

**Locating the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people from low  
income, lone parent families**

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## **Abstract**

*Background:* In the United Kingdom (UK) it is predicted that economic cuts and a subsequent increase in child poverty will affect those already on the lowest incomes and in particular, those living in lone parent families. As a result, the informal pedagogic encounters within the family that contribute to the development of physical activity related values, beliefs and dispositions from a very early age will be affected. It is therefore vital that we gain an understanding of the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people, as well as the informal pedagogic practices and the socio-cultural forces that influence individual agency.

*Purpose:* Based on Bourdieu's (1984) key concepts this paper explores the interplay of structural conditions and personal agency with regard to physical activity in the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families.

*Methods:* This study reports on the voices of 24 participants (aged 11-14) from low income, lone parent families in the West Midlands, UK. These participants were engaged in paired, semi structured interviews to explore issues of personal agency by listening to how they reported on their present lives, past experiences and future possibilities with regard to physical activity. All corresponding interview data were analysed using analytic induction.

*Findings:* This paper suggests that young people exhibited diminished desires to engage in activity due to structural constraints of time, parents' work commitments and a lack of transport that resulted in engagement in sedentary alternatives. Informal pedagogic practices within these families were restricted due to the associated structural conditions of living in a lone parent family. As such, young people's choice not to seek out physical activities when at home reflected a 'taste for necessity' resulting from a lack of cultural and economic capital, placing restrictions on physical activity opportunities that stemmed from their family doxa.

*Conclusions:* To succeed in fostering dispositions and opportunities to participate in physical activity we must engage with young people from low income, lone parent families from an early age. Certainly though, further consideration of the informal pedagogic practices within, and the demands on, lone parent families is required when designing any intervention or policy that seeks to enhance their current circumstances and provide opportunities for engagement in a variety of contexts.

*Key words:* *Lone parent families, informal pedagogy, field, agency, doxa*

## **Introduction**

In a climate of worldwide recession, grim economic futures and pressures on public funding, identifying the social and personal factors influencing participation in health enhancing physical activity by marginalised groups is of paramount importance. For instance, in the United Kingdom (UK) economic cuts (HM Treasury 2011) alongside a projected increase in child poverty (Joyce 2011) are likely to affect those already on the lowest incomes and in particular, those living in lone parent families (Save the Children 2011a). This will undoubtedly impact on their disposable income, time and energy for structured, health enhancing physical activity. Therefore, it is imperative we understand the place of physical activity in the lives of these young people so that we can target effective and economically viable future public policies that are designed to promote healthy lifestyles amongst marginalised groups such as low income, lone parent families.

Between 2001 and 2010 the number of married, mother and father families decreased by 100,000 (Office for National Statistics 2011), indicating that the dominant, ‘naturalized’ view of family is in decline, paving the way for a host of different family formations to come to the fore. Among these are cohabiting couple families, same sex couple families, extended families and, of importance to this paper, lone parent families. According to the 2001 UK Census, lone parent families have been described as “a father or mother with his or her child(ren) where the parent does not have a spouse or partner in the household and the child(ren) do not have a spouse, partner or child in the household” (Office for National Statistics 2004a, 26). Changes in society and family life, both nationally and internationally, have meant that lone parent families are arguably one of the fastest growing categories of families. In the UK for example, lone parent families now equate for around 1 in 4 (25.5%) of the total number of families with dependant children (Office for National Statistics 2011). This is substantially different from 1972, when the equivalent proportion was 1 in 14

(McConnell and Wilson 2007). These figures are similar in the United States where lone parent families account for over 1 in 4 (27%) of the total number of families (U.S. Census Bureau 2010), while in Australia they form approximately 1 in 5 (20.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). In the UK, lone parenthood remains largely the preserve of women, with lone father families accounting for around 1 to 3% (0.3 million in 2009) and lone mother families approximately 24% (1.8 million in 2009) of the total number of families with dependent children (Office for National Statistics 2009). The result is that lone-parenthood now forms a distinct part of the overall composition of families with children in the UK and abroad and signals a shift in ‘normalized’ perceptions of family.

In comparison to other family formations (such as married couple or cohabiting families), lone parent families tend to be severely disadvantaged with weekly household wages substantially lower (Office for National Statistics 2004b; Save the Children 2011b). Approximately a quarter of all children living in lone parent families are classed as being in severe poverty (Save the Children 2011b), while half of all children in poverty reside in lone parent families (Save the Children 2011a). Lone parent families are therefore most likely to experience social and economic deprivation especially with regard to their material circumstances (UNICEF 2011) and are more likely to be associated with lower social class groupings (Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

A central tenet of this paper is to explore how young people learn and acquire physical activity and health related dispositions within lone parent families. To that end, Tinning (2008, 416) argued that pedagogy explores “the processes of knowledge (re)production” and is therefore concerned with the transmission of physical activity and health related beliefs, values, dispositions and identities produced through different pedagogical encounters (Tinning 2008). Hence, it is important to not only be aware of the ‘formal’ pedagogic encounters that take place in institutional sites such as schools, but also informal encounters

that occur in different fields (Tinning 2010). The family is one such pedagogic environment or 'field' (Bourdieu 1984) whereby informal pedagogies occur, with parents in particular transferring and (re)producing knowledge about physical activity and health (Dagkas and Quarmby in press).

The research reported here will provide an evidence based understanding of the role and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families. As such, this paper sought to uncover:

- The structural conditions (resultant from young people's immediate social environment - lone parent family) that may facilitate or constrain individual agency, and;
- The place that physical activity occupies within the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families.

Understanding the role of physical activity in the lives of these young people is important because epidemiological data underpinning policy and interventions often adopt a homogenous approach (see Gard and Wright 2005) and overlook difference within and between various family formations; preventing understanding of how young people's physical activity behaviours develop. The following paper is organised into five main sections: (1) an overview of the theoretical framework informing the study; (2) the specific methodology employed; (3) the main research findings; (4) discussion and finally; (5) conclusion.

### **Theoretical framework: Bourdieu's key concepts**

In an effort to help understand the place of physical activity and how wider structural conditions converge to orient young people's activity choices, this paper draws on the social theory of Bourdieu. Bourdieu's work can be used to explore, not just the lived experiences of individuals, but also the social conditions that shape and limit that experience (Bourdieu

2003). In particular, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, field, capital and particularly taste, were prominent here. Used by Bourdieu (1984), habitus is a means to understand how various mechanisms lead to the reproduction or transformation of certain behaviours. Reay (2004) considers the transmission of beliefs and values that help to construct individual histories as vital in helping to understand the concept of habitus. For example, physical activity participation is seen to be shaped by social structures and essentially, how young people's habitus is shaped may influence their initial and ongoing involvement in physical activity and even the nature and reasons behind engaging in activities in general. Furthermore, tastes have been described as the "conscious manifestation of habitus" (Shilling 1993, 129) and affect people's orientations toward their bodies and thus, their orientations to particular forms of physical activity (Shilling 1993). It may be that an individual's habitus, as a set of dispositions that bear experiences of their family upbringing, may motivate action and provide individuals with certain desires to engage in physical activity in a particular field.

Importantly, habitus recognises potential for change, which most likely occurs as individual's move across social space or, when the make up of that social space changes. Bourdieu himself suggests this possibility when individuals encounter new 'fields':

"[habitus, as] the product of social conditionings, and thus of a history (unlike character) is endlessly transferred, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance, raises or lowers the levels of expectation and aspirations" (Bourdieu 2004, 116).

Broadly, fields are defined as distinct cultural and social realities, sites of cultural reproduction with particular norms and boundaries within which various interactions and events take place (Bourdieu 1984). In that sense, fields are sites of ideological reproduction

(Bourdieu 1996). The family then, according to Bourdieu (1996), is a particularly important social 'field' that nurtures physical activity tastes, preferences and interests (Quarmby and Dagkas 2010). However, as Bourdieu discusses above, entry to a new field can be seen as providing the opportunity for habitus to change as individuals are confronted by the unfamiliar. Such changes in field also alter stocks of capital which, alongside habitus and field, are vital in determining practice. Capital has been described as the various resources individuals can draw upon and, according to Bourdieu (1984; 1986), dispositions to engage in activity are the result of a complex interplay of economic, cultural and social capital that are rooted in social class. More specifically, economic capital consists of property rights and in particular monetary assets, which can have a significant influence on physical activity participation. On the other hand, cultural capital is institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications and can shape decisions regarding some physical activities that require cultural or social knowledge to participate (Fitzpatrick 2011). Finally, social capital consists of an individuals' stock of social connections and relational networks (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, for these low income participants, access to different forms of capital may mediate individual agency and influence one's participation in a particular field; such as the field of physical activity (Bourdieu 1978).

In keeping with Bourdieu's tradition of working with dualisms, this research attempts to work with habitus' duality as both collective and individualised, attending to personal circumstance and social structure. Adopting such an approach allows for an exploration of individual agency in relation to the structures within which they reside. However, working with Bourdieu's principles includes acknowledging that the social structures influencing habitus pertain to that particular time and place only (Grenfell 2008) and therefore any subsequent findings may be applicable to those individuals alone.



## **Methodology**

All participants ( $n = 62$ ) were selected from three schools in low socioeconomic status areas of the West Midlands (England, UK), located close to the city centre by way of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The IMD is a UK Government measure of deprivation that includes assessments of income, employment, health, education, crime, housing and living environment (Noble et al. 2008). The IMD for the postcode of each school was obtained from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Neighbourhood Statistics website (<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>) and calculated at the 'Super Output Area' level. This provided an overall IMD rank as well as individual ranks for each domain and resulted in all schools being drawn from deprived areas that scored highest (higher scores indicate greater deprivation, i.e. low socioeconomic status) on all individual ranks, and the overall IMD rating. A benefit of using the IMD was that it preserved participant privacy as home addresses were not required. It is however worth noting that the IMD represented a measure of deprivation for the school area and not the individual participant though still allowed for the gathering of data from young people who attended schools located in those neighbourhoods. To counter this, IMD information was supplemented with additional data from school Ofsted reports, which also pointed toward high levels of deprivation in the surrounding catchment areas and in the pupils attending each school. The surrounding catchment area for each school contained high levels of unemployment and benefit claims, while in all three schools, Ofsted data indicated that the majority of pupils were white British. The use of Ofsted data alongside the IMD provided a clearer picture of the school contexts from which the participants were drawn (in terms of socio-demographic indicators and socioeconomic make-up), allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their potential backgrounds and social circumstances. Participants were selected from these schools, in these areas, because low socioeconomic

status boroughs typically contain a greater diversity of family structures and provided access to a broader sample (Quarmby, Dagkas and Bridge 2011).

### ***Participants***

In order to explore the place of physical activity within the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families, this paper draws from the voices of 24 out of the 62 participants. The sample comprised White Caucasian young people, aged 11-14 years old and of mixed sex ( $n_{\text{male}} = 14$ ;  $n_{\text{female}} = 10$ ). These 24 participants, from lone parent families, were part of the interpretative phase of the larger project who took part in paired in-depth interviews. According to Macdonald et al. (2009) interpretive research allows for participants to be viewed as individuals and as part of a larger social organisation (i.e. the family) and thus, works alongside Bourdieu's key concepts and aligns with his notions of dualisms. Moreover, the interpretive perspective ensures that participants' meanings and actions are linked to a particular time and place, enabling the significance of social phenomenon to come to the fore (Macdonald et al. 2009).

### ***Methods***

It has been acknowledged that the use of interviews allow the researcher an insight into the way participants view, think and feel about their worlds (Powney and Watts 1987). Moreover, the use of paired, semi structured interviews provided an encouraging and supportive environment as participants engaged in paired interviews with a friend from the same family structure (Hight 2003). While occasionally, some participants were distracted by their peer, this was more easily managed than in a larger group and led to the generation of higher quality data (Hight 2003). In fact, these paired interviews were designed to explore issues of personal agency (their ability to shape their own lives and identities) by listening to how

young people reported on their present lives, past experiences and future possibilities with regard to physical activity. The interview protocol was initially piloted with 12 children (aged 11–12) before the final schedule was created. All interviews were conducted in an open room within their respective schools and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Questions on the interview protocol included: ‘What does physical activity mean to you?’, ‘Do you think physical activity is important?’, ‘Is there anything that prevents you engaging in physical activity?’, ‘Do you do any activities with your family?’ ‘How much activity do you normally do?’ and; ‘What do you normally do at the weekend?’. These questions are important as they allow individual dispositions that structure individual agency to emerge. The research project and interview protocol were approved by the researchers’ university ethics committee and consent obtained via in loco parentis, with the gatekeepers and head of each school vetting all procedures and methods.

### *Data Analysis*

With regard to data analysis, all interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim and included information on the school, gender of students, age, family structure and pseudonyms allocated to participants (as seen in the results section) to maintain anonymity and enhance confidentiality. The transcription process acted as an explanatory phase enabling the researchers to get a sense of what was happening. The next phase of data analysis included multiple readings of the raw data before a thematic analysis was employed whereby data was coded and simultaneous memos were recorded. After coding the interviews, the process of identifying common themes began. This process was based on deductive and inductive analytical procedures (LeCompte and Preissle 1993). Based on the semi-structured interview protocol, this involved scanning the data for themes and relationships among the initial categories. Working typologies were then developed based on an examination of the initial

cases before being modified and refined on the basis of subsequent cases (LeCompte and Preissle 1993). This consequently allowed for the emergence of new categories as well as subdivisions within each category. Here, two strategies were employed to ensure the study was trustworthy, rigorous and credible: (1) peer-debriefing and (2) member's check (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Miles and Huberman 1994). With regard to peer-debriefing, a detailed description of a sample of the responses was shared among the researchers to identify similarities and differences in the emergent categories. For the member's check, once the transcription process was complete, the lead researcher revisited the schools where the transcripts were returned to the participants who were asked to comment on the material, thus providing an opportunity to modify existing information. However, extensive checking at the interpretation stage was not possible due to lengthy summer holidays.

## **Findings**

Three prominent themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data. These included: (1) the participants' perceptions of physical activity; (2) the structural conditions to activity that impact on individual agency, and; (3) young people's emerging tastes for physical activity. This final theme highlighted participants emergent tastes that resulted from living within the social space of a low income, lone parent family and importantly, drew attention to the place of physical activity within their everyday daily lives. In the accounts that follow, exact quotes have been used to illustrate key points.

### ***Perceptions and importance of physical activity***

It was apparent that participants' recognised the importance of being active coupled with how their parents' tried to encourage activity for health and fitness benefits. Lauren, for instance, offers one such example. At the time of the interview, Lauren was 12 years old and lived at

home with her mother, older sister and brother. Due to pressures on her mother to work during the week and some weekends, Lauren reported spending more time with her grandmother on the weekends while her mother was out. Despite the limited time Lauren had available with her mother, she (her mother) still found time to encourage Lauren to be physical activity in school based activities.

*Yeah, like at school, she tells us to like join after school clubs and that*

Ok. What kind of after school clubs?

*Like dance and stuff like that... I don't know why, probably cos she used to do it and she says it's good to do to like keep me healthy I guess.*

During their informal pedagogic encounters, Lauren recalled how her mother would encourage her to “*not eat a lot of sweets because of your health*”, while at the same time attempting to get her to engage in activity. For Lauren, her mother attempted to encourage her to engage in activities (dance) that she saw value in and experienced in her youth. The result of these transmissions was that Lauren was able to recognise the importance of activity. She defined health and fitness with regard to “*being energetic and that and running about and health is like eating the right foods and that and watching your diet*”. Importantly, she also suggested that physical activity was important in supporting one’s health because “*It keeps you healthy... cos you’re not lazy in later life*”.

Another example of the importance of physical activity was offered by Jerome, who was aged 13 and lived at home with his mother, brother and sister. Importantly, Jerome indicated that his mother, when she could, visited the gym in order to stay in shape. Asked if he thought his mother was fit and healthy Jerome replied:

*Erm, sort of because my mum... she does go to the gym like twice a week or whenever she can to keep fit*

Jerome also indicated that his mother (as well as occasionally displaying physical activity dispositions) tried to transmit appropriate physical activity values to him and encouraged him to engage in badminton, an activity she was heavily involved in, in her youth.

*Yeah she tries to get me to do more stuff for like my fitness and, yeah she tells me the things that, that helps me, erm, to get better at it like badminton*

Recognising that his mother tries to keep fit, Jerome was also able to demonstrate his understanding of health and fitness and the importance of physical activity. He understood that health circulated around “*everything being good*” while being fit revolved around the ability to be able to be “*capable of doing, like the physical activities*” which, importantly, he saw as vital for maintaining health and fitness.

Similarly, Jordan lived with his mother and brother and had no contact with his father. He recognised that his mother ate well but didn’t engage in regular activity. Like those presented before, Jordan also experienced the transmission of related physical activity beliefs, indicating that physical activity was valued to some extent within his family field. For example, his mother continually encouraged participation in physical activity for the same health related benefits:

*Like running, and football and that, cos she wants me to get a job like as a team worker, like and, why she, like thinks like, I kind of say I wanna be a footballer, but she says you have to do these things to be that... like train well and eat healthily*

It was also apparent that his mother actively encouraged his participation in order to develop additional skills (such as teamwork and social capital) that would be useful in later life. More specifically, it is clear that Jordan’s mother viewed physical activity and sport as a means to translate physical capital to social and economic capital. Like the previous perspectives, Jordan was also able to link the importance of physical activity with health, while also

reflecting similar concepts with regard to the amount of social capital that some activities permit access to:

*You get like, its fun, and you like improve like you get more friends and that are stronger and relationship with friends... well, like by being in a team and like cooperating... and like you're healthy and your body works well... like you know, not unhealthy*

The accounts above exemplify how physical activity was viewed by these young people. Engagement in activity was encouraged within their family (regardless of parents' participation) and justified as a means of improving health. Engaging in physical activity for health benefits is consistent with dominant messages and a healthism discourse (advocating individual responsibility for preventing ill-health) circulating within society. Importantly, this offered an insight into the value of physical activity within their social field (family), which will be discussed in more detail in the latter stages of this paper.

### ***Structural conditions to physical activity***

Despite physical activity appearing to occupy a place of value within their field, for these young people from low income, lone parent families, there were some equally consistent and prominent structural conditions (resulting from their family structure) to their potential engagement in physical activity. The most common of these (during the week and at the weekend) were the challenges inherent in their parents living busy lives, which the participants felt contributed to an overall lack of time to be able to provide support for their activity. For example, Lauren drew attention to her mother's lack of free time, alongside her custody arrangements, which meant she found it difficult to engage in regular activity. Given that the sample here were from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, many of the lone

parents were left to work long hours to try to support their offspring. In turn, parents' work commitments were seen to be a constraint to activity for these young people.

*Erm, weekends my mums always out, while I'm up at me Nan or dads and the week like Monday to Friday she's at work... Erm, one week I go to my Nan and then the other week I go to my dad (Lauren)*

According to Bourdieu (1986), the loss of a member from a family (through divorce or separation) puts at stake its whole definition, its boundaries and identity, exposing it to change. For instance, Jerome discussed how he would regularly play with his father and brothers at the nearby park. However, since his father left home two years ago, the change in family structure has acted as a barrier to his engagement in unstructured physical activity because of the increased pressure on his mother and her subsequent lack of free time.

*Yeah, I used to do some of them and like Frisbee throwing as well, in the park... [with] my dad, and like some of my brothers... In the park it was like fun and like you got to spend like time with your family you know... I don't really go to the park any more and plus don't live with my dad now either so... guess we just stopped it.*

Living in a lone parent family is also related to lower household income and, for some young people here, this was recognised as another structural condition that prevented engagement in activity. Citing the cost of equipment and access, Jerome highlighted how his mother's lack of economic capital meant he couldn't afford to purchase the equipment to engage in certain activities:

*Yeah like I said earlier I like... I would like to play badminton but she [his mother] can't afford like the rackets and stuff and there aren't many like sports centres nearby were I could go anyway so... that's why I don't really do it.*



Similarly, Lauren also drew attention to a lack of economic capital. However, thanks to her larger relational network (stock of social capital), it meant her grandmother would often subsidise any activities she did.

*Like my Nan pays any stuff I do... cos my mum can't afford to*

Citing a lack of time with her mother and a lack of economic capital, it is perhaps not surprising that Lauren's mother encouraged her to engage in free, school based activities. However, she also reported several difficulties in getting home from after school clubs which meant that she didn't engage in as many as she could.

The young people interviewed in this study also highlighted additional after school time demands that acted as a constraint to physical activity. Nevertheless, these were often self imposed in an effort to reduce the load on lone parents who were seen to be under constant pressure to manage their busy lifestyles, including work hours and home responsibilities. For example, Joe (who lived with his mother and older sister) reported that:

*Well it's her job [to clean and carry out household chores] but I try and help out as much as I can... like sometimes to make it easier for her... so it sometimes gets in the way of like doing other stuff I guess.*

This was equally the case for Jordan who similarly identified trying to support his mother:

*I don't get the that much time [to do activities], now like, people don't wanna go, they do wanna go but like I'd be to busy and that, I have to do jobs for my mum... I don't have to do it for my mum, but like, she's just like, I don't want her to do, she's tired and that and I don't want her to get more tired, so I just like chip in and like clean my room and that... I sometimes help get all the food together and clean the room.*

Jordan also cited issues of locality that living in a low income neighbourhood gave rise to. Such issues seemed to impact on his mother's perception of safety and accounted for a

restriction on the time his activities could take place. When asked if he was encouraged to become involved in structured activity after school, Jordan indicated that his mother continually worried about him getting home (because she couldn't collect him due to her busy schedule) and as a result, tried to ensure he was home early.

*So yeah most of the time I like have to be home by a certain time coz it's a bit dodgy at night sometimes.*

So you mentioned that your mum can't pick you up?

*No. Like she's too busy working well... not like too busy but it's like difficult for her to come and get me so like I have to get the bus early.*

As mentioned earlier, low income areas in which many lone parent families reside may be prone to more socio-environmental constraints to physical activity, with some neighbourhoods facing higher rates of crime that ultimately affect young people's ability to engage in unstructured, physical (play) activities. Whilst only a brief description of the structural conditions that impact on individual agency, it was clear that young people recognised that the busy lifestyle of lone parents was in part due to a need to work long shifts to support their family and simultaneously manage the family home.

### ***Structuring dispositions and tastes for physical activity***

The final theme focused on the place of physical activity within the lives of these young people and the structural conditions that act as constraints to activity resulting from living in a lone parent family. Here, the previous two themes are considered with regard to an exploration of individual agency, demonstrating the physical activity dispositions and tastes of their emerging habitus.

To explore young people's reported dispositions, it is also important to consider the influence of prominent figures within the same field, since those sharing the same social space

will often exhibit similar beliefs, values, dispositions and habitus. For the participants in this study, often the dispositions enacted within their family field worked in opposition to those being encouraged by their mothers. For example, for Lauren, despite her mother promoting and encouraging activity, she indicated that she (her mother) often didn't reflect those same values or align with Lauren's notions of health. Lauren suggested that her mother "*like smokes, she drinks, she goes out, and she's not really energetic*". This painted a conflicting image since Lauren also recognised that by engaging in activity and adopting a healthy lifestyle, parents could be role models for their children. The nature of Lauren's family environment also meant that she didn't spend much time with her mother:

*Don't do any activities together cos she's always going out or working so don't like really see her much*

As a result, Lauren was left to occupy her self at home, often in isolation.

*Yeah, I like to be out. I don't like being kept in really... its boring cos you're on your own but normally I just stay in and watch TV or something.*

Though she appeared to resent being stuck inside, she didn't report exhibiting any physical activity dispositions; perhaps as a result of her limited opportunities and social environment. In fact, her dispositions to not engage in an active, healthy lifestyle were very much reflected in her perceptions of her health and fitness.

*I eat a lot of junk food and I'm not really energetic... I don't really have a balanced diet, and I don't really do that much sport, only at school*

This was equally the case for Jerome. Clearly, a lack of free time on his mother's part prevented him engaging in any joint activities with her and as a result, ensured he developed a taste for more sedentary activities that would occupy him. When asked what he did in his spare time, Jerome replied:

*Most of the time I'm like on my X Box but sometimes I do like to go round to my friends and we like play some football or something but normally just play X box... there's not much else to do like really cos mum's always busy...*

The structural conditions of living in a lone parent family were perhaps most apparent for Naomi. At age 14, Naomi lived at home with her lone parent mother and rarely saw her father. Asked about her mother's health and fitness, Naomi indicated that "*she eats healthy... but she doesn't do much exercise, but she does walk to work on the odd occasion*". For Naomi, physical activity did not occupy a place of significant value in her life. Other than occasionally walking the dog with her mother (the extent of both of their unstructured activity), Naomi was left to reflect on the nature of her family structure, indicating that there wasn't much opportunity to engage in anything other than sedentary pursuits. When asked if she and her mother do any activities together Naomi replied:

*Don't know... coz there's nothing to do like with just me and my mum, we just sort of sit at home and watch the tele. Don't really speak or anything... Apart from watching like TV... no not really... maybe we used to do little things together when they [mother and father] were together ages ago but she's not got the time now so yeah we just watch TV*

Though this wasn't always the case when both of her parents were together, watching television with her mother now occupied a special time that her and her mother could spend together and presented a rare opportunity for them to engage in conversation.

*It's [watching TV] nice cos like you can have a chat... but it's good to be outdoors as well.*

So it's good to go out and have a chat. What sort of things do you chat about?

*Sort... life and work and mum and school and that.*

Ok, do you chat any other times?

*No, usually watching TV... it's like easier to chat than when we're out.*

Moreover, when asked if they talked about physical activity during this time, Naomi recalled how it rarely comes up in conversation, even when discussing school based activities: “*We like chat about school and lessons like English, Maths and stuff but nah, not really PE or sport... more like how I'm doing in lessons*”. In fact, the lack of attention given to physical activity and the importance seemingly attached to academic subjects highlights the difference in value between these two areas within her family field.

The reduced status of physical activity, formation of her family field (i.e. lone parent) and regular engagement in sedentary activity with her mother ultimately displaced any physical activity desires and dispositions. As a result, she demonstrated alternative dispositions to carry on engaging in sedentary activities, even when opportunities for physical activity were present:

So what do you do at the weekend?

*Well... like... I sometimes walk the dog but like mostly, well lately I just stay in and watch TV. Oh I sometimes like walk round with the little kids [neighbours children], push em round in a pram or whatever and then just sit and watch TV with them really... then come home and go to bed.*

Moreover, when asked if Naomi engaged in any after school activities, her response was to highlight her desire to go home and watch television instead:

*I don't do no activities... Cos I'd rather go home and watch TV than stay here.*

Clearly for these young people in this study, their limited support and social surroundings restricted their ability to engage in activity and thus, for many (and particularly evident in the voices of Lauren and Naomi presented here), their emerging tastes reflected the most accessible and in some cases, common shared activity (TV viewing) within that field.

## **Discussion**

This paper sought to explore the place of physical activity in the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families together with the structural conditions that constrained individual agency. Bourdieu's notions of individual habitus suggests that individuals' personal histories and current social circumstances crucially influence young people's engagement in physical activities, particularly when considering the influence of the family as a social field. Studying young people's reported habitus highlighted the workings of structure and agency and it was clear that their individual agency (practice) was reflective of the particular field in which they resided (lone parent family) because of the associated structural conditions. Various informal pedagogic encounters, coupled with formal pedagogic encounters within school meant that these participants expressed perceptions of physical activity in line with a dominant healthism discourse (Kirk and Colquhoun 1989) that encouraged engagement in physical activity for health and fitness benefits. Moreover, their mothers', despite their competing demands, tried to promote and encourage activity and transmit appropriate beliefs and values although often, the economic and social resources converged to restrict the possibilities for those young people to enact such practices. It is important to note that generally families headed by a lone parent are vulnerable to low income, poor housing and in some cases poverty (Save the Children 2011a; 2011b). In this study, young people from lone parent families clearly expressed financial concerns that restricted their engagement in activity. They commented on how difficult it was to find time for their parents to engage in activity with them or even provide the necessary support to maintain their activity engagement for example, in the form of transport. These comments reflect the findings of Wright et al. (2003) and Macdonald and colleagues (2004) who argue that young people's physical activity is frequently a task to be managed in relation to the competing demands of other members within that particular field. However, access to those

things that are required to manage activity and provide the necessary support to enable their child(ren) to engage in activity, may simply depend on the amount of economic or social capital (relational networks) available to lone parents. And so, it was evident here that the amount of social and economic capital available to lone parents was not sufficient enough to be able to continually do this.

Importantly, Bourdieu (1990) argues that it is the intersection of habitus, capital and field that produce the logic of practice. Moreover, he suggests that those who occupy the same field, or in the case here the same family structure, with similar objective living environments, may share similar habitus and reproduce the culture of their shared fields through practice (Bourdieu 1985; 1989). This was evidenced by the young people in this study who, despite acknowledging the importance of physical activity, began to exhibit diminished desires to engage in physical activity and made unconscious choices that reflected the behaviour of their family structures. This was particularly apparent for Naomi whose normal family activity was to watch TV with her mother, neglecting physical activity due to their structural conditions of her field which limited her opportunities and choices for activity. Naomi reproduced the behaviours most common in that environment (field) which in this case, given their parents' busy lifestyles, the limited opportunities and other structural constraints discussed earlier, were sedentary in nature. Ultimately then, decisions not to exercise their physical activity dispositions were down to the wider structural forces of family structure and in some cases class. For example, class related sociodemographic factors such as locality and the resulting lack of facilities were also thought to impede accessibility to activity opportunities. For Naomi in particular, her choice not to seek out physical activity alternatives when at home was reflective of the particular tastes developed within her family field. This is not surprising since Bourdieu (1989, 19) suggests that for habitus, its "operation expresses the social position in which it was elaborated". Thus, her choice to engage in sedentary pursuits

(television viewing) may be the result of the development of a “taste for necessity... an acceptance of the necessary, a resignation of the inevitable” (Bourdieu 1984, 372) that arose from a combination of their family structure and social circumstance: increased constraints to activity and a lack of time with parents that resulted in reduced support, along with low income and limited opportunities within their neighbourhood. This subsequently resulted in a lack of social and economic capital that placed restrictions on her physical activity opportunities. So, when Naomi lacked the necessary resources and opportunities to be able to engage in physical activity, her resulting non-participation could be deemed to be a natural expression of taste (Lee and Macdonald 2009). However, Bourdieu (1984) would argue that the relational configuration of power within a field explains why some actions are rendered legitimate and others not. Thus, Naomi’s expression of taste was seen to be legitimate since she was subject to the hegemony of legitimate (i.e. dominant) sedentary tastes within the boundaries of her lone parent family field. Only when considered in relation to alternative fields or wider social space (society) are these tastes considered illegitimate and non-normative.

Though recognised as an important element of young people’s development (by parents and the participants themselves), physical activity was not actively supported in these families due to the structural conditions mentioned above. Thus for some (e.g. Naomi and Lauren in particular) physical activity did not occupy a place of significant value within that field and the development of a ‘taste for necessity’ (Bourdieu 1984) by these participants highlighted certain beliefs and ‘natural attitudes’ within their families. These natural family attitudes (their taken for granted assumptions) about the value of physical activity and its place within their lives, could be expressed more specifically, as their family specific doxa. Doxa forms part of Bourdieu’s theory of practice (Bourdieu 1990) and refers to the commonplace values and beliefs, unquestioned opinions and perceptions permeating a given



field that determine natural practice and attitudes. Although doxa is produced by a particular habitus, namely that of an individual within a field with particular symbolic power (i.e. a parent), it importantly transcends any one particular habitus (Atkinson 2011) allowing agents within a field to share similar doxic experiences; to adopt similar values and beliefs. Thus, within a given field such as a lone parent family, doxa is fed back into multiple habitus and shared beliefs and orientations of offspring and other family members to create a legitimate family specific doxa and shared views toward physical activity; much like the way in which Naomi shared her mother's views toward physical activity.

Importantly, the power of the doxa is strengthened by the mutual reinforcement between field and habitus which ultimately guide an individual's feel for the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) or, their sense of comfort, since we feel most comfortable in fields in which our habitus has been formed (Bourdieu 1989). That said, though not evident here, a change in an agents stock of capital, or more broadly a change in field, could cause a "sudden rupture and doxic experience can be disturbed or even shattered" (Atkinson 2011, 340). Since lone parenthood is not a static formation, but often a transitory formation between married couple and cohabiting family structures (or vice versa), it is not unreasonable to expect further changes to the structure of the field and thus further shifts in family specific doxa, the legitimation of tastes and ultimately, habitus.

It was however clear that the family, as a particular social field and site of social reproduction that struggles with physical, economic and symbolic power relations (Bourdieu 1996), allowed for the development of physical activity tastes and preferences. That said, these were influenced by the specific family formation and the amount of resources available that contributed to the development of a specific family doxa and legitimate tastes. This was evidenced through the young people's limited engagement with physical activity and the emergence of a subsequent 'taste for necessity' (Bourdieu 1984).

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was to explore the place of physical activity within the lives of young people from low income, lone parent families and to understand the structural conditions that influence individual agency. As documented in the 2007 UNICEF report, young people in lone parent families are reported to have poorer levels of health than their counterparts in alternative family formations (i.e. married couple and stepfamilies). Hence, with current economic uncertainties and projected increases in poverty, especially amongst these groups (Joyce 2011), the study and understanding of young people's dispositions from low income, lone parent families toward physical activity and health is of paramount importance. The present study furthers our understanding of the social conditions that shape young people's lives and suggests that, although the family is an important source of influence that helps young people to understand the role of physical activity in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, various constraints remain that ultimately shape individual agency. For instance, the voices of these young people would suggest that physical activity engagement within their family was reduced due to their mother's lack of free time, increased work hours and the competing demands of other family members. As evident here, in some lone parent families physical activity did not occupy a position of any great stature within their lives, reducing its currency within that field (family) further. As a result, for many of the young people, their mothers may be even less likely to invest the necessary resources (in terms of time and effort) to support activity, leaving them with different dispositions to engage in more sedentary activities when at home. The development of a 'taste for necessity', reflected their lack of activity choices and the prevailing family doxa, which placed little value on physical activity and oriented their habitus toward more sedentary activities.

The aim here was not to further marginalise young people from low income, lone parent families; rather it was to highlight the difficulties and disadvantages they face with regard to physical activity in their day-to-day lives. It is also inappropriate to consider low income, lone parent families as a homogenous group and therefore, we must acknowledge that inequalities are not always perceived in the same way as those from similar social backgrounds. However, if Government spending cuts impact on the poorest in society (Joyce 2011), and with approximately half of those in poverty living in lone parent families (Save the Children 2011b), then clearly young people's ability to engage in activity will become even more restricted. This is of particular concern for anyone involved in sport pedagogy. For example, for teachers and coaches to be effective, they must recognise individuals' needs and interests so that suitable pedagogical encounters can be created. However, to be successful in this endeavour, teachers and coaches must be fully informed about the different pedagogic environments in which young people come to learn about and experience physical activity and health. Importantly, informal pedagogic encounters within the family may differ and clash with formal pedagogical encounters in different institutions and as such, Tinning (2008, 419) argues that in order to better understand the impact of institutional work, there is a need to grasp the pedagogical work done by "other cultural players that often undermines the intentional pedagogical work" carried out by specialists.

Certainly, further consideration of the demands on lone parent families is required when considering the needs of young people from low income, lone parent families or when designing any intervention or policy that seeks to enhance their current circumstances and provide opportunities for engagement in a variety of contexts. Future research should also consider ethnic differences within and between families since it is equally important to acknowledge the contextual differences enacted by personal histories, religious and cultural ideologies and practices (Dagkas and Benn 2012).

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