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## Physical activity in the lives of young women and men: embodied identities

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## **Physical activity in the lives of young women and men: embodied identities**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex and diverse positions particular young women and men take up in relation to the moral imperatives of the healthism discourse. We do this through a discussion of the ways in which they talk about their own and others' bodies, in the context of a number of in-depth interviews conducted with them over the course of a year. These interviews were conducted as the major component of a longitudinal qualitative study, funded by the Australian Research Council, which investigates the place and meaning of physical activity and physical culture in young people's lives.

### **Introduction**

In contemporary western society (and through the processes of globalisation increasingly other societies) a healthism discourse, which equates health with a slim body shape achieved through exercise (Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989) provides a powerful set of imperatives for the ways in which people should live their lives and construct their identities. The consequences of such imperatives are far from unproblematic. As many writers and researchers have pointed out, the relationship between appearance and social capital (Featherstone, 1991), the promotion of a panic around an 'obesity epidemic' (Gard & Wright, 2001) and the unquestioning promotion of slimness as a desirable attribute for all women (Bordo, 1989; 1993) is associated with social practices and individual behaviours which can have adverse effects for young women and increasingly for young men (Evans et al., forthcoming 2003; Drummond 2002).

(Crawford, 1980) was one of the first to draw attention to the relationship between health and normality in contemporary capitalist societies. He coined the notion of 'healthism' to describe a discourse in public health practice where individuals are held to be morally responsible for the prevention of illness by knowing and avoiding the risk factors associated with ill-health. Illness then can be defined as evidence of moral irresponsibility and health as evidence of appropriately responsible behaviour. The healthism discourse constructs individuals as having a duty to constantly monitor their own well-being and to mediate and invest in choices and practices that are health enhancing and prevent illness. Such a position ignores the social constraints and the social conditions which organise priorities differently for different groups of people. It also pays little attention to the contradictory messages which circulate via the popular media and elsewhere and the power of particular forms of representation to persuade individuals to the consumption of products which may be deleterious to their health.

The individualistic nature of the healthism discourse means that the pursuit of health – and a particular version of health – has become an **imperative** for all members of society (Foucault, 1980; Lupton, 1995). Individuals that fail to take up this imperative or participate in their moral "duty to be well" are seen as 'problems' that are at risk. Those that adopt healthy behaviour (which seem to encompass most, if not all, practices within one's lifestyle – including what they eat, how they deal with stress and manage relationships) have become the ideal or as Crawford (1980) describes the 'model' men and women. In this context one of the strongest markers of health has become the appearance

of the body; with a slim body taken as an indicator of not only good health and 'appropriate' care of the body but of social attitude.

In the face of a public health (Lupton, 1995) and physical education literature (Gard & Wright, 2001) which continues to uncritically (re)produce the healthism discourse and the social practices which it promotes there is a need to reiterate the implications of this discourse as it is taken up by young people. However in doing so, we also need to recognise that young people are not passive consumers of particular regimes of truth/discourses (Foucault, 1994a, 1996) but because of their own biographies and current circumstances take these discourses up in different and complex ways. The purpose of this paper is to explore the complex and diverse positions particular young women and men take up in relation to the moral imperatives of the healthism discourse. We do this through a discussion of the ways in which they talk about their own and others' bodies, in the context of a number of in-depth interviews conducted with them over the course of a year. These interviews were conducted as the major component of a longitudinal qualitative study examining the place and meaning of physical activity in young people's lives.

One of the challenges of a study which relies on extensive data from individuals, as they talk about themselves and their lives, has been to find a robust theory which links the self – and particularly the embodied self - with the social. To meet this need we have drawn on Foucault's notions of subjectivity and discourse particularly as these relate to 'technologies of the self' and Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. These theories have provided the means to understand the relationship between the dominant corporeal discourses associated with health and physical activity and the ways in which the young people in the study constitute their embodied selves/identities.

Most contemporary feminist work on the body as a social entity draws in some way on Foucault (Bordo, 1993; Grozs, 1994; McNay, 1992). Foucault's notions of the 'technologies' or 'practices of the self' have been useful in providing ways of moving beyond simplistic notions of socialisation to a more complex understanding of how the operation of power works to connect the self with the social. For Foucault power does not operate simply as the subjugation of one group by another but is rather 'an impersonal set of negotiations between practices, discourses, nondiscursive events, a mode of management of a multiplicity of relations, a set of technologies linking the most massive cultural movement to the most minute day-by-day events in interpersonal life' (Groz, 1994, p.147). The body is caught up in this operation of power, it is not neutral, non-historical, non-social but a site where cultural meanings are inscribed, through the way the body moves, through the shape of the body, through clothing and makeup and other forms of adornment. The body shows the work done on the body both intentionally and unintentionally. Through such markings a body is 'constituted as an appropriate, or as the case may be inappropriate body for its cultural requirements' (Groz, 1994, p.143).

As Grosz points out there is no natural norm rather particular kinds of bodies are valued more so than others in a particular social and cultural contexts. Featherstone (1991) suggests that in contemporary consumer societies, the outward appearance of the body has come to be associated with an individual's value as a person; in Bourdieu (1984) terms particular kinds of body have greater 'social capital' compared to others. With the promotion of the slender body as a metaphor for health, youth and affluence (Williams & Bendelow, 1998) by the media, fashion and fitness industries, physical appearance has come to be taken as an indicator of social value and an appropriate moral orientation to personal care. When a healthism discourse linking body shape with good health is coupled with a discourse associating slim, youthful, attractive bodies with social and personal identity, a powerful set of imperatives are brought into play.

This provides a starting point from which to ask how young people take up the moral imperatives associated with healthism, how these imperatives are lived out in their everyday lives and with what consequences? Do you people position themselves and others differently from one another and is it possible to find explanations for these differences in the stories they construct about themselves as they talk about health, bodies and physical activity?

### **Method**

The interviews drawn on for this paper were collected as part of a longitudinal qualitative study which investigated the place and meaning of physical activity and physical culture in young people's lives. In comparison to the large body of literature concerned with the amount and kind of physical activity in which young people participate, the study makes an important conceptual shift by recasting and extending the notion of 'participation' to that of young people's 'engagement with physical culture'. Following Kirk (1997) physical culture' is here understood as a range of discourses concerned with the maintenance, representation and regulation of the body through institutionalised forms of physical activity. In addition, as a study which follows young people over three, and in some cases five years, the study investigates how participation in physical activity and physical culture changes as the participants' circumstances change – that is, as they move through and in some cases beyond school.

The study has so far followed panel cohorts of young people from five secondary schools in Australia. With further funding, two additional groups, including a group from a primary school have joined the study. The students in the original cohorts have now been interviewed over a period of three to five years. As a first stage of the study, students in from two year levels in each school were surveyed to identify a range of demographic features and basic patterns of participation which were used to inform the selection of students to participate in a semi-structured biographical style interview about their participation in physical activity and physical culture (Wright, Macdonald & Groom, 2001). The information collected from the surveys and interviews was then used to identify those students who would be invited to participate in the longitudinal study. Initially equal numbers of female and male students were chosen for each geographical location – locations which were also chosen for their differences in social class demographics. In 2002 there were 36 boys and 42 girls in the study; with ages at this time ranging from 11-18.

The young people in the panel cohort were interviewed four to five times in the first two years. The schedule of interviews was organised around a set of themes: the first interview recapped on biographical features related to physical activity and physical culture; the second focused on their definitions of health and fitness, during which the interviewers drew upon media cards and magazines to elicit discussion. The third interview focused on the young people's perception of the Olympics; and the fourth involved the cohort discussing their use of time after school and on the weekends. The students were also asked to keep a journal of how they used their time over a period of ten days and were provided with disposable cameras to take photographs of aspects of their life which were important to them. The photographs were then used to prompt conversation in a follow up interview. Where possible the young people were also observed as they participated in physical activity and at last one parent was interviewed about their perception of health, physical activity and the participation (or not) of their child.

This paper will draw on the analysis of interviews in the original panel cohorts to examine the ways in which they drew on particular discourses associated with health and physical activity to make constitute themselves as embodied subjects. The close analysis of

the text of the interviews indicated the importance of going beyond the fragments which were provided by the NUDIST search tool; it demonstrated the importance of following young people over time and interviewing around a range of issues across a number of interviews. Particularly for the young women, it soon became evident that interpretations from one part of an interview were very likely to be contradicted or given a different twist by other sections from the same or other interviews. What must be reiterated, however, is that in keeping with a poststructuralist discourse analysis we are making no claims to knowing the 'truths' of what these young people think or do (Scheurich, 1997). Rather we are interested in how they draw on particular discourses to make sense of themselves as embodied subjects. This is not however a totally dispassionate position; we are also concerned to explore the likely effects of such position.

### **Young men talking about health: 'its just good to be fit'**

Despite suggestions in the literature that body shape is increasingly the concern of young men there was far less talk about bodies and body shape in the interviews with the young men as compared with those with the women. This, in itself, suggests something about the boys' relationship with the discourses associated with health and with bodily appearance. For the young women, it was obvious that such talk was something that came easily to them, they had rehearsed such conversations many times, probably with friends, whereas with the young men this was clearly not the case. There were two aspects to this: firstly the male participants were apparently less interested in talking about bodies, their's or others', and seemed to have a much narrower discursive repertoire to do so; secondly when they did talk about bodies, their desires were associated with the capability of bodies, whether this be in relation to sport, particular kinds of work or the just everyday physical demands, rather than appearance and this did not merit much analysis. There was some talk about the desirability of muscles but no apparent great commitment to this (Drummond, 2002).

Less often in the young men's talk, in comparison to the talk about the capability of the healthy/fit body, was the notion of the fit body as one which had been worked *on*. Where this kind of relationship was evident it again was more likely to be about a body that showed evidence of the hard work associated with training for sport rather than the deliberate shaping of the body that might take place in the gym. This is exemplified by the following exchange with Dwayne, who when asked directly what he thought was a 'healthy body', responded 'a looks pretty fit'. But fitness in this case is not determined by slimness, but by the muscularity (prompted by the interviewer) and strength – notably in the legs.

Int: What do you think is a healthy body?

Dwayne: Looks pretty fit.

Int: How do you determine what looks fit? Is it the muscle, how thin?

Dwayne: Um, probably um muscles in legs and that, but not like um heaps strong, I don't think.

Dwayne's ambivalence in response to a prompt that suggests muscularity as a sign of fitness is clarified in his response to the mediacards. He judges the fittest players as those who have to do the most running, so for Dwayne fitness is more about endurance and capacity than how the body looks. This interpretation is further reinforced by Dwayne's comment that his own form of physical activity participation, tennis, is at least partially about maintaining his fitness; an association between physical activity and fitness that is typical in many of the interviews with the male participants.

Int: Right of these guys, how fit do you think they are, who do you think is the fittest?

Dwayne: Um AFL, yeah.

Int: Why?

Dwayne: 'Cause they've got the biggest field and they have to cover it all.

Later in the interview

Int: How fit are you, on a scale of 1 to 10, where would you put yourself?

Dwayne: What 10 being like these guys?

Int: Oh 10 being the fittest, not like these guys, and 1 being completely unfit land, where would you put yourself? Without comparing to these guys.

Dwayne: Yeah probably about a 7 to 8.

Int: What would you have to do to be a 10 out 10 in your life?

Dwayne: Um I don't know, just get out and do more things, 'cause I don't really exercise apart from doing sport.

And later still

Int: Alright, um what do you want to do with your tennis, where does this go for you?

Dwayne: Um, I don't want to like, be like any good, I just want to play like socially but I like, I don't know, it's just to keep fit, really yeah.

The following quote from Michael provides further evidence of the common theme in the young men's talk that fitness is a desirable state in and of itself. One of the most common explanations offered by the male participants as to why they participated in physical activity was one variation or another on 'just to keep fit'.

Int: Are you training for anything in particular?

Michael: No just to keep fit.

Int: So what are you doing? Weights, running and?

Michael: Cycling.

A little later in the same interview

Int: Are you hoping to compete in anything, like getting fit to compete in anything?

Michael: No, just doing it to keep fit.

There is a moral imperative at work in some of the boys' talk but it is not so much about body shape as about the value of being fit in and for itself. In this sense physical activity of some kind is important because it will produce fitness. From the texts this seems in most cases to be 'cardiovascular' or aerobic fitness. To be fit then is a valued state, but not necessarily read off the body. The following examples show this discourse working in slightly different ways: in some cases acknowledged but not taken very seriously; and in others used to evaluate the behaviour of others who do not engage in the appropriate behaviours prescribed by the discourse.

From Steve:

I: Do you think you're doing less physical activity now that you've dropped PDHPE?

Steve: Yeah 'cause it means I don't have to do it (laughing).

Int: So that was the last of your physical activity?

Steve: Yup.

Int: Have you taken up anything to make up for it?

Steve: Um, no, not really.

Int: Do you feel less fit?

Steve: No I walk home now, like from work, from X station, I walk home. So I still get a little bit of fitness.

Int: Does it worry you?

- Steve: Yes.  
 Int: How does it worry you?  
 Steve: It worries me that I'm not doing any active sport at all, really, I walk and that's it.  
 Int: Why does it worry you? Just because I'm asking you about it or would it worry you...  
 Steve: Well 'cause like you see those commercials on TV all the time about your health, keeping fit and things like that and I sit there and I say well I don't do any of that.  
 Int: Would it worry you to gain weight?  
 Steve: Not really 'cause I'm a twig.

#### From Seth

I think it's important to have physical education and ahh, because there's some people they, they don't get out of bed at all and participate in any sport, which I believe is wrong, you should keep fit ...

#### And from Max

- Int: What would you have to do to be a 10 out of 10 (on a fitness scale) ?  
 Max: Probably, I don't know, get stronger, and like, not sure.  
 Int: What about the term healthy, to you what's the difference between healthy and fit?  
 Max: Healthy's being like, your body's healthy, you're not sick all the time, you eating right and you stay sort of slim, but not, I don't know, yeah.

The following excerpt, however, points to the difficulties of assuming that 'just to be fit' is simply a physically feeling and a capacity to do work. For many of the participants, both male and female, it is sometimes only through a phrase that there is a hint that the meanings around a particular idea are more complex than they first seem. John, a club and school rugby league player, and a long distance runner, begins by explaining that he trains 'just to keep myself fit'.

- Int: So is all this sort of stuff, it's basically training is that why you're doing it?  
 John: Ahh yeah and just to keep myself fit  
 Int: Yes  
 John: Cause I don't think I'd be able to stand myself being like unfit, like overweight and all that so I just keep, do it to keep myself fit and for a bit of fun

#### **Young women talking about health and fitness**

For the male participants there were few indications that the healthism discourse was a central organising discourse in the ways in which they conducted their lives or constructed their sense of self. The same could not be said for the female participants. While for most it was certainly not the only discourse drawn on, if their appearance was important to them (and for most it was in some way or another), then a version of the healthism discourse was often engaged to understand how to think and see their own and others' bodies, and how to do the work on the body to bring it closer to the desired ideal. This finding is not surprising given the powerful relationship between dominant forms of femininity in western society and body shape; indeed it would have been more surprising if we had found otherwise. This relationship has been extensively documented in the feminist literature (see Bordo and Bartky) and while our own findings suggest that such versions of femininity remain persuasive, what we are interested in exploring here are the ways in which the young women in the study took up, resisted and/or contested their positioning in relation to this discourse. We are interested in how they managed their positioning as female/feminine subjects in relation to a discourse which is promoted through so many aspects of their everyday lives – in interactions with friends, family, the media and their schools. To do

this an analysis of interviews from two of the young women in the study, Karin and Chrissie, have been drawn on to demonstrate how in their different ways these young women negotiated the healthism and related discourses.

### *Karin*

In this first example, Karin, both linguistically and through her bodily practices, exemplifies a position associated with an unquestioning acceptance of the relationship between health and appearance; where appearance is understood as a thin body shape maintained through a close monitoring of the body in keeping with the widely circulating instructions about how to avoid getting fat. She engages in vigorous exercise regularly, monitors her weight closely and engages in eating behaviours, in particular, that worry her family and friends. Like most of participants in the study when asked to 'define health' she drew on a notion of health as eating healthy food and exercising. However as she expands on her notions of healthy food in this and other interviews, it becomes clear that Karin is not particularly interested in fruit or vegetables but in the amount that she does or does not eat. Food is linked to losing weight rather than its nutritional benefits. As the interview progresses the importance of a fairly restricted diet and frequent vigorous exercise for the way in which Karin lives out her notions of health and fitness become apparent.

Int: What is your definition of health?

Karin: Um, health. It is trying to be fit. Um, eating healthy food, you know, have a balance of food and all that stuff. Getting enough exercise. Basically all that type of stuff.

Int: Would you say that you're pretty healthy?

Karin: Oh, I don't know about that. I'm not very fit. I try to eat the right foods all the time, accept for the occasional pizza, haha. But I don't know. I think that I get through life, you know, maybe I could try to be a bit healthier. I guess. Try to get fit. In summer I try to do a bit more exercise but winter it's too cold around here, way too cold in the nighttime.

Later in the interview Karin talks about how she was fatter earlier this year and was 'really determined to lose the weight'. She links her loss of weight with the ability to have more endurance in her hockey games.

So I started on a diet type thing. Not necessarily a diet but I exercised regularly, cause it was summer and I just cut down from eating, like I would have five meals a day and then I would have about five things in between each meal. And it was just making me sick, thinking about it, like now it makes me sick thing about how much I ate. Now I have roughly three muffins, the English muffins, I would have three of them a day and that would do me for the whole day. Yep, that's all I would eat, muffins all day. And I loved it... I felt great, you know, loosing all this weight and being able to run onto a hockey field. And I mean even people were noticing that I could run more on a hockey field. They were saying 'gees you are fitter than you used to be!' It made me feel great and I was healthy. I wasn't getting hungry at all. Like I still don't get hungry that only reason why I eat more now is like I see something now, like I see something nice and I think 'oh, it's not going to hurt me that much.' haha.

Elsewhere in the interview Karin talks about how much she misses her hockey when she is not playing. Her way of talking about hockey in these other parts of her interview suggests that it is the physicality of playing hockey which she misses in her life. However, in this section of the interview, missing the game is clearly linked to her fear of being fat.

Int: how do you feel if you missed out on a game?



- Karin: oh terrible. Yeah, we have bye games this season, so it's terrible. I feel terrible. I can't stand it. And if we don't have training either, nup I hate it. I just have to do something and I mean if we don't do anything than I just have to go for a fun up the street. I'll do anything just to waste the energy, haha. I can't stand missing out on games.
- Int: so you try and do something else?
- Karin: yeah, I try to. I try to fill in the gaps.
- Int: so how do you feel exactly when you miss out?
- Karin: just terrible, I feel like as soon as you miss out on a week, I just feel, you know, like fat. You know, you're feel lazy, you can't do anything. You know, you feel fat and you feel so oily. You know you haven't worked off any energy so you feel heavy and, just like you are miss the little exercise you need to feel normal.

What is particularly apparent in Karin's talk around health, fitness and physical activity is her certainty that her ways of understanding the relationship between the body, fitness and health are widely shared and 'normal'. Those who do not share her understandings are either caste as over indulgent or when it is those close and dear to her, such as her family and boy-friend, as misguided. Karin's rejection of interpretations of her behaviour which do not accord with her own, is not that difficult in a context where her understandings are in keeping with the dominant discourses associated with healthism currently circulating in most western societies; she is constantly confirmed in her world view by popular media coverage on the 'obesity epidemic', by the fashion industry and women's magazines and by a school health education program which suggests a close monitoring of weight by balancing food intake and exercise. Karin neither problematises the healthism discourse nor her positioning in relation to it. She manages her central position in the discourse by discounting all other discursive positions which would unsettle her certainty.

While Karin's positioning in relation to the healthism discourse is arguably the most concerning and bears out the warnings from feminist writers and others of the relationships between femininity and appearance, she was in the minority in the larger cohorts of female students. This is not to say, however, that the healthism discourse was absent from the talk of other students in ways which were also troubling. Chrissie, for instance, was very much aware of the discourse and the way in which it worked to construct a notion of the ideal female body; however, this did not make her life easier. Her interviews suggest that the culturally constituted investments in being attractive by having a slim toned body were difficult to resist, despite knowing how they operated. For Chrissie it seemed to a constant struggle between her knowledge and her desires; a struggle which caused her considerable anxiety, frustration and anger.

In response to the question "What do you think health is?", as demonstrated in the following quote, Chrissie's answer is very close to Karin's, although on prompting she broadens her answer to include the emotional aspects of health – she suggests that being healthy can be judged by how happy a person looks.

- Chrissie: I think that it is sort of being well with in your self. I don't know. It is hard to define with out using healthy. It's sort of... um, healthy is about eating the right foods and sort of, um, health. It is sort of a combination between exercise and eating the right foods. I don't know. Sort of keeping well with in you. So keeping well in side and your body well out side. That kind of stuff. I'm sorry I'm not very good at that question.
- Int: no, that's ok, how can you tell that some one is healthy compared to not healthy?
- Chrissie: um, they look healthy, they look bright, and they look happy. They don't look down all the time. They are happy with in themselves, bubbly. I guess. That's about it.

Int: do you think you are healthy?

Chrissie: yeah. I think that I'm pretty healthy. I think that I eat the right foods and I try to do exercise. I think that I am a pretty happy person. So I think that I'm pretty health, yep.

However in the same interview, Chrissie confesses to being 'self-conscious' about her weight and to feeling that if she eats 'junk food' she has to 'work it off because ... it makes me feel that I am gaining weight'. When asked why she feels 'self-conscious' she reflects at length on the role of the media in promoting 'thinness'.

Chrissie: I think that it's the magazines and TV. Like you see all the models, not so much the models, but like in Neighbours you see the girls your age and they're thin. You just want to be like them. You always want to be like less than you really are. Like skinnier than you really are. I have got a really skinny friend and she just wants to be skinner. It's just the TV and it's the magazines, stuff like that has a big influence on teenage girls and I guess some guys, but mostly girls.

Int: why do you think that it's good to be skinny?

Chrissie: I don't know. It's being on TV. It's sort of brain washed. It's always there. You've always had the skinny girls on the ads and things like that. It's just a thing. We've all been brought up with people being skinny and that's better. Not that I want to be anorexic or anything. But I wouldn't mind, like I would want to be taller. And in the width less than I am. But I think that because it's publicised so widely and it's always in the front page, like some model on the front page that is heaps skinny and you just think 'mmm, I wouldn't mind being that skinny.' So I reckon that it has a lot to do with the media and the TV. That has a lot to do with why people want to be skinny and things like that. It influences them.

Int: so you were saying that if you eat something that you can feel it, can you explain that more?

Chrissie: um, well it just plays on my mind. I think 'mmm, I shouldn't have had that chocolate because I don't want to but on any more weight.' It's not obsessive; well I don't think that it is. But it is still there. Like when I'm eating some chips I just sort of think 'ooh, I wonder how much fat this is putting on.' But it's not sort of run to the toilet to make my self sick or any thing, it's just there all the time. It plays on my mind.

Int: does it make you feel, like how does it make you feel?

Chrissie: it makes me feel angry sometimes that you can't eat the stuff that tastes good with out thinking of the consequences of putting weight on or getting pimples or things like that. It's annoying, haha. They put in all this fat just because it tastes nice. The only stuff that tastes good has all the fat in it. The no fat, like the 99% fat free stuff doesn't taste good. I think why make it if it's going to make people fat. I feel angry and annoyed.

Int: at your self?

Chrissie: no at the media for making it such a big deal.

In schools in NSW, and in particular in Chrissie's school, health studies and English studies often involve studies of the media and the way it produces messages about femininity (and to a lesser extent masculinity). At the same time most literature about young people's consumption of media images has moved beyond the notion of passive dupes to an understanding of young people as well able to critique the way they are positioned by advertising (see for instance, Gilbert & Taylor's (1991) book). However, being aware and being able to resist are two quite different positions. Like many young women, Chrissie has taken up powerful cultural investments associated with the thin body

– she too fears being fat. She acknowledges both the discourse and is reflective about her own positioning in relation to it – this does not however provide a sense of empowerment. While Karin monitors the practices she engages in to maintain a thin and for her acceptable body, Chrissie monitors the ways, as she sees it, in which she is positioned by the media and feels guilty when she succumbs to its message or to the behaviours it prohibits. It is not all that clear who is better off at this point in their lives.

### **Discussion**

The ways in which these young women and men talk (and do not talk) about health and physical activity suggests that identifying as male or female still strongly differentiates orientations to the body and the ways in which the healthism discourse is taken up. This is not surprising given the different investments that young women and men have in appearance and specifically to particular forms of appearance (Oliver, 1999). Femininity and masculinity are inscribed differently on the body because of culturally constituted ways of being, acting and experiencing the body and culturally constituted investments in different relations to bodily appearance. While these differences are becoming increasingly blurred as advertising creates desires associated with appearance, to encourage the consumption of their products by (both gay and heterosexual) young men, there is still a far greater number of women's magazines devoted to instructing girls and women on how to work on their bodies to become attractive objects of the male gaze (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993).

However, following Foucault (1985, 1994, 1994) individuals constitute selves/subjectivities differently in relation to particular discourses. From our analysis it is clear that the healthism discourse is neither monolithic nor determining of selves/identities, but is negotiated and internalised in different ways both within and across the groups of female and male participants. For Karin and Chrissie, the healthism discourse is a powerful organiser of the ways in which they make choices around food and activity. Although both their interviews demonstrate the effect of the discourse, their positions in relation the discourse were in many ways quite different. Karin, for instance, talks about her desire to be thinner, and the eating and exercise practices necessary to become so, as though her constructions of the relationship between health, fitness and appearance were common knowledge and unproblematic. Chrissie, on the other hand, both expresses the desire to be thinner, and recognises the source of that desire. While this may not be a comfortable position, Chrissie, recognises her positioning, can reflect on it, and makes choices about how she will act in relation to the imperatives of healthism and related discourses, as difficult as these choices might be to make. Chrissie is caught between knowing and desiring – but this provides her with some agency, some freedom to reflect and act differently in relation to herself and others. Karin, as she positions herself in these interviews seems to have fewer choices. She may appear to be happier with her life, but she has few alternative ways of thinking about herself, in Foucaultian terms, of constituting her subjectivity differently – to be not thin is unthinkable and to be avoided, perhaps, at all costs.

For the young men whose interviews we have drawn on, fitness is talked about in ways which suggest that it is a desirable attribute in itself, achieved through physical activity and required to be able to participated effectively in sport. There are, however, traces of the healthism discourse which surface in some of the young men's talk. Whereas Karin and Chrissie wanted to be thin/thinner, where the boys linked fitness with appearance, it seemed to be more about fear of being fat or overweight. This is not that surprising and warrants further investigation. With the increasing prominence of talk about the 'obesity epidemic' in the popular media and its recontextualisation in school physical

and health education as the rationale for increased physical activity (Gard & Wright, 2001) it is likely that the abhorrence of 'fat' and the fear of being judged overweight is likely to become an increasing preoccupation in developed (and increasingly developing) societies.

None of the boys articulated a particularly reflective or resistant positioning to the desirability of being 'fit', nor to the stigmatisation of those who were not fit and/or were fat. The taken-for-grantedness of sport and physical activity as a 'good' in most of their interviews suggests that at least at this stage they have few resources, nor a great desire to evaluate or question the mainstream discourses associated with health, fitness and the body. On one hand, this could be regarded as 'not a problem' because such a position seems to have few adverse effects. On the other hand, if they have few resources to question the ways these discourses provide standpoints from which to evaluate others, to stigmatise those who do not conform to appropriate body weights or shapes; to judge those who choose not to pursue physical activity regimes as lazy and morally wanting, then their current positions may be a problem for others if not themselves.

### Conclusion

Taking up Foucault's (1994a; 1996) notion of discourse as a 'regime of truth' helps to understand the cultural and institutional resources young people draw on to talk about themselves and the way they live their lives. Foucault's (1985; 1994ba; 1994ab) later work on 'practices of the self' provides the means to move beyond a determining view of discourse to an understanding of individuals as having opportunities to reflect on how they are being positioned and to make choices about where they 'stand', and how they make sense of their own and others practices, in this case in relation to health and physical activity. This is not in any way to suggest that individuals have a free choice in the way they can act. Priorities in people's lives will be still be set within material and cultural constraints. However if young people are to recognise how truths are constituted it behoves those who would seek to educate them to provide the means by which they have choices in the discourses they take up and to understand the effects of their positions on themselves and others.

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