

# How do constructions of gender influence young women's physical activity participation and experiences?

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## Introduction

Physical activity has many well-established health benefits but in spite of that, Australians (like the people of many other developed countries) are becoming less physically active. Of concern in this study is that women are less physically active than men, across all age groups. Also, women (as do men) become less physically active as they get older, and for young women this begins as young as 16.

While research in the health promotion field has concentrated on developing theoretical models based on predictors or indicators of physical activity, there has been little work done in this area on the influence of gender on young women's participation in physical activity beyond noting that a relationship exists. There is, however, a significant body of research on gender and physical activity in the fields of education and leisure studies, most often on school-aged young people.

## Background and Theory

Much of this research has investigated young women and physical activity from a feminist perspective and has shown that stereotypical ideas about femininity and masculinity appeared to shape young women's attitudes to physical activity and the meaning it has for them. Such research has generally tended to focus on one particular

There is wide concern that a large number of young Australian women are insufficiently physically active to achieve health benefits. This has become a focus of intervention programs in schools and the community, although how gender is constructed, and the effect this has on young women's physical activity participation and experiences, is often neglected. This paper therefore seeks to investigate to what extent gender relations theory can be applied to the area of young women and physical activity by giving examples of some preliminary data from interviews conducted with young women who have left school, reflecting on their physical activity experiences throughout their lives<sup>1</sup>.



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aspect of gender relations such as patriarchy, class, power, sexuality and the body on young women and physical activity.

For example, research has demonstrated how the practices of institutions and organisations reproduce patriarchal gender relations and act as barriers to women's participation in organised sport both in and out of school. Time use studies have shown that the sexual division of labour within the family means that wives, mothers and daughters have less access to leisure time physical activity. Studies looking at young women, sexuality and physical activity have shown how compulsory or assumed heterosexuality influence women's physical activity participation and limit their choices of activity in order to maintain a subordinate feminine sexuality and avoid a "butch" image. Lastly, research into gendered symbolism of language and images in the media (and in society more generally) have shown stereotypical views surround women and physical activity, with a focus on beauty and attractiveness rather than skill or performance. As well, there is a growing body of research which is looking more specifically at young women and the body – their size and shape – and the work young women do on their body to achieve a particular look and why.

Connell (2002) describes a model of gender relations which has four distinct dimensions of gender (power relations, production relations, emotional relations and symbolic relations) which closely correlate with these areas of research. Connell

believes that several aspects of gender relations can be operating at any one time in any given situation and suggests that considering all of these influences on gender concurrently is essential for a global understanding of the effect gender relations have on something – in this case physical activity meaning for young women. Therefore, what follows is a preliminary analysis of the interviews I have begun with young women, using Connell's gender relations theory as a reference.

It should also be noted that while the body and embodiment is not addressed directly in this model of gender relations, Connell acknowledges that bodies are inextricably linked with gender relations. He believes that the body is both an object of social practice and an agent in social practice and talks of the loop or circuit which links these bodily practices and gender relations. Undoubtedly this is even more relevant to young women in the context of physical activity and will also be discussed.

### Aim and Method

This study aims to investigate young women who have already left high school (age 20-24). Young women of this age are reported to become progressively less active from as early as 16 years of age, particularly after they leave school; however, they are not often studied (unless through their membership to a particular sport or university course) as they are more difficult to access as a group. Therefore this research seeks to investigate how these young women have incorporated

physical activity into their everyday lives and the meaning that it has for them currently, as well as in their past and future, and how their ideas about physical activity are mediated by constructions of gender.

To date I have interviewed five young women about their life history from a physical activity perspective. I am allowing the data to inform theory development as well as using the existing theoretical frameworks; so after I interviewed and tape-recorded the first young woman, I transcribed the tape and coded the transcript by hand for key themes from the health promotion, leisure studies and education literature as well as for any other recurring themes. I put this coding frame into NVIVO, a software package designed for analysing qualitative data and I have used this coding frame for the next four interviews, modifying and refining it with each interview.

### Findings and Implications

What has been most striking about the interviews so far is the pursuit of a particular body ideal by these young women, their concern with appearance and body image and the disciplining of their body through the physical activity they undertake to achieve this ideal. Their conversations about working on their body incorporate at least three of the structures of gender relations, as it is about symbolic relations – achieving a particular look, emotional relations in so far as why they are pursuing a particular look and about power relations – not in the form of institutional oppression so much as the discursive power

that is omnipresent and controlling young women's physical activity participation through everyday decisions about their body. More than any of the other dimensions, power relations are continuously present in the conversations about disciplining their bodies and so it is inevitably this dimension which has received more attention.

One common example of this is how most of the informants feel a sense of obligation regarding exercise, particularly gym work. They talk of feeling lazy if they are not doing body work and of the need to "do something", not for enjoyment but to control and discipline their body. For example:

**Kate:** *...I started working and I joined a gym for a while 'cause I thought I had to do something (laugh)*

*...I would just be happy going to the gym or something like that, a couple of times a week but yeah, I'm a bit lazy (laugh).*

This is a subtle example of discursive power to which Connell refers, and it is an area which has been dealt with in great detail by Foucault in his writings about power. Although Foucault has been criticised for not dealing with gender, as Wright (1996, p.62) points out, "Foucault provides a starting point from which to talk about femininity and masculinity as constituted through a process that is both historically and culturally specific and which begins with a focus on the regulation of bodies".

The construct of the body as the

object of discipline and control provides a partial explanation for the centrality of the body to most of these young women's ideas about physical activity. This theory of power, control and the body is relevant for men and women alike, however, and Wright found in her research that both young men and women equated activity and effort with being virtuous. The visible evidence of such work is the body – thus, "fatness" equals laziness and lack of willpower. As well as desiring to be virtuous or disciplined with their bodies, for young women the link between physical activity and desirable body shape is evident. To be fit and slim is not only associated with being in control, but with femininity. Disciplining the body in order to achieve a feminine heterosexuality through their appearance encompasses the dimensions of power, symbolic and emotional relations as described by Connell.

**Britney:** *What MAKES me want to go (to the gym) is when I look at the mirror in the morning and go "Ooooh, that's not friendly!" (laughing) Those bits of flab, they're not supposed to be there!" – That's what motivates me!*

**HG:** *So do you think if you looked in the mirror and thought "Well I look pretty fantastic", that you wouldn't go?*

**Britney:** *Oh, I still would. 'Cause I know that my body type, you have to keep doing it to get it to stay like that.*

Britney makes the most forthright statement about her reasons for

being physically active. I think that she was the most candid in her disclosure about this topic and that the informants were reluctant to spell such thoughts out, even if it was what they believe. Britney feels that her body is something that needs continual work to achieve the look she desires and to get "it" (the object) to "stay like that". She participates in other activities, such as dancing and soccer, but they are for enjoyment, not body work and she sees them as quite separate objectives.

This is something I have noticed in the interviews – all of the five informants have attended the gym at some point in order to work on their body, but also pursue other physical activities, whether it is shopping or dancing, as forms of leisure. In this way, gym is seen as work rather than leisure. These young women also talk about wanting to keep their weekends for "themselves" – as a time for leisure but free from "work outs". As Fullagar (2002, p.81) points out, dominant modes of active physicality such as the gym generate a normative and rather exclusive form of health identity based on body image. Dominant health regimes are aimed at measured self-improvement, which may in fact generate a further disengagement from the subjective body that in turn produces a "sense of meaninglessness or futility in the exercise/leisure experience itself".

The tension between the body as object (or body as canvas) versus the body as subject (or body as machine) is something Connell (2002) elaborates on in his theory of social embodiment. He emphasises

the agency and activity of bodies, not just their docility. Bodies may participate in disciplinary regimes not just because they are docile but because they are seeking pleasure, experiences etc. However, with regard to gym work the emphasis is still very much on the body as canvas.

This leads to the suggestion which has been raised in other research (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; Theberge, 1997) that some physical activity, gym work in particular, rather than providing young women with the choice to be active and resist hegemonic feminine ideals about the body, constrains them both in terms of their appearance and their time by providing them with yet another mechanism by which to achieve these goals.

Britney sees physical activity as inseparable from body image to the point that when she is asked what physical activity she would like to be doing in the future she responds with a description of her ideal body type:

**HG:** *What do you anticipate, what do you imagine yourself doing in the future exercise-wise? What would you hope to be doing?*

**Britney:** *Um, a size 10 (laughing) I'm so funny! (pause) I want to be fit, like physically. I want to have arms like Madonna, she's got awesome, awesome arms. Physically I would like to be smaller and a lot more fit... I will never be a size six or whatever, I don't want to be, but I would like to be smaller than I am now and what girl doesn't?*

Britney is equating physical activity

with fitness and an ideal body type with a stereotype of feminine attractiveness. Not all the young women I talked to made this connection. Nerida, for example, is in some respects a study of resistance rather than a study of constraint of hegemonic femininity:

**Nerida:** *I have gone to the gym (in the past), cause like, in 1<sup>st</sup> year cause we'd do so much together, the girls in the dorms, we'd go through these little spates where we would go to the gym and stuff and play on the rowing machines and stuff and that would be fun for like a day and then I'd go "I'm bored". Like I just didn't find it – and I have a gym where I live and I don't use it. I went there once and I got on the bike and I was like "right, pretty boring" and I felt like I was there for an hour and I was probably there for about three minutes. I just went "I can't do it". I have to trick myself into it, I can't do exercise if it is just for the sake of it. I have no motivation to be exercisey, I would rather just do it if it is fun...*

*...I lived with people who were obsessed with going to the gym every day and losing weight – it was always about losing weight though, not about being fit.*

**HG:** *And that never rubbed off on you?*

**Nerida:** *No, I would just sit at home and watch TV.*

Nerida is aware of the pressure on young women to shape and train the body, but cannot bring herself to separate physical activity from leisure in order to do "body work".

This does not mean she is not physically active, in fact all but one of the young women interviewed were regularly physically active. Just as it is the discursive, intimate and pervasive power of hegemonic femininity that influences these young women (for example Britney) to strive for a particular appearance, the nature of this power is not all or nothing and alternative discourses allow young women such as Nerida to resist the dominant discourse. This could be seen as an example of the body as an agent in social practice, rather than an object of social practice. It could also be that Nerida has already attained what she views to be an "ideal" body type and so she doesn't need to work on her body. The possibility that she is simply not vocalising her more private feelings about her body and her physical activity also needs to be woven into the equation.

The last point I would like to make here is regarding the influence of emotional relations (and more specifically sexual relations) on these young women's choices. For example, Darcy talks of how at high school she stopped swimming or going in races, even though it was something she had enjoyed and was good at when she was younger, because she was embarrassed to be seen in her swimmers. When asked if she still feels this way she says:

**Darcy:** *I am meant to be doing swimming (with my boyfriend and his friends) at night actually, and I was like "oh... can't make it"*

*...They asked me but... yeah. So no, obviously I am not over it! I wouldn't*

*swim without my board shorts!*

When asked why she doesn't mind going to the gym, she says it is because she has more clothes on, but also because there are mainly women there:

*Like there were two guys in our class on Monday night but it's very rare. I suppose I am more comfortable just with women.*

Similarly in her research on high school girls Wright comments "for the girls the enclosed areas of the halls and gymnasiums provide freedom from the gaze of the male Other together with an opportunity to participate in activities that allow them self expression and creativity" (1996, p.71). In Darcy's case, however, while the gym removes her from the male gaze, it is definitely more about discipline and body work in order to look good (most likely for the male gaze) than an abandonment of her inhibitions and exploring her creativity. Darcy's attitude to her body is almost one of disgust – her body is a badly behaved object which embarrasses her. This is not always the case for her though, as at other points in the conversation Darcy talks of how she used to play competitive netball at a high level and describes with some animation the thrill of scoring a goal, of feeling skillful and of winning. Whether she sees her body as an object or the subject definitely seems dependent on the context.

Grace also talks of how in Year 10 she and some friends began walking to school rather than catching the bus solely because "we were like obsessive about losing weight and

stuff". As Grace recalls it:

*...I never really had a full on athletic body, I was always chubby during high school and primary so... all the other girls would have boyfriends and I'd be like when am I going to get one? You know? (laugh)*

Grace equates being physically active with being sexually attractive to young men. Walking to school was a means of working on her body to achieve a desirable appearance – her body is the object. Grace still participated in other types of physical activity when she was at school (such as basketball) for other reasons, but walking to school was purely for bodywork. Grace reports that now "it doesn't really bother me, like I'm over it". She says that now she goes to the gym for different reasons – to be "toned and healthier". She believes that as she has got older she has realised that "we are all different and it doesn't really matter".

Both these young women talk about physical activity in relation to men (both are worried about what men will think of their appearance), meaning their emotional relations influence and constrain their physical activity behaviour. It is interesting that both Grace and Darcy feel that their obsession with appearance (past and present respectively) isn't ideal, and they also both feel that they are now less concerned with issues of body image than they were in the past. Given their current types of engagement in and beliefs about physical activity, however, it is reasonable to question whether they have simply become more adept at

rationalising the work they do on the body. Have they just internalised their body image issues and learnt to say what they think people want to hear while continuing to pursue the unattainable body beautiful? Whether or not this is the case, it is still apparent that these young women's motivations, decisions and beliefs arise from their gendered constructions of physical activity in the realms of emotional, symbolic and power relations.

## Conclusion

Whilst still in the early stages of interviewing and analysis, there are themes or patterns that can be commented on. The young women I interviewed are, for the large part, physically active. The body is central to their understandings of physical activity and their multi-dimensional, gendered constructions of the body therefore influence their physical activity. Much of the talk in the interviews was concerned with physical activity in order to discipline and control bodies. While Connell states that bodies are both objects and agents at any one time, for young women pursuing a particular shape and size through physical activity such as gym work, there appears less agency for these, more docile, bodies, depending on what they are trying to achieve. In such scenarios, gendered constructions of the body as an object are operating to control and regulate the physical activity of these young women to varying degrees.

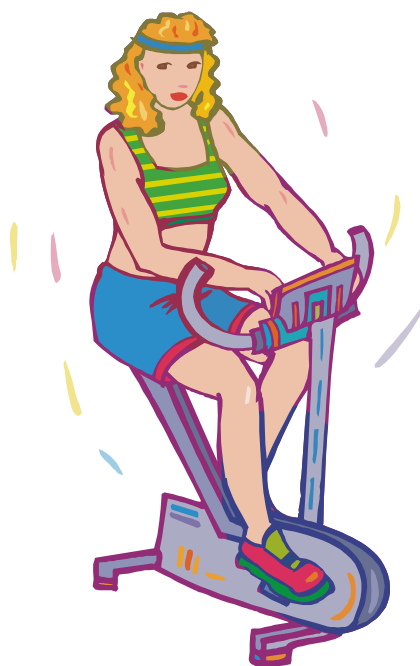
This is not the same across contexts for one woman, however, or

between women. At the same time it is also apparent that there is agency in these women's choices. They are aware (to varying degrees) of the dominant constructions of gender and they make choices with this in mind. So, although power and control operate throughout many systems of thought and knowledge about the body, these systems can be subverted, which is the challenge for change.

Because of the broad scope of Connell's gender relations theory, it is tempting to break the interview into neat categories according to the different dimensions. This is not, of course, for which it was designed. Just the opposite: it was designed to help understand the constant intermingling and interactions within the complex reality of gender relations. Analysis in such a manner is a massive task if it is to be done properly. While I still feel it is possible, it also seems apparent to me that some dimensions of gender relations (for example, sexuality and power) have more importance for these young women with regard to the body and physical activity. I also think it will be important to incorporate the body even more closely in future discussion and analysis, as both gender and physical activity are bound (literally) to it.

In practical terms for young women and for those who work with them, these findings suggest so far that hegemonic masculine discourses may predominate, but they are never absolute, nor the sole determinants of bodily meaning. As Bronwyn Davies (1993) points out in her study of how young people in

primary school become gendered, the challenge is to disrupt the apparent inevitability of the male-female dualism, characterised by the assumption of male and not-male, where female is lesser, weaker and passive. The challenge can be pursued by engaging young people in discussions about different ways of being, as well as exploring with them, in Davies' terms: "the constitutive force of the discursive practices through which gender relations are done". Following the completion of my interviews and analysis I hope to be able to make more practical recommendations specific to young women and physical activity.




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