Constructing identity in relation to physical education and sport: as told by two young men

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Abstract

From a sociological perspective the notion of youth is taken to be a relational rather than a developmental construct. In this paper we explore how young people's identities are constructed in relation to institutional and cultural discourses associated with physical activity and sport. In particular we are interested in how the discourses associated with school sport and physical education and sporting culture more generally, constrain or open up possibilities for the construction of masculinity in the lives of two young men - one studying at a private boys school in a large city and the other attending a government coeducational school in a semi-rural area. The statistical and interview data on which this discussion is based was collected as part of an ARC funded project investigating the place and meaning of physical culture in the lives of young people.
Introduction

Despite considerable concern at what is perceived to be a decline in young people’s participation in physical activity, their health, and their commitment to school sport (e.g. Booth et al., 1997), there has been very little attention given to the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people from their point of view. Nor has there been attention in the ‘youth research’ specifically focusing on the place of physical activity and physical culture in shaping young people's identities and social relationships. Consequently, school physical education curricula often fail to recognise the diverse and shifting ways in which young people engage with physical activity.

The term physical culture refers to a range of discourses concerned with the maintenance, representation and regulation of the body through highly codified and institutionalised forms of physical activity such as sport, physical recreation, and exercise (Kirk, 1997). In the process of their engagements with physical culture, young people do not merely 'participate' in physical activities, they are also consumers of the commercialised and commodified products of physical culture, ranging from foodstuffs, music, and sportswear to membership of exercise and sports clubs. Since physical culture provides the discursive resources for making sense of activities such as sport, physical recreation, exercise, and physical education, young people construct identities utilising these resources, sometimes in highly idiosyncratic, subversive, (re)productive, or conformist ways and reflecting their class, gender, ethnicity, and geographical location. Focusing on the broader concept of physical culture rather than physical activity is consistent with the call by Crouch (2000) and others in leisure studies to account for the complex interactions of practise, space, subject, knowledge and embodiment in understanding everyday existence. Further, with its implicit relational analysis, it strengthens the research through interdisciplinary study comprising cultural, youth and leisure studies, sociology, and education (Deem, 1999).

This paper draws on early work in an Australian Research Council-funded project that is investigating the meaning and place of physical activity and physical culture in the lives of young people. The project is examining the coherence between physical activity in young people's lives and the way physical activity is approached in their schools and communities during the crucial transition years from primary to high school and into the years following compulsory schooling. The project will document the perceptions of students from different social, cultural and geographical locations across three states as these change and develop over a period of three years. Only through examining the relationship between young people and physical culture can we understand the complexity of factors that shape their engagement with physical activity.

Many writers argue that current curricula in physical education are narrowly grounded in a set of hegemonic masculinist priorities such as physical speed, strength, power and competitive gamesplaying that favour the teaching of culturally dominant sports. Educators in Australia (e.g. Macdonald 1990; Wright 1995; 1996) and elsewhere (e.g. Evans 1993) highlight that these curricula fail to engage or educate many students, particularly girls, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, non-mesomorphic boys and as a consequence, young people are said to ‘drop out of sport’ and become
alienated from their bodies and from themselves (Kirk & Wright 1995). Tinning and Fitzclarence (1993) suggest that schools are failing to meet the interests and outside school experiences of physical activity and physical culture of young people living in a postmodern world.

Here we are particularly interested in the construction of masculinities through the interplay of physical activity opportunities and preferences, school, space/place, family structure, social class, and embodiment. There is a considerable literature on the determinants of, and barriers to, young women's participation in sport beginning with the socialization literature of the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, with the influence of poststructuralist feminist theory and cultural studies (see Hall 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Wright 1995; 1998), the focus has been increasingly on the construction of meanings about femininity and masculinity, in and through sport, particularly in the print and electronic media. Most of this work demonstrates how the social practices associated with organised forms of physical activity construct gender differences in ways that deny women power and rarely challenge traditional forms of femininity. Within recent masculinities research, following Connell (1995, 2000) and the work of Messner and Sabo (1990) in the US, a regularly reiterated theme has been the place of sport in constructing particular and sometimes problematic forms of being male (see also Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). While this has provided important insights into the ways in which male and female bodies are inscribed with meanings in relation to sport, less attention has been paid to young people of school age (see Wright 1996) and to those whose participation in physical activity does not fall into socially recognisable categories.

**Background literature**

There has been considerable documentation of the amount and kind of young people's participation in physical activity generated from large scale, quantitatively based studies using purpose designed surveys (egs ABS 1997; Booth et al 1997; Measurement & Consulting 1991). However, the participation research is not designed to take into account the social and cultural contexts, local, national and global in which young people participate in physical activity, except as variables with which to compare one group to another. While this study is also concerned to enhance the young people's opportunities and experiences of physical activity and physical education, an important conceptual shift is that it recasts and extends the notion of 'participation' to that of young people's 'engagement with physical culture'. Underpinning this engagement are questions of identity, social capital, space/place, and physical activity patterns and traditions.

**Young people, identities and transitions**

Identity, youth, and transitions are critical concepts in understanding the relationship between young people and their engagement in physical culture and physical activity. In the context of current feminist and postmodern writing, identity is understood not as fixed and established at birth or by early adulthood, but as dynamic and multiple 'created in response to a set of circumstances' (Tsoldis 1993). Identity is thus understood as negotiated in relation to various sets of meanings and practices which individuals draw on as they participate in the culture and come to understand who they are (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). In this sense identity involves a notion of agency, indeed performance: 'a
re enactment and re experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established' (Butler quoted in Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, p.47). As an example the Gilberts point particularly to the importance of sporting practices as a resource for young men in their understanding and performance of masculinity. Hence, physical activity is seen as a significant, and as yet relatively unexplored aspect of the period designated as 'youth'.

This study is informed by an understanding of youth as a social process (Wyn & White 1997), that is, one that understands young people's experience to differ historically and for different social and cultural groups. Such a notion of youth also provides a means of conceptualising transition periods in young people's lives in ways which assume young people's agency and avoid a linear and deterministic approach to development and change. Wyn and White (1997) argue that one of the problems with generalising and universalising the characteristics of young people is that it serves to 'trivialise and make abstract the lived practices of different categories of youth in ways which distort the social differences and diversity of experience among young people'. They argue for ethnographic research, which will be 'sensitive to the actual lived reality of young people... if we are adequately to understand the cultural worlds of the young' (p.77-78). It is this challenge that we take up in relation to young people's experiences and physical culture.

Current studies point to the importance of change or transitions in the individual biographies of young people. There is now clear evidence that the meaning of 'transition' through youth has changed in ways that raise questions about the links between social structures (such as the family, education and the labour market) and individual agency (the extent to which young people shape their lives). Common threads in research on youth transitions are an emphasis on pragmatic choice, diversity of life patterns and resiliency as opposed to the traditional assumptions about youth, of linearity, development and risk (Wyn & Dwyer 1999). In Britain, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have linked these changes to the concept of the risk society (Beck 1992) in which traditional and institutional forms of social and economic relationships have become fragmented and individuals bear the responsibility and cost of shaping their lives.

In terms of an approach to research, this conceptual shift translates into an interest in how young people construct their biographies, balancing their multiple involvements in study, employment, relationships and leisure. Following Wyn and Dwyer (1999) and others (Du Bois-Reymond 1998) we call this a 'choice biography', emphasising the extent to which young people are making choices and following complex life patterns, rather than experiencing their pathways through youth as linear or preset.

**Understanding young people's participation in physical activity**

The quality of children’s participation in sport has become an issue of major significance (e.g. *Australian Senate Inquiry into Physical and Sport Education* 1992). Statistics such as those from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) and the NSW Schools Physical Activity and Fitness Survey (Booth et al. 1997) provide a picture of declining participation in organised and unorganised forms of participation from the primary years through to adulthood and differences in participation rates for girls as compared to boys and particularly for girls from cultural minority backgrounds. Examining the reasons for this decline has been identified as an important priority for future research (U.S. Dept of Health & Human Services 1996). One of the largest surveys of young people is that
commissioned by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) to provide it with information to support the introduction of the Youth Sport Program (Measurement & Consulting Services 1991). The ASC study concluded that for a large number of young people their experience of physical activity was very positive, while for others it was about 'waiting for a go, being rejected by the team they aspired to, being belittled when they made a mistake'. They suggest that, for some children, where there is a larger cultural gap between a child's family and the broader community, the school seems to be the only access the child has to organised sport.

In a study sponsored by the ASC, Kirk et al. (1997) found that eighty per cent of children under 15 who play club sport come from 'white collar' families, and emphasised the significance of socio-economic status, family structures, and geographic location in providing opportunities for ongoing participation. Penney, Carlson, Kirk, and Braiuka (1999) have therefore argued for the importance of schools as a major provider of sport for many Australian children.

While these studies provide us with a broad view of participation patterns and motivations across the Australian population they take little account of cultural meanings and structural constraints which shape young people's opportunities and desires to engage in physical activity. Ethnographic researchers have begun to examine the experiences of young ethnic minority people in relation to physical activity and physical education, again primarily in the UK (Carroll & Hollinshead 1993; Evans 1993). While these studies provide important insights they rarely explore the engagement of these young people with the more broadly conceived physical culture.

Families, location and cultural capital
Recent research conducted by Wright et al. (1999) points to the importance of the ways in which families, especially those with young children, engage with the discourses about the benefits of physical activity. Young mothers in particular seemed concerned to provide opportunities for their child as early as possible to enhance, as they saw it, their development as healthy, sociable young people. Family social location was important in terms of the place and meaning of physical activity in these young people's lives. Similar contextual factors have been recognised as important in shaping young people's health practices and the nature of parental input into health behaviours (Brannen et al. 1994) and in access to community sport as previously mentioned (Kirk et al., 1997).

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1978) is helpful in understanding questions of social location and, in this context, young people’s relationships between their engagement in physical activity and their social and geographical location, schooling, and family structures. Bourdieu (1986) approaches opportunity and social energy from the perspective of capital: economic capital associated with money; cultural capital which may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications and converted into money; and social capital or connections. Each is unequally distributed among social groups/classes. Relatively common to members of the social class are dispositions that produce ways of looking at and operating within the world or a *habitus*. The habitus, and the cultural capital that flows from it, thus provide the cultural and cognitive resources for scholastic success (Bennet, Emmison and Frow, 1999, p. 11) and interest and opportunity to engage in particular physical cultures.
Bennett et al.’s analysis of class differences in Australian recreation and sport draws on Bourdieu to analyse how activities are highly classed. For example, tennis, swimming, and golf are popular with higher income earners. They conclude ‘that participation in sporting activity tends to rise rapidly with level of education, with income, and with attendance at private schools’ (Bennett et al. 1999, p. 133). Light and Kirk (2001) also used Bourdieu to understand how school rugby union establishes social distinction and reproduces social advantage from school years well into established careers. As education and income decreases so too does participation in sport. In contrast, men with lower levels of education, and who live in rural and regional Australia are relatively inactive in institutionalised sport and recreation with their recreation patterns being passive and narrow (Bennett et al., 1999).

Consistent with this concern for the differential distribution of access to and outcomes from physical activity, Wearing and Wearing (1990) point out the theorisation of leisure has moved beyond simplistic assumptions of ‘free time’ and ‘free choice’, to questioning the structural relations of power. They point to inequities in the allocation of resources that are based on particular dominant social agendas and meanings associated with the ‘benefits’ of leisure to the state. This has seen resources allocated to support sport as a major site of ‘productive’ leisure – that is, a site where attributes of individual achievement, striving and so on judged desirable for citizenship in a patriarchal capitalist society are developed.

Rural communities provide an interesting case with respect to questions of allocation of resources. Gray and Lawrence (2001) report the slow or negative growth in rural and farm incomes that is having a high impact on rural and regional Australia’s ‘lifestyle’. The spectre of rural poverty has implications for the workload carried by adults and children. Young rural Australians trajectories are typically shaped/limited by having less formal education, lower secondary school retention rates, and thereby more limited social, cultural and economic capital unless they shift to urban boarding schools. Nevertheless, Giddens (1994) argues that local cultures such as those in semi/rural communities will remain strong as they provide avenues for the retention and development of personal identities. An important aspect of local semi/rural cultures in Australia is an individualisation lived out through discourses of self-sufficiency and intergenerational succession that may have a bearing on the configuration of family relationships and commitments (Gray & Lawrence 2001).

Data collection

This paper draws upon two sets of data: quantitative surveys and interviews. A survey was administered to all students in two key transitional years in the participating schools - the first year of high school (Yr7 in NSW and Yr8 in QLD) and the last year of compulsory schooling (Yr10) (total n=1154). Questions were concerned with participation patterns, demographics, and attitudes to physical activity and physical education and key influences on participation. The responses to the survey were analysed using SPSS to map students’ participation patterns, attitudes to physical activity and physical education, major influences on participation and self-perceptions in relation to physical activity. These results served two purposes. They not only provided a means of
generating the sample for the longitudinal, qualitative element of the project but also provided some baseline information that shall be presented in the section to follow.

The interview sample to date (n=74) was chosen to include young women (n=39) and young men (n=45) from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, geographical locations, and having varied attitudes and participation patterns in relation to physical activity. Some of the students were chosen because they were not very active in conventional terms. At least three semi-structured interviews have been held with each participant around specific topics such as: current participation patterns; feelings about physical activity; responses to events and issues taken up in the media and current feelings about physical education and school sport. Each student is taken to be constructing their individual identity(ies) - their beliefs, values, emotions and desires - in the context of the cultural and institutional discourses to which they have access, i.e. 'subjectivity that is interwoven within its context' (Scheurich 1997, p. 174).

Data analysis draws on a life history approach, informed by poststructuralist notions of the self and difference. As Wyn and White (1997) point out the 'analytical task is to conceptualise the negotiation of identity in different social worlds' (p.81). For this preliminary paper, our task was to conceptualise two young men’s negotiation of identity in relation to physical culture as it is constituted in the context of home, school and the wider society, and as these in turn intersect with their positioning in relation to masculinity, school, location, and social class. They were selected from two Queensland school cohorts that have shown significantly different survey results.

**Survey responses**

The results of the survey drew our attention to what appeared to be two very different groups of boys. In this paper we want to focus on the responses of the male students in the two Queensland schools. Our argument is that these two schools represent significantly different populations and different opportunities for the construction of identity, in and through the students’ engagement with physical activity. Further, we are particularly interested in the responses to Question 17 of the survey: *Below are some reasons for NOT doing more exercise or activity than you do. Please show how strongly each statement applies to you.* This question provides some indication of the students’ orientation to physical activity and sport. As far as a survey is able to do, it provides insights into the ways particular groups of students construct their subjectivities in relation to these aspects of social life. In the next section of the paper the differences between these groups of boys will be further examined through the stories of two particular boys.

In the following graphs the figures for the responses from both the female and male students in Queensland and New South Wales have been included. This serves to point to the positioning of the Queensland rural school (QRS) boys and Queensland independent school (QIS) boys in relation to each other, in relation to the boys from the NSW schools and in relation to the female students from the NSW and Queensland schools. Although we are not discussing the differences between the responses of the female and male students in this paper, it is important to point out for the argument being made here, that the greatest differences between groups were between the different groups of boys on most responses to Question 17 and not between boys and girls. Differences between boys
and girls were only calculated on a school-by-school basis - with the inclusion of the QIS boys, the numbers of male and female students were too unevenly distributed to provide a basis for comparison.

The following graph points to the total numbers of students surveyed across the two years at each school. As QIS is a boys school there are no comparable figures for female students. QIS also had the best return of survey responses.

**Figure 1: Demographics of schools**

The following graphs provide indications of the responses to the various statements that comprised Q17. Students were able to choose from a range of five points on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (does not apply very much) to 5 (applies very strongly).

The responses to this question suggest that the boys responding from QRS are a significantly different group from those responding at QIS. When means were compared across groups, the responses from the QRS boys were significantly different from those of their Queensland peers at QIS on responses to the following statements: ‘I already do lots of exercise’ ($p \leq .05$); ‘I am self-conscious about my looks when I exercise or play sport’ ($p \leq .01$); ‘I just don’t enjoy exercise or sport’ ($p = .01$), ‘my parents don’t encourage or help me’ ($p = .01$), ‘exercise or sport is not regarded as very important in my family’ ($p = .01$), ‘I am just not very good at any sports or activities’ ($p \leq .01$) and ‘the right facilities are not available’ ($p \leq .01$) (see Figures 2-8).
Figure 2: I already do lots of exercise

Figure 3: I am self-conscious about my looks when I exercise or play sport

Figure 4: I just don’t enjoy exercise or sport

Figure 5: My parents don’t encourage or help me
Exercise or sport is not regarded as very important in my family

I am just not very good at any sports or activities

The right facilities are not available

In comparison there was not a significant difference between the QRS and QIS boys’ responses to ‘I don’t have enough time’ and ‘there are other things I like doing more’ (see Figures 9 and 10).
In the next section of the paper the differences between these groups of boys will be further examined through the stories of two particular boys at each of the schools. These boys were selected because they help to provide a window into the lives of boys attending these two very different schools – one an elite private boys school and the other a semi-rural government coeducational school. Together the quantitative and qualitative data reveal very different ways in which masculinities are constructed across space and place in keeping with Connell’s (2000) emphasis on masculinities.

Young men’s stories

The two case study students were both in year 12 at the time of the interviews. Brett lived in a small semi-rural town in the southeast corner of Queensland, with his parents and brother on a small farm. He attended the local state high school, which he travelled to by
car. Aaron also lived at home with his parents and sister in an outer suburb of Brisbane and attended an independent boys school to which he was driven in the mornings by his mother, catching the bus home in the afternoons. Brett was like many of the semi-rural boys who, if they were involved in any physical activity at all, it was in a non-dominant sport that was not school-based. Aaron was like many of his peers who tended to be involved in a wide range of school-based team sports. Further contextual information on the two young men are summarised in the tables below and insights into their engagement with physical culture follows.
Physical activity past and present
Brett’s physical activity participation has been focused on pistol shooting and riding motor bikes from early age whereas Aaron:

Started off playing sport when I was about 6, started playing basketball, then a bit of AFL as well… with some mates outside…. Then when I came to (present school), I started playing basketball and tennis… and I was also playing club basketball and club tennis. Then in grade 10 I started rugby as well.

This pattern of engagement has carried into their secondary school years.

Brett: yeah, (I) ride a motorbike, generally ride a bit on the weekends and that…. I do a bit of pistol shooting and a bit of shotgun shooting. We generally go off to a club and shoot there with some friends….

Aaron : I just do personal training… like running, a bit of weights… at the school gym…. Rowing,… rugby,… and basketball as well - they’re all school sports.

Based in the city and with a greater economic capital, Aaron differed from Brett in patterns of spectatorship.
Aaron: We usually go to the State of Origin. We’re going to the Indy on Saturday… Dad can usually get pit passes…. We went down (to the Sydney Olympics) … and watched a bit of the tennis… went to the shooting.

Brett would have liked to go to the Olympics but did not think he would get there, ‘just too much money for seats.’ He did however travel at Easter:

….to Darwin for the pistol shooting nationals…. I didn’t compete this year but the year before I did… just watched my Dad.

Managing Physical Activity
Aaron and Brett also differed in the ways they managed their time and the place of physical activity in their routines. Brett’s commitment to shooting involved:

Nearly every weekend there’s a shoot on and we basically try to get to at least 3 shoots a month… with Dad…. Some Saturdays if there’s no shoot on I’ll sometimes go down with my Granddad and he’ll … coach me…. Shoots normally last a whole day, if not 2 or 3.

Brett’s commitment, while constant and ongoing, was less demanding upon his time than Aaron’s juggling of multiple activities. Aaron had decided not to play rugby this season as, ‘after the rowing season, which went for six months, I just wanted a bit of a break…. I was putting in … 12, 16 hours per week.’ Aaron had also swapped from tennis to basketball as the ‘school only allows you to do one…. I usually just switch over each year, get a bit of variety.’

Family Involvement
Although both boys’ families are involved in their physical activity participation, they appear to play different roles. Brett’s father and grandfather are both heavily committed to his physical activity participation.

Brett: I look up to my Dad ‘cause he’s ranked 7th in the world for pistol shooting and yeah, I’d like to be there one day…. I admire my Granddad as well… he was the Australian coach at one stage.

Brett appreciated his father’s and grandfather’s experience and encouragement with his Dad urging ‘me on whenever I need any encouragement’ and his Grandad coaching him.

Aaron’s family also had a history of coaching, encouragement, and transport roles although he rarely mentioned his family when speaking about his physical activity participation and they seemed to play a more passive role than did Brett’s. For example, he talked about how his, ‘Mum and I go out and play a bit of tennis every so often… My family were quite active in tennis.’ Aaron had also started ‘playing basketball because my brother was playing’ and he also goes to the golf driving range with his brother as they have ‘some of the same tastes in sport.’
Discussion and conclusion

How are we to understand this data? Our first response was to see the QRS boys as a disadvantaged group in relation to the opportunity and also the desire to participate in physical activity and sport. This is an easy position to take up in the context of those powerful discourses of participation which suggest that i) participation in sport and exercise is a social and civic necessity and ii) to not do so, or not desire to do so, is evidence of some lack either of opportunity or appropriate attitude. The QRS boys’ responses to the first round of interviews did however, challenge some of these easily made conclusions. These interviews certainly confirmed the supposition that the QRS and the QIS boys were qualitatively quite different in their orientation to sport and exercise and in the ways in which they constructed meanings around these. DiMaggio (1987) has argued that with the widespread commodification of culture, we have entered a period of cultural declassification where boundaries between social groups are more porous. However, our cases above suggest different ways of being a male engaged in physical culture. Each had a different trajectory or movement through social space as the amount and type of capital they accumulated varied (Bourdieu, 1987).

Where the QIS boys participated in traditional competitive sports as part of the expectations of the school curriculum, the QRS boys engaged in activities which would rarely be defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other participation surveys as ‘sport’ or ‘exercise’ (e.g. Bennett et al. 1999) – these were activities such as shooting, dirt-bike riding, caring for animals, horse-riding, showing dogs, involvement in rural fire brigade and State Emergency Services and so on. This data points to the limited and inappropriate nature of terms such as sport and exercise when it comes to describing the lives of the QRS boys. Like the QIS boys the QRS boys indicated that their lives were busy but that there were things they like doing more than sport and exercise (more so than the other two groups of boys in NSW) and that their families did not regard exercise or sport as important.

The interview results however suggest that the kinds of activities that shaped the QRS and the QIS students’ lives were very different. The QIS boys were much more likely to be involved in competitive, organised, team sports often in the context of GPS interschool sport, whereas for the QRS boys their involvement was much more likely to be in relatively loosely organised and individual or family activities, associated very much with their lives in a semi-rural environment. In this context, their parents’ involvement did not fit neatly into categories such as spectating and driving their children to and from sport – the usual form of support and encouragement provided by the QIS parents.

Bennett el al.’s (1999) analysis of physical activity patterns in Australian society gives us some insight into the place of physical activity in Aaron’s life. Aaron’s physical pursuits (rugby, rowing, tennis, golf etc) were stereotypical of high socio-economic group’s activity interests. With respect to rugby, Light and Kirk (2001, p. 95) concluded that ‘embodied cultural capital is acquired through the physical practices of rugby and is later exchanged for social, cultural and economic resources.’ These exchange processes are embedded in hegemonic masculinist practices and discourses that can be typical of those that shape independent school cultures (Courtice, 1999). There are also questions of self and societal surveillance in Aaron’s story, again more typical of higher socio-
economic groups (Bennett et al. 1999). Here we mean that economic capital is linked not only to the type of sports participated in but also to self-care to which Aaron referred (e.g. personal training in the school gymnasium).

At the same time we do not want to over-romanticise the lives of the QRS boys. It is also quite clear from their and their female peers’ responses that the choice to participate in a range of sports is considerably limited, with few facilities available and transport to sport not easy. The QRS boys’ responses to the ‘I am just not very good at any sports and activities’ and ‘I am self-conscious about my looks when I exercise or play sport’ stand out in relation to almost all of the other groups, both male and female. In a society where participation in sport is so highly valued and so strongly linked to notions of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) these responses point to issues, which need to be explored further. For example, Bourdieu (1978) and Shilling (1993) argue that a focus upon the legitimate (masculine) body and the legitimate use of the (masculine) body can be especially helpful in deconstructing dis/advantage in physical education and physical culture more broadly.

QRS boys had a strong sense of parental encouragement and/or support, which was significantly different to the other cohorts yet Brett and Aaron’s stories suggest quite different ways in which they interact with their families. In Brett’s case he spent a lot of time with his father and grandfather pursuing his shooting interests, thereby supporting what Gray and Lawrence (2001) describe as the individualisation of rural cultures. There was a strong sense of Brett enjoying leisure time with his family. In contrast, Aaron’s parents had chosen a school that was heavily committed to traditional male sports, which accordingly provided to Aaron high expectations for involvement across a range of demanding commitments. Aaron did talk about participating in physical activity with his family although much of this occurred in his younger days and in the capacity of a spectator.

Clearly, previous statistical data on physical activity patterns based upon age and sex variables masks the complexity of young people’s identity construction. Brett and Aaron’s stories as semi-rural and urban young men respectively, highlight how differently they engage in physical culture despite commentaries on the massification and globalisation of culture. Further, we are seeing here the interplay of gender, location, socio-economic status and embodiment as they shape the habitus of Aaron and Brett, and more specifically, the socially reproductive nature of the education systems in which they participated (Grenfell & James, 1998). This preliminary analysis is therefore a platform for ongoing questions of diversity, identity construction, location and schooling as we move between structuralist and poststructuralist ways of understanding young people and their relationship with physical activity and physical culture.
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