball identifies as a blind White woman who is currently a doctoral student studying adapted physical activity. As an adult, she regularly engages in exercise and physical activity and has experience as an elite athlete. She admittedly has experienced a variety of barriers and challenges when attempting to engage in physical activity herself, which has influenced her interest in this area of research. Haegele identifies as a nondisabled White man who is a professor at a research-intensive university. He has been involved in research and has contributed to programs that support physical activity experiences for blind and visually impaired people for the past 15 years. There is also a relational element between the authors, where Haegele acts as Ball’s formal academic advisor within her doctoral program.

Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, individuals had to (1) be between the ages of 18 and 45; (2) identify as having a visual impairment; (3) have experience with exercise, physical activity, or sport as an adult; and (4) be willing to complete an interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. This age range was selected to focus on the physical activity experiences of young to middle-aged adults, which tend to differ from those who are more advanced in age. For the purposes of this study, exercise was defined as “a type of physical activity that involves planned, structured, and repetitive bodily movement done to maintain or improve one or more components of physical fitness.” Physical activity was defined as “any bodily movement that is produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle and that substantially increases energy expenditure.” Finally, sport was defined as “an athletic activity requiring skill or physical prowess and often of a competitive nature.” Possible participants were recruited through an email invitation sent to existing contacts and distributed on a listserv of blind and visually impaired adults interested in participating in research. The invitation described the purpose of the study along with the time commitment and the data collection process. Individuals interested in completing the interview were asked to email Ball directly indicating their interest and answer the demographic questions listed on the invitation. Ball scheduled an interview with each interested individual upon receipt of their initial email. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Old Dominion University.

A purposive sample of 10 blind or visually impaired women ages 27–45 served as participants for this study. To ensure participant anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and the places and organizations referenced during the conversations. Demographic information for all participants is presented as a
narrative below rather than in a table as navigating tables with screen reading software often used by blind or visually impaired individuals is ineffective and inefficient.\textsuperscript{30,31}

Nine participants were US citizens with Alicia living in New York, Diane in Kansas, Heidi in Ohio, Kimberly in Michigan, Sonia in Minnesota, Jessica in Wisconsin, Beth in California, Lisa in New Jersey, and Melissa in New Mexico. One participant, Shannon, is a Canadian citizen living in Saskatchewan. Alicia, Shannon, Diane, Heidi, Jessica, Beth, Lisa, and Melissa identified their race/ethnicity as White. Kimberly identified her race/ethnicity as European Spanish and South American Indian, and Sonia identified as Hispanic/Latina. Diane, Heidi, Kimberly, Sonia, Jessica, and Lisa described having B1 vision (i.e., no light perception in either eye up to light perception with the inability to recognize the shape of a hand at any distance or in any direction), Alicia and Shannon having B2 vision (i.e., from the ability to recognize the shape of a hand up to visual acuity of 20/600 and/or the visual field of less than 5 degrees in the best eye with the best practical eye correction), and Beth and Melissa having B3 vision (i.e., from visual acuity above 20/600 and up to visual acuity of 20/200 and/or a visual field of less than 20 degrees and more than 5 degrees in the best eye with the best practical eye correction) as per the US Association of Blind Athletes visual classification system. All participants disclosed engaging in regular physical activity as an adult. Alicia, Diane, Heidi, Sonia, and Jessica reported currently exercising in their homes while Beth and Lisa frequent a local fitness center. Alicia, Kimberly, Sonia, and Beth described also participating in sports throughout their adulthood with Alicia and Sonia engaging in running road races and triathlons, Kimberly competing in martial arts, and Beth playing blind soccer. Alicia and Shannon participate in local events through community organizations such as running groups and blind sporting events.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this study was one-on-one, audio-recorded, semistructured virtual interviews that ranged from 30 to 76 minutes in length. Participants had the option to complete the interview over the telephone or Zoom. Heidi and Beth opted for a telephone interview, while all other participants chose Zoom for their interview platform. Conducting the interviews virtually allowed the researchers to recruit participants from a larger geographic area rather than only recruiting locally. All interviews were conducted by Ball. She began each interview describing the study’s purpose and procedures as well as her background information relevant to the study.\textsuperscript{32} Each interview followed an interview guide that was developed based on Campbell’s\textsuperscript{5,33} *Contours of Ableism*. The interview guide was originally constructed by Ball, and shared with Haegle, who critically reflected upon the guide and its relationship with Campbell’s definitions of ableism. After reviewing the document, the authors came together to discuss the construction of the guide, which went through 2 revisions before it was considered finalized.

Throughout the interview, participants were asked to reflect on their exercise, physical activity, and/or sport experiences and the meaningfulness of those experiences as an adult. Experiential questions included “Can you tell me about some good experiences that you’ve had as an adult in exercise, sport, or physical activity,” “Can you tell me about some bad experiences that you’ve had as an adult in exercise, sport, or physical activity,” “What accommodations or modifications have helped you experience the most success with physical activity,” and “Can you describe any barriers or hindrances that have stopped or restricted you from being physically active?” Additionally, participants were asked to describe any experiences with direct, indirect, systemic, or internalized ableism related to exercise, physical activity, or sport throughout adulthood thus far. For example, participants were asked, “Are you familiar with direct ableism?” Then, they were provided the following definition: “Direct or overt ableism is a conscious and oppressive action toward a disabled person. Examples include asking someone invasive questions about their disability or restricting access or participation solely based on a disability diagnosis.” Finally, in this question series, participants were asked, “Can you tell me about any instances of direct ableism you may have experienced in exercise, sport, or physical activity settings?”

A secondary data source for this study was reflective interview notes. During and after each interview, Ball documented her thoughts and interpretations specific to each interview. More specifically, she noted meaningful aspects from the conversation as well as potential emerging themes. The reflective notes provided depth to the interview data and allowed Ball to conceptually return to the interview during the data analysis process.\textsuperscript{33}

Data Analysis

Following data collection, each interview was transcribed verbatim. Ball then analyzed the interview data using a reflexive thematic analysis defined by Braun and Clarke.\textsuperscript{28} To start the analysis process, Ball read and reread the interview transcripts and notes several times to immerse herself in the data. Second, she inductively coded the data by labeling meaningful segments of data. Semantic codes represented explicitly expressed meaning articulated by participants while latent codes conveyed interpreted conceptual meaning.\textsuperscript{28} During the third phase of the analysis, codes were clustered to form initial themes that represented patterns of shared meaning through a central organizing concept.\textsuperscript{28} Finally, codes and initial themes were reviewed to ensure each theme was distinct, richly developed, and representative of the overall data set.\textsuperscript{28} Constructed themes were shared and discussed with Haegle to explore and examine relevance and coherence. Agreed upon themes are presented as findings below.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to support the trustworthiness of this research project. Due to the researchers’ lived experiences influencing methodological decisions and analysis, as the interviewer, Ball exposed her personal and professional positionality to participants, and both Ball and Haegle disclosed their positionality to readers to reveal their biases.\textsuperscript{27,28,34} Additionally, participants’ voices are centered within this research through the presentation of rich and copious verbatim interview extracts, allowing readers to examine participant data and reflect on the researchers’ interpretation of the findings.\textsuperscript{35,36} To support rigor in this study, an interview guide was developed and utilized that follows the conceptual framework of ableism, the data collection and analysis process was detailed, and specific reflexive thematic analysis procedures were followed.\textsuperscript{28,36} Finally, to support trustworthiness, Ball collaboratively discussed the research design, data collection, and analysis with colleagues through frequent debriefing sessions.\textsuperscript{37}
Findings

Based on the data analysis, 2 themes were constructed that depict the participants’ experiences in physical activity spaces: (1) “It’s exhausting”: navigating inaccessibility and (2) “You feel like a fish out of water”: internalized ableism. As our intent with this paper was to center the participants’ experiences and perspectives, the themes are described using rich direct quotes from each participant, with minimal researcher interpretation, in the sections below. An analytic interpretation of the constructed themes is then provided in the “Discussion” section. This presentation style is in alignment with the “show” and “tell” style, discussed by Morley et al. where first data is “shown” to readers for them to construct their own knowledge and understanding of the data before authors move to an analytical “tell” in the “Discussion” section.

“It’s Exhausting”: Navigating Inaccessibility

For several participants, physical activity spaces were inaccessible to various degrees, leaving them to constantly communicate their disability-related needs while trying to participate in physical activity, exercise, or sport. The constant advocacy left participants feeling “exhausted” (Alicia), “frustrated” (Diane and Sonia), “discouraged” (Heidi), and “limited” (Jessica). Alicia further articulated her exhaustion,

“It’s exhausting. I think it’s just tiresome that we have to fight for an opportunity to participate in, to be present. I just think it makes me feel exhausted because I don’t think people should have to, in 2023 or 2018 or 2019, I don’t think that we should have to advocate and fight so much for even just an opportunity to participate.

Participants went on to describe numerous situations where they encountered inaccessibility whether it was denied access to the facility or event, or overall inaccessible equipment. Shannon recalled a time when she wanted to take a group fitness class, but she was denied access to the class due to her visual impairment. She stated,

Yeah. So, I wanted to take a program at the gym, and they said they couldn’t adapt it because they just didn’t think, it was a weights class, and they just didn’t think it was safe for me because of my vision loss to do it because it was on the machines that you have to like pull the ropes and stuff. And they just didn’t think that the trainer could give me enough one-on-one time because it was a class, like it was a group class and they were like super apologetic and they said if I wanted to come back for like one-on-one training, they’d be more than happy and they’d like offer a discount. Like they tried to make it okay, but like they just said as a class setting, it wasn’t, they just didn’t think they could do it.

Like Shannon, Beth also wanted to take a fitness class at her local gym. Though she was permitted to take the class, she still struggled with accessing the specific exercises involved in the class due to the dim lighting in the cycle studio. She recalled,

Oh, and then I went to one class and the instructor had the lights off, and I was like, this isn’t gonna work. Yeah. I was like, I get that it’s fun to have the . . . cause you know like in spin classes, they’ll have almost like stage lighting sometimes? So, she had the lights off and then had these LED lights on, and I was like, “I cannot see anything.” So, I had to ask her, like, “Can we have the lights on? Sorry to ruin the vibe, but I can’t see at all.”

While recalling her experience taking this particular spin class, Beth felt defeated having to give a reason as to why the lights needed to be on and alter the experience of others taking the class.

Alicia expressed similar feelings to Beth when she recounted a time a few years ago when she was registered to run a half marathon and the race organizers were resistant to her request to complete the race with 2 sighted guides because that went against their policy. She reflected,

I wanted to improve my time on that race, and it was really only gonna be possible if I had two guides with me on the course. And trying to . . . I was registered for the race. They were saying, “Yeah, you can participate but only with one guide.” It worked out in the end. It took a lot of advocacy for myself, but Global Heel (running group) actually had put together a petition and got signatures from the running groups, like running groups for non-disabled runners just to petition Sidewalk Joggers’ (race organization) policy. So, I was able to participate in the end. But they weren’t outright saying, “You can’t do the race,” but they were initially saying, “You can’t do the race with the accommodations that you’re requesting.”

Even though, in the end, Alicia was able to run her race with 2 guides, the experience left her feeling defeated and unvalued. She continued,

Yeah, I think it goes back to that sense of just like, “Oh, this is exhausting,” and like, “I have to spend all this energy to convince you that I am valued in your event.” Essentially it makes me feel like, “Oh, you’re like . . . . Because you have a disability, you’re not like a real runner. You’re not valuable. We don’t appreciate your existence, really.” I think that’s the best way to put it.

Many participants were interested in going to a fitness facility to complete their own exercise routine but were often frustrated with their inability to use the equipment independently as they had to ask an employee, fellow patron, or friend to orient them to the machines. Sonia explained,

And then you get to using the equipment itself. It’s even back in the early 2000s, most of the equipment was like a flat panel to run the treadmill, almost like touchscreens. There were a few that had buttons or arrows, that were somewhat raised, but nothing had . . . . Even today that I’ve used, nothing has speech output to it unless you use an app on your phone. And so, always having to ask, “Okay, can you explain the layout of this panel for me so I can try to use it?” And then sometimes, I would bring along Scotch tape and I would be like, “Can you tape the start and the stop buttons?” You come back the next day and the tape has been removed cause someone else peeled it off. So, those kinds of things are pretty frustrating, just that there’s no . . . . Kind of how we have the standard access for building layouts and for lighting. There’s not that same standardization for sports equipment.

Diane expressed a similar frustration when she said,

But it’s very frustrating, those stupid touch screens on the machines. Those are impossible. This is the biggest complaint that I have there. Because you literally cannot get started or select your speed or something. But in the gym, most of the
gyms I went to I could never navigate my own thing, my own machine or exercise bike. And then you cannot . . . . I wish they had some way of, on some machines you can check how many calories you burn, what your heart rate is, all that stuff. I wish there was some kind of audio thing that could announce that. And if you don’t want to have the rest of the world know how much you burned or whatever, you just put headphones on, right?

The continuous process of navigating inaccessible spaces and educating others on their needed accommodations or modifications was draining for participants and something extra that they did not always want to deal with. Diane recalled,

When it comes to navigating gyms and stuff, getting there. It’s all doable. If you want to, you can learn your way but it kind of takes away from your motivation. Not only do you come to the gym and work out, you need to think about, “Oh my god, I need to go there. I need to change.” And then find the machine and make sure nobody’s on it.

In expressing a similar opinion about the inaccessibility of fitness spaces, Jessica added,

Yeah, so I think, and it was a really big facility too. It was like, I don’t know, like kind of windy and there was music, and it was loud and I just, I don’t. I just didn’t really feel like I could get a good sense of it. And also, I wanted to work out, I didn’t wanna learn a gym, if that makes sense. Like I wanted to just do my work out and be done and not have to deal with other people and learning a new environment at the time.

For Jessica, the exhaustion of having to navigate new spaces and interact with new people led her to not pursue activities she was aware of in her community. She continued,

There was like a kickball league in the city where I lived for a number of years, and I didn’t really ever reach out or do anything about it. And part of that might have been because I was . . . . You get kind of burned out of having that conversation after a while. Yeah. And talking to a new person.

“You Feel Like a Fish Out of Water”: Internalized Ableism

All participants experienced some form of internalized ableism (ie, negative thoughts and feelings about oneself based on societal stereotypes surrounding disability) in physical activity spaces that seemed to be linked to their perceptions of others and the perceived expectations others have for them. Ultimately, participants wanted to feel like they belonged while engaging in physical activities and not be outwardly noticed by their nondisabled counterparts. For some, entering an unfamiliar physical activity space made them feel nervous or anxious. Kimberly highlighted,

There’s definitely inaccessibility in those types of spaces, which is partially why going into them independently is nerve-racking in my brain. ‘Cause I know it’s not gonna be accessible. I think there’s always the potential for inaccessibility everywhere we go, and then I’m very pleasantly surprised when people or places are accommodating and everything’s good to go. So, I think some of these things are . . . . What’s the word? The society kind of sees blind people a certain way, and I think overcoming what general public sees as the abilities of a blind person is . . . . That’s the biggest kind of ableism, systemic or otherwise, that we kind of always face, is this big, whole blanketeted statement of blind people can’t do this because they’re blind.

She continued,

I’m going to have to prove to people pretty much anywhere I go that I can do the thing, whatever it is. And so it’s always been my mindset that I need to be, I don’t wanna say the best, that’s so egotistical, but I have to be on my game at all times when I step through a door of a place that is not designed for me, right? And this is a lot of weight I carry, and that probably leads to some of my anxiety because I know in my head, I need to be on my game all the time at all times, because the second you slip, the second you show you can’t do something, somebody’s gonna see that and have a concern, and so I guess I kind of just have always tried to put my most competent self forward to avoid those situations.

Similar to Kimberly, Jessica was concerned with how others perceived her and how that would influence their perception of other blind people. She explained,

And then I think too, just feeling pressure about how my failure or success would impact other blind people in the future that these people met. Like if I did really well, then they would think, oh yeah, blind people can do whatever it is. But also like with that skiing incident, like how I ended up needing to hold onto a bar and it’s like there are blind people who can do double black diamond. It’s like, this isn’t, this is just me like separating the [sic] what is a me issue versus what is like a physical limitations issue.

For the participants, asking for help was a specific area in which they expressed having internalized feelings about their capabilities. For example, Beth became more uncomfortable at the gym when her vision began to decline, and she needed to ask for more help, stating,

It is embarrassing sometimes. I think something I struggle with a lot too is I feel very self-conscious. I always have been comfortable in the gym and comfortable doing these things. And then, once I started to need a lot more help, I was self-conscious and then people will be like, “So why do you have that stick with you?” And I’m like, “Why does anybody have a red and white cane with them?” And they’ll be like, “But you can see. Why . . . .” And then it’s like my gym time, I start having to explain and all these things, and I’m like, I just wanna do my workout. So it’s frustrating, embarrassing. Sometimes, it’s annoying. And I just feel . . . . Sometimes, I just wanna go to the gym and I just wanna workout like everybody else, and I’m having to put in more mental effort than just . . . . I can’t just go and get my weights or do my workout.

Beth concluded her statement here by noting that “It’s just like I feel like I’m always asking for extra than the average person at the gym needs, if that makes sense.” In a comparable vein, Lisa expressed similar self-conscious feelings by stating:

When we first started doing the dragon boat racing and they had different exercises that they would do before getting into the boats and then everybody would start doing the exercises and they’re like okay what are you doing? So finally after a
couple times out there then they’d realize that I’m not seeing what they’re doing so somebody would yell over and explain how to do the exercise I’m like okay this works but for that time being you felt like a fish out of water. ’Cause it was like you didn’t know what they were doing and you’re just like okay I don’t want to do something and look stupid.

While Beth and Lisa voiced feeling self-conscious when needing and asking for assistance from others, Melissa and Shannon indicated they would rather avoid the thing they needed help with altogether. Shannon recalled,

They didn’t do this on purpose, but the Dragon Boat team had dry land training and it was for the whole team, but it was at a park. I didn’t know the park well enough to find the team ‘cause they’re like, oh, we’re gonna meet in the grassy knoll in the middle of like Regal Park. And I’m like, Nope. Like none of that’s helpful. ’Cause I could find Regal Park, but goodness knows, I couldn’t find a grassy knoll in the middle of it. So I was just like, no, I’m busy on Tuesday. Sorry. But I wasn’t at all busy, but it was like embarrassing to tell that to somebody.

Here, Shannon recalled an instance where her Dragon Boat team’s practice was in an unfamiliar location, and her decision not to attend because of the embarrassment of not wanting to ask a teammate for assistance in locating the practice. She continued,

It was like embarrassing to be like, “Can you meet me at the bus stop and walk me to the grassy knoll?” I’m a full-grown ass adult. That was embarrassing to say out loud, but that was what I needed, so it would’ve been nice for someone to maybe realize that and say, “Oh, would you like to come? I can meet you at the bus stop.” ’Cause then I wouldn’t have felt bad about asking or like, “Hey, do you want a ride? Like, would you like to come? I can give you a ride.” ’Cause if I’d gone once, then I would’ve known where the grassy knoll was for the next time, where it was just like that first time.

Not only was Shannon willing to forego activities with her teammates because she did not want to appear as a burden by asking someone to meet and show her to the activity teammates because she did not want to appear as a burden by asking someone to meet and show her to the activity. And sometimes, the frustration can get in the way for people, and so they get so frustrated that they just don’t even wanna deal with it and don’t feel they should have to deal with it. But in the process, nothing changes. So that’s always why I push through that frustration, and I make sure that I get on the treadmill and as frustrated as I am, that I’m at least on there for like 10 minutes, 15 minutes. To me, in my mind, it’s always like I’m proving a point. Like, I went through all that, I got you to explain this so I could use it, and now you’re gonna watch me use it and I’m gonna be here. Even if I’m walking, even if I have to stop and go to a walk ’cause I’m so annoyed or I’m tired, I make it a point to at least stay on it so that I’m visible. That’s always on the back of my mind, I’d have to say.

Perhaps these negative internalized feelings participants experienced in physical activity spaces are linked to interactions they have had with others. More specifically, several participants described instances where fellow physical activity goers did not believe they were blind or their participation in activities was discredited because of their blindness. For example, Alicia explained a time when a fellow fitness center patron could not fathom that she was blind and a guide dog user. She noted,

I had a woman at the . . . I haven’t been since before the pandemic, but the pool that our tri-team used to use, I had been working out there and I was getting dressed and everything in the locker room, and it was just me and my guide dog. And this woman had been observing me moving through the space, from my locker to where the towel bin was, or just doing things that you do in a locker room after a workout. And she was like, “Oh, are you training that dog?” And I was like, “No, this is my service dog.” And I went to take a shower and when I came back she was still there and she was like, “Oh, well you don’t look like somebody who needs a service dog.”

Having previously received remarks like this in other spaces, Alicia was not unfamiliar with this type of comment. She continued,

And so I was just like, “I don’t know what to tell you, I’m blind.” And she just couldn’t believe that I was . . . I had been working out with a friend, but I didn’t need the friend there. We were just doing it as most people do, going to work out together at the gym just to not be bored and hold each other accountable. But she couldn’t believe that I was there by myself. At this point my friend had already left. And I didn’t fit her stereotypes of what somebody with a disability let alone blindness looks like.

Unfortunately, like Alicia, Shannon, also had uncomfortable and discouraging conversations related to her sports participation and her visual impairment. She affirmed,

People usually ask how the sport works, which like, I’m not offended by ’cause I understand, they’re, like, how is that different than regular golf or how is that different than regular curling or how is that like, so I get the point of the question, but then some people demean it. They’re like, oh, so it’s not real curling and that’s the one that gets me. ‘Cause I’ll be like, oh, so it’s like this and they’re like, oh, so there’s like a special league and I’m like, yeah, we have like our Westerns and our provincials and they’re like, oh, so you don’t curl with like regular people. And I’m like, well, we have a blind league.
We don’t curl on the sighted league. If that’s what you’re asking, you don’t normal and regular me sir.

Discussion

In this study, the impact of ableism on the exercise, physical activity, and sport experiences of blind and visually impaired women was examined. While prior research has documented barriers to physical activity for blind and visually impaired adults, to the knowledge of the researchers, this is the first inquiry to attempt to understand the physical activity experiences of blind and visually impaired women through the lens of ableism. Findings revealed that participants needed to navigate inaccessible spaces, which led to exhaustion, frustration, embarrassment, and withdrawal from exercise, physical activity, or sports. While the participants continued to engage in physical activity and exercise despite these experiences, it is clear that instances of systemic and internalized ableism shaped the way they pursued, accessed, and engaged within these contexts.

Overall, participants were exhausted with often having to navigate inaccessible equipment, programs/events, or attitudes within exercise, physical activity, and sport environments. Unfortunately, a few participants experienced overt ableism in that their accommodations or access to physical activity events were explicitly denied solely based on their visual impairment. The explicit denial of access for participants in this study is congruent to the findings of Healy, who identified that blind or visually impaired people in the United States were unlikely to even receive responses to email inquiries to fitness centers about accessibility, yet alone accessibility considerations within those settings. These examples provide perhaps surprising depictions of direct ableism, where blind or visually impaired people are explicitly denied service and participation restriction simply because of an impairment or diagnosis. It appears that the hesitation to include blind and visually impaired persons into physical activity spaces may be linked to staff members’ negative attitudes, highlighting the need for disability-related training for fitness facility employees; however, even this assertion appears aligned with ableist thinking, where stakeholders or gatekeepers (eg, staff members) within physical activity spaces are reducing opportunities or access due to having to “deal with” disabled people. As such, it appears clear, and perhaps obvious, that the construction of trainings for staff in fitness facilities, races, or other types of physical activity or recreation spaces focused on minimizing ableist attitudes toward blind and visually impaired individuals specifically, and disabled people more generally, is necessary. We would encourage future researchers interested in this type of work to partner with visually impaired people themselves in helping to construct these types of trainings, to ensure that messages are supportive and constructive, and to avoid unintentionally perpetuating ableist messaging.

Within fitness facilities specifically, inaccessible equipment was a main source of frustration for participants. That is, it was clear that equipment was built with a normalized standard in mind, where accommodations for blind or visually impaired people presented a need for retrofitting, rather than consideration in the initial design of the facility or equipment. Instances like this reinforce the idea that fitness facilities follow an ableist gaze, which is first directed at nondisabled bodies, and the mind-bodies of disabled people are not sufficiently considered. This finding may have policy implications and supports prior assertions that regulations followed by fitness or exercise facilities, those typically informed by the Americans with Disabilities Act, are concerned with simply access to a built environment with no standardization for equipment. That is, rather than being concerned about the successful participation of those within the environment, and therefore purchasing and supplying equipment or exercise classes that are accessible, many fitness or exercise facilities may more simply only be concerned with meeting minimum standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act. Several participants spoke to this issue discussing the need for exercise equipment, especially cardio machines, had, for example, with audio output that would allow them to utilize the machine independently. This desire echoes the call to make fitness facilities accessible for blind and visually impaired individuals, and may support the need for future co-production research with blind and visually impaired people to help construct recommendations for exercise and physical activity spaces. The subsequent withdrawal from and hesitation to pursue new physical activities expressed by the participants is of little surprise as Kirk et al found an association between accessibility barriers to physical activity (ie, lack of accessible equipment, facilities, and programs) and lower physical activity engagement among visually impaired adults.

A majority of participants in this study expressed feelings of internalized ableism such as feeling burdensome to others and pressuring themselves to work hard and prove their abilities despite their visual impairment. For some participants, this materialized in a willingness to avoid activities where they had to ask for help or were hesitant to attend the activity on their own. These findings are reminiscent of those by Ives et al, who found that the fear of the unknown and attending activities alone was a significant internal barrier to physical activity for disabled persons. These implications of internalized ableism may have reverberating effects. That is, it may be reasonable to suggest that those experiencing internalized ableism, and subsequent withdrawal from physical activity opportunities, may not return to physical activity in other areas because they have learned that they, themselves, are not physically active individuals or do not have physically capable bodies, thus contributing to the low levels of physical activity identified by Ross et al. With this in mind, future research should consider further exploring the physical activity or exercise behavior effects of internalized ableism, as well as how internalized ableism can be reduced in efforts to further support physical activity engagement. For other participants, internalized ableism resulted in pressure to be the best version of themselves and show their capabilities to earn the respect of others. For some, these feelings, linked with internalized ableism here, may also be due in part to interactions with nondisabled people in the physical activity environment. More specifically, experiences of normalized ableism were commonly noted among the participants where others were not intending to cause harm yet their remarks of belittlement toward blind sport leagues and disbelief of the presence of a disability communicated to participants that being blind or visually impaired is an inferior state of being.

For our participants, experiences with inaccessible equipment and contexts and feeling burdensome highlighted instances of systemic and internalized ableism that framed their experiences in physical activity, sport, and exercise contexts and supported ideals of these contexts as ableist. Unfortunately, scholars have identified that experiences within ableist contexts like exercise facilities can culminate in trauma-inducing, emotionally dangerous, and humiliating contexts for disabled people. Experiences that were also noted by our participants. Notably, experiences like this may go far to remediate or combat the positive social and psychological benefits that disabled people can enjoy, such as
enhanced self-perception and the development of friendships, participation without representation. As such, it is clear that the way in which physical activity, exercise, and sport is accessed by and accessible for blind and visually impaired people may not be generalized to specific physical activities or sports.

The purpose of this study was to examine how ableism influences blind and visually impaired women’s experiences accessing and engaging in exercise, physical activity, and sport. Largely, participants in this study often navigated inaccessible physical activity spaces that resulted in exhaustion and expressions of internalized ableism. Though participants continued to be physically active, systemic, indirect, and direct ableism played a significant role in the ways in which they accessed and engaged in activities.

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