‘I’m many different people’: examining the influence of space and place on girls’ constructions of embodied identities

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Abstract

Within the field of physical education, much interest has been given to the study of young people’s social practices in recent years and the impact of these on their understandings of self (Sandford & Rich, 2006). Authors have highlighted the growing complexity of social life (Wright et al., 2003) meaning that young people are now shaped by their engagements with numerous, interconnecting social fields (Holroyd, 2003). Within these debates, there has been a strong focus on the body as a means by which individuals construct understandings of self (and others) with physical culture identified as an important context influencing the development of embodied identities (lisahunter et al., 2014). As such, it is argued that to gain authentic insight into the activity choices/practices of young people, it is important to take into account the social/cultural spaces that constitute their day-to-day lives (O’Donovan et al., 2014). This paper draws upon data from two distinct studies that sought to examine the impact of social experiences on girls’ constructions of embodied identities. Adopting a youth voice perspective (MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2010) data were generated through various focus group discussions and activity-based tasks (e.g. drawing, writing, mapping and ranking activities) with girls aged 8-16 years from schools within the Midlands and North-West of England. A thematic analysis of data, informed by a Bourdieuan theoretical framework (e.g. Bourdieu, 1985), highlighted several issues relating to the impact of space and place on girls’ embodied constructions of self. This discussion identifies four key themes, which serve to illustrate the complex process of managing/negotiating identities. These are: the recognition of multi-dimensional identities; the contextual nature of embodied identities; the problem of conflicting identities; and articulations of resistant identities. The implications of these themes with regard to girls’ dispositions towards, experiences of and participation in sport/physical activity are discussed.

Key Words: spaces, place, embodied identity, girls, physical activity
The Sport Project: Probing the Boundaries: 4th Global Meeting

Introduction

Within the field of physical education, much interest has been given to the study of young people’s social practices in recent years and the impact of these on their understandings of both self and others (e.g. Sandford & Rich, 2006). Such interest can be seen to reflect, in part, concerns about the impact on young people of navigating an increasingly complex social world. In this way, it can be seen to mirror contemporary concerns and interests regarding young people’s identities being raised within broader academic fields (e.g. Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Heath et al., 2009; Hopkins, 2010). It has been argued that profound social and cultural changes in recent times, in particular the breakdown of traditional institutions (family, religion, community etc.) coupled with an increase in migration and mobility across both social and geographical boundaries, have had a significant impact on the structure and organisation of social life (Wright, 2004). Such changes have had a particular impact on the younger generation, leading to the development of new patterns of youth transitions (e.g. in terms of education, employment, financial independence) as well as an increase in agential action (Wyn, 2004; Newburn et al., 2005). Certainly, there is now an acceptance that young people in contemporary society have an increased capacity to construct their own multi-dimensional biographies and follow more complex life patterns (Jeffery & MacDowell, 2004).

Contemporary social life, then, is seen to be characterised by an increased sense of reflexivity and individualisation, in which individuals both shape and are shaped by their involvement with various social and cultural contexts. For young people, the core spheres of influence are perceived to include significant institutions such as the family, school and religion, as well as peer communities and the pervasive field of media (Holroyd, 2003). However, several authors have acknowledged the central role of the body in the “reflexive project of the self” (Giddens, 1991 p.9) identifying it as the means via which individuals can both experience social practice and engage in it (Shilling, 1993). It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that the field of physical culture, saturated as it is by “meanings, values and social practices concerned with the maintenance, representation and regulation of the body” (Kirk, 1999 p.65), has also been identified as a significant context for young people’s constructions of embodied identities (Garrett, 2004; Fisette, 2011; lisahunter et al., 2014). Somerville (2010), however, also identifies the body as central to our experience of place, acknowledging the impact of context, which has interesting implications for the identity formation process given the growing perception of social experience as multi-dimensional.

The interconnected nature of social experience is also emphasised within the work of Bourdieu (e.g. 1985, 1986, 1993). As noted below, the work of Bourdieu is drawn upon within this paper, in order to help provide a theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between young people’s experiences of space/place and their construction of embodied identities. Of particular relevance is Bourdieu’s recognition that social fields are not independent of one another, but co-exist temporally and spatially (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002). This facilitates an understanding of young people’s social experiences as inter-contextual and allows for an appreciation that individuals may be engaged within more than one field simultaneously. However, the different norms and expectations regarding appropriate practice within fields can sometimes render these intersections, or border spaces, places of conflict and contestation (Somerville, 2010; O’Donovan et al., 2014). It has been argued, for example, that Physical Education as a subject is becoming increasingly irrelevant for large numbers of pupils, particularly (although not exclusively) girls, as it is perceived to be disconnected from their lives, identities and lifestyle interests beyond school (e.g. Sandford et al., 2008; Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010). As such, research has highlighted the need for greater effort to be directed at acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of young people’s social lives and appreciate the implications for the resources (or capital) that individuals may carry with them into the educational milieu (O’Donovan et al., 2014). It is clear then, that understanding not only what spaces young people occupy, but also how these spaces are structured as well as how they interact/intersect, is important if authentic insight is to be gained into the ways by which they generate understandings of themselves and others in an increasingly complex social landscape.

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

This paper draws together data from two separate studies that both sought to examine, among other things, the impact of girls’ social experiences on their constructions of embodied identities and their engagements with physical culture. A summary of key features is presented here for context, but full details regarding each study’s methodology are presented elsewhere (see Holroyd, 2003 & Gorely et al., 2011). Although separate research endeavours, the two projects share similar aims, objectives and design features; indeed, the design of the latter study (an externally funded research initiative) drew heavily on the former (a doctoral research project). As such, although the projects took place in different places and at different times, it has been possible to combine
elements of the information generated in order to create a larger data set and examine the perspectives of a broader group of young people. Both projects involved girls aged 8-16 years from schools within the Midlands and North-West of England (including individuals from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds) and employed a predominantly qualitative research approach, underpinned by a youth voice perspective (MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2010). As such, attempts were made to provide opportunities for the young people to share their thoughts and experiences via a variety of different methods within focus group discussions. Various researchers have questioned whether valid interpretations of data can be made based on single encounters with young people and have suggested that repeated meetings with the same group can facilitate the generation of richer data (e.g. Punch, 2002; O’Kane, 2008). Within both projects, focus groups were undertaken with the same groups of girls on at least three occasions and data were generated through both semi-structured conversation and a selection of carefully constructed activity-based tasks e.g. drawing activities, mapping activities, ranking tasks and open-ended questions (e.g. Clark & Moss, 2001; Oliver & Lalik, 2001; O’Kane, 2008).

In both projects, the raw data were collated, reviewed and then analysed thematically, using an approach similar to the constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2000). In short, a series of repeat coding and categorisation processes were undertaken in order to help identify key themes/patterns within the data, highlight issues for further consideration and ultimately generate theoretical insight (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In combining the data from the two projects, the core themes and categories were reviewed alongside each other in order to identify similar threads for discussion, which also served as a form of triangulation (Patton, 2002). Finally, both research projects shared a theoretical framework. As noted above, drawing upon a Bourdieuan perspective allows the social world to be perceived as a multi-dimensional space. This space comprises a number of intersecting social fields each with a structure that is determined by the differentiation and distribution of various forms of capital which in turn shapes the nature of individuals’ social practice (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986, 1990b). Engagement in this social practice then allows the social to be ‘written into the body’ via the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990a p.63), influencing individuals construction of embodied identities. Bearing in mind the assertion that it is often helpful for researchers to be guided by their theoretical or conceptual frameworks when analysing qualitative data (e.g. Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) it is important to note that the work of Bourdieu, in particular his conceptual ‘tools’ cited above, also influenced the interpretation of the data within the analysis process. An analysis of the combined datasets from the perspective of focusing on the issue of space/place with regard to girls’ constructions of embodied identities and engagements with physical culture identified a number of overlapping themes that serve to illustrate the complex process of managing/negotiating identities for young people in contemporary society. Four key themes are now presented for discussion.

**Discussion of Key Themes**

**Theme 1: The recognition of multiple identities**

The multi-dimensional nature of young people’s social experience was clearly demonstrated within the focus group discussions. Certainly, it was clear that the girls themselves perceived themselves as engaging, at various points and to varying extents, with numerous different fields e.g. family, schools, peers, religion, physical culture (e.g. sport, leisure, recreational activities). It is interesting that there was also a clear recognition by individuals that their practice was different in these different spaces (‘You always act around different people in different ways’; ‘You change when you go into different places’). Several individuals talked about the impact of this on their ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1990), emphasising the embodiment of social norms and expectations through the perceived need to demonstrate relevant capital and an appropriate habitus. For example, some girls talked of the perceived need to maximise their physical capital (Shilling, 1993) in the field of peers by wearing make-up, having the ‘right’ kind of clothes or even using specific forms of language. As Jodie commented, ‘when you’re at home you don’t really care what you look like because it’s your family who see you with your hair all messy and things, but when you’re at school you want to look nice for your friends’. There was also an understanding by some, however, that the shifting nature of identity made it difficult to definitively answer the question of ‘who am I?’. For example, Katie commented that ‘it is difficult to say who I am, I am many different people, it just depends on what I’m doing and who I’m with’.

**Theme 2: The contextual nature of embodied identities**

As noted above, there was recognition by many of the girls that their behaviours, attitudes and even appearance changed when they moved between different fields. For some, this was perceived to be a deliberate decision, designed to ensure they have sufficient capital (social, cultural or physical) to ‘feel more comfortable’ and ‘be
liked more’ by others within the field. For others, however, it was ‘kind of an unconscious thing that you do in your mind’, suggesting that norms and expectations regarding appropriate behaviour within a field had to some extent been embodied through the *habitus*. What was clear, however, was that the girls recognised context as a significant factor influencing their embodied identities. As Sarah commented, ‘well, whatever you do it kind of shapes how, I suppose how you dress in a way and how you act’.

To some extent, drawing upon appropriate material resources was deemed important in signifying an individual’s tastes and interests. For example, particular fashion styles, brands of clothing or tastes in music would accompany different lifestyle choices (e.g. skater, football fan, street-dancer). However, some discussion also hinted at a more deeply embedded sense of social/cultural expectations regarding appropriate comportment, behaviour and, importantly, space. This was certainly an issue for the Muslim girls involved in one particular focus group, who stressed the perceived need to ‘stay within our own area’. Expanding on this, Maya commented, ‘staying in your own community; I know how to be, what to do, where to go and where not to go’. Likewise, Alanah commented: ‘It’s like we want to go to the park to meet with our friends, but to get there we have to go through (an area) that we aren’t supposed to go to…if we are seen there, we can get into trouble, because it’s not appropriate for us’. There is a sense, then, that context – particularly space and place - is incredibly important in shaping young people’s multi-dimensional identities, but the comments above also hint at the potential for conflict in navigating the boundaries of different fields.

**Theme 3: The problem of conflicting identities**

In many ways, the overlapping nature of social fields was perceived to be a source of difficulty for the girls, as they struggled to manage the diverse, and often competing, demands of different contexts. For example, some talked of the different language that was acceptable in different contexts (‘I definitely can’t swear in front of my parents!’; ‘My parents expect Urdu, but my teachers want English’), while others expressed frustration about not being able to wear items of religious jewellery at school (‘I think it’s unfair and disrespectful’). Similarly, there was some suggestion that girls often struggled to manage the different cultural views regarding appropriate/acceptable practice in different fields. As Halina pointed out, ‘I love dancing, but my aunty keeps reminding me that it’s not good for Muslim children to dance’.

There was also some indication that girls found it difficult to determine the boundaries between fields. For example, girls from one school talked about still feeling the ‘pressure to act sensible’ when wearing their uniform outside of the school grounds, hinting at the difficulty of separating identities at the boundary-spaces of fields. It was clear that the boundaries between the fields of school and peers were often heavily contested spaces and one of the most prominent sources of tension was the concept of uniform. For the most part, the uniform was perceived to be in conflict with the ‘chosen’ embodied identities of the girls (‘they’ve started saying that you have to wear navy tights, I mean, I’m not wearing blue tights!!’) and did not afford them the best chance of accumulating physical capital within the peer group. This was true of uniform in general, but particularly when it came to topic of PE kit, which was berated by some girls for being ‘exposing’, ‘embarrassing’ and leaving them open to the gaze of others (‘we compare ourselves to each other’). This reinforces many previous findings from physical education research (e.g. Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2002; O’Donovan & Kirk, 2008), but also points to the potential for resistance in those spaces at the intersections of different fields.

**Theme 4: Articulations of resistant identities**

While the data clearly show young people’s general compliance with the norms and expectations of different fields (“knowing what to do and how to act”), it is also evident that there were, at times, attempts at resistance; particularly in those contested spaces at the intersections between different sites (home/school/peers). For example, while it was acknowledged that wearing school uniform was necessary in order to comply with the rules and *practice* of the field, there were numerous examples of girls fighting against this in quite subtle ways e.g. wearing colourful flowers in their hair, choosing branded clothes that are similar to the official uniform or even fastening ties in a particular way (‘It’s how you wear it, if you know what I mean’). One particular group of girls also commented that within their peer group they had an agreement to all wear ‘fancy’ underwear on a Friday, because it represented something of the freedom they felt at reaching the end of the time when school could dictate their embodied practice (‘Friday pants show that Friday is the best day…it’s the weekend and we get to go out!’). To some extent, this subversion was perceived to allow them to (re)gain a sense of control over their embodied identities.

There were also some examples within the data of girls’ expressing resistance against the general pressure to conform to the expectations of others, particularly with regard to complying with dominant bodily norms. For
example, Sasha commented that ‘It does not matter what people think of you, it matters what you think of yourself’, while Emily suggested that ‘You shouldn’t have to try to be something you don’t want to be’. However, the extent to which such views could be followed often depended on an individual’s willingness to be seen as ‘different’ and accept that they will lack relevant capital (and thereby status) within particular contexts. This sentiment, then, was often more appealing in practice than in principle, which led to situations when girls would exercise context-specific resistance. For example, following her comment about negative family views of dancing (above) Halina boldly suggested that ‘if I want to do dancing, I do dancing… and if I want to sing then I sing’ before acknowledging that ‘actually my mother doesn’t know that I sing; I just sing on the bus when we’re going swimming with school’. Again, this brings to the fore the complexity of young people’s inter-contextual experiences and the difficulty of managing their practice in the complex spaces between fields.

Concluding Remarks

The findings above help to demonstrate something of the multi-dimensional nature of young people’s social worlds. Moreover, they show the ways in which young people’s engagements with different fields can influence their social practice and that, in many ways, the body is central to this process and to individual’s understanding of self and identity. This is no straightforward process, however, due to the overlapping and intersecting nature of social fields and the malleable, shifting boundaries between them. As Hopkins (2010) points out, ‘place is now recognised as having open and permeable boundaries, shaped by complex webs of local, national and global influences, and different social and cultural flows and processes’ (p.11). Intersectionality, then, is an important concept to consider when examining young people’s social experiences. As noted above, adopting a Bourdieusian perspective and appreciating the social world as inter-contextual helps to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which young people’s identities ‘change, transform or remain the same as they intersect and interact with other markers of social and cultural difference, in different places and times’ (Pain and Hopkins, 2009 p.88).

However, what the work presented here also demonstrates is that the spaces at the intersections between fields are of huge significance, as they represent sites that require individuals to engage in a complex process of managing the demands of competing structural influences, resources and practices (O’Donovan et al., 2014). Somerville (2010) has referred to these border-spaces as the ‘discomfort zone’ of practice and Hill et al., (in press) have also acknowledged the challenge for individuals in navigating the complex terrain of field boundaries. The work presented here would concur that these spaces are often difficult for young people, but also points to the value of examining young people’s practice within these spaces in terms of gaining insight into the diverse influences underpinning their construction of embodied identities. It could be argued, then, that there are some important implications here for those individuals who work with young people; not least the need to recognise that there are competing influences on young people’s social practice. More specifically, however, there is a real need for them to recognise the pressures at work within ‘transitional spaces’ at the boundaries between fields (O’Donovan et al., 2014) and to manage their own practice within these contexts. There is perhaps a special significance for physical educators here, as practitioners who work within the intersections of several key social fields (school, peers, physical culture) and within a context in which management of the body is at the heart of practice (Kirk, 1997). In particular, it would seem necessary for practitioners to appreciate that when young people enter the PE context they do not enter a neutral, sterile environment, nor do they leave behind the experiences, influences and values of other social fields (e.g. Azzarito & Ennis, 2003; Sandford & Rich, 2006). Greater recognition of, accommodation for and critique around the competing demands on girls’ embodied identities in this regard, may aid the development of more relaxed, inclusive practices that could potentially facilitate young people’s (re)engagement with sport/physical activity.

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References


