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Embodying Sporty Girlhood: Health and the Enactment of “Successful” Femininities

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Abstract

This paper focuses on young women’s embodiment of health discourses and how these are “played out” in education and sporting contexts where varying physical cultures are enacted. We draw on data from three qualitative projects that considered girls’ understandings of PE, football, and running within the context of their active schooling subjectivities. Health concerns increasingly frame young people’s participation in sport and physical activity and “girls” in particular have been encouraged to be more physically active. Influential “healthism” discourses continue to construct compelling ideas about “active citizenship” as moral responsibility and within broader, fluid and neoliberal societies young women are seen as the “magic bullet” (Ringrose, 2013) to overcome social issues and complex health problems such as obesity. Through critical feminist inquiry into the material-discursive rationalities of healthism in postfeminist times our analysis demonstrates that health and achievement discourses form powerful “body pedagogies” in relation to young women’s engagement with sport and physical activity. The body pedagogies we analysed were multifaceted in that they focused on performative potential of sport and physical activity in the quest for the ever “perfectible self” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 719), and were also imbued with fear, anxiety and risk related to failure and ‘fatness’. These findings are significant as they show that current responses to “tackle” ill health that mobilise sport and physical activity as simplified and rationalised responses to the “threat” of obesity are problematic because they do not contend with this complexity as young women assemble their postfeminist choice biographies.

Keywords: *Gender, Sport, Obesity, Postfeminism, Health*

Introduction

Within this paper we focus on the material-discursive intensities of health imperatives as they are “played out” in sporting contexts where varying physical cultures are enacted. Specifically, we explore how active and inactive gendered bodies are experienced within and beyond schools in order to advance research that analyses the ways social and contextual forces influence the construction of health and frame physical activity and sport as health practices. Recent concern with obesity and overweight has renewed attention towards young people’s physical activity levels as a form of “risk” prevention in the UK and elsewhere. As a still underrepresented group in sport and physical activity, “girls” in particular have been encouraged to be more physically active and

initiatives such as *ThisGirlCan*¹ and *GirlsActive*² have sought to increase their participation. Additionally, recent research (Harrington & Fullagar, 2013) suggests that health concerns have increasingly come to frame many people's participation in physical activity since an influential "healthism" discourse has constructed compelling ideas about "active citizenship" as moral responsibility. Young women remain at the centre of many public health concerns particularly in relation to their bodies. Fears about obesity, inactivity, unhappiness and social media have driven policy responses that target young women and their "problem" behaviours, call out "risky behaviours" and "risky subjectivities" and/or urge women to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. The aim of our paper is to explore how these health concerns have come to frame young women's experiences and understanding of their active bodies within the context of broader schooling trajectories. Our analysis focuses on interview data collected in three qualitative projects with participants aged 11-17 who discussed their involvement in extracurricular football and running groups and Physical Education (PE) classes. A common finding across these projects was the strong influence of health in girls' understandings of their sports participation and therefore we focus here on the intertwining of health, gender and sports participation as modes for learning about the body within particular sites such as the school.

Recent research from a critical health perspective suggests that a pervasive feature of these broader agendas and policies shaping young people's health has been the deployment of rationalised and individualised responses to what are complex health issues (Evans, Rich, Allwood & Davies, 2008; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Gard & Wright, 2005; Garrett, 2004). Disproportionate attention is given to an apparent obesity "crisis," legitimising intrusive and surveillant measures to track, monitor and weigh young bodies. Yet, research collated as part of the last two Children's Society reports in the UK (2018, 2016) outlined the increase in young people's unhappiness due to significant appearance concerns. Whilst this is the case for both boys and girls, the statistics for young women still demonstrate increased incidences of body disaffection and mental ill health.

In order to locate our data more explicitly within the current debates about young people's health and broader health concerns related to body shape and size, we now move on to critique weight-centric approaches to health and consider the ways in which schools have become sites for blame, implementation and intervention in relation to young people "at risk." Moreover, we interrogate the material-discursive implications of healthism that interact with postfeminist relations of "successful girlhood" in what has been described as part of a "transformation imperative" (Riley & Evans, 2018).

Growing public health concerns around an ongoing "obesity epidemic" (Gard & Wright, 2005) have implicated children and young people as "intensively governed" subjects of broader social anxieties (Rose, 1999, p. 123). Such concerns are readily evident within policy imperatives framing youth-specific provision and schools, both of which are subject to risk-management agendas and ongoing surveillance aimed at increasing children's physical activity and monitoring their eating patterns (Harwood, 2009). Recent interventions targeted at young people have included the Healthy Schools Initiative, the National Child Measurement Programme—which weighs children from reception to Year 6 (DoH & DCSF, 2008)—the Change4life health campaign (DoH, 2009), which has a school-specific programme, and the Daily Mile Campaign (2019), which encourages children to run for 15 minutes a day. Thus increasingly, public health concerns are being addressed

1. *ThisGirlCan* is a media campaign supported by Sports England <http://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk/>

2. *GirlsActive* is a school-based sports initiative in England aimed at encouraging more girls to take part in physical activity. It was developed by the Youth Sport Trust and is funded by Sport England <http://www.youthsport-trust.org/girls-active>

through early intervention, through risk-aversion strategies, and in relation to particular ‘at risk’ populations including young women. As an “under-represented” group in sport (WSFF, 2012), physical activity programmes are frequently directed at young women specifically by encouraging them to be more active, often within a celebratory “girl power” discourse of empowerment (Chawansky, 2012; Heywood, 2007). As Chawansky (2012) argues, young women’s participation in sport and physical activity is frequently framed within a moralised and oversimplified “can do”/at risk binary that is unable to account for the complexity of young women’s participation or the ways in which the obesity discourse conflicts with a number of other “risk” agendas placed on schools.

In recent years schools have been tasked with managing an increasing number of identified risks for young people including body image, sexualisation (Bailey 2011) and mental health issues (DfE, 2018), where such concerns are evident in the newly mandatory health and sex education curriculum (PSHE, 2019). As Renold and Ringrose (2013, p. 247) argue, a disjointed yet growing number of risk imperatives invoke “the ‘girl’ as socio-political project” with gendered consequences. At the same time, cuts to PE and after-school activity funding as well as the abolishment of ring-fenced funding for school sport partnerships have limited access to physical activities for many young people (Briefing Paper, 2015, 2019). Accordingly, we seek to provide a gendered analysis of obesity discourse through attention to the ways in which young women have become the frequent subjects of obesity ‘risk’ discourses encouraging their take up of more physical activity within a framework that sees this participation as particularly health and achievement-oriented.

Developing our Postfeminist Sensibility: A Theoretical Bricolage

As we analyse gendered meaning making around health and physical activity participation, we draw from many theoretical perspectives to explore gendered health discourses and what these *do*. We take a material-discursive approach to understand how bodies, materials and discourses interact. The relationship between the material and the discursive has been described as one of “mutual entailment” where “neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated” (Barad, 2003, p.822). For us, schools and sports clubs therefore act as sites for meaning making around health and gender as the “healthy self” is articulated and negotiated discursively and through objects and spaces such as posters, vending machines, canteens, corridors, gymnasium (Evans, Rich, Allwood & Davies, 2008). However, our research is not underpinned by singular theoretical unity, rather theory is used as a *bricoleur* as we piece together theory, practice, discourse and objects to understand young women’s experiences of health, sport and physical activity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Multiple theoretical perspectives have been used in the planning and conducting of the research (Oliver & Lalik, 2004) and within this section we define some key concepts and their relevance for this project and our theorisation of young women’s experiences.

In order to understand more fully the complex relationship between girls’ embodied subjectivities and material-discursive relations of health, we make use of the concept of “body pedagogies.” Body pedagogies can be understood as the processes through which broader health discourses become “filtered, mediated and re-contextualized within the educational field” for example by validating certain bodies and behaviours along moralistic, culturally constructed lines of social inequalities (Shilling, 2010, p.152). Thus, we understand these pedagogical contexts as sites aimed at cultivating the healthy ‘biocitizen’ (Halse, 2009) within processes that are at the same time gendered, racialised, classed and otherwise embodied. Studies of girls’ experiences set in

school sport and PE settings have found that “health” within these settings was frequently translated as the “thin,” “fit” and worked upon body (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Garrett, 2004). As Evans and Rich (2009) argue, desires around weight and body size must be understood within a performative, heterosexist culture where girls are expected to achieve across the academic, health, and heteronormative hierarchies that structure their daily interactions.

We also make use of the concept of postfeminism as a mode of analysis for understanding “a distinctive cultural condition that invites and produces new articulations of femininity” (Toffoletti et al., 2018). This perspective draws on the work of Angela McRobbie who has argued that in a cultural understanding of feminism as “already accomplished,” young women have been invited or even expected to perform “successful, capable” femininities which require an ongoing maintenance of the endlessly perfectible self who is invested in her academic achievement alongside sporting and other extracurricular achievements including her own body.

In this paper we bring these concepts together in order to think about how schools and sports clubs, and the discourses and materiality around achievement and health come to influence the construction of postfeminist femininities in specifically gendered body projects. We suggest that evaluations both of girls’ bodies and of their ability to invest in appropriate “projects of the self” form an ongoing form of surveillance or extended normative gaze within schools and the wider pedagogical ‘field’ of extracurricular sports. This is related to a range of policies and practices that have been taken up in schools in recent years, which we explore in the next section.

Schools and the Enactment of Successful, “Healthy” Femininities

Schools play an important role in the lives of young people, particularly as they negotiate the contradictory and complex body pedagogies related to health and active subjectivities. In the UK we see these pedagogies formalised through the National Curriculum as part of Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) and PE, but also emerging in discursive and material ways through more “informal” policies and pedagogies that assemble throughout the corridors, playgrounds, extra-curricular activities creating an all-encompassing “knowledge economy” relating to health and the body (Evans et al., 2008, p. 387). Additionally, Oliver and Lalik (2004) shed light on the social and curricular gendered politics of schools and the impact of the hidden body curriculum for young women within school spaces. We take seriously these sites of girls’ education and, like Azzarito (2010), explore the links between (in)active femininities, schooling, sport, subjectivities and representation in neoliberal and postfeminist societies. This research is thus located at the crux of the collision between the feminist gains that have broken down barriers keeping women out of sport, education, employment and what Anita Harris (2004) posits as the “broader socioeconomic need for young women to take up places in the new economy...and the expansion of consumer capitalism” (p. 7).

Children have for a long time and in a variety of ways, been linked to the wider projects and responsibilities of the state. For Gonick (2004), it is not just children in general that are centralised within contemporary, individualised, state-building, it is young women and “feminized” subjectivities. For Harris (2004), young women are heavily implicated by the “blending of a kind of individualised feminism with neoliberalism” (p. 185); in fact, her work highlights the way that distinctively neoliberal, biopolitical feminine subjectivities have been related to the social and economic prosperity of society.

In this context, schools and sport are important sites for analysing the complex set of individualised logics by which young people become responsible for their own health and wellbeing.

In line with the market-driven climate of postfeminism young women are heralded as “free-to-choose,” free to consume individuals (McRobbie, 2008) and educational achievement and investment has become endowed as a key component in the upholding of a young woman’s choice biography (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). With Harris (2004,) “[t]hese changes have enabled the current generation of young women to see themselves, and to be seen, as enjoying new freedoms and opportunities” (p.8). While this is presented as progressive and a result of feminist intervention, this postfeminist and neoliberal feminist reconfiguration of educational opportunity disavows inequalities and issues of social justice and reconceptualises them in personal and individualised terms (Rottenberg, 2014).

Across policy (including health and education) and popular culture we continue to see politics and activism being disentangled from the feminist project and a non-politicised postfeminist discourse prevails. The result is that feminism, and feminists, have become dispossessed in terms of discussing issues of difference, inequality and social justice as the focus falls on individualised desire and pleasure. Our own engagement with postfeminism is such that we have attempted to develop a critical postfeminist sensibility that can help us understand women’s embodied experiences of sport and physical culture. This approach, like many others (Gill, 2007; Toffoletti, 2016), is to treat postfeminism as a critical object of enquiry, to explore the practices and conditions associated with postfeminism in order to open up new spaces for feminist intervention and activism in sport and physical culture—including PE. This paper extends this work by critically interrogating the notion that physical inactivity is a young women’s “problem” and also challenging the juxtaposed rhetoric of “progress” that accompanies improved opportunities, achievement and visibility within schools. We do this in order to make clear the way that discourses of improvement are not straightforward in relation to girls’ physicality, PE and sport but are complicated by postfeminist “Can do” and “Do it yourself” ideals that maintain hierarchies of healthy and unhealthy, active and inactive, successful and unsuccessful femininity (Azzarito, 2010).

Negotiating this ambiguous terrain is no easy task. Young women have become emblematic of these new, flexible, enterprising subjectivities and yet they are also precariously placed because failure is attributed to the self and the pursuit of an “inappropriate” choice biography. For Rosalind Gill (2007) one of the key features of the postfeminist sensibility is the visibility of the female body, a body that, despite contradictions, engages in health, physical activity and diet practices. In a move away from past images of women as disengaged from sport, Heywood (2007) proposes that today’s “Future Girls” engage in sport and health practices, occupying spaces once designated as male in order to assert their presence in traditionally male occupations, achieve success, respond flexibly and with confidence to the demands of neoliberal economies and society (Azzarito, 2010). The “Future Girl” is the embodiment of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007); her powerful, strong body is representative of investment, hard-work, dedication not just to sport and physical activities but also to performing a heterosexuality feminine subjectivity. Aligning with media representations, marketing campaigns accompanying sports initiatives such as *This Girl Can* and the materiality of clothing with “catchy” slogans and mantras, “the Future Girl is a girl who through her successful participation in sport and other physical activities, becomes socially, academically and economically successful” (Azzarito, 2010, p. 267).

Throughout advertising there has been a marked change from a focus on athletic, sexualised and stylised bodies to market women’s sport to a more postfeminist form of address that speaks directly to the individual woman to “get active” by overcoming the affective forces of shame, guilt and fear (Depper et al, 2019). If we take the aforementioned *This Girl Can* campaign

as an example, mantras such as “I jiggle therefore I am” and “Damn right I look hot” are accompanied by affective imagery to “empower” women through sport. Women are urged to engage with local provision, share their stories across multiple social media platforms and now Sport England work in partnership with the Association for Physical Education to produce *This Girl Can* resources for schools in the UK. Elsewhere we have discussed how troubling the ubiquitousness of the campaign is given the narrow range of subject positions that are rendered meaningful by “Girl Power” and “Do-it-yourself” constructions of femininity that are marked by class, race, age, sexuality and disability (Depper et al, 2019). The perpetuation of these narrow ways of embodying sporty girlhood within schools provides a perfect vehicle, through sport and PE, for normalising young women as symbolic of achieved gender equality, rendering feminism redundant (McRobbie, 2004).

Methods: Investigating Health and Sport in Postfeminist Times

This paper draws on data from two separate qualitative research projects which share an interest in girls’ participation in physical cultures and youth sport clubs. “Sporting Girlhoods: An investigation of girls’ participation in community running groups” (henceforth abbreviated to “Running Group”) was carried out by Sheryl in 2017/18. This project investigated the participation of girls aged 10-19 in a running group at an athletics club in London. It involved interviews and focus groups with working- and middle-class girls from a range of ethnic backgrounds who attended nearby primary and secondary state-maintained institutions in London. The running group itself was established in 2010 by Sheryl and others in response to the lack of any provision for teenage girls at the male-dominated club and aimed to make the group participatory rather than overtly focused on competitive physical performances. Over the period of a year, sheryl observed weekly sessions as well as interviewing eight girls, two parents and three coaches involved with the group. Girls were interviewed about their motivations for running, physical activity choices and their experiences at the club. The topic of health entered participants’ discussions on why they decided to take up running and on their relationships with their bodies.

The second data-set combines findings from two related projects, “Sculpting Schoolgirl Subjectivities” (henceforth abbreviated to “Schoolgirl Subjectivities”) and “Footballing Femininities.” This research was conducted by Jessica and Laura between 2011-2016 and investigated gender, physical culture and health within schools and school sports/PE. Combined, the data set includes: interviews, focus groups, moving methods such as Football workshops, completion of training diaries and drawing tasks. More information about the methodologies for these projects is available in Francomb (2013; 2017) and Francombe-Webb & Palmer (2018). These studies involved two groups of privately (fee paying) educated, 11-13 year old young women. Both studies took place within schools over the course of a half-term during lunchtimes and after school. While workshops for the “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” were more wide ranging in their focus on physical culture and body image, the participatory methodology designed for the “Footballing Femininities” project was focused on young women’s day to day experiences of playing football for the first time (see Francombe-Webb & Palmer, 2018).

Ethical approval was obtained by both Institutions’ Research Ethics Committees and parental consent was obtained for the participants in addition to providing information about the aims and outcomes of the research. Pseudonyms are used throughout, in order to protect their identities but they identified as ‘girls’ and therefore we use this nomenclature herein.

We will now move on to analyse the key themes that emerged across our projects. Although some of this data has been published elsewhere (and this is indicated in what follows), this paper makes original contributions to the field as we look across our findings for the first time to explore the everyday experiences of “sporty girls” in the UK in what we see as integrated contexts of postfeminism and healthism. Our analyses coalesce around the formal and informal body curriculum, negotiating sport and physical activity as health practices, the performance of high achieving subjectivities and the pressure and pleasure that accompanies this.

“Sporty Girls” Negotiating the Hidden Body Curriculum Within and Outside of Schools

The unofficial pedagogies and knowledge circulating within schools (practices and events) beyond the formalised curriculum constitute the “hidden curriculum” (Bigelow, 1999 as cited in Oliver & Lalik, 2004). Oliver and Lalik’s (2004) research explores the way gender and the body are centralised within and circulated by the hidden curriculum in ways that impact upon students’ learning and wellbeing. The hidden *body* curriculum within the schools studied emerged in complex ways as the girls were surrounded by “all the teachers saying in our PSHE lessons, ‘There’s no such thing as a perfect body’” (India, “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project) and yet simultaneously they were aware of not only the constant “judgment about what is desirable, but an injunction as to a goal to be achieved” (Rose, 1989, p. 131).

As a case in point, a wider public health concern with obesity and the “risks” of the overweight body has resulted in increased monitoring of body mass index, food consumption and physical activity levels in schools creating an ascendancy of a body politic that “normalises” particular versions of healthy, productive and enterprising subjectivities (Fusco, 2006). Within this construction of “truth effects” (Rose, 1989) the girls feared “fat and that’s about it” (Charlotte, “Schoolgirls Subjectivities” project). The girls within our research negotiated the material-discursive affectivity of this fear through the spaces they occupied, the movements they made, the clothes they wore, how they styled their hair, their behaviours, demeanour and performance of gender. Across our data we see examples of what Gonick (2004) identifies as the push and pull of individual and collective selfhood as these physically active girls feared their bodies being read as “fat,” overweight and a “little bit chubby” (Lottie, ‘Schoolgirls Subjectivities’ project).

For some young women school PE heightened their concerns about their bodies and what they considered their imperfections. The extract below is indicative of the workings of the hidden curriculum as there was an affective intensity that accompanied PE that extended beyond the formalised curriculum content to impact upon the girls and their sense of self. Within a focus group for the “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project, the young women often expressed body disaffection due to the movements required, muscles developed, and clothing worn:

Charlotte: Yeah because of riding my calves are like huge and my thighs are just fat

Interviewer: Do you ever think about, like, your own body when you are doing sport?

Felicity: Yes

Amelia: I have fat ankles

Joanna: I think about my tummy

Interviewer: You think about your tummy?

Joanna: Because like some stuff is too tight for you...it might be a bit too small for you... Yeah so you think about what other people are looking at. So you feel kind of worried

Throughout the data there are multiple references back to a “normalised” body politic and the girls would often refer to “the normal one” (Charlotte, “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project) and “someone who looks normal” (Joanna, “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project). The hidden body curriculum is pervasive here as the girls’ experiences speak more to an entanglement of meanings related to body shape, size, perceived health, educational investment, use of free time and clothing brands worn rather than the PSHE curricular that promotes positive body image and why it is important. For the girls in our projects being slender was of paramount concern. They distinguished between healthy and unhealthy, desirable and undesirable subjectivities on the basis of body shape and they readily examined body parts, divulged their dissatisfaction and confessed the sins of the flesh both within and outside of school. India’s comment within the following extract locates the gaze of the girls, the surveillance felt from friends and family members, the organisation of bodies in particular spaces as well as the access to computers and the internet as all merging to and leading to her intense body monitoring:

India: We were lining up to practice our diving and all the boys were going “is she pregnant?”

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

India: Umm, well I knew I had, I knew I was a bit over weight because like I had just come to the school and I was eating a lot to smother like the homesickness and I had packed on a few pounds. But, like, it did hurt for them to say it...My brother said I needed to go to fat camp, yep my own brother...he actually went onto the internet typed in fat camp and I think I took it as like yeah I don’t really eat healthy. I mean I’ll have an apple or a banana every so often but I do have, like a, you know, those little kit kats you can get? I do have like one of them with my milk every night. But, like, hearing it from your brother it’s really annoying. (“Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project)

Fears about being “fat,” having their bodies criticised and scrutinised prevent girls from participating in everyday activities, including sport and physical activity (Girl Guiding UK, 2016) and cause “hurt” as we can see from India’s PE experiences when her peers gazed upon her body in a swimming class. The power of the hidden body curriculum is evident not just in what is said but also in the way the body is made visible online and offline and the way judgement, shame and humiliation is legitimised on the basis of what is eaten or the shape of certain body parts. Broader trends towards reducing complex health issues to simple, individualised and easily recorded categories have resulted in a reliance on blunt measurements for health based around measuring weight and body size. These young women’s experiences reaffirm that within these material-discursive relations (as health is legislated for in policy, represented in the media, enacted within medical and educational organisations, bodies stand on and off scales, fat is “tested” with callipers, data categories are created and statistics inputted) healthy bodies are equated to “slenderness” with minimal “excess” flesh. Postfeminist “Future Girls” are sporty and healthy, investing in their own selves through sport, education and careers. Their bodies are athletic and strong enabling them to respond confidently, easily and flexibly to the demands of new neoliberal economies. Yet, within the UK we see rising numbers of young women experiencing body disaffection and lacking body confidence (Children’s Society) through increased physical activity.

Femininity as Bodily Property: Sporty Girls and Health Practices

The previous theme allowed us to explore the hidden *body* curriculum of formal and informal school spaces as well as at home with family members. This data demonstrates pervasive “obesity” discourses and the way that these influence conceptualisations of health and the body (Wright, 2009), especially for young women. Within this theme we unpack the ways in which the “‘truths’ of the obesity epidemic” (Wright, 2009, p. 1) have consequences for young women and how they come to know themselves and “others.” The combined effect of bodily knowledges “not only place individuals under constant surveillance, but also press them towards increasingly monitoring themselves, often through increasing their knowledge around ‘obesity’ related risks, and ‘instructing’ them on how to eat healthily, and stay active” (Wright, 2009, p. 2). Physical activity and sport is widely considered a key mechanism for increasing health through reducing sedentarieness, yet our data reveals that postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities of individualisation, self-work and choice need feminist inquiry as they can result in an instrumentalisation of these health practices in narrow and troubling ways.

Previously we identified that sport and PE were spaces of comparison, self-monitoring and caused hurt and upset for some young women. Within this section we will also explore the way that PE and sport provided the girls with mechanisms to manage their weight. For Alice, a participant in the “Running Group,” physical activity was something she invested in in order to avoid bodily critique and stigmatisation. Alice, like many young women, equated health with slenderness and individualised monitoring of calorie intake and physical activity. Here once again swimming emerged as a troubling, affective activity on the basis of the exposure of the body and the worry caused:

Alice: I do try and keep healthy. I dunno, I went to Spain recently and I got a bit self-conscious because I wasn’t eating really healthily but now I think I’m really happy with my weight and stuff. And I’m eating what I want but in good amounts. And running helps with that.

Interviewer: What happened in Spain?

Alice: I went for an exchange and I was really worried because we had to go swimming and I was really worried what they’d think about me. But it was fine in the end but I was just worried.

The reduction of health to slenderness serves as a form of postfeminist symbolic violence (McRobbie, 2004b), making difference and diversity invisible, causing young women to; *worry* about exposing their bodies, sees diet as something to be carefully *controlled* and running as *instrumental* in weight management. The postfeminist knowing subject is also apparent when analysing the experiences of the young women in the “Schoolgirl Subjectivities” project. Previously this has been discussed in relation to young women’s leisure time (see Francombe, 2014), but here we revisit this data to bring to light the governance and regulation of young women through multiple body pedagogies within and outside of schools. More aligned to the tenets of “Future Girl” subjectivities, in these extracts the young women located themselves as “experts,” in terms of energy expenditure and calories consumed. The participants in this focus group exemplified this knowing subject as they enacted the authoritative discourses of healthism through their management of food intake to avoid, at all costs, a “fat” body:

Interviewer: What's kind of the body that you don't want?

Charlotte: Fat and that's about it...

Stephie: Yeah, you think you're a bit podgy then like you'll like try a little bit extra for the exercise front. Like maybe try like, I would try harder in games, run more in games than you usually do

Jasmine: I just try and eat a bit less

Amber: I'd just eat a bit less, not have so much lunch, don't have a pudding at lunch.

Throughout the data presented so far, the young women do not critique or challenge the social or institutional forces that affect their engagement with sport or PE, instead they take up postfeminist subject positions of entrepreneurs of their 'healthy' selves who are "offered a number of ways to understand themselves, change themselves and take action to change others and their environments" (Wright, 2009, p. 2 emphasis in original).

Achievement Codes and "Future Girl" Subjectivities in School and Sport

While obesity discourse, constructed as a "fear of fat," formed an overarching framework for girls' engagement in sport as a health practice, achievement discourses embedded in 'can do' subjectivities were similarly compelling. Overall, the project of schooling (which we have suggested elsewhere included sports) acted as a material-discursive-pedagogic space whereby educational and sporting achievements serve as symbols of investment and work on the self and 'successful' girlhood (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Skeggs, 2007). This was evident in girls' desires to work on their running times as a form of individual achievement within a metric of ongoing improvement:

Zoe: I've probably learned that I can do a lot better than I thought I could. Because I used to think I would just stay the same but then the more I ran the more I got better. So I've learned that you can get a LOT better if you just try...[later] like you get your PB and it feels really happy. It's really hard to get a PB at [parkrun] because it's really hilly so you really have to make a big effort to do it. When I got 24 minutes finally, like 1 second off, I was really proud of myself. ("Running Group")

Zoe's body here is representative of hard work and investment required of the postfeminist subject but there is an additional sense of enhanced capacity set against gendered expectations. Her body is more able than she imagined and she can run "a lot better than I thought I could." She expresses a sense of joy as her body moves beyond these expectations; disrupting the normative physical culture of white masculinity entrenched within athletics where black female athletes have been characterised as "space invaders" (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014, p. 169).

Certainly this was the case at the running club she attended where male performances and training were consistently prioritised and celebrated. The personal best (PB) in running pits Zoe not against male performances but against herself through a metric of ongoing development and self-actualisation evident within a postfeminist sensibility (Rich, 2018). Zoe clearly enjoyed and gained much from her running and part of this pleasure came from the lure of improvement. She attended a high-achieving academy secondary nearby and described herself as a "perfectionist" who was in the "top sets" for all of her classes at school. Therefore, Zoe's desire to do her "personal best" at running closely echoed the achievement codes she subscribed to at school but it also

seemed to offer her a form of pleasure and escape still within the confines of an organised physical activity where her body has been traditionally excluded

Young women's investments in individual projects of the self through academic or sporting achievement also allowed them to position themselves as morally responsible in relation to less active girls. "Other" girls who did not invest in education or sport were constructed as lazy and disinterested. The undervaluing of education specifically took on a decidedly moralistic turn in the following conversation between the participants in the "Schoolgirl Subjectivities" project:

Roxy: You see these people in the day, you see these people, and they are not at school

Paris: Yeah that gets on my nerves as well

Roxy: It doesn't get on my nerves because it's their life

Paris: Yeah I know it's their life...They have the option to go to school, I know a lot of them do, they have an option to make their life better it's not like they don't.

Not only does this extract bring to the fore the class-based stigma levelled at young women who opt not to "make their life better" through education (including taking PE seriously), it also reveals the intense individualisation of educational opportunity (Francombe & Silk, 2015). Rather than discussing disengagement and educational achievement as problems for government and state provision, the girls used neoliberal, postfeminist rationalities of responsibilities to rework underachievement as a moral hazard and a "risk behaviour" needing different, personalised work ethics. As has been highlighted elsewhere, young women are the embodiment of "personal desire, hard work, and good choices" (Harris, 2004, p. 184) and education is an essential technology of the self within a postfeminist era where young women are precariously placed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them (Ringrose, 2007). Through school and extra-curricular sport as well as broader educational opportunities the girls in our research represent these new femininities in postfeminist times. That is, they discuss their life trajectories, their choices and their activities in ways that are self-made, independent and they are ambitious and aspirational. Rather than recognising that their ability to make certain "choices" are contingent on a variety of class-based privileges, the young women use distinctively neoliberal language that defies acknowledgement of the inequities that keep some young women out of sport and/or education.

The Pleasure and Pressure of Performing 'Sporty' Subjectivities

As much as sport participation offered up the lure of self-improvement and achievement, there was also a tension for many of the girls around their studies and sporting activities. The project of schooling and successful girlhood demands a careful juggling through a managed itinerary of "concerted cultivation" practices including sport, study and other accomplishments (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013, p. 76). The prioritisation of education within the "new competitive meritocracy" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) and its demand for academic achievement alongside discourses of healthism could also create the impression that sports participation was frivolous—unless being performed at a high level of achievement—or a mechanism for managing bodily health. While far from unproblematic, some of the girls were able to manage this tension by instrumentalising their sports participation as ultimately beneficial through a wellbeing mind/body discourse where sports participation could benefit their health and their studies. Alice for instance, emphasised the extent to which physical activity was prioritised in her family and thus expected of her as well as something she enjoyed doing:

Interviewer: So, what do you get out of running?

Alice: My mum always encouraged me to run and was like “Alice, you’ve got to join a sports club” and stuff. Running is probably my favourite thing to do. I think they just wanted me to be fit and healthier and stuff. Especially at GCSE time it’s good to be healthy because then you can think clearer and stuff. It’s good for stress as well with exams coming and if you go for a run you feel better. (“Running Group”)

So, although running offers up a kind of reprieve from the ongoing stress of studying, exams and “fitness guilt,” it is still instrumentalised and needs to be made useful as a strategy for self-work and productivity. Health is here rationalised as both a familial expectation and an individual responsibility where physical activity is part of a broader ongoing care of the self. Although Alice was able to justify her sports participation in this way, she also expressed her trepidation around performing to the expected level at running and worried that she would not be fast enough when she joined the running club. These fears were not unfounded, and several other girls relayed their experiences at other youth sport clubs with an overt emphasis on competition and an environment in which they felt pressurised or undervalued if they were not performing at expected levels. Laura had left her previous running club because of this pressure and returned to running in a more participatory group:

Laura: Here it’s not as pressurised as [previous running club] where they expected you to go away every weekend. I was a bit younger and I didn’t go with my parents so I was going on my own so I was like “you can’t treat me like this.” (“Running Group”)

The overt emphasis on performance and competition at youth sports clubs has been elsewhere documented where a power imbalance facilitates possible exploitation and emotional harm (Stafford et al., 2013). This could lead to disillusionment for some girls as the pressure to perform increased anxiety and fear of failure. Moving from athletics to football, the anxiety that can prevent girls from trying new sports became more evident:

Libby: I think the other girls in the year would probably get a bit embarrassed, because they might not be as good...they don’t want to fail or try a new sport like football. (“Footballing Femininities”)

Libby went on to comment that for every young girl that doesn’t “feel any outside pressure at all” there are others that “have huge pressure from their parents to be good at everything, like schoolwork, music and sport.”

This data from the “Footballing Femininities” project, though not exhaustive, suggests that the freedoms and opportunities of postfeminist sport and education need critical interrogation not only because of the entrenched patterns of inequality that are eschewed but because of the enormous pressure placed on young women to ‘achieve’ these successful subjectivities. There is little, if any, consideration given to the affective, biological and social hurdles they may have to navigate when encountering new sports and activities or even the health and wellbeing implications of this pressure to perform (Depper et al, 2017).

Conclusion

Within this paper we have explored the ways young women, who identify as “girls,” negotiate the material-discursive relations of healthism and their achievement-oriented engagement in health practices such as sport and PE. In bringing together our research around young women and sport we have shed light on how they come to understand, experience and engage with contemporary health practices in an era of postfeminism.

The growing impetus towards a preventative, risk-averse model of health has been described as a form of “healthism” in which individuals are expected to manage their health by avoiding certain “risky” behaviours such as smoking, overeating and lack of exercise (Tinning & Glasby, 2002). Conversely, activities such as exercise and healthy eating have been cast as preventative strategies through which individuals are able to demonstrate self-management and individual responsibility as healthy and active citizens (Wright, 2009). Kelly (2001) argues that young people have been particularly implicated in risk discourses through a shift towards self-responsibility that asks them to “prudently manage individual reflexive biographical projects” in a system of neoliberal governmentality (p. 23). Our data provides evidence for the everyday impact of the growing expectation that young people will manage their future trajectories in a series of risk-adverse choice biographies that set health practices amidst a range of other expectations, including academic achievement and individual distinction within a competitive schooling system (Rich & Evans, 2013). Specifically, our analysis demonstrates that health and achievement discourses formed powerful “body pedagogies” in relation to girls’ engagement with sport where sport as a health practice could both provide a motivational means of working on the ever “perfectible self” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 719), and yet where fear of failure (by not achieving an expected level) and fear of ‘fat’ remained constant risks thereby generating an ongoing anxiety around this engagement.

These findings are significant as they show that current responses to “tackle” ill health that mobilise sport and physical activity as simplified and rationalised responses to the “threat” of obesity are problematic because they do not contend with this complexity as young women assemble their postfeminist choice biographies. Our data makes clear that sports participation is itself wrought with struggles as young women fear failure and humiliation as well as stigmatisation of the body and any evidence of it being “out of control” due to exposing excess flesh or an inability to perform skills to the highest standards. Rather than contending with this complexity, responses to a number of health issues directed at young women continue to “roll out” campaigns and initiatives based on the same individualised and responsabilised mantras of “Do-it-yourself” and “Girl Power.”

As school sport provision dwindles in pressurised secondary schools focused on academic attainment (Youth Sport Trust, 2018) young people themselves are increasingly expected to facilitate this participation in physical activity. Sports clubs can be seen as an extension of the schooling project situated in wider healthism discourses in which young people might be expected to manage their bodily health. This paper makes an original and significant contribution to critical work which seeks to understand the implications of healthism on young people’s embodied subjectivities, particularly as they are enacted in schools or activities associated with the project of schooling such as sports participation (Cale, Harris & Chen, 2014; Powell & Fitzpatrick, 2015).

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