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Gender, Physical Education and Active Lifestyles: Contemporary Challenges and New Directions

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Abstract

The idea for this Special Issue, ‘Gender, Physical Education and Active Lifestyles: Contemporary Challenges and New Directions’ developed from the interest generated by a one day conference held at Leeds Beckett University in September 2017. The conference marked 25 years since the publication of Sheila Scraton’s ground breaking, feminist analysis of Physical Education. As a pivotal text that has contributed to the growth of gender research within the UK and more broadly, it seemed fitting to mark this occasion. The reach of Sheila’s work was perhaps realised through the delegate body. Early career researchers mingled with established scholars from America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the UK. Building on this conference and a wider call for papers, we are delighted to offer two Special Issues of Sport, Education and Society. The first issue engages explicitly with the challenge of theorising and understanding gendered subjectivities and embodiment across a range of contexts. These papers reflect the diversity of theoretical approaches being employed with some drawing on feminist perspectives, and others using Bourdieu, intersectionality, critical whiteness studies, and masculinity studies. The collection of papers in the second issue seek to examine the different ways in which gender becomes implicated in pedagogical relations and practice. These range from accounts of teachers’ struggles to use critical pedagogies to address gender inequities in PE classes, to analyses of the wider pedagogical ‘work’ of the media in constructing understandings about gender, with several papers exploring these two aspects in combination. We hope you enjoy reading the papers *across* these two Special Issues as much as we have enjoyed the journey as the editorial team. Collectively the papers raise alternative questions and provide new insights into gender and active lifestyles, and importantly, all seek to make a difference in moving towards more equitable physical activity experiences.

Key words:

Gender, Physical Education, Active lifestyles, New directions, Challenges

Introduction

It is more than 25 years since Sheila Scraton published her ground-breaking, feminist analysis of Physical Education (PE), *Shaping Up to Womanhood: Gender and Girls' Physical Education* (Scraton, 1992). It was a pivotal text in helping to build the foundations for what is now a flourishing body of gender research about young people's experiences of PE, physical activity and sport both within the UK and internationally. A cursory glance of past volumes of *Sport, Education and Society* pays testament to the diversity of gender related research inspired by Sheila's work (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Garrett, 2004; Hills, 2007; Stride, 2016; Stride, Drury & Fitzgerald, 2018). This Special Issue developed out of a conference held in 2017 at Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK to mark this significant contribution and to provide space for debate and analysis about contemporary challenges and questions of gender. We were interested in asking what, if anything, has changed over the 25 years since the publication of *Shaping Up to Womanhood*? How does gender impact the lives and experiences of girls and young women (and boys and young men) today, particularly in relation to PE, physical activity and sport? Is gender still an issue in young people's active lifestyles? How have our theoretical understandings of gender shifted and changed, and to what extent are these developments influencing policy and improving practice? How might we go about conducting gender research if we aim to make a difference? We ask these questions cognisant of the wider gender issues that have dominated public discourse recently including the #me too campaign, and disparities in women's and men's pay.

We were heartened by the strong response to our call for papers for this Special Issue such that the papers appear over two issues, **Issue 23.7 and Issue 23.8**. Gender research, it appears, is not something that has been 'done' or has little relevance to our contemporary experiences and practice. On the contrary, collectively, the papers demonstrate the breadth and depth of enquiry and contemporary theorising on gender, PE and active lifestyles. The

papers are varied in their theoretical and methodological underpinnings, as well as their approach to praxis. Like Mansfield, Caudwell, Wheaton & Watson (2017) we see this diversity as positive for it opens up possibilities for different questions about gender to be asked and addressed. Indeed, the title of our conference, *Gender, PE and Active Lifestyles: Researching Young People's Experiences*, reflected our desire to welcome papers that acknowledge that young people experience physical activity in spaces, contexts and via pedagogies, beyond those offered by the PE practitioner in school. In relation to gender equitable futures, many of the papers explicitly focus on the pedagogical challenges of working with teachers and young people to disrupt gendered discourses and practices. This work signals a collective endeavour to sustain and develop the legacy of early feminist work on gender and PE to make a difference.

Although a somewhat artificial separation, each of the papers we have chosen to include in the first issue engage explicitly with the challenge of theorising and understanding gendered subjectivities and embodiment, albeit across a range of contexts. Not all of these papers draw explicitly on feminist perspectives; many use alternative theoretical approaches, including Bourdieu, intersectionality, critical whiteness studies, and masculinity studies. In contrast, the papers included in the second issue seek to examine the different ways in which gender becomes implicated in pedagogical relations and practice. These range from accounts of teachers' struggles to use critical pedagogies to address gender inequities in PE classes, to analyses of the wider pedagogical 'work' of the media in constructing understandings about gender. Several of the papers combine these two aspects, and examine how media can be used as a pedagogical tool in and of itself to explicitly engage teachers and students in critical reflection about gender. Taken together, the papers across the two issues advance our understandings of gender, as well as presenting important new empirical evidence about its continuing significance in the active lives of young people.

The opening paper by Sheila Scraton provides a timely evaluation of both the continuities and changes that have happened in relation to gender and PE, since the publication of her research 25 years ago, in *Shaping Up to Womanhood*. Sheila acknowledges that the theoretical shifts in feminism from structuralism to post structuralism have resulted in far more micro analyses of teachers' and students' subjectivities, identities and difference, as well as more complex understandings of power. However, she also warns of the dangers of the dislocation of individual biographies from broader social, political and economic structures. She argues for the continuing importance of critical work on gender, particularly the challenge of closing the gap between increasingly sophisticated feminist scholarship and everyday practice. Yet, she is realistic about the scale of this challenge, given the neoliberal and post feminist sensibilities that characterise contemporary educational contexts.

An important aspect of Scraton's (1989; 1992) early research was her identification of the link between gender, physicality and sexuality, an aspect that appears to have been missed out, or downplayed, in more contemporary accounts, certainly of girls' PE (Stride and Flintoff, 2018). More recent feminist theorising has returned to the question of the material body (for example, Francis & Paechter, 2015) in the production and reproduction of social inequalities and hierarchies. Lisa Hunter's paper importantly identifies women's bodies and in particular, breasts, as both absent and present in discussion of women's physical activity experiences: absent, because they have been largely ignored in contemporary gender analyses; and present, because they remain a primary site of corporeal objectification of the active female body. She forefronts the use of 'breastwork' as a means of disrupting the everyday acts of gender injustice that are rooted in biological essentialism. Kelly Ashbolt, Gabrielle O'Flynn and Jan Wright's paper, similarly highlights the significance of women's bodies in constructions of femininities. They uncover the ways in which hierarchical

relationships between embodied femininities are constructed through different track and field events, and how women athletes themselves are instrumental in the surveillance of their own gendered identities in relation to dominant gender norms.

Several of the papers explore how embodied pedagogies (Oliver & Kirk, 2017) are fruitfully engaging young people in meaningful and physically demanding activities across different contexts. Beccy Watson's paper, for example, highlights the positive and empowering experiences of (mainly) white, working class young men and women in community dance classes, as well as offering important insights into the complexities of researching their difference and sameness. Likewise, Karen Lambert shows how girls can experience their bodies and physical capabilities in pleasurable and positive ways when taking part in a summer camp centred on the development of fire-fighting skills.

In contrast to the positive experiences of the young people documented in Beccy and Karen's papers, it is disconcerting to read the two papers that examine experiences of school PE and which show the continuing saliency of sporting discourses in the differential positioning of young women and men (Gorely, Holroyd & Kirk, 2003). Sarah Metcalfe's paper, based on interviews with young men and women across different school contexts, identifies how gendered discourses of embodiment continue to work to prevent girls from being able to claim a sporting identity. Ingrid Mattingsdal Thorjussen and Mari Kristin Sisjord's paper foregrounds students' *multiple* identities in examining processes of inclusion and exclusion in multi-ethnic, mixed-gender PE settings. The study shows how gender identities are experienced through other aspects of identity, in this case, ethnicity and religion, and how these intersections can be sources of tension and exclusion, rather than enrichment.

The papers in the second edition are united in their desire to examine how gender relations may be disrupted through pedagogical practice. The starting point of Cara Lamb, Kim Oliver and David Kirk's paper is that we must do more than *document* gender inequalities - we must seek to challenge them through the research/praxis process itself. Activist research (Oliver & Kirk, 2015) is one example of such an approach which seeks to *work with* young women, and men, to engage them in critiquing the gender discourses that may limit their experiences of PE and sport, and to support them in constructing new activity contexts that are inclusive and meaningful. Cara, Kim and David explore the benefits of working with girls to co-construct curricula. Their paper documents girls' responses to the four dimensions of the activist approach: a pedagogy that is student-centred; inquiry-based; focused on embodiment; and one that listens and responds to girls over time. With a more explicitly feminist agenda, Sánchez-Hernández, García-Martos, Soler and Flintoff's research involved a cooperative learning intervention in football, coupled with the use of learning activities explicitly designed to enable critical reflection about gender. Importantly, this intervention was with mixed sex classes and revealed some of the challenges (but also rewards) of working with young men, alongside young women, to challenge exclusionary practices and sexism.

The remaining papers in this second issue all examine aspects of the media as a pedagogical resource for constructing and/or challenging gender relations. Emma Rich's paper assesses the contribution of new digital cultures to young people's understandings of their health and bodies. She highlights how the 'rapidly growing field of digital health and fitness technologies are being used on and by young people as new means to directly monitor, regulate and shape their bodies, and how these are often subsumed by postfeminist and neoliberal orientations. Importantly however, she urges us to avoid seeing technology as either 'inherently oppressive or empowering' but as always having potential to provide pedagogical possibilities for resistance.

The pedagogical possibilities of using media for resistance are also explored by several other papers within this collection. Both Bonnie Pang and Joanne Hill's paper, and Alison Wrench and Robyne Garrett's work, address the ways in which various forms of media work to construct powerful gendered discourses of embodiment. Yet importantly, they also point towards how young people can be helped to become critical media consumers. Joanne and Bonnie focus specifically on the construction of Chinese young people's embodied identities. This is an important contribution, given that Chinese young people are a group often missed out in analyses of ethnic minority young people's physical activity experiences (but see Pang & Macdonald, 2016). Similarly, Alison and Robyne's paper argues for the importance of a critical analysis of sports media sites, which function as 'public pedagogies that frame knowledge and learning negotiated within and beyond PE lessons'. Alison and Robyne explore how online sports media construct understandings about females, 'race' and 'whiteness' within the (post)-colonial Australian context. Both papers argue that with appropriate pedagogical support young people can become critically informed consumers of sports media in relation to constructions of sporting bodies.

Both Amanda Mooney and Göran Gerdin's paper, and Corina van Doodewaard, Annelies Knoppers and Ivo van Hilvoorde's research offer examinations of the challenges of using media as a critical pedagogical tool. Amanda and Göran consider the use of visual methodologies (specifically video stimulated reflections, VSR) for working with boys and young men to interrogate and challenge the pedagogical practices and culturally valued performances that contribute to their gendered identities in PE. Whilst the use of VSR enabled participants to engage in ethical self-work, the authors offer a number of cautionary observations about this approach, including the importance of responding carefully to negative reflections, and recognising that not all will engage positively in the process.

Corina, Annelies and Ivo also address how media (in this case, video replays of PE lessons) can be used to prompt critical reflection between students and teachers. They explore the types of student bodies that are typically used in the filming of instructional videos that teachers use to facilitate students' learning in PE. The paper concludes that the bodies chosen by teachers to be 'on show' reinforce differentially valued notions of physicality.

Importantly, some of the teachers involved in the research began to think more critically about their pedagogical practice and the significance of the images they select for their learning resources.

We hope you enjoy reading the papers *across* these two Special Issues. As we have already indicated, our separation of papers into each issue is somewhat arbitrary since different themes explored cut across many of the papers. Collectively they raise alternative questions and provide new insights into gender and active lifestyles, and importantly, all seek to make a difference in moving towards more equitable physical activity experiences.

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