



# Valued tactics: Men's reframing of participation in football-based weight management programmes as a working utopia of collective action

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## ABSTRACT

For men living with obesity who want to lose weight, the femininity associated with practicing weight loss strategies often acts as a constraint when trying to integrate themselves within the social environment of conventional weight management programmes (WMPs). Although, increasingly popular sport focused men-only WMPs seem to have a favourable impact on sustaining men's engagement. Drawing on interviews with 14 men currently involved in football-based WMPs, we argue that a spirit of collective action spontaneously developed within this innovative weight management space of doing physical activity together, sparked by shared grievances of feeling emasculated when previously attending female-dominated commercial WMPs. This collective spirit surpassed weight loss as men's priority for attending the programme. To do justice to the bespoke social support constructed and relished by the men, we utilise the collective action concepts of tactics, frames and working utopias. This study may inspire more sociologically driven investigations of social support within health service contexts and the experiences of those subject to health-related stigma.

## 1. Introduction

As rates have tripled over the past four decades across the world (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020), obesity has come to occupy a central position within public health agendas at global, national and local levels (Public Health England, 2019; World Health Organization, 2004). Within the UK, weight management programmes (WMPs) remain a female dominated space despite the number of adult men living with obesity increasing from around 13.2% in 1993 to 27% in 2019 (NHS Digital, 2020). As a social practice, attempting to lose weight is still considered a predominantly feminine pursuit (Monaghan & Malson, 2013) and fundamental to why men remain reluctant to attend and integrate themselves into the social environment of most WMPs and services (Elliott et al., 2020). However, recent gender sensitive developments to WMPs, such as those structured around sport participation as both a weight loss and masculine affirming activity mitigate such constraints and have been reported as conducive to men's continued interest and engagement (Budden et al., 2020). While emerging evidence underlines men's endorsement of the type of social support they experience and contribute to within sport-based WMPs, thus far only banter has been offered as an influential mechanism through which this support is acted out (Budden et al., 2021). As social support is frequently cited as a

crucial factor for joining and maintaining involvement in WMPs (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016), this paper attempts to explain how this supportive environment develops amongst men living with obesity currently involved in a football-based WMP. To do this we utilise the concept of collective action to illustrate the growth of a sense of togetherness, which surpassed weight loss as men's principal motivation for attending the programme and brought about self-reported mental health benefits. Subsequently, we further argue that future studies may also want to draw attention to sociological mechanisms and divisions that drive health-related social support amongst stigmatised groups and break from the conventional depiction of social support as an entirely psychological concept.

### 1.1. Men and weight management

Over the past decade or so, there has been a steady increase in the number of studies on men's perspectives of living with obesity and overweight (Elliott et al., 2020; Gough et al., 2016; Gough & Flanders, 2009; Lewis et al., 2011; Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016; Monaghan, 2007, 2008; Monaghan & Malson, 2013). This research emphasises the gendered intricacies encountered by men when practicing weight loss strategies and the vehement resistance they can hold toward

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government-supported recommendations about attaining a healthier bodyweight (Monaghan, 2007, 2008; Monaghan & Malson, 2013). It has also been suggested that successful weight loss amongst men can substantially enhance their sense of self-image and wellbeing, revealing how profoundly some men care about their physical appearance (Gough et al., 2016). Therefore, while men can be reluctant to engage in weight loss practices and critical of Body Mass Index (BMI) as an accurate indicator of excessive fatness (Monaghan, 2007, 2008), they do seem to value the aesthetic benefits of losing weight once successful (Gough et al., 2016). Furthermore, in men-only weight management contexts, men can establish social bonds with others that hold a more affective resonance than the crude outcome measure of weight loss (Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016). These nuances reflect the sophisticated workings of masculinity in a social arena traditionally dominated by women. Therefore, men living with obesity who want to lose weight must negotiate the threats posed to their embodied masculinities by the femininity associated with both their existing fatness and the world of weight loss (Monaghan & Malson, 2013).

### 1.2. Men losing weight together

The developing evidence on men's experiences of practicing weight loss strategies together as part of a WMP indicates that, in comparison to mixed-sex environments, a gender-sensitive context vastly improves men's sustained engagement, behaviour change and overall sense of embodiment (Budden et al., 2020, 2021; Donnachie et al., 2017; Hunt et al., 2013, 2020; Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016). This work highlights the crucial role played by the masculine-affirming weight loss strategy of physical activity participation, to the extent that men involved in gender-sensitive WMPs view the prospect of exercising with a female partner as inconvenient and potentially detrimental to their masculine independence (Tripathi et al., 2020). In respect of the mechanisms behind men's prolonged engagement and sense of healthful and masculine embodiment realised through being physically active with other men, negotiating the overlaps and tensions between masculine capital and hegemonic masculinity is considered integral (Budden et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2013). Masculine capital is a key element accrued from masculine-affirming activities and spaces, such as physical activity in the form of football (Budden et al., 2020; Hunt et al., 2013), for building and maintaining a masculine identity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013). Given that doing masculinity through embodied action represents an opportunity for significant gains in masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009), collectively participating in physical activity for the purposes of weight loss has been identified as a way for men to favourably do gender and health simultaneously (Hunt et al., 2013, 2020). Furthermore, the opportunity to accrue masculine capital by attending a football-based men-only WMP is a stark contrast from the conventional and potentially feminising emotion-focused support offered at commercial WMPs dominated by women (Bennett & Gough, 2013). Along these lines, a highlight often referred to by participants when commencing men-only WMPs is meeting and developing meaningful connections with other men 'in the same boat' (Budden et al., 2020, p. 8; Lozano-Sufrategui et al., 2016, p. 20), 'like them' (Donnachie et al., 2017, p. 11), or 'like me' (Hunt et al., 2020, p. 26).

While this corpus of knowledge has been important in establishing that men-only sport-based WMPs mostly represent a more comfortable and engaging environment in comparison to conventional female-dominated WMPs, research has yet to consider how this supportive environment develops following men's initial desire to attend such programmes to reduce their medically 'excessive' BMI. In addition to the requirement of carrying a sufficiently excessive BMI to attend football-based WMPs, further commonalities that men embody and enter this context with are likely to include preconceptions about the social space of sport (de Visser et al., 2009; Monaghan, 2008), triumphs and setbacks during previous efforts to lose weight (Bennett & Gough, 2013; Couch, Han, Robinson et al., 2017), and being on the receiving end of the war on

obesity (Monaghan, 2007; Monaghan & Malson, 2013). These elements of biography, central to men's identities while living with obesity, have not yet been examined in-depth in the context of sport-based WMPs for men. Such presuppositions represent the starting point from which the supportive and meaningful collective spirit of practicing weight loss strategies with men 'like me' develops. This paper seeks to outline some of the mechanisms by which men themselves cultivate a supportive environment through participating in men-only football-based WMPs.

### 1.3. Collective action

The concept of collective action has been widely utilised to explain the activities and organisation of people who come together to form social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). Although, more generally, collective action has also been employed to better understand scenarios where group behaviour appears to develop a spirit and momentum of its own, which is greater than the accumulated actions of individual group members and unanticipated at the point of initial group formation (Cleland et al., 2018). While there is no conventional fashion or agreed pattern by which collective actions are structured (Cleland et al., 2018), drawing from Goffman (1974), the schema of a collective action frame carries merit for tracing the growth of strong feelings of injustice directed toward a particular issue previously considered unfortunate but tolerable (Snow & Benford, 1992). Specifically, a collective action frame draws attention to the bounds of who or what is to blame for the shared grievance identified by group members and the corrective action to be taken (Snow & Benford, 1992). In practice, actions to be taken represent tactics selected to bring about change (Blumer, 1951; Cleland et al., 2018; Jasper, 1997). Commensurate with the concept of tactics, Tilly's (1978, 1995, p. 41) theorisations on collective action used the term 'repertoire of contention' to describe 'the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests'. Repertoires and tactics of collective action utilised by a group tend to remain relatively conventional and stable over time (Becker, 1974), despite a vast array of actions available to deploy (Tilly, 1979). Nevertheless, some groups and tactics are more flexible than others and allow for a degree of innovation and the adoption of less familiar means of action within certain bounds (Tilly, 1979). Factors that influence the type and extent of unfamiliarity permitted when selecting tactics include the collective identity of a group (Jasper, 1997), individual identities and tastes of group members (Jasper, 1998), beliefs about past successes and failures (Cleland et al., 2018), social stratification (Becker, 1974), and affective attachment to the symbolic spaces where collective action is devised, negotiated and practiced (Crossley, 1999).

While these factors offer immediately logical reasons behind the development or change in focus of collective action tactics, less attention has been paid to the unplanned character of collective action (Snow & Moss, 2014). For Blumer (1951), there is a spontaneous facet to the circular interaction between the trajectory of collectivity and the actions inherent to collective behaviour. While social structures do not determine what people do, it is also the case that people do not behave randomly (McCall & Becker, 1990). Instead, people sometimes behave in surprising and unconventional ways as a consequence of continuously negotiating the process of interacting with others (McCall & Becker, 1990). The planning, negotiation and enactment of the action of collectives tends to occur within specified spaces that provide group members with a sense of ontological security (Jasper, 1997). The interactive and symbolic spaces chosen for members to group together thus represent a foci where collective ties between actors are strengthened (Becker, 1982). Crossley (1999) has further developed and underlined the importance of such spaces to the ongoing relational processes of collective action through the concept of working utopias, where members endeavour to produce the very environment of enchantment that affectively bonds them together. Inspired by Bourdieu's (1998) notion of *illusio* to explain how the members of a collective hold and sustain a belief in the game by the way they frame their activities, Crossley (1999,

p. 821) highlights that the sites of working utopias are also an arena for undertaking practical experiments which can produce ‘new ways of seeing, thinking and acting’ in everyday situations. Especially notable for the purposes of collective action, is that such experiments can throw-up evidence in the form of publicly visible yet contentious ‘proof’ that innovative and alternative methods of seeing, thinking and acting really can and do ‘work’ (Crossley, 1999).

In this paper, we emphasise the spontaneous, unintended dimension in the development of collective action amongst men living with obesity who joined a football-based WMP to lose weight. Specifically, we focus on the men's reframing of football participation as a collective action tactic in addition to its function as a weight loss practice. To better understand this spontaneous expanded meaning of attending a football-based WMP our analysis draws upon the collective action concepts of frames, tactics and working utopias.

## 2. The study

As part of a study based on interviews with 28 men aiming to better understand their experiences of losing and gaining weight while living with obesity, data analysed in this paper are drawn from interviews with the 14 men of this sample currently participating in football-based WMPs. In the initial study, we purposively sought to recruit adult men with a BMI of 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> and varying types of experience in practicing weight management strategies, with the aim of producing findings generalisable amongst the experiences of others in this population (Gobo, 2004; Mason, 2018). The weight management experiences of the 14 participants analysed in this paper are detailed in Table 1. The types of WMP that interviewees had experience of attending were divided into the categories of *public-funded* WMPs, *commercial* WMPs and *football-based* WMPs. These categories were formulated alongside data collection and determined by the activities involved, as reported by participants.

*Public-funded* WMPs included those provided and funded by local authorities as well as more clinical services delivered by professionals working for companies commissioned by local authorities. Meeting a sufficiently excessive BMI and residing in a specific catchment area was a requirement to attend programmes of this type. Programmes delivered directly by local authorities required participants, both men and women, to individually attend weekly drop-in sessions during an allotted time slot, where they were weighed and briefly discussed their recent dietary and physical activity behaviours with a healthy living champion. Public-funded WMPs delivered by clinical professionals offered both individual and group sessions as well as one-to-one support outside of these formal sessions. These sessions took more of a counselling format and were underpinned by affective, behavioural and cognitive principles drawn from health psychology. At the start of data collection all clinical group

sessions were mixed gender, but one provider also developed male-only group sessions during the course of our study. Some public-funded WMPs also offered optional group physical activity sessions, both in-person and online depending on lockdown restrictions at the time.

*Commercial* WMPs consisted primarily of group sessions delivered by companies that produced and sold dietary products. Mixed gender group sessions comprised of a weigh-in followed by a group discussion partly framed by the weigh-in results and partly informed by the sales remit of the weight management consultant delivering the session. Depending upon the local authority catchment area attendees reside and their BMI, they might be eligible to attend the first 12 weeks of group sessions for free. After this period, attendees either became members and paid a reduced monthly fee or paid full price for each session they attended. Paid members could also access one-to-one digital support from a weight management coach outside of group sessions.

*Football-based* WMPs consisted of a weigh-in followed by participation in a game of 6-a-side football. Identifying as a man and meeting a sufficiently excessive BMI was a requirement to attend programmes of this type. All aspects of the programme were competitive, with participants scoring goals for weight loss and own goals for weight gain, which contributed to their team's score for that week in addition to goals scored during the game. The programme was organised around a 14-week league season and men were part of the same team each week. Depending upon residential catchment area and BMI, men might be eligible to attend their first 14-week season at no financial cost. After this period, men had to become members to continue to participate in further league seasons by paying a monthly fee and having a sufficiently excessive BMI. There was also some variation in the football-based WMPs that men had attended, as one programme was funded by a two-year local authority grant in an area of severe economic deprivation. This programme occurred weekly, did not involve a competitive league and was always free to attend for men with a sufficiently excessive BMI living in the deprived area. All football-based WMPs included a WhatsApp group where men were encouraged to discuss their weight loss journey with dietitians, football coaches and amongst themselves.

Of the 14 men recruited, all were involved in football-based WMPs at the time of interview. Eight of these participants also had previous experience of attending commercial WMPs and three had prior experience of attending public-funded WMPs. Only Frank was simultaneously involved in two WMPs at the time of interview, as he regularly attended football-based WMPs on a weekly basis and ‘casually’ attended commercial WMPs with his female partner less frequently. As well as attending WMPs, we were also aware that the majority if not all recruited participants would bring a further dimension of weight management experience via engagement with dieting and physical activity in a less formal sense. Given the prevalence with which people sporadically participate in such weight loss practices (Glenn, 2013), this was not

**Table 1**  
Participant experiences of weight management strategies and self-reported BMI.

Participant Pseudonym	Public-Funded Weight Management Services and Programmes	Commercial Weight Management Programmes	Football-based Weight Management Programmes	Individual Weight Loss Practices (Diet/Exercise/Calorie Counting)	BMI (Body Mass Index) (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )
Geoff	X	X	X	X	60.0
Stuart	X	X	X	X	38.7
Tyler			X		31.0
Glenn	X	X	X	X	40.7
Will		X	X		33.9
Paul		X	X		30.4
Tim			X	X	40.0
Sam			X	X	35.4
Gareth		X	X	X	31.0
Frank		X	X	X	32.7
George		X	X	X	32.4
Brett			X	X	39.5
Matt		X	X	X	40.8
Steve			X	X	33.0

something that could be explicitly sampled for.

To recruit participants to the study we engaged with personnel involved in delivering football-based WMPs in the East of England. We also contacted local authority health and social care commissioners who oversee and allocate funding to WMPs in England to make them aware of the research and enquire about opportunities to immerse ourselves in the world of weight management. As a result, JD spent 16 hours observing the delivery of men-only football-based WMPs and 2 hours observing the delivery of a mixed-gender public-funded WMP. JD also engaged in a 2-hour meeting with a male commercial weight management consultant and five one-to-one meetings with commissioners and service providers across the UK with a vested interest in weight management services and obesity research. These initial meetings took place prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. To further immerse ourselves in the current policy environment of weight management services and obesity as a public health concern, both authors also attended in-person and online meetings hosted by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on obesity. JD also attended an obesity strategy event organised by a National Health Service Clinical Commissioning Group. A football-based WMP also admitted JD into their WhatsApp group chat, which forms part of the service, as a silent observer.

After receiving ethical approval from a local authority in the East of England, the entirety of data collection took place following the first COVID-19 lockdown restrictions imposed within the UK from March 2020. In-depth qualitative data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide focusing on men's experiences of losing and gaining weight. Initially, interviewees were asked to outline and describe the weight management strategies they had practiced before being asked more directly about their experiences of weight loss and gain. Participants were also asked how they felt about being categorised as obese and why the majority of WMPs tend to be dominated by women. During the interviews, JD attentively explore the lived world as described and understood by participants in their own words and then during data analysis focus shifted to unearthing the essential meanings of these described encounters (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Due to social distancing measures, interviews took place through each participant's choice of a phone or video call. 13 interviews were conducted via telephone and one via video call. In total, 11 hours and 56 minutes of interviews ranging from 37 minutes to 1 hour and 58 minutes were collected and transcribed verbatim. For anonymity purposes, pseudonyms are used to present data provided by interviewees.

Each participant also provided their self-reported Body Mass Index (BMI) or height and weight at the time of interview and completed a demographic survey of age, disability, socio-economic indicators (highest level of education, occupation, employment status), marital status, dependent children, and ethnicity. This information was collected to provide transparency regarding the participant sample upon which our analysis is based (see Table 2).

Analysis and identification of meaning from interview transcripts were guided by Gadamer's (1975) interpretive philosophy of translations between particular experiences and a whole understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, we made interpretive movements between particular experiences and a whole understanding of weight loss practices employed by men living with obesity. We did this by fusing together i) meanings men attributed to their experiences available within the texts of interview transcripts; ii) relevant understandings available within the texts of published peer-reviewed studies; and iii) our understandings of the weight management and public health contexts we encountered and interacted with during participant sampling. The broadening of our horizons via the fusion of these (con)texts heightened our sensitivity to the victim blaming implicit in the work of obesity policymakers and some researchers. As well as the unsettling position men living with obesity are located when expected to meaningfully engage with WMP environments dominated by women and feminine health discourse.

The lead author read each transcript as it became available, then,

**Table 2**  
Research sample demographics.

Demographic		Frequency
Age	20–29 years	2
	30–39 years	1
	40–49 years	9
	50–59 years	2
Disability	Yes	1
	No	13
Level of Education	University	6
	Further Education	3
	School	3
	Other	2
Occupation	Managerial, Administrative, Professional	6
	Intermediate	4
	Routine, Manual	2
	Long-term unemployed	2
Dependent Children	Yes	12
	No	2
Relationship Status	Married	10
	Cohabiting	1
	Separated	1
	Divorced/Dissolved	1
	Single	1
Ethnicity	White: British	12
	White: Gypsy/Irish Traveller	1
	White: Irish	1

following the completion of data collection, each transcript was re-read in full and weight loss practices were highlighted to identify and abstract the relevant data set. JD revisited and coded this data to illustrate participant's descriptions and interpretations of their involvement in weight loss practices. These codes were then organised into themes built around the causes and consequences that participants connected with specific weight loss practices and contexts. In the interests of quality assurance, SK also independently repeated these steps with six randomly selected transcripts. Both authors then met to discuss and scrutinise the identified themes. The purpose of this comparative discussion was not to check the 'inter-rater reliability' of our respective interpretations, but to add interpretive richness and further rigorous depth to the analysis (Seale, 1999).

In line with Gadamer's (1975) argument that understanding phenomena differently following the meanings identified by fusing together various perspectives through dialogue with the text is a hermeneutic necessity, our interpretations were guided by a desire to develop an understanding driven by originality and strike a 'harmony between the whole and the parts of the text' (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021, p. 6). When we met to discuss our interpretations, we agreed that the type of social support men encountered at WMPs was fundamental to whether they maintained their involvement. This pattern was most frequently articulated in interviews when men compared their sustained attendance at men-only football-based WMPs with their disengaging and relatively brief experiences of attending commercial WMPs. We also felt that existing psychologically reductive conceptualisations of social support did not do justice to the intricate social dynamics of the collective support interviewees constructed and experienced at football-based WMPs. Accordingly, we looked elsewhere for sociologically-informed theoretical frameworks more indicative of the supportive contexts where men were comfortable and motivated by the opportunity to practice weight loss strategies together. This drew us in the direction of the concept of collective action to explain our findings. We invite readers to judge the quality of our findings presented below in terms of inferential generalisability (Lewis et al., 2014) to the football-based WMP experiences of other men in the UK living with obesity.

### 3. Findings and discussion

For most men, the space afforded to them by a football-oriented WMP meant that social aspects of being part of this collective became a more meaningful priority than the purpose of weight loss, for which men had initially attended programmes of this type. Here, we first detail this priority shift and then explain how this process is connected to the men's disenchanting experiences of female-dominated commercial WMPs, before elaborating as to why football-based programmes seem to function as a working utopia for men living with obesity who want to lose weight.

#### 3.1. The expanded frame of football-based weight management as a collective action repertoire

Men initially joined a football-based WMP through a variety of pathways such as after seeing advertisements online, in newspapers, and at work, knowing someone who already attends, encouragement from a partner or through referral by a health professional due to an obese BMI,

*The nurse said to me when I did the [BMI] check ... 'because you're overweight the council will pay for you to do one of two things if you're interested' ... one of them was Weight Watchers and one was Shift the Timber, a football program. I said, 'I'll do it'. She didn't have to tell me any more ... 'yeah, I'll have some of that!'. (Will)*

As the remit of the football programmes was to support men living with overweight or obesity to lose weight, a BMI that bordered upon or fell within an obese classification was a requirement to attend for a 12-week period or 14-week season. The focus on weight loss was also reflected in the structure of these programmes, whereby participants could score 'goals' by losing weight. Interviewees recalled how this reward system maintained their interest in engaging with the programme, although once they had started the programme their primary motivation soon shifted to the opportunity to continue socialising with other men they could immediately relate to,

*There's more people that are exactly like me. They're in the exact same boat as me. Just blokes who want to shed some pounds, make some friends, kick a ball around. And then at the end, if you can have a laugh, that's a bonus as well. (Matt)*

Disappointing and disengaging previous encounters with more conventional WMPs were a further commonality that strengthened the sense of connection amongst men and their appreciation of finding a WMP in which they felt authentically involved,

*It (commercial WMP) is very centred on women ... before you know it, you're having a discussion on losing weight and the menstrual cycle, which you're clearly not going to stay around and get anything out of. (George)*

The principle of using football as a masculine hook to spark men's interest was described as a 'no brainer' by interviewees, yet when it came to actually entering this context while embodying the identity of a man living with obesity, men perceived playing football for weight loss purposes as both innovative and unfamiliar due to the 'stigma of a fat bloke going into a skinny person's game' (Stuart).

The combination of deploying football as an engagement strategy for weight management amongst men, prior experiences of trying to immerse themselves in uninspiring weight management contexts and the unusual embodiment of playing football as a 'fat bloke' extended the impact of the programmes beyond the initial medical rationale of BMI reduction. Specifically, some interviewees referred to how their experiences contested two forms of stigma. Namely, defying the emasculating 'women only' stigma that feminises men who speak openly about their desires and efforts to lose weight, and challenging the stigma that participating in intense physical activity to lose weight is not aesthetically appropriate for people with obesity. As football-based WMPs are

also relatively innovative spaces because participants being physically active together is the main focus of the service, we argue that such a weight loss strategy for men represents a form of collective action.

For Tilly (1979), the tactics of collective action tend to be either relatively flexible or more rigid. In the case of football as a weight loss strategy for men, what started out as a rigid health-based repertoire became a more flexible and expansive tactic that established meaningful connections amongst men and symbolically challenged taboos concerning bigger bodies participating in physical activity and the feminine dominance of weight loss contexts. A central mechanism that gave rise to the close bonds that evolved between most men was a shared disenchantment with traditional female-dominated WMPs, especially commercial programmes,

*If I think about Weight Watchers, I think of women sitting around talking about how to lose weight and what they've been up to in the week and all that sort of shit ... as a man, I'd rather go and play a sport than go and sit around in a room. (Frank)*

This unforeseen reframing of football-based WMPs as spaces for men to air shared grievances about the feminine character of commercial WMPs served as the basis from which men founded the collective fortitude to challenge the stigma attached to their weight loss quest. As Tilly (1979) points out, the degree of flexibility and growth possible within collective action is determined by the previous experiences of group members, and in this way, the trajectory of men's weight management journey was telling, as all nine of the interviewees with experience of both commercial and football-based WMPs indicated a strong preference for the latter. So much so, that eight of these men stated they had no intention of returning to commercial WMPs following their 'discovery' of football-based initiatives as their preferred weight loss tactic.

Overall, the process by which men's involvement in football-based WMPs grew into a tactic of collective action represents an element of spontaneity, a feature of collective action that has tended to be overlooked as it runs counter to the dominant theoretical belief that collective behaviour is always more organised than spontaneous (Snow & Moss, 2014). Along these lines, our findings are original in that they suggest somewhat rigid and organised collective action can unexpectedly develop into more expansive and flexible collective action as a consequence of group members sharing relevant prior experiences (Tilly, 1979). While the collective action tactic of playing football together remained constant during the spontaneous emergence of men becoming more sensitive to the stigmatisation of their health-related intentions and behaviours, it was the meaning that men attributed to this tactic which brought about the expansion of the collective action frame. The meanings of frames can be reworked through the interactional processes inherent to collective action, as the meaning of a frame does not exist without context and is always open to reinterpretation (Reinecke & Ansari, 2021). Thus, as can occur within collective action, men's involvement appeared to take on a life of its own (Cleland et al., 2018).

#### 3.2. Gendered grievances with confessional commercial weight management programmes

The shared gendered grievances with commercial WMPs men conveyed as a consequence of their relevant previous experiences were primarily directed toward commercial WMP organisers for cultivating a feminine environment,

*There is probably a little bit of embarrassment as well ... Slimming World and Weight Watchers they're mainly marketed at women. So, if you walk in that door automatically people go 'what's he doing here?' ... that to me is another barrier. (Glenn)*

As well as feeling 'watched' and increasingly self-conscious upon entering the room, all interviewees with experience of attending commercial WMPs identified the confessional framing of the discussion that

followed the weigh-in as the most dis-engaging and dreaded aspect of each session,

*I literally signed up and on my second weigh-in I walked out because the woman looked absolutely horrified at what I'd put on ... I didn't want to have to face the room ... I know that I would've then had to stand up and say why [I'd gained weight] ... because everyone gets asked how they've done. So, for me to stand up and say I've put on five kilos and it was my first full week there, I just didn't want to do it. (Geoff)*

As obese bodies are continually visible, they signify a type of palpable confession by default (Couch et al., 2017). Although, explicitly and publicly confessing this in a weight management context requires one to announce that they are guilty of bringing about their unwanted plight (Couch et al., 2017). 'Admitting' their culpability was a sticking point that men were keen to avoid when under the gaze of women,

*A lot of men don't really like to be held accountable, don't like admitting fault or asking for help ... you're admitting defeat, aren't you? (Frank)*

It was the way that such confessions would be received within the feminine climate of commercial WMPs which men feared more so than the disappointment of weight gain per se,

*They (women attendees) are all pally pally ... saying, 'you've done this, you've done that', 'you've tried really hard' and 'well done'. And as soon as they walk out the room, it's 'fucking silly cow, why has she managed to do that?... how come she can't do it?'. (Frank)*

In contrast, all men felt the social experience of being weighed in front of their team-mates at football-based programmes was an integral and generally supportive aspect of working towards their desired weight loss, even when they had gained weight,

*With MAN v FAT you have the option to weigh-in by yourself, you don't have to weigh-in in front of everybody else, but everybody does because when people have a bad week and put weight on, it's supportive ... they will take the mick and pull your leg, but it is a really supportive process when that happens ... being weighed in that environment. (George)*

In addition to the contrasting environments of how they encountered, perceived and responded to the spectacle of weighing-in according to gender, men referred to a preference for the way football-based programmes were structured. Where weighing-in was only an aspect of the programme alongside the practical and embodied action of playing football, rather than 'sitting and chatting' about their weigh-in results as the main event,

*Slimming World groups, they go, they weigh, they chat, it just doesn't really appeal to me. They pay £8 a month to get some advice and sit and chat. The thing with the MAN v FAT it's not exactly the same, it's more like a gym membership ... encouraging you to go, they're giving you something to do. (Brett)*

In tandem with contemporary understandings of what constitutes masculine appropriate health-related behaviour (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013), the lack of embodied action at commercial WMPs in favour of a more reflective confessional approach was appraised as being more indicative of femininity,

*Fuck that, I don't want to go sit around with a load of people saying I'll get a round of applause for losing a pound. The way it's set up is the fact that women like to sit around a lot and talk about things. Blokes don't, and I think that's why a lot of men don't want to go. (Matt)*

As men tend to oversimplify masculinity and femininity as polar entities (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013), they also saw themselves as naturally incompatible with commercial WMPs, especially once they had experienced the masculine-affirming context offered by football-based WMPs. Interestingly, and potentially through their socialisation with

other men at football-based programmes, interviewees with no prior experience of attending commercial WMPs, such as Brett and Tim, had also developed a disdainful perspective of the approach taken by such services. Therefore, while gender sensitive WMPs are more efficacious than conventional WMPs for engaging men, the collective spirit that transpires amongst men as a result may encourage an unnecessary and divisive belief system amongst group members that their health issues and needs are 'completely different' to those of women. The collective conceptualisation of WMPs as either ideal or entirely inappropriate in conjunction with gendered norms fuelled a feeling of injustice amongst men that their previous weight loss efforts guided by commercial WMP strategies were destined to fail. This strengthened the belief that masculinities and femininities are irreconcilable and from men's position of feeling as though they were now receiving weight management support within a vastly more favourable context, women represented an easy and unjust target to deflect attention away from their own stigmatised obesity. Prior to attending football-based WMPs, men with disillusioning experiences of commercial WMPs represented a 'sentiment pool' of people with a common grievance, but lacked sufficient connection with others in similar circumstances to voice their sense of collective injustice (Snow et al., 1986, p. 467). By being introduced to the social environment of men only football-based WMPs, men were acquainted with a network of like-minded actors to form bonds that constitute collective action (Snow et al., 1986).

Men's preferred tactic of participating in football to manage their bodyweight was not only empowering in terms of agency, but the popularity of this approach across the participant sample also challenges the dominant and long-standing convention of structuring WMPs around the main activity of a confessional group discussion. Throughout the interviews, men were eager to differentiate themselves from 'other people', particularly women, who they believed were better suited and more receptive to weight management sessions framed around group discussion. In doing so, men both challenged a dominant cultural practice of WMPs and laid out an oppositional collective identity (Meyer & Whittier, 1994). A 'conventional way of doing things' provides collective action with an element of routine for group members to follow (Becker, 1974, p. 770), and although football-based WMPs for men do not represent a direct threat to the conventional routine of commercial programmes, services designed in this way do offer a more sensitive alternative to the long-standing subcultural gendered stratification of commercial WMPs.

### 3.3. Practicing fat men only football as a working utopia

In contrast to disenchanting experiences of 'sitting and chatting' at commercial WMPs, football-based programmes presented men with the chance to involve themselves in the action-focused support they generally prefer (Bennett & Gough, 2013). This support involved a degree of laddish 'banter' prevalent in football culture, but the accompanying weight loss frame seemed to ensure this only occurred within the limits of a respectful threshold,

*It's all light-hearted because everyone knows that everyone's there for a reason. So although we all have a laugh and a joke, it's not probably to the extent of what we would in a normal football team ... if you turned up at your football team and said to the lads, 'oh I'm overweight' they'd rip you. (Gareth)*

Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of banter as a device used by men to create a comfortable and supportive WMP environment (Archibald et al., 2015; Budden et al., 2021), and data in the current study suggests banter was enacted with an element of sensitivity that meant the experience was also an empowering one for men who did not embody an outright laddish nature,

*There's always a little bit of banter going on there which takes you away from why you're really there ... I'm quite a reserved and quiet person. I*

*don't have a wide circle of friends. Compared to some people around the area [I live] ... you think 'actually, I'm not a man', you know, a typical bloke. (Will)*

Thus, football-based WMPs were not only a space for men to practice a weight loss strategy together, but also provided a rare men-only forum to consider, act out and locate their masculine identities. In some interviews, this revealed a link between the image of masculinity that men were trying to uphold and the detrimental consequences for their mental health,

*As a man, there's the whole mental health crisis at the moment ... it is hard being a man in every aspect of life, not just being overweight. Like you've got a lot of responsibility and you've got a lot on your shoulders and a lot to deal with. (Frank)*

While not all interviewees connected their struggles with masculinity, bodyweight and mental health so succinctly, all interviewees did associate their bodyweight with either the status of their masculine image or their mental health. In each case, football-based WMPs were something of a saviour for the men as a unique social space missing from any other domain of their lives,

*I started eating and drinking more because I was lonely ... my relationship broke down. There was a cycle of depression ... circling downwards ... I saw this advert for it (football-based WMP), and I couldn't imagine a better way of doing something I love and needed. The first two weeks I didn't like it at all ... I found it really difficult but that was the depression. Then I lost a bit of weight and people around me were supporting me ... you quickly become teammates, you have to. (Sam)*

As collective action is dependent on dynamic and ongoing interaction between group members (Blumer, 1951), 'success' is not only a matter of outcome, but the process of doing collective action can also bring about rewards and favourable benefits that are not necessarily quantifiable or visible to outsiders (Jasper, 1997). In working towards weight loss together through playing football, men further sustained and boosted an environmental climate that tapped into masculinity without reverting to some of the humiliating banter previously experienced when playing for a conventional football team. Coupled with a sensitivity for one another's mental health, the combination of playing football to lose weight and the developed sense of togetherness meant that the social space of football-based WMPs represented a working utopia in ways that carried more holistic value for men than the simplistic and impersonal measure of BMI. Thus, once men had 'tested out' men-only football-based WMPs with favourable consequences for their mental health (Crossley, 1999, p. 821), they also challenged and reformulated the notion that 'good health' is chiefly determined by bodyweight,

*Nobody's fat because they want to be ... if you could do a similar thing with weight loss to what's happened with mental health, I think that would be a game changer ... people need to be comfortable in their own bodies and I think that's what we should be encouraging. (George)*

The practical embodied learning essential to maintaining the magic space of working utopias offers the opportunity for change by creating symbolic and concrete evidence that alternative ways of acting, thinking and feeling are possible (Crossley, 1999). Such experiences were a stark comparison to the feminine-oriented confessional reflections that had previously led men to become disengaged from commercial WMPs, a space where they were only 'told about change' (Crossley, 1999, p. 817). Lozano-Sufrategui et al. (2016) have also argued men-only sport-oriented WMPs bring about a camaraderie that becomes more meaningful and engaging for men than the initial motive of weight loss in the process of taking practical collective action to lose weight. Lozano-Sufrategui et al. (2016) found men were initially a little reluctant to participate in sport-based WMPs through fear of being fatter than other participants and the potentially stigmatising combination of playing sport and

identifying as fat. While interviewees in our study were also conscious of this contradictory embodiment, 'fatter' men participating in structured exercise for the first time in several years were viewed with a profound respect,

*One guy joined the other week ... well, I thought he was going to pass out! He's only ran around for about three minutes ... he was like bent double behind the goal ... I know people get out of shape, but I mean, some of these people don't look like they've done sport for all their lives ... you look sometimes and think 'bloody hell, fair play'. (Tyler)*

Although living with obesity may not constitute a social division to the same extent as gender, class or ethnicity, such embodiment is fundamental to identifying with the initial aims of the programme and then being accepted by other men into this working utopia. Akin to forms of collective action shaped around removing stigma, such as those instigated by minoritized ethnic and underprivileged socio-economic groups, the very aspects of identity that are stigmatised in wider society are empowering symbols of shared understanding within this space (Jasper, 1997). Unique to the situation of football-based WMPs is that, in theory, the more successful men are at losing weight by immersing themselves in the programme, the less collective affinity and embodiment they share with fellow group members. Thus, although the practice of fat men playing football to lose weight may function as a working utopia that challenges the notion weight loss is a feminine practice and offers alternatives to female-dominated WMPs, such programmes remain structured around a far-reaching anti-obesity imperative (Monaghan, 2007). Subsequently, men who attend football-based WMPs may get away from obesity stigma when situated in this space, but like women, remain unprotected within everyday life from the obligation to escape their deviant bodyweight,

*When I started doing MAN v FAT ... the kids are brilliant at giving feedback. They point it out to you and said, 'oh dad, you've got a jaw line, you've got your neck back again'. Kids are very honest, aren't they? (Steve)*

#### 4. Conclusion

Drawing upon interviews with men living with obesity who have experience of participating in men-only football-based WMPs, this paper has argued that such involvement gives rise to a sense of collective action against the stigma commonly encountered by men living with obesity who practice weight loss strategies. Disillusioning prior experiences of attending female-dominated commercial WMPs and the opportunity to practice weight loss strategies with other men were central to the development of this collective spirit. So meaningful was men's sense of connection with one another that this surpassed weight loss as the primary motivating factor for attending and thus extended the framing of their involvement. Consequently, the meaningful bonds men established were cited as bringing about unanticipated benefits for their mental health. As men were galvanised by their current, collective and practical involvement in men-only football-based WMPs compared to previous experiences of the disengaging confessional feminine environment of commercial WMPs, the paper also offers nuanced insight into the gendering of health focused social support. We would encourage future studies of group-based social support to also elaborate on the sociological of this support to ensure that potentially divisive social grievances are not overlooked and thus unintentionally legitimated. Due to the absence of ethnic variety in our study sample, a consequence of the lack of ethnic variety at the WMPs interviewees were recruited from, there is a priority to investigate why WMPs remain predominantly white spaces. Within the health service arena of WMPs, more explicit attention is also required to address anti-obesity agendas, which underpinned men's need for both collective action against weight stigma and their desire to lose significant weight.

## Ethical statement

The authors declare that this is their own original work, which is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere. JD completed all aspects of the research process, including the writing of the paper. SK assisted with interview transcription and data analysis.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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