

EXPLORING THE GENDER-CONSTRUCTED BODY ACROSS TIME IN UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION THROUGH A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

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Abstract- Physical education has the potential to be an empowering arena for young women in that they have the opportunity to resist many of the dominant discourses in relation to femininity and gender. However, many girls and young women choose not to pursue physical activity beyond the school context, since they feel alienated by the pedagogy and practice within physical education. Using a feminist framework that draws on four key perspectives, this paper explores ways in which the body has been and continues to be gender-constructed in UK physical education. By revisiting various historical happenings and issues it exposes the prevalence of discourses in relation to the body and gender, illuminating how they persist even in contemporary physical education. Indeed, the paper proposes that gender discourses remain entrenched in much of the pedagogy and practice of the discipline. This is due to societal structures that have a vested interest in maintaining divisions between gender and sex, and promoting notions of normativity in relation to what constitutes female or male, and their respective roles. Reconceptualisation of longstanding gendered practice in this school subject is proposed by drawing on the poststructuralist feminist perspective in which the notion of gender as performativity is paramount. Utilising such a theoretical framework can help to challenge orthodox gender constructions of the body both within and beyond the physical education context.

Key words- Physical education, discourse, gender, govern, body, corporeal, feminist, feminine, normativity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Physical education is a practical subject that has been recognised as being principally physical in nature (Armour, 1999). Arnold's (1979, 1988) triumvirate curriculum model for physical education is noteworthy in this domain, due to its concentration on the interrelated dimensions of learning 'in', 'through' and 'about' movement. Taking into account the dominance of "practical knowledge" in physical education (Reid, 1996; Ryle, 1949, 2009), it might be concluded that the body is at the centre of learning in this subject, affirming the need to examine different scholarly perspectives on the body in order to better understand physical education per se. Game (1991) appears to validate this conjecture through her conception of the body as a site of interplays, which she believes provides the possibility for an alternative conception of knowledge. Similarly, other theorists propose that physical education pedagogy and practice socially and culturally construct the body over time (see Evans, 1986; Kirk & Tinning, 1990; Wright, 1996). Indeed, the history of physical education has allegedly been dominated by disciplining, controlling, moulding and gendering the body, which has subsequently been objectified (Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Vertinsky, 1992; Wright, 1998). Hence, the body needs to be recognised as a complex entity that might be governed in a multiplicity of ways; accordingly it could "...be conceptualised as an object that can be laboured on, and as the outcome of an evolving interaction or mutual conditioning with the mind and between nature and culture, between biology and society" (Bates, 2015, p. 142). In parallel with such thinking, four feminist approaches to the

body have been identified as particularly pertinent to this study; these will each be explored in succession. The convolute interrelationships between these feminist perspectives of the body and physical education will be illuminated as such; for the body's significance in this curriculum area has already been established. Moreover, inherent gendered power structures and struggles in physical education will be exposed during this analytical process.

II. DRAWING ON FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES TO EXPLORE THE GENDER-CONSTRUCTED BODY IN UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A number of feminist perspectives might be considered in relation to physical education pedagogy and practice, with liberal, radical, socialist and poststructuralist perspectives having the most impact on this subject (Flintoff & Scraton, 2005). Feminist perspectives seek to comprehend and explain gender relations, illuminating inequalities between the sexes whilst simultaneously advocating strategies for change. Each of these four perspectives has implications for the governance of female and male bodies within a physical education context. However, it is recognised that a complete overview of all four selected feminist perspectives would be an impossible task within the limitations of this paper; moreover, feminist theories are inherently dynamic and fluid, with one theory never entirely being replaced by another despite their chronological development. It should be remembered, therefore, that there is coexistence of different traditions of feminist thought in one text. Furthermore, gendered accounts of physical education do not always elucidate which

specific feminist perspective underpins them. Notwithstanding this, an endeavour will be made to organise the ensuing discussion of gender and physical education into particular feminist strands, thereby connecting issues raised with the perspective that is most akin to these.

III. LIBERAL FEMINISM IN THE UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

Liberal feminists contend that the 'oppressor' relative to females is their lack of opportunity due to biological determinism and patterns of socialisation that normalise this. Challenging traditional assumptions about the body as a natural, biological entity and simultaneously furthering research on the social construction of the body highlights some of the socio-cultural effects on girls' and boys' participation in physical education (see Azzarito & Solmon, 2005; Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Wright, 2000). Notwithstanding this, biological determinism has underpinned the preliminary institutionalisation of physical education for girls, permeating the choices of physical activities that were on offer to girls and boys respectively. Accordingly, traditional 'male' activities (for example rugby) that emphasised strength, endurance or physical contact, were modified to accommodate girls 'innate' feminine qualities, and new female-based activities such as netball, lacrosse and field hockey that did not run the risk of promoting overt masculinity and active sexuality were introduced in the private school sector. Netball promoted restrictions of space which reduced the speed of the game, and its no contact rule ensured suitable spacing between players was maintained. This 'protected' the girls for their future reproduction function and minimised sexual contact or awareness (Scruton, 1992). Similarly, lacrosse and field hockey involved an implement that effectively assured distance was created between the ball and the player, therefore minimising body contact.

In this manner, the female body in physical education experienced something of a dichotomy: "Ideologies around women's ability, role and behaviour became institutionalised within the PE [physical education] profession such that secondary school girls experienced a subject which on the one hand contributed to their liberation in terms of dress, opportunities for physical activity, and access to a future profession but on the other hand reaffirmed clear physical sex differences, their future role as mother and the boundaries and limitations of women's sexuality" (Evans, 1986, p. 79). Hence, eugenic and social Darwinian arguments about the female body needing gentler treatment in order to enhance its maternal energy - and thereby not jeopardise the survival of the human race - seem to have endured during decisions about what constitute 'appropriate' games for boys and girls.

Unsurprisingly, gendered pedagogic principles and content such as these were retained when state-provided secondary schools were developed for children of all social classes during 1944 in the UK. Moreover, even with the development of movement education and Laban-based teaching (1948) that focused on traditional 'female' domains such as creativity, expression, discovery and cooperation during the 1950s and 1960s, the alleged biological inferiority of the female body proved difficult to contest. The dominance of male-driven scientific functionalism within physical education, which defined its pedagogy after the 1950s (Kirk, 1992), served to compound such gendered methods of practice.

IV. RADICAL FEMINISM IN THE UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

When examining radical feminism, sexuality is more centralised in this perspective and regarded as the principal site of male domination over females through the social institution of heterosexuality. A woman's right to control and redefine the meanings of her own sexuality and her own body is at issue here, in tandem with the acknowledgement of how seldom this is the case both historically and in contemporary times. Thus, the manner in which patriarchy is sustained through structural power relations becomes the primary focus, along with how these serve to disempower females. Under patriarchy, femininity and masculinity therefore become relationally defined hegemonic constructions (Macdonald et al., 2002). Masculinity, through historical constructive processes, encompasses physicality in ways that exclude females, who become alienated by virtue of the sex-gender divides within the social system in which they reside. In this way, gender oppression is normalised and becomes the status quo.

It would appear that the gendered differentiation of physical education activities provided to girls and boys, in tandem with the ways in which both sexes are effectively manoeuvred into gender-appropriate activities and thereby not granted equal opportunities are indicative of longstanding gender oppression in this school subject. Whilst several researchers have affirmed such matters (Griffin, 1984, 1985a, 1985b; Kirk, 1992; Talbot, 1993), others have also been influential, maintaining that girls are socialised into 'female' activities such as netball and gymnastics, whilst boys pursue the more 'male' activities of football and cricket (Leaman, 1984). Girls' differential and restricted physical education provision could therefore be said to reflect and reinforce an ideology of femininity, appearing to therefore validate women's inferior status in society. Such phenomena also seem to substantiate the gender normalisation process mentioned earlier. Certainly,

such clearly defined male and female roles imply that a heterosexual body is central, and also actively promoted, within the physical education milieu. In addition, radical feminism in the physical education context might be discernible when considering how stereotyping and gender-related attitudes arise. Whilst the 'performance' and construction of normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity will be examined in more detail forthwith, it might be recalled that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century agents from the fields of medicine and physical education (structural power relations), successfully constructed a stereotypical view of the female body as powerless, passive, physically weak, and therefore needful of modified, 'feminine' physical activities.

With regard to contemporary physical education, it has been recognised that "...teaching behaviours and practices reveal entrenched sex stereotyping, based on 'common-sense' notions about what is suitable for girls and boys, both in single-sex and mixed-sex groups and schools" (Talbot, 1993, p. 74). Thus, despite the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act in the UK, there remain restricted opportunities for both sexes to certain physical activities, specifically in relation to girls' access to competitive sport (Talbot, 1993). Such matters point to the fact that physical education is one of the few subjects on the curriculum where a gendered history of curriculum differentiation has prevailed (Fletcher, 1984; Kirk, 1992). Efforts to facilitate mixed sex physical education from the 1980s onwards have indeed proven complicated, with gendered body stereotypes often uncontested and reproduced by teachers (Evans, 1989; Flintoff, 1996; Scraton, 1993). Moreover, a widespread presence of perceptions of male superiority and female inferiority by both teachers and students has been acknowledged (Chepyator-Thompson, Jepkorir & Ennis, 1997; Santana, Solmon, Cothran, Lofthus, & Stockin-Davidson, 1998). Notwithstanding these issues, the unequal access to competitive sport is of particular concern, since competitive sports and games have already been recognised as a male discourse that has governed physical education pedagogy since the 1950s (Kirk, 1992, 1998). Evidence of gender inequalities in physical education classes have also been highlighted elsewhere, with boys discriminating against girls and dominating participation in team sports, whilst girls adopt maladaptive behaviours such as giving up or acquiescing due to male practices being favoured in the curriculum (Griffin, 1984, 1985a, 1985b). It would appear then that divisions between the sexes have often prevailed in physical education as a result of 'natural' biological differences; these have accounted for variations in content between girls' and boys' physical education, together with differences in their expected participation and performance levels by peers, teachers, curriculum designers and higher power

structures. This, combined with broader socio-cultural influences on both girls and boys, leads to very different gendered experiences in physical education, with girls often being alienated due to 'traditional' sex-gender disparities in the school system (Evans, Davies, & Penney, 1996; Leaman, 1984; Scraton, 1992).

As well as documenting oppressive patriarchal structures in physical education such as those outlined above, contemporary radical feminists allude to the notion of the female body being controlled and restrained within a lesson context due to uniform designs across time. At the turn of the twentieth century, physical education contributed to the reform of women's dress and clothing for physical activities, with the gymslip and tunic releasing the body from restraining items such as corsets and bodices (Scraton, 1986). At first sight this seems progressive, but the barrel shape of the new uniform carefully concealed young women's bodies as they moved, simultaneously disguising any signs of developing sexuality and preserving their modesty for their future roles as mothers (Okeley, 1993). Contemporary female physical education kits in the UK also show signs of control being exercised over young women's bodies, with the traditional donning of short skirts, tee-shirts and athletics knickers; this provides opportunities for heterosexual, male gaze and comment as young girls are reminded of their heterosexual femininity through a uniform policy that is institutionally endorsed (Flintoff & Scraton, 2005). It also appears to reinforce the ideology of woman-as-object, since the girls are judged against desirable femininity standards; thus their reference point becomes the boys' attitudes, opinions and responses. In this manner, they conform to the dominant, institutionalised patriarchal narrative that values women primarily for their bodies. Accordingly, under radical feminism, the female body in physical education is, to all intents and purposes, disempowered and excluded on a personal and institutional level since it has lost its right to control and redefine the meaning of its own sexuality.

V. SOCIALIST FEMINISM IN THE UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

The third feminist perspective to be examined, socialist feminism, locates oppression in the intersection between capitalism and patriarchy (Tong, 1998), maintaining that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression. Essentially then, socialist feminists argue that capitalism strengthens and supports the sex-gender division status quo as men hold the power and money. Analytical connections between class relations and gender relations in society are therefore made, in an endeavour to relate changes in the role of women to

changes in the economic system and patterns of ownership of the means of production. Hence, the social variables of class and gender are perceptible, only this time they are intertwined; while women are recognised as being divided by class, they are viewed as experiencing a common oppression as the female sex. In terms of physical education per se, a socialist feminist perspective maintains that boys are prepared for the job market through physical activities that promote aggressiveness, independence and competition, whilst girls learn modified behaviours such as nurturing and cooperation to facilitate them into their future devalued labour, namely their reproductive role (Bray, 1988). In a similar vein, Scraton (1992) compares nineteenth century ideologies of femininity with contemporary physical education teacher expectations about girls' physical capabilities, contending that girls remain defined as less able than boys, passive, vulnerable and subordinate. Such matters directly link to the notion of the 'performance' of gender, that is to say, how femininity and masculinity are learned, produced and reproduced in the physical education environment through pedagogy and practice; some physical education scholars (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002) confirm this phenomenon occurs due to the choice of curriculum activities, girls' physical education clothing, and teacher attitudes and expectations.

Western historical constructions of masculinity and femininity have long been associated with the body (Shilling, 2012), and since the body has already been established as central to physical education, it becomes the key vehicle through which subject knowledge is built and replicated. Taking this into account, Kirk (2002, p. 25) maintains that "...for over one hundred years, the practices that make up physical education have been strongly associated with stereotypical views about the behaviours and activity that is appropriate for girls and boys respectively and with notably singular images of femininity and masculinity". Whilst physical education practices have already been investigated, the latter point requires additional consideration and contextualisation, since the way in which physical education provides both informal and formal sites for the construction and reinforcement of gender identity is essential for an enriched understanding of the gendered body. Indeed, Clarke (2002, p. 42) maintains that students and teachers actively "...learn and recognise the required feminine and masculine codes for acceptance within physical education and schooling more generally". The body thus becomes inscribed by the gender-appropriate, dominant discourse and this has an impact on the 'lived' body experience, transforming it into a place of personal, cultural and economic desire and struggle in pursuit of an ideal. In accordance with Garrett's (2004) 'comfortable' body analogy that is discussed in greater depth forthwith, Bordo (1995) and Wright (2004) claim that the feminine body ideal is

associated with slenderness. Conversely, masculine bodily ideals are linked to strength and muscularity (Connell 1990; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2003), which symbolise superiority, aggressiveness, independence, leadership and bravery. Although these are polarised body conceptions, there are gender commonalities to be found in the very notion of bodily concern, for it has been confirmed that "Body shape, size, muscularity, and physicality... are of central importance to [both] girls and boys" (Azzarito, 2009, p. 20). Notwithstanding this, a significant narrowing of girls' physical activity choices can occur, since body shape and size appear to be connected to female and male engagement in gender-appropriate physical activities (Gorely, Horloyd, & Kirk, 2003). This is merely one example of various tensions and contradictions that have already been illuminated between the body, gender, and the body 'work' that is undertaken in the physical education environment.

Within this exploration of socialist feminism, Hargreaves' (1986, 2002) historical perspective is also a useful one to note, since she suggests ways in which early physical education (as previously elucidated) was designed to ensure girls' healthy bodies so that they could give birth to strong, able, healthy workers, whilst men accumulated capital. Socialist feminism is thereby considered a dual approach due to its focus on both class and gender. Interestingly, Kirk's (2001, p. 477) reference to the introduction of competitive sports and games in physical education by the ruling classes during the 1950s aligns class and gender (albeit from a male perspective only): "Playing games was viewed as a way not only of redirecting homosexual desire, but also of producing new desire to be part of a team and by extension part of the collective such as a social class or ethnic group or a nation" (Kirk, 2001, p. 477). However, correlations such as these between class and gender have been questioned by some for the unequal priority that they potentially attribute to one or the other of these (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). Regardless of this, socialist feminist analysis is acknowledged as having broadened its concentration from solely females' experiences to a more critical review of gender relations (Flintoff & Scraton, 2005). Studies of boys and masculinities have consequently emerged, with explorations of student and teacher experiences in physical education (Braham, 2003; Fleming, 1991; Skelton, 1993). These have illuminated the centrality of power relations between various groups of boys and men, implicitly linking this perspective to the fourth and final one to be reviewed.

VI. THE POSTSTRUCTURAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE UK PHYSICAL EDUCATION CONTEXT

The poststructural feminist perspective has developed more recently than the three previous ones outlined.

By exploring connections between oppression, discourses, language and subjectivity as they impact upon gender identities and relationships, it endeavours to dismiss normalising conceptions of female and male, thereby promoting the shifting, plural and complex nature of gender. Experience, according to poststructuralist theory, is conferred meaning in language through a variety of "...discursive systems of meaning, which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality, which in turn serve conflicting interests" (Weedon, 1997, p. 33). Indeed, poststructuralist feminist analysis illuminates ways in which dominant discourses can ensnare a person in conventional meanings and modes of being, noting that language and the range of subject positions that it provides always reside in historically specific discourses which are, in turn, located in and structured by discursive fields such as the education system. Foucault's work has been adopted by some poststructuralist feminist scholars to interrogate the notion of corporeal, gendered styles that are embedded, resisted and controlled.

Perhaps at this point it is important to acknowledge the work of Butler, a key poststructuralist feminist theorist, who collapses the distinction between sex and gender, contending that there is no sex that is not always already gendered and that both are constructed as opposed to originating from any biological foundations. As a result, Butler (1990, p. 139) maintains that "...the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality..." For Butler, then, the 'natural' body cannot precede culture and discourse, but it should be remembered that the body is not a passive medium that is inscribed by external sources (Butler, 1990). In a similar vein, gender is not perceived as a passive construct that is "...determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy" (Butler, 1988, p. 531); it is instead produced through stylisation of the body and becomes a site through which agency takes place. The notion of performativity consequently comes into play, with the body being naturalised into a specific gender role through repetitious and ritualistic acts over time. This effectively repudiates the notion of gender being a stable identity or locus of agency, enabling the body to step outside of its "...restrictive frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, p. 141).

Butler's work frequently draws from Foucault's (1980) theory of power relations, emphasising the need to deconstruct 'female' and acknowledge pluralities of femininities and masculinities, which has implications for the diversity of girls' and boys' experiences in the physical education context. As

such, the individual has to be taken into account, with an analysis of ways in which they can become empowered, disempowered or actively resist the effects of power through the gender construction process. Garrett's (2004) poststructural examination of how young women experience their body during physical activity in contemporary society is of particular relevance here. She contends that there are three main female body types that are constructed within physical education, namely the comfortable body, the bad body and the different body. The 'comfortable' body is one that conforms to the slim, white, Western, middle-class conception, wherein the individual accepts the need to engage in physical activity to achieve a 'good' body whilst continuing to survey herself and others. The 'bad' body is one that is essentially viewed as fat and non-sporty, which inhibits the development of physicality and physical identity. In effect, individuals with 'bad' bodies seem to have internalised the Western culture of thinness as well as patriarchal standards of what constitutes an appropriate, and indeed attractive, female body. Finally, there are individuals who are described as having the 'different' body, because they do not conform to traditional discourses that focus on visual identity; they instead enjoy sensation and empowerment during movement experiences through their 'lived' body experiences. These three deconstructed body types expose the corporeal diversity that can be developed and sustained in physical education, illuminating how contemporary young women experience their bodies in multiple and sometimes incongruous ways.

When viewed historically, the body is recognised by poststructural feminists as being a text of culture on which central rules and hierarchies are inscribed, simultaneously operating as "...an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control" (Bordo, 1989, p. 14). Power is thus exercised through such corporeal discourses, but poststructural feminists advocate that "To be effective, they [discourses] require activation through the agency of the individuals whom they constitute and govern in particular ways as embodied subjects" (Weedon, 1997, p. 108). Social conditioning and normalisation processes on the female body therefore underestimate the unstable nature of subjectivity, as well as the creative agency that the individual has (Bordo, 1993). Moreover, the continual need for body work through the uptake of physical activity, implicitly alludes to the unpredictability and duplicity of the body, as well as it always being in the process of 'becoming'. It is in this space that dominant bodily codifications might be mediated, which is of particular interest to poststructural feminists.

Garrett's (2004) hitherto mentioned analysis of the comfortable body, the bad body and the different body demonstrates the complex interrelations

between bodies, gender and discourses. Other poststructural feminists (Hall, 1996; Theberge, 1987) have also used Foucault's notions of discourse, concurrently revealing ways in which surveillance and technologies of the self operate through disciplinary power. Using such points of reference, the manner in which young women's bodies are constructed and inscribed with knowledge have been shown to affect their understanding of self along with their involvement in physical activity. Theberge (1987, p. 393), for example, emphasises that physical activity and sport offer liberatory possibilities, providing "...the opportunity for women to experience the creativity and energy of their bodily power". This is akin to Garrett's (2004) conceptions of 'good' and 'different' body types, notably vis-à-vis the 'lived', embodied experiences to which she alludes. It would seem, therefore, that girls in physical education, with or without 'good' bodies, can potentially offer some resistance to traditional viewpoints surrounding femininity and the body through their rejection of restrictive gendered body discourses along with stereotypically feminine physical activities. Whilst some of these power struggles are shaped and driven by popular culture, the physical education profession has an opportunity to help girls contest discourses that define bodily norms and dictate what physical activities girls should undertake as opposed to boys. The work of poststructural feminists also highlights the performative nature of gender with its iterations of socially constructed codes that construe and confirm gender in the female-male replication process. Hence, performative approaches to gender such as those proposed earlier by Butler (1990) have been shown to be significant in terms of how they extend our understanding of gendered bodies in the physical education context.

CONCLUSION

The relevance of the gendered body in the physical education context has been affirmed through the above exploration of four widely accepted feminist perspectives, even though boundaries between these are recognised as being fluid and traversable. What has become evident are the specific ways in which female and male bodies are differently constructed, viewed and treated in physical education. Indeed, the legitimisation and reproduction of social inequalities connected to female-male differences in the physical education milieu have been highlighted, together with some of the accommodation and resistance to gendered body 'norms'. It is apparent that ideologies of gendered physical capacities are embedded in the development of the pedagogical practices and content of physical education, and that they have become an important aspect of its tradition across time. Hence, "...both as a school subject and as a 'profession', historically physical education in the UK has

developed in explicitly gendered way" (Evans & Penney, 2002, p. 3). This not only rejects the possibility of a student being an individual with multiple identities, thereby relegating girls and boys to discrete homogeneous groups, but it also fails to recognise the shifting nature of gender and gender relations within physical education pedagogy and practice. Taking these factors into consideration, fundamental questions about physical education practice for girls and boys might be raised, challenging the subject's reinforcement of gender stereotypes and sexual divisions, whilst simultaneously revealing the continuing influence of patriarchy at institutional level across time. Some would even go as far as saying that "...physical education as it currently exists in many British schools is a masculinised form of the subject. But it is not merely masculinised. A particularly narrow form of masculinity informs and is expressed in this masculinisation" (Kirk, 2002, p. 35). Recognition of such power relations is pivotal to achieving deeper comprehension of gender issues. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that gendered representations of the body are far more complex than at first sight, which signifies that analyses of gendered bodies will always fall short if there is no explicit engagement in the dynamics within and between gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990). Once it is recognised that gender is "...a corporeal style and a copy of a copy" (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 93), and that societal structures have a vested interest in maintaining divisions between gender and sex, notions of normativity in relation to what constitutes female or male, and their respective roles, can begin to be contested both within and beyond the physical education context.

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