

## Research Space

Journal article

**Learning about bodies and the lived consequences**

**Hornsey, R. and Gubby, L.**

This article has been accepted for publication in The Journal of Sociology.

## Learning about Bodies and the Lived Consequences

### **Abstract**

From the perspective of a final year physical education and sport and exercise science undergraduate student, this paper explores the relationship between learned and lived experiences related to the body. The research uses an autoethnographic approach that focuses on the educational and social issues that the first author faced as his physical identity changed. The author reflects on the ways in which his once acceptable body experienced declining capital (Bourdieu 1984) as his body became too 'fat' within the spaces that he was connected to. In an attempt to resist institutionalised understandings that imply that larger bodies are a result of neglect and poor lifestyle choices, this research demonstrates the impact of cultural understandings on the everyday life of a university student seeking an 'acceptable body'.

**Key Words:** autoethnography, bodies, capital, habitus, masculinity, physical education

This paper adopts an autoethnographic framework in order to apply sociological theory to experiences that the first author faced whilst in his final year of a physical education and sport science degree at university. Using autoethnography allowed him to reflect and give an honest account of his experiences in order to contribute to the growing body of literature that addresses the marginalisation and rejection of certain bodies within physical education, sport and exercise spaces. From seeing a shift in his body composition that also led to an increase of twenty kilograms of body weight, he documented the moment of realisation where he was 'classified' as obese by guidelines issued through government

institutions. Having previously devoted years helping people lose body weight, he struggled to come to terms with how he had let his body change. From this, and despite the effort he was putting into his studies, he felt lazy, deviant, and unworthy to be able to continue in an industry that only credits those with the leanest physique. At the time of writing the reflections, he was a twenty six year old white, heterosexual male who worked both as a personal trainer and as a sports coach for children at primary schools around the South East of the United Kingdom.

This paper aims to help raise the awareness of different bodies within physical education, sport and exercise spaces. It endeavours to encourage individuals to enjoy these spaces and not feel like they are intruding on areas that belong to the 'normal sporting body' (Chase 2008). In contrast to other literature that looks at the 'fat *sporting* body' (e.g. Chase 2008; McMahon et al. 2012; McMahon and Penney 2013) this paper is linked to health-based university degree programmes and gym spaces in general.

### **'FAT BODIES': WHERE DO THEY STAND?**

A recent survey in the United Kingdom suggests that 27% of adults are classified as obese (NHS Digital 2018: 17). Government and health organisations convincingly lead obese people to believe that they are living with a chronic disease caused by overeating and a sedentary lifestyle (Monaghan 2008a). Evans et al. (2008: 17) use the term 'body pedagogies' to describe 'conscious activity taken by one person, organisation, or a State, designed to enhance an individual's understanding of their own and/or others' corporeality'. They argue that body pedagogies provide guiding resources which are a reflection of particular social and cultural understandings influenced by corporeal norms and health concerns of a particular time, such as the current 'obesity epidemic' (Gard and

Wright 2001; Cliff and Wright 2010). Discourses associated with obesity normalise the idea that fat people are a cost to taxpayers and bad citizens (Petersen and Lupton 1996 cited in Cliff and Wright 2010). Fat is deemed a clearly visible symbol of self-neglect and lack of willpower (Cliff and Wright 2010) giving off messages of laziness, lack of hygiene and unkempt presentation (van Amsterdam et al. 2012). We learn to understand fat bodies as the undesirable 'other' (Cliff and Wright 2010) in comparison to 'normal' and acceptable bodies. Government policies which reinforce this discourse have included the weighing of schoolchildren and the subsequent categorisation by BMI (LeBesco 2011), and published guidelines on frequency and duration of physical activity (Ayo 2012). In addition, the free market allows corporations to market goods which promote a healthy lifestyle such as low-calorie food, fitness clothing, health magazines, and exercise DVDs (Ayo 2012). Brands offer their wares and then ethical, neoliberal citizens make the decision to consume them (Ayo 2012).

Body pedagogies are evident in educational establishments where school health and physical education programmes are based around tackling 'the epidemic' (Cliff and Wright 2010). When considering the use of the word 'epidemic' in relation to fatness, LeBesco (2011) suggest that those that are of a 'normal' body shape feel a need to safeguard themselves by separating themselves from fat bodies and monitoring the abnormal 'other'. The way language is used to suggest fatness is a problem that is unacceptable and out of control promotes the idea that to possess a fat body is a moral deviance (Murray 2007; Monaghan 2008b). As a result of this, 'obese individuals are highly stigmatized and face multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination because of their weight' (Puhl and Heuer 2009: 941). Burrows, Leahy and Wright (2019: 201) suggest that PE may not reduce obesity or successfully influence students' actions, but 'they may leave a damaging legacy, which

cannot be ignored (e.g. weight-based oppression, victim blaming, discrimination, body hating, stigmatization, weight bias and so on)'. Gard and Wright (2001) explain how there tends to be a lack of critical consideration in physical education in relation to the obesity epidemic which impacts upon physical activities, practices and research within physical education. According to van Amsterdam et al. (2013), teachers displayed an understanding that a lack of body fat was closely linked with good health and the potential for good performance. Teachers presented bodies as malleable entities which should be shaped to comply with social norms of the 'good body', likening the body to a project.

In addition to educational establishments, body pedagogy is also reiterated within media and entertainment across a number of platforms (Markula and Pringle 2006). The most obvious being the innumerable television shows that are dedicated to the management and regulation of the fat body that is out of control (for example, *The Biggest Loser USA*). Such programmes reinforce discourses related to which bodies are considered an acceptable shape, size, and weight. Fat bodies, on the other hand, are gazed at as 'freak like' and 'monstrous' (Richardson and Locks 2014). Dominant discourses shape how we perceive a person's body and broader social discourses related to fatness and fitness are often reflected in schools. Within schools, children's understanding of bodies and valuable physical activity practices are influenced by the intersected and interrelated body pedagogies endorsed outside of the school environment (Powell and Fitzpatrick 2015).

Bourdieu (1991: 76) describes how discourses continue to exist in a particular way as long as they are accepted by society, 'i.e. heard, believed, and therefore effective within a given state of relations of production and circulation'. The discourse of how we should present our bodies has therefore led to society thinking that the fat body is 'out of control, out of place, and out of shape' (Sykes and McPhail 2008: 67) and therefore, holds less values (or

capital) than non-fat bodies. Findings in Varea and Underwood's (2016) study further emphasise this as they found that pre-service physical education teachers made judgments about fat bodies being abnormal, deviant and disgusting, and demonstrated pity towards those they deemed as fat.

However, our perception of the body and the judgements we make are subject to time, place, and the society in which we live (Shilling 1993). For example, historically, within Western society, a larger body was commonly recognised as a symbol of wealth and success whereas slimmer bodies were often associated with the poor (Synnott 1993; Richardson and Locks 2014). If we recognise the very real impact of temporal and social influence on our own understandings and consider the body in a more neutral way, we can recognise that body shape does not always have a direct link to health (Le Besco 2011). Suggestions about causation between fatness and illness need to be more critically assessed and questioned (Clough 2004; Flegal et al. 2005).

## **BOURDIEU'S RELATIONAL CONCEPTS OF FIELD, HABITUS, AND CAPITAL**

### **Field**

Social issues of body can be analysed by applying Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of field, habitus and capital. Bourdieu (1984) defines fields as socially occupied spaces where informal rules, values and power relations exist. Gyms and educational contexts can be viewed as fields. An agent (or person's) position within a given field is influenced by the rules (or doxa) that help structure a field. The doxa tend to align to the collective values and social norms in the field. As such, these doxa more or less structure acceptable ways to act within a particular field (Bourdieu 1977). However, occasionally, agents may wish to transform the doxa in order to benefit their own position within the field, whilst those trying

to preserve the status quo will struggle to maintain the existing doxa (Bourdieu 1977). Those in the field will evaluate an individual's habitus to judge how well they fit.

### **Habitus**

Habitus is described as 'socially acquired, embodied systems of schemes of disposition, perceptions and evaluation that orient and give meaning to practices' (Bourdieu 1984: 17).

Bourdieu (1984) explains how habitus does not result from either autonomous choice or structural influence. Instead, it is the result of both of these factors over time, whereby dispositions become influenced by previous experiences and structures, but that also influence existing experiences and structures, and, critically, shape our opinions and views of these. Individuals enter into fields with a habitus which is shaped by personal experiences as well as social class, gender, race, ethnicity, educational background, and other characteristics. Habitus determines a person's status and behavior in a field and can be viewed as "'unreflective practical habits', which shape the way we act and think in different social contexts or 'fields'" (Browitt 2004: 1). Additionally, capital is often acquired as a result of an individual's habitus aligning with the doxa of a field.

### **Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) describes how capital can be affiliated with power within the field it is presented in and it usually presents itself in three core forms. The first is economic capital which is related to an instant conversion to money. The second is social capital which is related to social networks and connections which 'provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital' (Bourdieu 1986: 248-249). The amount of social capital that an individual agent will possess is dependent on the number of connections one can activate and the amount of capital each of those connections has. Finally, cultural

capital can take a variety of forms, including an embodied state, an objectified state and an institutionalized state which includes the capital gained from educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital is notable in its embodied state because, as Bourdieu (1986: 244) explains: 'the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan [...] cannot be done second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out)'. In order to possess this type of embodied cultural capital, the bearer of the capital must invest personal time and sacrifice. Cultural capital can also present itself in an objectified state which is linked to material objects. The important element of objectified cultural capital is that it is not solely the ownership of a material object, but the ability to 'consume' it, the means to 'appropriate' it (Bourdieu 1986). It is the knowledge and understanding which goes beyond simple ownership that turns this capital into symbolic capital. Additionally, one form of capital can be transferred into other forms of capital. As suggested by Shilling (1993), one's socio economic status has an imprint on their body. For example, the body of somebody who can afford to eat the required food, and afford access to the required training guidance and facilities may have a more aesthetically pleasing body than those without the same opportunities. This is an example of economic capital being transferred into physical capital. The concepts of field and capital are used to explain how hierarchal structures are formed within and amongst groups (Bourdieu 1984; Connell 1987).

The field of the gym can be used as a good example of how people's bodies are evaluated and earn capital. In masculine dominated gym spaces in particular, those who possess the largest muscles and have the leanest bodies tend to possess the most physical capital due to their compliance with dominant discourse, therefore, they are most respected by others in the environment (Andrews, Sudwell and Sparkes 2005). Alternatively, within the same space, those who possess fat bodies would be at the bottom of the hierarchy, particularly



because being fat has been conflated with excess femininity (Sykes and McPhail 2008). It is worth noting that this is a social field whereby particular understandings of masculinities dominate. Pringle (2001, 2003) discusses how practices which emphasise masculinity, such as rugby, allow participants to assert the power of their 'manly' bodies over 'other' males and all females. Pringle (2001) explains how he used and presented his body in certain ways in order to reproduce dominant discourses of masculinity in this field. For example, he explains: 'at times, I would act 'manly' by taking dares, swearing and being physically rough' (Pringle 2001: 434). Pringle (2003) demonstrates that normalised actions and presentations of the body exist in the field of rugby which reproduces dominant masculinities. This work demonstrates how particular social fields adopt specific understandings and enactments of masculinities.

## **METHODS**

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach where the researcher reflects on their own experiences for the purpose of analysis (Sparkes 1995), retrospectively giving meaning to events (Polkinghorne 1995). Autoethnography explores the author's personal story and connects these stories to wider political, social, and cultural meanings (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis 2004) with the aim of extending sociological understanding (Sparkes 2000). Allen-Collinson (2012: 194) explains that 'the researcher's own experiences *qua* member of the social group and within social contexts are subject to analysis, in order to produce richly textured, often powerfully evocative accounts or even performances of lived experiences'. It can be seen as both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Ellis and Bochner (2000: 737) describe the process of autoethnography,

‘I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I’ve lived through. Then I write my experience as a story.’

The body is of utmost importance when recollecting events and also when trying to explain and understand actions performed during a moment. Bourdieu (1990) recognises the importance of placing the body in a posture to remind us of emotions, thoughts and feelings. Maybe partly because ‘most of the words that refer to bodily postures evoke virtues and states of mind’ (Bourdieu 1990: 70), for example, someone walking in a determined manner as opposed to someone walking hesitantly. Bourdieu (1990) discusses the importance of embodied sociology. He recognises how the body learns physical conduct and movements and then enacts these movements as ‘body automatisms’ (Bourdieu 1990: 69). Informed by common sense and habit, agents do not consciously consider these actions. For example, he discusses embodied manners such as sitting up straight and how, over time, this culturally significant state ceases being a conscious thought process. The body is of utmost importance when considering habitus, it is an essential component which is closely connected to time and language. The actions of the body can be viewed as an *enactment* of the past rather than a simple recollection of it (Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu (1990: 73) goes further by explaining that ‘what is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is’. As stated by Denzin (2012: 298), ‘an embodied project that matters must locate the body within a radically contextual politics. It must focus on the active, agentic flesh-and-blood human body’.

Cook (2014) describes how autoethnography can be seen as narcissistic and self-centred, but also explains how this can be alleviated through the use of analysis and critique in order to maintain academic integrity. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain how the author should move backwards and forwards through the exploration of moments related to personal experiences and honest vulnerability, to a more detached analysis of events and experiences utilising theories and previous research. This method highlights the author as being a social-being within a larger society. It is a reflection of past experiences, but is also a valuable representation of the culture that they are situated within. From this, it allows others to make connections with stories and reflect on how it may relate to their own life within the culture. It is also useful for readers to understand the experience of a social-being as listening to stories promotes learning and self-discovery (Coles 1989).

Autoethnography has previously been justified by others within the field of physical education and sport. Cameron (2012) suggests that this style of writing promotes different ways of researching physical education and explains how it is a useful method to encourage other teachers and students to reflect upon the influence of their previous experiences on pedagogical choices and practices. She asserts that learning opportunities arise from writing stories of our experiences. Legge (2014) and Landi (2018) both utilise autoethnography to reveal experiences in the field of physical education. Legge (2014) reflects as a teacher educator negotiating her cultural heritage as a European New Zealander within the Māori culture in which she taught, and Landi (2018) discusses his experiences as a queer male PE teacher, drawing recommendations related to inclusivity in physical education and suggesting that systemic change could be encouraged as a result of findings from autoethnographic approaches. Thus, autoethnographies align to Drummond's (2010) call for

a shift from normalised methods being used to analyse masculinities and the body and he stories about these ideas at a time he describes his life as being consumed by sport.

Due to the openness that autoethnography encourages, the first author used this method as a means of confronting the dilemmas regarding self-presentation (Allen-Collinson 2013). As a third-year student at university, he felt that he had witnessed an involuntary shift in his own identity that he felt powerless over. This autoethnography gives an embodied insight of the inner struggles that he experienced whilst coming to grips with his new body presentation, perceived loss of identity, and adoption of a new identity that he rejected.

Prior to the first author completing the reflective accounts, the first and second author engaged in discussions related to the methodological approach of autoethnography.

Discussion was then ongoing as the level of detail portrayed in the stories was reviewed and the second author asked questions to encourage and invoke deep thought from the first author. Both parties also engaged in the theoretical analysis and application of Bourdieu's (1984) ideas and academic literature which were used to explain two personal 'moments' as products of wider social influences. Initially, the first author applied key theoretical ideas, and then the second author continued with the analysis, checking with the first author that the subsequent theoretical applications accurately continued to represent and explain the personal vignettes. This provided a useful way to embrace the involvement and detachment process of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

The first author constructed the stories in a solitary environment at home in the hope that they could engage in an honest account without the distraction of others when remembering the details and feelings that were experienced at the time. Autoethnography should provoke emotion in the reader (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013), meaning that the

author wanted to accurately represent their feelings in order for readers to engage with his perspective. He went through a process of reflection where he thought back to important personal moments. Additionally, he engaged in on-going reflexivity where he considered the self, contextualising why he felt a certain way, recognising experiences and realising the influence of past experiences and personal history on his presentation of events. Examples of this include the confession from the author that he made excuses to friends for gaining weight as well as feeling the need to change his body shape through gym workouts. The author engages in a reflexive process whereby he presents his perspective through his description of moments and then considers the presentation of knowledge by utilising literature to understand why he felt like this and to explain the way he represents how he felt at particular times. Reflexivity allows the author to 'self-consciously problematize a definitive sense of self and others, pursuing instead a richer understanding of the fragmented, temporally and contextually shifting nature of selves and relationships' (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2013: 73). Allbon (2012: 64) further clarifies this process of self-reflexion by explaining that the 'inward observations' are then 'turned back outwards as reflexive inquiry shaped by events and processes'. Writing the stories at home alone alleviated some of the first author's discomfort as he felt embarrassed about some of the deeply personal information being disclosed: he was more comfortable in what was perceived to be a safe space away from the gaze of others. Historically, people had identified him as a fitness enthusiast, and he feared that people would think that more recently he had neglected himself. The stories are both reflections from 'moments' where the first author struggled with his body image. These stories have been told in a hope that the reader gets an insight into personal identity struggles through self-narrative. Sparkes (1997: 221) claimed that 'focusing on reader response encourages connection, empathy and

solidarity, as well as emancipatory moment in which powerful insights into lived experiences of others are generated’.

In order to maintain the trustworthiness of this research, rigour was examined using Le Roux’s (2017) five criteria for excellence in autoethnography: subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility and contribution. The research has been acknowledged as being self-consciously subjective and self-reflexive, it was written openly and honestly in the hope that the autoethnography resonates with others and promotes credibility of the research.

Finally, the contribution of this research will hopefully ‘extend knowledge, generate ongoing research, liberate, empower, improve practice, or make a contribution to social change’ (Le Roux 2017: 204). Le Roux (2017) also recognises that the excellence criteria are intrinsically linked to ethical considerations. Despite talking about personal experiences, others are acknowledged as part of the author’s history and the described moments. The stories were given to some of the people who were referred to in the vignettes, so that they could discuss the accuracy of the representation of described events and the moments could be reconsidered if necessary (Legge 2014; Landi 2018). The following vignettes are the result of personal reflection and agreement from others involved in the moments.

### **‘CLASS 1: OBESE’**

It is Friday and I walk into the court room where the physical activity and health module takes place. Straightaway, I feel a jab in the side of my stomach as my friend laughs at me and says ‘what’s this?’ I smile and sit down, embarrassingly making excuses to why I have put on weight. The lecture begins and I stare at the clock whilst the lecturer discusses the dangers associated with obesity. She warns us that despite some criticism, whilst it may not be the case for athletic people, the Body Mass Index (BMI) calculation gives an accurate

indication about one's body. Lupton (2013) recognises how there is an ongoing critical conversation related to the use of the BMI, particularly in relation to assumptions in the medical and scientific realm, which tend to unquestionably link ill-health, disease and decreased life expectancy to resultant categories of 'overweight' and 'obese'. After the lecture, my partner for the case study grabs me and suggests that we go and complete the pre-assessment data; I agree and we go to the lab. We record my height, weight and respiratory function. We both go home and later, he emails me the pre-assessment data. I read down the side of the normative data classifications: 'class 1 - obese'. I sit there with my head in my hands, staring at the blurred desk through my teary eyes. 'That is it!' I think to myself. It is no longer a matter of individual interpretation, science itself has made a clear judgment about my body. I do not want to go to university on Monday, I feel so embarrassed. I wonder what people will think when they know that the case study is based on me. Ideas evidenced with scientific reasoning become taken for granted as normal and common-sense (Pronger 1995). Within a 'risk society', people perceived as experts create moral panic related to obesity. Obesity discourse categorises normal and abnormal bodies and aligns individuals with being good social actors or bad social actors at risk of needing state health care (Gard and Wright 2001). Individuals are encouraged to manage personal risk and being 'fat' indicates that person has morally failed (Butler-Wall 2015). I sit there trying to convince myself that this scientific judgment is not so bad and I think of apologetic strategies to convince my partner that I am not the bad social actor that science suggests I am. I worry that now my label of 'class 1 - obese' is recorded, I will be mocked and marginalised by my friends, even though they may not intend to hurt me. I am sure that they would not think that their mocking would affect me because of the person I used to be:

a strong, toned personal trainer and gym enthusiast. Yet, now, my body has been labelled as outside of normal range, it has been classified as deviant by the BMI calculation.

The evening comes and I sit in my desolate room, with the lights off, staring at the screen of my laptop. Only a few more weeks are left of university and then I am finished for good. The television is on in the background and I overhear an advert that talks about being 'beach ready'. My heart sinks as I think about my current body and how I can physically feel myself growing out of my t-shirts that looked good on me last year. I am dreading this summer; perhaps I can work on my body project once I finish university, but for now, I do not have time. My gym membership has expired and I cannot afford another one. Last month's gym membership was a waste of money as I hardly went; I was too busy delivering Chinese takeaways to earn enough money for petrol for the week. I think about my friends who seem to have such an easy life. One has his own company, the other has his own house, and I am having to drive Chinese food around in order to survive. I hate having two jobs, I never have time to do anything that I want to.

I get out of bed and turn on the light. I stare at myself in the mirror, turning from side to side to see how I look from every angle. I sigh and reach up to my shelf and pull down the 'Ultimate Body Plan' book: 'How to transform your body in 12 weeks' - that sounds good. So, if it is April, I could look more respectable by July when I go to Rome. Now, I need to find the time and money to get back to the gym before it is too late. I realise that every week I delay it, the worse I will look on holiday. Shilling (1993) explains how those with a lower socioeconomic status develop an instrumental relation to their body as they have little time away from necessity. Bourdieu (1986) emphasises the link between economic and cultural capital by recognising that embodied capital requires the investment of personal time and



that acquiring this form of cultural capital is dependent on free time away from economic necessity.

I sit thinking about my habitus (Bourdieu 1984) and who I am. I start to get feelings of resentment towards my parents for the way I am before feeling guilty for thinking this. I am the one to blame for getting to this size, nobody else is. It is me who has not trained and me who has been gluttonous. I debate with myself whether I am the hard-working person that I believe I am, or whether I am the lazy person that I imagine my friends think I am because I am fat. After all, fat people are automatically assumed to be lazy and undisciplined (Fitzpatrick 2011). Discourses of healthism persuade us that health is visible through our physical appearance and corporeality (Kirk and Calgouhoun 1989).

The next day comes and it is glorious. It is the middle of April, yet, the sun is shining and the forecast says it is going to reach twenty five degrees centigrade. 'Let's go to a theme park', Danielle suggests, 'you've been working so hard recently - just have a day off and enjoy the sun'. I smile and agree to go, it will be a lovely day out and I have been working hard. I put on a new top and get my new shorts out for the first time. I think to myself: this is the dress rehearsal for summer. I can hardly do the button up on my shorts. Suddenly my face changes and I find myself staring into the mirror again without even realising. Moving from side to side, I stare at the bulging layer of fat underneath the white t-shirt which is obviously protruding over the waistband of the shorts. Last summer I was looking at myself in the mirror with delight, now, nine months later, I feel like a mess. I climb into the car, hiding behind the lenses of my sunglasses: I imagine myself to be less visible to others whilst I am wearing them. The stark reality of my body shape, highlighted by the materiality of the shorts, left me feeling uncomfortable. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, habitus is embodied. An

individual's habitus is shaped by previous experiences which influence dispositions, and these dispositions affect an individual's opinions and views (Bourdieu, 1984). I was aware that my 'new' body would leave me with little embodied capital in many social fields (Bourdieu, 1986) so I looked for a way to 'hide', for example, behind my sunglasses.

We get to the theme park and I climb out of the car and stare at myself in the reflection of Danielle's car. I think: 'damn, I'm doing it again! Why can't I stop?' I look around to see if anybody is watching me but they are not. This is a bad habit that I have developed, but I cannot help it. I am constantly monitoring myself, quite often without even realising. Last year I admired my body, now I am checking how visible my fat is. As I stand by the car, I consider strategies to hide my physique. I suck in my stomach to make myself look thinner just in case somebody is looking at me.

### **FROM MEASURING WEIGHT TO LIFTING WEIGHT: FAILING AT BOTH**

It is one o'clock in the morning and I cannot sleep. I am having one of my self-reflexive moments where I think about what is going on in my life and how I should improve myself. It has been a while since I have trained as I am so busy. I do not have any money either. Curiosity gets the better of me: That is it! I climb out of bed and walk into the bathroom and over to the scales. After spending some time amending the settings of the scales, I manage to set them to measuring in kilograms. Right then. So I was eighty six kilograms and I am expecting to be around ninety kilograms with my recent lifestyle. I step on the scales, then off, then on again. 'This cannot be right'. The scales are measuring 106 kilograms. I step off in disbelief and stand there on the cold bathroom tiles with my eyes closed. Multiple feelings shoot through my mind to the point where it was hard to pinpoint exactly which was the most dominant feeling: disappointment, embarrassment, disgust. Who am I? All of

a sudden, I have become a monstrosity. Weighing and measuring practices can be seen to embarrass and discipline fat bodies (Sykes and MacPhail 2008). So that is what Dean was indicating when he was poking me in the belly. That is why my friends have been telling me that I am 'tank'. It all makes sense: I am fat. Shilling (1993) describes the body as a project that is worked on over time, forming one's identity. As I stood on that cold bathroom floor, I thought about who I was and who I am now. I found it hard to fathom how quickly I had put on twenty kilograms in weight after taking just six months off of training. It was as though a demon had taken over my body, I had lost my identity. Feeling guilty I get back into bed thinking of ways to correct my body. I'll ask Grandad to lend me some money in the morning and I can get a gym membership. I grab a book off my shelf that promises to transform the body in twelve weeks. It tells me to 'Incorporate lots of compound moves, especially Squats, Deadlifts, Lunges, Dips, and Pull-ups'. Great! I thought to myself, I can do dips and pull-ups with a twenty kilogram weight tied around my waist, this will be easy. Finally, I drift off to sleep, excited about signing up to the gym.

The next day arrives and I sign up to the gym. I feel excited and motivated. I warm up on the machine that works the latissimus dorsi muscles whilst I wait until the pull-up frame is free. Finally, I race over to it, and before I begin my set, I look over my shoulder to get a glimpse of who is watching. The room is full of other men in tank tops with rippling striated muscles. I think to myself: I may not be looking as good as they do, but I can sure show them what I am capable of with these pull-ups. Right this is it, let's go for it. I jump up and grip the bar, my feet dangle two inches above the ground. I pull through my arms and expect to go sailing up towards the bar. I go nowhere. I lose grip and land on my feet again. I stand there in silence, gazing at the reflection in the gym in the mirror, checking whether anybody has witnessed my complete failure. Nobody looks and I feel relieved. Reflecting on what

happened, I felt quite embarrassed by my need to catch attention before showing off my capabilities. Having walked into the resistance area with an out of shape body, I felt that I needed to justify my status within the gym space. I recognised I had no physical capital (Bourdieu 1984) due to being overweight and, therefore, I tried to compensate by showing my body's functional ability instead. I felt that I had to compensate for my overweight body within a masculine dominated space, since my fat body did not feel very masculine (Sykes and McPhail 2008). Yet, having assumed that my habitus would align with the doxa of the field, the reality of incompatibility between the doxa of the field and my habitus resulted in me gaining little capital in the field. Previously, I felt comfortable in the gym; starting conversations with people and talking to like-minded others for a prolonged time. I felt that I belonged there. When walking into the gym with an overweight body, it felt different. I felt that nobody in this space acknowledged me in the way I was used to; people did not speak with me in the same way. As Thompson (1991: 15) explains, 'a field is always the site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or alter the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it'. In my case, the field was the gym and where I had lost my physical capital, other forms such as my social capital also saw a decline too.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

The openness that autoethnography allows has hopefully enabled others to gain a wider understanding of the pressures that certain discourses can create within Westernised culture and particularly within specific physical education, sport and exercise spaces. Reflections have been situated and explained through the application of Bourdieu's theoretical ideas in order to analyse personal experiences. From this reflection, partnered with the use of theoretical analysis, critical conclusions suggest that whilst discourse may

influence how individuals identify themselves, an individual's habitus limits, or enables, opportunities related to body image and capital within a field, rather than it simply being attributed to an unlimited range of lifestyle choices. Alternatively, it should also be considered that sometimes lifestyle choices are made as a result of one's taste, which in turn, is influenced by the formation of one's habitus and their social standing (Shilling 1993).

The autoethnography has allowed personal reflection about taken for granted assumptions related to what a 'good' body should look like and be able to do. It allowed critical thought to be applied to practices encountered by the first author who would have unknowingly contributed to the doxa of the fields of the gym and the university degree programme which he was part of. It allowed an unpacking of previous experiences and critical reflection on the way the first author felt in various situations, considering broader social influences to explain why he might have felt like that. This reflection allowed the first author to become aware of moments where his embodied habitus gained him capital in the field, but also the moments when his habitus did not align with the doxa of the field, which resulted in gaining little capital. It allowed the first author to critically realise ideas that he had not really considered or tried to understand in this level of detail before. Brown (2005) explains how Bourdieu (1999) recognised the possibilities of 'new conditionings' which allows the notion that the habitus can be changed as a result of heightened awareness and new knowledge. Embodied change can be an intentional personal initiation.

The messages and discourses being reproduced in many physical education or sport and exercise science programmes may reassert what bodies are seen as valuable or which bodies gain capital within these fields. At the same time, hidden messages are evident about less desirable bodies, those with embodied habitus' that do not marry with the field's doxa,

and bodies which ultimately result in gaining little capital within these educational spaces. As many individuals undertaking these degrees may aspire to become physical educators, it is important to consider how the reproduction of doxa and the hidden curriculum may filter into the school education system which influences generations of children. Here, often, there is a reproduction of knowledge about particular embodied habitus' gaining capital within the field of physical education and other fields centred on physicality or broader social fields with doxa that promote the same views about valuable and desirable bodies. However, there is also the opportunity to resist these values and norms through transparent, critical conversations. Yet, as Brown (2005) suggests, change will only come from knowledge creation that challenges existing assumptions and characterises new conditionings of the habitus of physical education teachers and others within physical education, sport and exercise science fields. New conditionings of the habitus' of these social actors will provide the best possibility of a change to the doxa in the field, and therefore, who possesses capital.

## **RESEARCH ETHICS**

Research included personal reflections of the researcher. No other participants or human subjects were part of the research design.

## **References**

Allbon, C. (2012) "Down the Rabbit Hole" – "Curiouser and Curiouser" Using Autoethnography as a Mode of Writing to Re-call, Re-tell and Re-veal Bodily Embodiment as Self-Reflexive Inquiry', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 1(1): 62-71.

Allen-Collinson, J. (2013) 'Autoethnography as the Engagement of Self/Other, Self/Culture, Self/Politics, Selves/Futures', pp. 281-299 in S. Holman Jones, T. E. Adams and C. Ellis (ed.) Handbook of Autoethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Anderson, L. (2006) 'Analytic Autoethnography', Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35(4): 373-39.

Anderson, L. and B. Glass-Coffin (2013) 'Autoethnographic Modes of Inquiry', pp. 57-83 in S. Holman Jones, T. E. Adams and C. Ellis (ed.) Handbook of Autoethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Andrews, G. J., M. I. Sudwell and A. C. Sparkes (2005) 'Towards a Geography of Fitness: an Ethnographic Case Study of the Gym in British Bodybuilding Culture', Social Science and Medicine 60(4): 877-891.

Ayo, N. (2012) 'Understanding health promotion in a neoliberal climate and the making of health conscious citizens', Critical Public Health 22(1): 99-105.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital', pp. 241-258 in J. Richardson (ed.) Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education. New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) Language and Symbolic Power. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1990) The Logic of Practice. Cambridge: Polity Press

Brown, D. (2005) 'An Economy of Gendered Practices? Learning to Teach Physical Education from the Perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's Embodied Sociology', *Sport, Education and Society* 10(1): 3-23.

Burrows, L., D. Leahy and J. Wright (2019) 'Cruel Optimism? Socially Critical Perspectives on the Obesity Assemblage', pp. 200-212 in R. Pringle, H. Larsson and G. Gerdin (ed.) *Critical Research in Sport, Health and Physical Education: How to Make a Difference*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Butler-Wall, K. (2015) 'Risky Measures: Digital Technologies and the Governance of Child Obesity', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 43(1&2): 228-245.

Cameron, E. (2012) 'DE/REconstructing my Athlete-Student-Teacher Self: A Critical Autoethnography of Resistance in Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE)', *PHEnex Journal* 4(2): 1-16.

Chase, L. F. (2008) 'Running Big: Clydesdale Runners and Technologies of the Body', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(1): 130-147.

Cliff, K. and J. Wright (2010) 'Confusing and Contradictory: Considering Obesity Discourse and Eating Disorders as they Shape Body Pedagogies in HPE', *Sport, Education and Society* 15(2): 221-233.

Clough, P. T. (2004) 'Future Matters: Technoscience, Global Politics, and Cultural Criticism', *Social Text* 22 (3): 1-23.

Coles, R. (1989) *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Connell, R. (1987) *Gender and Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.



Cook, P. S. (2014) "'To Actually be Sociological'": Autoethnography as an Assessment and Learning Tool', *Journal of Sociology* 50(3): 269–282.

De Mello, M. (2014) *Body Studies: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

Denzin, N. K. (2012) 'Triangulation 2.0', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 6(2): 80-88.

Drummond, M. (2010) 'The natural: An autoethnography of a masculinized body in sport', *Men and Masculinities* 12(3): 374–389.

Ellis, C. (2004) *The Ethnographic I: a Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Oxford: Altamira Press.

Ellis, C. and A. Bochner (2000) 'Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject', pp. 199-258 in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Ellis, C., T. E. Adams and A. P. Bochner (2011) 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Historical Social Research* 36(4): 273–90.

Evans, J., E. Rich, B. Davies and R. Allwood (2008) *Education, Disordered Eating and Obesity Discourse: Fat Fabrications*. London: Routledge.

Fitzpatrick, K. (2011) 'Obesity, Health and Physical Education: A Bourdieuan Perspective', *Policy Futures in Education* 9(3): 353-366.

Flegal, K. M., B. I. Graubard, D. F. Williamson and M. H. Gail (2005) 'Excess Deaths Associated with Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity', *Journal of the American Medical Association* 293 (15): 1861–1867.

- Gard, M. and J. Wright (2001) 'Managing Uncertainty: Obesity Discourses and Physical Education in a Risk Society', *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20: 535-549.
- Kirk, D. and D. Calquhoun (1989) 'Healthism and physical education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 10(4): 417-434.
- Landi, D. (2018) 'Toward a queer inclusive physical education', *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 23(1): 1-15.
- Le Roux, C. S. (2017) 'Exploring Rigour in Autoethnographic Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(2): 195-207.
- LeBesco, K. (2011) 'Neoliberalism, Public Health, and the Moral Perils of Fatness', *Critical Public Health* 21(2): 153-164.
- Legge, M. F. (2014) 'Autoethnography and teacher education: Snapshot stories of cultural encounter', *The Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 39(5): 117-134.
- Lizardo, O. (2004) 'The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu's Habitus', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 34(4): 375-401.
- Lupton, D. (2013) *Risk*. Second Edition. Oxon: Routledge.
- Markula, P. and R. Pringle (2006) *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*. Oxon: Routledge.
- McMahon, J. and D. Penney (2013) 'Body Pedagogies, Coaching and Culture: Three Australian Swimmers' Lived Experiences', *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 18(3): 317-335.

McMahon, J., D. Penney and M. Dinan-Thompson (2012) "'Body Practices—Exposure and Effect of a Sporting Culture?' Stories from Three Australian Swimmers', *Sport, Education and Society* 17(2): 181-206.

Monaghan, L. F. (2008a) *Men and the War on Obesity: A Sociological Study*. Oxon: Routledge.

Monaghan, L. (2008b) 'Men, Physical Activity, and the Obesity Discourse: Critical Understandings from a Qualitative Study', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25: 97-129.

Murray, S. (2007) 'Corporeal Knowledges and Deviant Bodies: Perceiving the Fat Body', *Social Semiotics* 17(3): 361-373.

Navarro, Z. (2006) 'In Search of a Cultural Interpretation of Power: The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu', *IDS Bulletin* 37(6): 11-22.

NHS Digital (2018) 'Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet - England, 2018 - NHS Digital', Retrieved April 25, 2018 (<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet/statistics-on-obesity-physical-activity-and-diet-england-2018>)

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995) 'Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 8(1): 5-23.

Powell, D. and K. Fitzpatrick (2015) "'Getting Fit Basically Just Means, Like, Nonfat': Children's Lessons in Fitness and Fatness', *Sport, Education and Society* 20(4): 463-484.

Pringle, R. (2001) 'Competing Discourses: Narratives of a Fragmented Self, Manliness, and Rugby Union', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 36(4): 425-439.

Pringle, R. (2003) *Doing the Damage? An Examination of Masculinities and Men's Rugby Experiences of Pain, Fear and Pleasure*. The University of Waikato.

Pronger, B. (1995) 'Rendering the body: The implicit lessons of gross anatomy', *Quest* 47(4): 427-446.

Puhl, R. M. and C. A. Heuer (2009) 'The Stigma of Obesity: a Review and Update', *Obesity* 17(5): 941-964.

Richardson, N. and A. Locks (2014) *Body Studies: the Basics*. Oxon: Routledge.

Shilling, C. (1993) *The Body and Social Theory*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

Sparkes, A. C. (1995) 'Writing People: Reflections on the Dual Crises of Representation and Legitimation in Qualitative Inquiry', *Quest* 47(2): 158-195.

Sparkes, A. C. (1997) 'Ethnographic Fiction and Representing the Absent Other', *Sport, Education and Society* 2(1): 25-40.

Sparkes, A. C. (2000) 'Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17(1): 21-43.

Sparkes, A. C. and B. Smith (2014) *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health: from Process to Product*. Oxon: Routledge.

Sykes, H. and D. McPhail (2008) 'Unbearable Lessons: Contesting Fat Phobia in Physical Education', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25: 66-96.

Synnott, A. (1993) *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. London: Routledge.

Thompson, J. B. (1991) 'Editor's Introduction', pp. 1-31 in P. Bourdieu (ed.) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Boston, MA: Polity Press.

Van Amsterdam, N., A. Knoppers, I. Claringbould and M. Jongmans (2012) "'It's Just the Way it is..." or Not? How Physical Education Teachers Categorise and Normalise Differences', *Gender and Education* 24(7): 783-798.

Varea, V. and M. Underwood (2016) "'You are Just an Idiot for not doing any Physical Activity Right Now": Pre-service Health and Physical Education Teachers' Constructions of Fatness', *European Physical Education Review* 22(4): 465-478.

Weedon, C. (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell