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# Remembering learning to play: reworking gendered memories of sport, physical activity, and movement

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**ABSTRACT**

In this article, we explore young women's memories of their experiences with sport, physical activity, and play during their childhood. Through collective memory work – sharing, discussing, writing, and analysing sporting memories/histories – we examine (re)constructions of young women's experiences of gendered relations of power, bodily awareness, and regulation within movement-based practices. The approach taken explores relationships between theory and method, a feature of post-qualitative inquiry. Forming a collaborative memory workshop with six young women (aged 19–22) and two researchers, we illustrate how *working* memories facilitates the interrogation of taken-for-granted assumptions about women's active bodies. Represented through two memories in this paper, their production, representation, and analysis were a collaborative effort, not solely representative of two individual experiences. Despite growing up within a period wherein women's access to and engagement with sport and physical activity is more available, common, and diverse compared to the youth of past generations, young women's experiences explored here illustrate the ways in which movement-based practices are located within the confluence of postfeminist sensibilities including, intensely scrutinised gendered body cultures, potent neoliberal configurations, and discourses of empowerment. It is these new sporting and active femininities and the gendering experiences of physical culture that are explored within this paper through memory work and collective biography.

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Memory; memory work; collective biography; femininity; gender; sport; physical activity; post-qualitative inquiry; collaborative writing; embodiment

## Introduction

In this article, we explore young women's memories of their experiences with sport, physical activity, and play during their childhood. Since the beginning of the 21st Century, within Western societies, young girls and women have had previously unparalleled access and opportunities to participate in sport, physical activity, exercise, health and wellness, and leisure (or broadly, physical culture). For these young girls and women, they have aged in an era in which physical culture has become symbolic of their empowerment, wherein women's 'equality' and 'girl power' has been celebrated. Yet, scholars across a diversity of disciplines have challenged this rose-tinted view utilising a diversity of theoretical orientations (Toffoletti, Francombe-Webb, and Thorpe 2018). Critical postfeminism and third and fourth wave feminism trouble a distinctly progressive view of change. Riley, Evans, and Robson (2018) wrote that young women's engagement with sport and physical activity and their understandings of their bodies, selves, gendered relations, and health are 'formed at the intersections of postfeminist sensibilities, neoliberal constructs of citizenship' (p. 1) and individual

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responsibility that is largely related to consumption. Whilst acknowledging that young girls and women growing up in the 21st Century in the West have experienced discourses of empowerment and choice, particularly around physical culture, their engagement with such embodied practices are largely constituted in individualised ways. The dangers of this ethos of individualisation alongside the growth of confidence culture (Gill and Orgad 2017), is that issues of social justice are rendered redundant and with this, feminism is considered, in McRobbie's (2004) words, 'taken into account . . . it is a spent force' (p. 255). As such, heteronormative critiques, as well as concern for the racist, healthist, ableist, and ageist cultures of movement-based practices, are pushed to the margins. It is within this confluence of women's empowerment, postfeminist discourses, and potent neoliberal political and economic configurations that Toffoletti, Francombe-Webb, and Thorpe (2018) locate the emergence of new sporting femininities. These new sporting femininities and the gendering experiences of physical culture that explored within this paper through memory work (Haug et al. 1987) and collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006).

Through the formation of a writing collective that drew upon memory work and the practice of memory writing, we explored (re)constructed gendered experiences in physical culture. Individually and collectively, we shared, discussed, wrote, and analysed our own sporting histories as an act of feminist praxis and mode of post-qualitative inquiry. Noting the diversity of literature in the study girls' and women's experiences with physical culture and the diversity of theoretical influences on memory work, we locate this project within an array of feminist research into sport, leisure, and physical activity. This use of theory and method creates new possibilities for post-qualitative inquiry. In doing so, we highlight the diversity of epistemological, theoretical, and methodological positions that have informed this work, which includes post-structuralism and phenomenology.

Following, we provide a brief overview of memory work as a form of post-qualitative inquiry with a discussion of how theory and method are intertwined and then detail our methodological practices. Two analysis sections follow, each of which focuses on a singular memory that was collectively produced. To conclude, we suggest that memory work is a research practice that can be better put to work in the continued and much needed task of negotiating feminine subjectivities forming within movement-based practices. We also raise several questions of relevance for the method, those who may seek to work with it, and qualitative research in sport, physical activity, and exercise.

## Feminist framings

Increasing opportunities to engage with physical culture, as well as the experiences of active subjectivities, are the focus of feminist scholars utilising numerous theoretical, epistemological, and methodological positions (e.g. post-structuralism, post-colonial feminisms, intersectional feminisms, transnational feminisms, phenomenology, affect theory, new materialism, posthuman and post-qualitative approaches) (Mansfield et al. 2018). This project is representative of this multi-theory-method approach. At the outset, our use of memory work oriented around post-structuralist accounts of gender as discursively constituted and a performative part of everyday lives and physical culture. With Davies and Gannon (2006, ix), we were interested in gender, feminine subjectivities, and post-structuralist power relations; we designed workshops that 'grappled with how we might bring post-structuralist thought to bear on our readings of (our own) lived experience'. However, as we worked through the sensuous, proprioceptive, and immersive elements of our embodied memories, it became clear that we were traversing through, borrowing from, and informed by the variety of feminist-driven theoretical and paradigmatic positions, notably the phenomenological, post-structuralist, affective, and new materialist, and we were wrestling with these in contexts shaped by a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007). In response, our conceptual framing for this paper is a reflection on our theoretical inclinations, discussions, and developments within the work as opposed to an overriding a-priori approach. That is, to paraphrase Hall (1992), theory is something with which we *struggled* in concert with the practice of memory work.

Feminist research paradigms, among others, have questioned claims to knowledge and the nature of subject and object. Post-structuralist theorising specifically highlights discursive power formations within which knowledge is constituted and subjectivities are performed. This post-structuralist orientation point, which ripples through this project, enables us to question taken for granted assumptions, making the banal and everyday vital moments of interrogation and asks questions of the social conditions that maintain these power relations (Davies and Gannon 2006). As we began the workshops that form the empirical core of this paper, discussions of gendered power relations were orientated around post-structuralist accounts of gender as discursively constituted and a performative part of everyday life. However, after the workshops, we revisited Iris Marion Young's (1980; 1990) work on the concepts of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality, which strongly resonated with our experiences in the workshops. In sharing, writing, discussing, and speaking about experiences and memories, it became clear that we were traversing and borrowing from a variety of theoretical and paradigmatic positions.

Writing well before the turn of the millennium – but foregrounding some of the issues within new sporting femininities and theoretical tensions – Iris Marion Young's (1980; 1990) work is pertinent to the discussion of the embodied activities of physical culture. In *Throwing Like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory* (1990), she draws upon Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theorisations of embodied intentionality, as expressed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, but challenges the neutrality or lack of attention he gives to gender differences in how men and women conceptualise the body, other bodies, and the occupation of and interaction with moving through space. In Merleau-Ponty's prose, the male perspective is universalised, which Young picks apart and adapts with De Beauvoir's (1974) contentions that women are subjects of and performers within distinct socio-historical contexts that educate and normalise a particular version of femininity that is distinct, and culturally, not biologically, defined. In Young's premise, women are constantly negotiating a tension between the *potential* of transcendental experience and a repressive immanence; that is, immersing themselves into subconscious action (whether it be sporting or everyday) and the rupture of experience as one repeatedly is brought back to the self-aware (conscious) modification of one's performance, to align with the gendered expectations of the context.

In re-examining Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology informed substantively but not exclusively by De Beauvoir's (1974) feminist critique, Young brings together a critical perspective on gender into embodied action. Particularly useful is the way in which she highlighted three 'modalities' in which women's inhibited intentionality is exemplified, feminine bodily (a) comportment, (b) motility, and (c) spatiality. For women situated in contemporary Western societies, she suggested bodily existence is imbued with feminised physical engagement with things, of ways of using the body, self-image, and space. These modes of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality she stressed are not anchored in 'anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine "essence"' (1980, 152). Their source lies in the 'particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society' (ibid.). The tension between transcendence and immanence, immersive experience and gendered rupture, and subject and object, are notable liminal sites in which Young's work and these three highlighted concepts are particularly helpful for gendered memory exploration.

Conceptually, Young's work is not alone in trying to bring together the perceptual/sensory with the forces and processes structuring experience related to gender. Several scholars of physical culture have done so with varying feminist-driven theoretical inclinations, such as: phenomenology (e.g. Allen-Collinson (2012); Allen-Collinson and Owton (2015)]; postmodernism and post-structuralism (e.g. Markula (1995); Markula (2001); Markula (2003); Birrell and Cole (1990); Cole (1993); (feminist) new materialism (e.g. Fullagar 2017; Thorpe, Brice, and Clark 2020; Newman, Thorpe, and Andrews 2020), and embodiment and affect (e.g. Glapka 2021; Heywood 2015; Fullagar and Pavlidis 2018; Probyn 2000). Here, in concert with a discursive orientation to gendered formations, Young's work assists in collectively and individually examining, sharing, discussing, and writing corporeally anchored memories.

Our aim in this collective memory work project was to explore women's early memories of physical culture with intent to articulate, inspect, destabilise, and challenge experiences and assemblages of power. In drawing upon Young's work with a post-structuralist orientation to power, embodiment, and memory work (Davies and Gannon 2006), the research was an opportunity for us to work *with* active gendered subjectivities, to take account of our 'existing subjective, embodied knowledges and understandings' (Olive 2017, 55), rather than utilising participants as points of and for data extraction alone. Collective memory work strives to overcome the theory/practice divide by putting theory to use in everyday life and in turn using everyday life to understand and extend theory (Davies and Gannon 2006). This novel and innovative methodology is scarcely taken up within sport, physical activity, and exercise research. Its use here represents an original, significant, theoretically informed, and methodologically unique approach enabling the exploration of gendered subjectivities in everyday physical cultural practices that can foster change and transformation.

## Memory work and collective biography

Haug et al. (1987) developed memory work, or collective memory work, during the 1980s as a method for understanding women's' socialisation experiences. Spirited by the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s, the collective of feminists, socialists, and Marxists forged the method with and for feminist movements as they sought to carve out space for women within Marxist thought (Haug 2008). From this position, memory work represents a consciousness-raising, political, and pedagogical method. Its starting point is the everyday experiences of its participants, who may otherwise be marginalised or under-represented. Within the method, everyday experiences are distilled into discrete moments, memories, or stories and serve as the material for sharing, discussing, and analysis within a group. The approach to memory work is not fixed in order to provide flexibility so that it can be adapted to reflect participants' heterogeneity. Haug (1987, 70–71) specifically noted this: 'there might well be no single "true" method'. Yet, within that flexibility, Haug (2008) detailed several considerations for guidance, namely that: research questions should drive the project; memory work is a collective and collaborative process; and theoretical orientations are infused throughout the process. A few assumptions also underpin the ethos of memory work (Haug 1999, 2008): that the self is constructed within certain structures, and we can play a part in that construction; as humans, we strive to give meaning to our everyday life and selves; the construction of meaning and the self are permanently ongoing processes; the meaning-making process involves an inter-dependence on and with others; language is an important site in which understandings of the self and meaning-making occurs; embedded in language are political dynamics through which we regulate and construct meanings and our sense of self; and that writing ourselves can assist in recognising how meaning is impressed upon, with, and through us. This entanglement of meaning, memory, experience, self, and bodies raise important onto-epistemological questions, that when taken with the post-structural framing of this project, push us to move beyond humanist qualitative traditions (St Pierre 2021). Memory work calls for us to think with theory-method, to embrace flexibility, co-generation, and to rethink validity, reflexivity, and representation. Memory work in physical culture, like other forms of post-qualitative inquiry, challenges the notion of authentic experience and subject/participant, works with post-structural theory to think beyond normative truths, and embraces 'ambiguity, uncertainty and the partiality of knowledge [that] can be incredibly productive' (Fullagar 2017, 248). Such destabilisation of binaries in post-qualitative inquiry assist with challenging taken for granted assumptions (Kuby et al. 2016).

The methodology has been expanded or taken up in several fields, such as psychology and emotion (e.g. Crawford et al. 1992), education and pedagogy (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2010), and Davies and Gannon (2006) inclusion of post-structural theory in collective biography. The latter of these, collective biography, also incorporated further practices, like the use of workshops, written correspondence, and ideas around embodiment. Importantly, experience and memory in both methodologies are *not* understood as truths or as facts of *some thing*, but rather recognised as artefacts to

be individually, collectively, and collaboratively *worked with* in order to produce new insight, to *work with experience* (Hamm 2021; Haug 2008; Kaufman et al. 2008). As in memory work, collective biography eschews a rigid approach, preferring instead to begin from participants' experiences and moments as entry points. It is in the sharing, speaking, (re)writing, reading, and thinking process, the *working of memories*, that the method unfolds the uniqueness of the individuals and collective. In this way, the memory work process is intended to be radical, fun, and creative (Crawford et al. 1992).

In sport, physical activity, and exercise research, Sironen (1994) and later Markula and Friend (2005) called for increased attention to and deployment of memory work. Despite advocacy of the methodology, few have incorporated either memory work or collective biography as inspired by the work of Haug et al. (1987). Poulson (2004) utilised collective biography to explore experiences of female physical educators; Clift and Clift (2016; 2017) used collective memory work to navigate teaching practices related to sport, physical activity, and gender; and Clift, Merchant, and Francombe-Webb (2021) worked through temporal aspects of memory and memory work to explore time as conceptual-methodological device.[1] Memory has seen some engagement in other modes, for example, Sparkes' (2002) use of memory via autoethnography to explore identity in relation to bodily impairment. Memory work, however, is under-utilised in sport, physical activity, and movement practices. In the related area of leisure studies, a few have used memory work to examine issues of gender and sexuality (Dunlap and Johnson 2013; Kivel and Johnson 2009), colonial power relationships (Grimwood and Johnson 2021), and tourist diving experiences Merchant (2011). In acknowledging the select studies that have explored memory or memory work from social and cultural perspectives in sport and physical activity, we suggest that given its politically, ideologically, and feminist grounding, as well as its flexibility and paradigmatic adaptability, memory work can be a productive methodology in critical accounts of sport and physical activity.

## Remembering learning to play: collective memory workshops

In our approach to memory work,[2] we formed writing workshops with six advanced undergraduate students who identified as women, aged 19–22. Each participant had experience thinking conceptually about physical culture as a gendered and gendering cultural practice as part of their undergraduate degree. Two research questions guided us: (1) What are the sporting memories of young women in relation to gender?; (2) How does recalling, writing, sharing, workshopping, and re-writing memories facilitate new insights into gendered meaning making? Our writing practices involved three writing workshops and independent writing/reflection in a memory journal. The three writing workshops lasted two to two-and-a-half hours each where we met to discuss the relationships amongst gender, sport, and physical activity, and our experiences and memories. The first session was organised around shared readings and discussions on gendered aspects of sport and physical activity, participants' experiences, and discussion of the aims, goals, and practices of memory work. In this initial session, we strove to disrupt (as much as possible) the boundaries and hierarchies between researcher and participant. The two researchers in the sessions initially spoke more in order to situate the collaboration and project, and over the course of the session dialogue became more balanced across the group. All participants (including the researchers) received a journal with reminders about the guiding aspects of memory work in which to record thoughts, notes, and memories across the workshops. Although some spoke more than others, each participant shared early experiences of gendered aspects of sporting or physical activity participation. Each participant also shared in the process of discussing the memories of others in the group.

Between the first and second session, participants were asked to further explore their past experiences with the topic and write out three specific memories. When we convened for the second session, each participant shared one or two self-chosen memories that were then explored by the group. Between the second and third sessions, we all narrowed down on one specific memory to develop in further detail. This included focus on its representational construction, including its form, style, word choices, readability, and intention. In our third session, all participants

shared their memory, which the group further workshopped together. Collectively, we explored the intricacies of the memory, asking questions of each other around, for example: clarity, as in, 'what did you intended by using this phrase or word?'; probing for further detail, as in 'what were the other boys doing while this was happening?'; questioning certain writing techniques, like, 'how might writing with your bodily sensations better situate the reader in your memory?'; or, appreciating one another for sharing, honesty, and trust. At the conclusion of our third session, the researchers collected all journals and followed up with participants individually about refining written memories and writing analyses.

Reflecting the collaborative and co-generative vibrancy of the memory workshops and the process, Amelia's (participant) and Jess's (second author) memories were selected and analysed with further literature. Both were chosen because they expressed experiences shared by other group members. Jess was also chosen not just for this reason but also because her inclusion here illustrates the researchers' position within the work. In contrast to a positionality or reflexivity discussion isolated to a methods section, Jess's memory was included in this paper to demonstrate the relationship between researchers and participants. As is expected in memory work, researchers are also participants. Researchers shared and discussed their own memories just as participants did; researchers also shared with participants the decisions around foci, readings, theories, and written expression. Such practices speak to the ways in which trust and rapport are developed in memory work, wherein researchers are vulnerable in sharing their experiences similarly to participants (Clift et al. 2023; Haug 1987; Haug et al. 2008). Acknowledging the design and effort taken to develop a participatory form of inquiry, we would be remiss in not acknowledging the similarities and differences amongst us and the power dynamics between researchers and participants. All participants and researchers were located in the UK. Jess and Steph, the second and third authors, are both white cisgender women in their 30s, and share similar backgrounds to participants, who were also white women but in their early 20s. Their experiences with sport and physical activity provided them an experiential common ground, given their demographic similarity. Their age, however, brought about some distinctions, especially around opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity; the younger women, for example, had far more opportunities in and out of school compared to the authors. Bryan, the first author, however, is a white cisgender man in his 30s. Although he does not have experience that may be considered shared on the basis of femininity, he has examined issues related to gender around masculinity and is a feminist ally; he has also similarly witnessed many of the gendered and gendering practices expressed by women in the project. Our academic experience was an important note of difference, too. As academics we have read and thought more about literature and theory than our participants, felt more comfortable expressing ourselves initially in the group, and been accustomed to the practice of writing more than our participants. As we developed trust, participants shared more comfortably and became more trusting of their authorial voices.

While only two individual memories are included here, it is important to recognise that these two memories were collectively generated; that is to say, that the presence, representation, and analysis of these two memories is the product of collective efforts, not solely representative of two individual experiences. As such, these two memories and their analyses are representative of the gendered experiences with physical culture amongst those the group. Relatedly, both memories represented are expressive of the creative analytical practices consistent with post-structuralism or postmodernism and writing as part of the method of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre 2005) wherein the reader is meant to feel and connect in ways that are different to more traditional academic prose (Richardson 1994). The first memory is Amelia's (a pseudonym) and the second is from Jess. Taking a descriptive, embodied approach, Amelia's aims to situate the reader within the memory, asking the reader, on some level and hopefully a rich one, to step into the memory of a twelve-year-old girl who engaged in competitive gymnastics. Jess's memory is a play-based experience at school when she was around the age of 6. Adopting a more poetic expressive form, it strives to incorporate the experience, bodily response, emotion, aesthetics, and pleasures associated with movement often left out of research

(Fitzpatrick 2018). As a way of knowing (Sparkes 2002, 2012; Sparkes and Smith 2012), poetry is necessarily emotive, sensuous and empathetic (Rinehart 2010).

## Oversplits

Amelia's memory is based upon her experience when she was approximately 12 years of age. At that time, she was a national-calibre gymnast in the UK competing for representing Great Britain at international competitions. Whilst unique in the research group for her level of competition in sport, other group members shared numerous gendered experiences with competing in sport. Amelia's memory of oversplits training was particularly powerful and representative for her as she and we revisited the moment.

> My legs are numb as the corner of the chair presses into my Achilles heel. This is the worst plastic chair, the hard brown one with a cracked back. Megan wasn't able to save me the shorter one with the wonky leg today. *I wish my head was numb*. I hold my right leg up in front of me stretching up to and beyond head height. My left stretches behind me, my quad, knee, and foot resting on the floor. To grip the chair and hold my right leg up in front of me but my pelvis and the rest of my body down, I press my heel further into the chair.
>
> Sally starts to cry. She is younger. I see the rest of the girls. *How can Katy do this so easily? Natasha is pissed*. I can't breathe. Imo starts to cry. *How come none of them put their arms down?*
>
> The pain radiates from my toes, arch, and heel through throbbing and trembling calves, quads, hamstrings, groin, and hip. There is nothing under my heel this time. I wish it were numb. The pain is too much. I touch my hands to the floor to adjust my position. As soon as I do, the tears streak out. They flood. They roll down my cheeks. I catch and hold my breath to prevent the audible cry that wants to escape. I clinch my eyes shut. I can't look at my classmates around me. I have let them down. I have let myself down.
>
> I wipe my tears with the back of my hands. I open my eyes. I adjust my back warmer. I bite my lips. I put my hands back on to my thigh, one on top of the other. I press my heel down again, thinking of anything that will help me to escape. I am getting nowhere.
>
> I refocus. I concentrate on soothing the shaking from my crying jitter. It is distracting from the task. I stare at the hole in my toe-shoe. I stare past it, through it, even through the hole in the chair back. The leg shakes and shutters calm. I close my eyes. Silvia comes over and tells me to breathe. She then calmly says to everyone, 'time has started again'.
>
> I push down on my leg again.
>
> *C'mon, only two minutes*.

Notable is Amelia's selection of this memory for exploration. It is one that is driven in part by experiences with pain and discomfort during the gymnastics training of her youth and adolescence. The pain and discomfort expressed repeatedly by Amelia, both within this particular memory and throughout the research process, are not just physical in nature but also cognitive and emotional. Each instance of discomfort in this memory leads to a rupture in the flow of Amelia's action, which when worked, culminated in the group's collective conscious reflection of the maladaptive practices and norms associated with women's gymnastics, many of which are gendered in nature. This 'rupture' is emblematic of the tension that young female athletes face as they strive to at once display sport and (and wider contemporary) specific displays of feminine athleticism at the same time as seeking to immerse themselves into the flow of motion, or what Merleau-Ponty (1969) would call 'transcendence', required to display the bodily shapes and skills of the sport. The expression of her experiences are here demonstrated in one specific practice, the flexibility and strength exercise of oversplits.

Splits involve training the legs to reach a flat, 180-degree angle; oversplits push this to the extreme, where leg angles exceed 180 degrees. Training the body for this kind of flexibility can be conducted in several ways, such as: using a wall to stretch one leg upward along it with the other leg standing, facing forward or backward; or placing a prop, like a block or pillow, in front or behind the

body or both whilst doing the splits to increase the range of motion. In Amelia's experience of oversplits, and in this memory, a chair served as her prop, a hard, brown plastic chair. A common and controversial training practice used in gymnastics, acrobatics, or ballet, oversplits are a type of movement constructed by and constructive of gendered societal norms and aesthetics.

Amelia's moulding of her body through pain and discomfort evokes the gendered relationship between physicality and aesthetics within gymnastics, which requires a body capable of performing extraordinary feats of strength, power, and flexibility combined with graceful, elegant, or sensuous movement. Crafting a body capable of achieving these sporting expectations necessitates the pain and discomfort Amelia experienced: leg numbness, pain in the Achilles heel, and radiating pain from her toes and foot arch throughout her calves, quadriceps, hamstrings, groin, and hip all evince the ways in which the body is experienced and instrumentalised in pursuit of training and performance. The gymnastic body toes the paradoxical line between athleticism and femininity (Chisholm 2002). Too much athleticism would imply a muscularity associated with masculinity that undermines socially constructed norms about feminine appearance (Krane 2001): women who appear too masculine risk not being perceived as real women (Griffin 1993). Faced with the development of strength and muscularity required for performance, women gymnasts must simultaneously meet aesthetic expectations of the sport and femininity more broadly, including a petiteness that delays bodily maturation (Baxter-Jones and Maffulli 2002) or an androgynous look resultant from training and weight control that belies their muscle density (Ryan 1995). Additionally, they must manage their self-comportment to maintain the charade that these feminine sporting ideals of flexibility and slender-yet-strong frames are a 'given'.

In this particular memory, Amelia is shocked that the expression of the other gymnasts remains unchanged, even during painful exercise. It is only her, Imo, and the younger athlete, Sally, who fail to conform by displaying their emotional state at the same time as performing the task. Relatedly, whilst collectively working this memory, Amelia shared how gymnasts deliberately choreograph movements requiring exceptional strength in order to hide the visibility of their face from the judging panel, thus allowing them the freedom to grimace whilst maintaining the illusion of grace and beauty. Amelia commented about hiding her face to avoid being marked down for 'funny faces', 'you would choreograph something so that your face wouldn't be shown to the judges'. Historically, women's gymnastics seeks to celebrate a version of femininity that denies many of the messy and 'natural' elements of corporeality experienced by young women whilst the achievement of the desired and valued body within gymnastics is intensely scrutinised by coaches, peers, and judges. Amelia again touches on the tension between socially defined femininity and the athletic requirements of the sport in the discussions that framed her fleshing out of this particular memory: she reflected on the notion that additional bodily weight would have in fact served as a benefit to the practice of oversplits. Whilst explaining that, from her experience, '60% (sic) of rhythmic gymnasts have engaged in disordered eating practices', she added that 'in oversplits you want to be heavy because gravity will take you down [. . . but] if they [coaches] decide you gotta leap for hours of a [. . .] training session then you wanna [. . .] look okay in a leotard'. Here then, is an acknowledgement that, not only is the gymnastic ideal incompatible, for many, through a balanced diet, but in addition this ideal is not universally beneficial to the execution of certain gymnastic skills.

Silvia, the coach, enters the memory at the point of failure. Having failed reaching the two minutes required in the exercise, Silvia reinforces the surveillant environment and constant judgement where the gaze operates to dominate the group of gymnasts. Disciplinary power here is evident in the coach's presence but is also diffused across the group amongst the athletes. The gymnastic body is forged according to its physical and aesthetic norms through, in Foucault's (1977) terms, a machinery of power that seeks to break down and rearrange it, one that is perpetual and exhaustive. This is evident physically, but also emotively and socially. Memory work gives prominence to the gendered formation of emotion (Crawford et al. 1992), which amongst Amelia, her peers, and Silvia are layered with meaning and significance. Amelia perceives her own failure as letting down her peers, so much so that she cannot look at them. Having failed herself and her peers,

the coach is less an authoritarian and more a reminder of an expectation that is already established and present. The coach's calmness and lack of empathy, commenting to 'take a deep breath' and 'start again', does not vigorously demand or command but instead poses a proposition for the athletes to continually evaluate yet embrace pain in order to correct the body for mistakes. As an advocate of such controversial training practices, commonly reserved to for the 'toughening' of army recruits, for example, forcing the whole group to re-do their oversplits because of the actions of one participant (Amelia putting her hands down, triggering the re-start of the clock), not least the removal of individual agency in managing the level of pain individuals endure whilst practising their oversplits (and her own apathy at witnessing the pain she is responsible for fostering), Silvia's role and authority in Amelia's memories is difficult to negotiate. While discussing the memory, Amelia noted that Silvia was her 'mentor', 'idol', and 'like a big sister', even helping her to make pastoral decisions, such as for which university to apply. When Amelia later transitioned from an athlete to a judge, she called Silvia an 'equal'. Here, then, Silvia's choices and actions demonstrate the troubling way in which socially defined, institutionally shaped, embodied, and sport specific versions of femininities are perpetuated not simply to appease the gender order (female gymnasts looking and performing in aesthetic routines designed to maintain admiration of the male gaze), but are re-enforced by women themselves and accepted despite its injustices.

Recalling, reworking, and rewriting this memory brings forward the pervasive sentiments of physicality and gendered discourse, the logics of the sport/body nexus (Cole 1993). In gymnastics, Frogley, Oliver, and Palmer (2018) suggest that the body within gymnastics training and competition tether bodily ideals, assumptions of athlete self-worth, femininity, and body image both inside and outside of sport. Normalisation of pain and injury, which is common in sport, though disciplinary practices can serve as a means to fabricate the desired body but when falling short of a result can lead to diminished self-worth (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), reduction in athlete motivation, loss, or retirement (Denison, 2007), or worse, injury or abuse (Barker-Ruchti 2008). Children in gymnastics are taught from a very young age that the body is to be viewed as a machine to be used and adjusted accordingly (Barker-Ruchti 2010). Willson and Kerr (2021) surmised that girl's and women's gymnastics are replete with normalised body shaming practices (e.g. bodily monitoring, weigh-ins, negative comments, food and water restrictions, or witnessing teammate bodily criticism, punishments for missing bodily standards), which exist in a liminal space between sporting excellence and emotional and physical abuse; such practices raise concerns on athletes' physical and mental health, sport performance, and enjoyment. Yet, there is also determination and acknowledgement that dominance is not totally realised.

Working this memory maps on to the discourses of *new* femininity, what Azzarito (2010) articulated as how 'physicality collides with the emerging image of *new* girls' (p. 261). These new girls are educated, healthy, strong, alluring, and active but not without ambiguity or contradictions as they consistently strive to manage, work, and sculpt active subjectivities (Francombe-Webb, Clark, & Palmer 2020). In exploring this memory, Amelia is aware of her navigation between and negotiation of (non)normative and (in)appropriate femininity (Krane 2001). Her experience is imbued with multiple and competing ideas about social identity and subjectivity. Far from an abstract and timeless recollection of a particular moment of training, Amelia's collective working of the memory into a minute moment of time acknowledges and interrogates the multiple power relations embedded within movement cultures (Hargreaves 1994).

Whereas this first memory illustrates gendered dynamics within elite sporting practices, the second memory that follows occurs within the confines of the school playground. This memory brings to the fore the intertwining of the spatial politics of children's play with bodily discourses that impact active feminine subjectivities. By focusing on the body's shape, size, and bodily norms (re) created within playground interactions, the memory has been reworked collectively to show that, from a young age, some bodies move more freely while others are more heavily regulated and subject to more control. We feel it is important to illustrate how highly gendered body cultures are

present and operate at the level of the everyday physical movements across the spectrum, from the playground to competitive environments.

## 'AHHHH, HIPPO!'

Jess's memory is based upon her experience when she was six years of age. It occurs on the playground of her school as she and her classmates were outside playing imaginatively. Like other research participants, school and free-time activities were common sites in which gender mattered. For Jess, this memory still haunts.

> Bodies propelling, jiggling, floating, mingling, conjured in and by the imaginations of 6-year-olds flying off into space. Body to body we rocket through the cosmos leaving behind the stillness and formality of the classroom. Adventure courses through us. Twitching legs yearning to move are now in free flow, feet fleetingly connecting with the playground floor. Tiny, rugged stones, loose on the tired tarmac impress on the soles of scuffed shoes. This discomfort is quickly dismissed as muscles contract and propel us forward, sideways, backwards. Chests heaving, air expelled noisily and warm.
>
> We duck and dive in and around each other, our movements interwoven. We have seconds to get back to the rocket before we are lost in outer space. Forever. My body collides with his

'AHHHH Hippo!'

> Suddenly frozen. I'm grounded from flight; ejected from the rocket ship, my body disentangles. My giggles stop. *His* comment is viscous, it impresses on and through me: I'm still, motionless.
>
> I'm rolling away.
>
> The weight of my arms and legs keep me still, I feel suddenly cumbersome, big, occupying space. My face is hot
>
> it glows red;
>
> tiny light bulbs flickering, transmitting light through my fleshy sinews, skin translucent. I flush red. Electricity flowing through veins, pumping through muscles, embarrassment sears through my body
>
> the current glows red hot.
>
> This tingling wrenches from the pit of my stomach. I find my feet in their shiny buckled shoes, push down and straighten my legs, I stand but my eyes are heavy with tears
>
> I don't blink, my eyes sting as I resist the urge,
>
> I don't blink, a blink risks opening an unending flood,
>
> I don't blink, the tears will show my hurt,
>
> I don't blink, the tears will show I care.
>
> A buzz from the bodies that continue the rough and tumble envelopes me. I am still, they are propelling, jiggling, floating, mingling, conjured in and by the imaginations of 6-year-olds flying off into space. Body to body they rocket through the cosmos leaving behind the stillness in and of me.

Primarily, this memory illustrates how one young girl's embodied subjectivity is negotiated as part of everyday playground activities at school. The children are engaging in imaginary role play about a group of astronauts on an epic space mission: what begins as a pleasurable, weightless, potential-filled, social, creative, and enthralling imaginative moment quickly turns into an unhappy, heavy, narrowing, inward-looking, and cutting one. Young femininity is here being negotiated in relation to the gendered body politics of the playground, the space travelled through (motility), the space occupied (spatiality), the bodies and subjectivities 'collided' with, and the sensuous immersion of the body in physical cultural contexts (Allen-Collinson, McNarry, and Evans 2021). Enfolding past and present understanding parses out how body disaffection and gendered relations intersect within

fraught experiences of body image for young women negotiating corporeal practices and the politics of a school's hidden body curriculum (Oliver and Lalik 2001). Via poetic expression (Sparkes and Douglas 2014) Jess's memory reminds us 'that people's knowledge of themselves, others and the world they inhabit, is inextricably linked to and shaped by their senses' (Sparkes 2009, 23–24). It is this bridging of the experiential and discursive amidst bodies, spaces, and materials that produces the political, evocative, and sensuous representational form. Touch for example, following Classen (2005), is a foundational medium through which social values and hierarchies are expressed, experienced, and contested. This memory brings forward the touch of bodies and surfaces, moving through space with time seamlessly standing still. It creatively portrays the multi-sensual experiences of young women and gives us an insight into the way that the senses impact everyday lives (Orr and Phoenix 2015). Arrestingly, the nexus of gendered and aesthetic-weight-centric power relations cohere around the active sensual body of the young girl flying off to space with her peers during school break time, and they crash her back to earth. This moment of immanence imposes a host of power relations upon her young body, changing perceptions of self and others as well as altering her engagement and playful encounters. She becomes motionless, unable to 'make full use of the body's spatial and lateral [and physical] potentialities' (Young 1980, 154).

Rupturing Jess's imaginary play was an encounter with her body as a site of scrutiny and criticism, the first time her body was knowingly overtly and explicitly commented on, which invoked an emotive response that electrically coursed through her body. She commented during the workshop that from this moment that, even in childhood and early adolescence, she became conscious of body shape and size and having had comments of a similar nature, but:

> . . . looking back now, the vulnerability of that little girl and I remember being very very aware of that comment. And um phew, god yeh that's my memory and I've got a couple that are like that. And I've got a little girl now and I don't want her to feel it.

'Ahhhh hippo' is a remark that is far from banal; rather, it is a quip of dehumanising and stigmatising character. The discursive link between Jess's body and a hippopotamus conjures imagery related to the construction of fatness, calling forward the animal's large size and weight. The hippopotamus, like the 'headless fatty' trope critiqued by Cooper (2007 cited in White 2013, 321) conveys 'complex and implicit messages about fatness, fat people and the place of fatness in the world'. Such imagery is reliant upon a 'radical "othering" which intensifies the dehumanisation of fatness' (White 2013, 320). In two words a nexus of interrelated discourses around gender and anti-obesity come into being, and they are embodied and felt in a viscous way.

The contact of two bodies, Jess's and the boy's, causes a rupture from which the widespread promotion of 'health knowledge' that perpetuates weight bias emerges. It is within this context and from this material and discursive assemblage that young people 'make meanings about bodies and health' (Pringle and Powell 2016, 124). For instance, health discourses related to body shape and size are weight-centric and facilitate cultures of individualised responsibility, effectively according individual blame and the labelling of young people as 'at risk' (Rich, De Pian, and Francombe-Webb 2015; Share and Strain 2008). Such formations have contributed to the production of an apparent obesity 'crisis' that extends far beyond the realm of health, which critical health, social, and cultural scholars have scrutinised for generating a range of problematic consequences born out of a ubiquitous focus on weight and body size. From essentialist understandings of the body as objectively measurable and the deployment of blunt measures to identify and label obese bodies (Bombak 2014; Monaghan 2005; Wright 2009), to social and psychological impacts of weight stigma (Brewis, Sturtz Sreetharan, and Wutich 2018; Deborah 2015; Puhl and Heuer 2010), there has been widespread critique of current approaches. Feminist scholars, especially, have demonstrated the ways in which the stigma of obesity is felt most by young women and girls (Francombe-Webb, Clark, and Palmer 2020). The reach of health discourses that affect young people, particularly young women, are part of the assemblage of everyday life, including intersecting policy imperatives, school practices (Crosnow 2007), family, and friendship dynamics. The resulting bodily preoccupation renders young women's

bodies as objects to be readily and easily commented upon, surveyed, and judged within schools starting as early as primary school (Pringle and Powell 2016). Jess further elaborated:

> I have distinct memories of people calling, commenting on my weight whether it was for rowing and coxing or whether it was for hockey and getting into teams and squads. [. . .] assumptions that I wouldn't be fit enough to play.

The everyday play of children are moments wherein wide-ranging impacts are experienced and felt, such as delight, friendship, exploration, and imagination, but also embarrassment, humiliation, fear, worry, or withdrawal. Pringle and Powell (2016, 123) highlight this damaging and diverse impact amongst those who come to believe they are fat with respect to psychological (e.g. body disorder ailments, poor self-esteem depression), social (e.g. disaffection, alienation, and marginalisation), and physical dimensions (e.g. as associated with starvation, purging, bingeing, and the effects of excessive exercise). Jess's body attests to how these impacts manifest: whilst on the outside she may be still, the inside undergoes a dynamic biological, chemical, and physiological response. Searing embarrassment and unnerving humiliation roil inside as the young girl ceases to move. Only her stillness, glowing red face, and withheld tears defy her effort to hide her response.

It is unsurprising that outcomes of pervasive, narrowly defined 'health knowledge', paradoxically, can have negative impacts on health and wellbeing. Young people whose bodies do not conform to societal norms in relation to size and shape are bullied, teased, and taunted to an extent that they suffer poor self-esteem, show self-doubt, withdrawal and worry about school and activities with their peers (Pringle and Powell 2016). Young people's unhappiness due to significant appearance concerns is on the rise for both boys and girls (Children's Society 2016, 2018); yet for girls this effect comes with 'increased incidences of body disaffection and mental ill health' (Francombe-Webb, Clark, and Palmer 2020). Toxic cultures of bodily surveillance and monitoring are highly gendered, and research continues to illustrate the way women's bodies across the lifespan are gazed upon. Indeed, for Young (1980):

> An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the every-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. (154)

Such is the weight (power) of two words uttered with little thought or regard, that Jess becomes immobile while all the other six-year-olds continue their space flight. The palpable weight of the comment presses upon and surrounds her being: 'Limbs once light and carefree suddenly cumbersome, big'.

In the moment she stops moving while everyone around her continues, the movement in space (motility) and the occupation of space (spatiality) in the memory further evoke negotiations of young femininity. Enthralled with the excitement and energy of the space mission, the young girl moves freely, flows up and down the playground, and weaves in and out of the painted lines as she reimagines their purpose from a netball court to the outline of the space rocket and the atmospheric boundary layer. This is a stark contrast to the still, sitting, and attentive body in school sat in a chair according to a teacher's instructions, and an even starker contrast to the rendered immobile body. Young (1980, 139) observed that the moving body and spatial relations are orientated to particular surroundings, meaning that women (and young women) 'comport themselves and move differently from the ways that men do'. Bodily movements and styles are constituted in gendered terms, which for women often refers to more constricted and self-conscious movements.

Jess's participation in the game elicits a more expansive bodily movement of 'propelling, jiggling, floating, and mingling'. This is different from the assumed feminine way of moving the body in the playground and beyond, that is often characterised by restraint or passivity and that precludes 'active play for its own sake' (Paechter and Clark 2007, 322). Moreover, this movement is done in conjunction with boys, where gendered bodily norms come up against one another. A gendered tension is produced in the moment of contact where the bodies bounce off each other, a tension

'between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object' (Young 1980, 141). The boy's body as it collides with hers is jarring *for him*, and his words disrupt the flow to create a moment of rupture in which heavily gendered meanings are inscribed upon the young girl's body. Pure embodied action is suddenly laden with constrictive forces. She has been too mobile. The space for her to move disappears. She is still on the exterior. Her impulse is to protect herself from further comments, from further ridicule so she desperately holds back tears that show hurt and vulnerability. But her stillness means her body is moved to 'conform', moved away from exertion and adventure towards timidity, hesitancy, and uncertainty (Young 1980). For Bordo (2002) the practices of everyday life, including bodily requirements, or what women eat and wear, highlight this vulnerability, normalisation, and subordination of feminine subjectivities. The moment of immanence carved out by the boy's two words plant her feet into the gravel as she comes to understand that her body occupied *too much space* in the playground (Paechter and Clark 2007). As she endures intense sensation, she becomes acutely aware of her body in space, her gendered, fleshy body that differs from the playground 'norm' (read more slender femininities or masculinities).

## Conclusion

This research drew upon collective memory work in order to explore young women's memories/experiences of learning to engage with sport, physical activity, exercise, or leisure during their childhood. Through the process of reading, sharing, telling, writing, and listening – technologies of memory – our collective (re)constructed participant memories; we explored, inspected, disrupted, and challenged taken-for-granted assumptions about women's active bodies, an act of feminist praxis. In opening-up memories for inspection, actively working with each other's memories, and thinking through theory and method, our own feminist activism has made visible the ways power is 'at work in oneself and on oneself' (Davies and Gannon 2006, 11). This process made possible the opportunity for participants to be active in analytically reconstructing meanings and significance associated with memories. Both memories, though different in any ways, allow us to explore how gendered subjectivities can shape participation in physical cultural contexts.

The second memory evokes a moment of transition wherein a carefree young girl is stilled by the size-based judgement of a boy, casting her onto the train of consistent and daily gendered relations of power and bodily awareness and regulation. In the process, the playground loses its liberal symbolism, no longer the antithesis to the classroom; instead, it becomes a place that is surveyed with rules that delimit bodily behaviour and appearance. In this way, it is not just a teacher who carries authority but all those around her who meet the physical and aesthetic standards of the time and place. From two words, she becomes motionless. Jess's memory demonstrates the various ways in which young girls, once challenged, are no longer able to move through (*motility*) and take up (*spatiality*) space in ways that predate their exposure to the conditioning forces of feminine discourse. The first memory illustrates a young girl acutely aware of the gendered, sport-based expectations placed on her body in gymnastics participation. In contrast to Jess's memory, Amelia's memory evokes a moment of attempted (if somewhat failed) conformity. The oversplit becomes an expression of the inhibited intentionality that occurs for young women as they learn to align their *comportment* to the context in which they are operating.

Young adults currently living in Western nations (18–25 years), like the participants within our workshops, likely aged and developed during a period in which women's access to and engagement with physical culture was more accessible, common, and diverse compared to prior generations, especially their parents. Yet, while increases in sporting opportunities may be apparent, this work offers a timely insight into and reminder of the gendered and gendering ways in which physical culture *continues* to shape contemporary feminine subjectivities. Women's experiences of physical culture have been subsumed within what Gill (2007) described as a 'postfeminist sensibility'. That is, amidst a nexus of neoliberal ideals related to choice, opportunity, responsibility, empowerment, and agency, the centralisation of the body (Camacho-Minano, MacIsaac, and Rich

2019) has intensified gendered bodily norms while effectively reconfiguring or hiding normalisation processes. Our collective memory work illustrates the ways in which young women's active subjectivities have been infused by these postfeminist modes of address that have seemingly provided increased opportunities for engagement, movement and active expression while the potency of gendered norms/expectations and injustices remain. Some of the most illuminating moments within the workshops were our critical, collaborative working with and through these experiences and tensions.

Finally, this paper demonstrates how thinking with post-structural and phenomenological theories informed memory work in becoming a post-qualitative inquiry (Kuby et al. 2016). Memory work as a methodology raises several pertinent questions and points of consideration for future research. First, memory work calls attention to the distinction between memory and experience. Often, 'experience' is taken as the empirical bedrock of qualitative research, which memory work deliberately strives to simultaneously unsettle and reconstruct. Where relevant, we encourage a scepticism of experience as a factful or artefact basis of and for authentic voice or truth, and instead encourage working with and reconstructing experience. This parallels the use of narrative inquiries and more recently creative non-fiction (Cavallerio 2021; Brett, McGannon, and Williams 2015) in sport and physical activity to move away from classic realist tales towards more creative, compelling, and still rigorous research representations. Second, because of its intense focus on minute moments in time, memory work revels within and effectively expresses the substantive *weight* of operations of power on the self. Operations of power in everyday experiences are constantly at work and often taken-for-granted. Slowing down moments of experience can assist in working *through* and *with* the numerous operations of work at work upon us Clift, Merchant, and Francombe-Webb (2021). Third, engagement with memory work needs to expand beyond academics alone and be utilized with more diverse groups. As a methodology, memory work has largely been conducted by and with academic collectives (e.g. Haug and colleagues; Davies and Gannon 2006; Crawford et al. 1992), and its uptake with non-academics is much needed. The methodology can also be put to use with a diversity of identities and subject positions (e.g. men and masculinity, race and ethnicity, bodily abilities, class, or nationality, etc.). Sport and physical activity researchers are in a great position to advance the methodology into new disciplines and foci. Fourth, memory work offers a methodology that in its politically, ideologically, and feminist grounding, and its flexibility and paradigmatic adaptability, can be a productive methodology in critical accounts of physical culture. Last, as a creative research approach, memory work illustrates how data is produced differently for different purposes. Like many others, we encourage deeper engagement with those qualitative methods and methodologies wherein creativity amongst researchers and participants enables differential views and understandings of each other's worlds. In this instance, writing, sharing, telling, discussing, and re-writing are the core creative activities, which we hope in doing *with* participants offers a praxis-oriented methodological approach of use to others. An enduring dilemma of all social justice-oriented work is where responsibilities lie for fostering change. Memory work is one such methodology that enables reflection upon and engagement with moments of the mundane and unjust that can facilitate the strengthening of capabilities of individuals and collectives to call out or challenge acute and chronic injustice.

## Notes

1. This article draws upon and reworks analysis developed in Clift, Merchant, and Francombe-Webb (2021, which focused on temporal aspects of memory work, and Clift, Francombe-Webb, and Merchant (2020), an unpublished paper presented at the Qualitative Research Symposium, Bath, UK, 29 January 2020. We would like to thank participants at that conference for their feedback and insight.
2. Ethical approval was provided by our appropriate departmental ethics review committee (EP 18/19 013).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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