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Young men’s physical activity choices: The impact of capital, masculinities, and location

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Abstract

This paper draws on data from an Australian longitudinal study into the place and meaning of physical activity and physical culture in the lives of young people. The aim of the national study is to add meaning to the statistics based on quantitative surveys which suggest a declining participation rate and satisfaction of young people in organized sports, recreational physical activities, and exercise. Frequently socioeconomic status, gender and geography are used as explanatory variables. In this paper we aim to provide an alternative reading of the statistical patterns by exploring how differences in capital (economic, social, and cultural) are played out in the lives of four young Australian males. We argue that schooling, geographical location, and access to capital play an important role in the intersection between masculinities, participation in physical activity, and engagement with physical culture.

Keywords: masculinity, physical activity, physical culture, capital

Word Count: 7846
Epidemiological studies of physical activity suggest that young people’s participation in physical activities declines as they get older, and this trend appears to be consistent across westernized countries (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006; Biddle, Gorely, & Stensel, 2004; Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000; Telama & Yang, 2000; Van Mechelen, Twisk, Post, Snel, & Kemper, 2000). Furthermore, particular groups such as girls and young people from lower socioeconomic families and ethnic minorities are represented as participating less (e.g. Health Survey for England [HSE], 1999; Trost et al., 2002; Tuinstra, Groothoff, Van den Heuvel, & Post, 1998). As with most statistical data, their underpinning methodologies tell us little of how variables such as class, gender, ethnicity or geography play out in people’s lives. Data presented in this paper are drawn from an Australian project spanning seven years funded by the Australian Research Council on physical activity and physical culture in the lives of young people. It aims to ‘bother’ the epidemiological data through a poststructuralist lens. While physical activity is inclusive of planned activities such as sport and exercise along with leisure activities and physical forms of transport, we are also concerned with physical culture, defined by Kirk (1997) as the social practices involved with maintaining, representing, and regulating the body. Together they provide supplementary ways in which to locate physical activity within young people’s lives (Authors, 2002).

The longitudinal project’s data analysis suggests that the young people involved in the study who shared common geographical and social environments, took on particularly diverse life trajectories and specifically had various, and sometimes quite distinct, ways of engaging with physical activity and physical culture. Sociocultural factors that shaped the young people’s engagement with physical activity and physical culture (among others) included
socioeconomic status, family structure, availability of facilities, and school type to name a few (Authors, 2003). Here we examine differences in capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986), of four young men attending two Queensland schools that service different socioeconomic groups and are located in geographically diverse contexts. Most specifically, we ask the following questions: how does possession of capital, manifested in socioeconomic status and type of school, interact with geographical location to shape young men’s choices (and options) around physical activity and physical culture? how are masculinities shaped by geographical location, school, and socioeconomic status and how is this played out in young men’s engagement with physical activity and culture. Thus, we are exploring the intersection of gender and geographical location with social, economic, and cultural capital.

**Social class, physical activity and masculinity**

The sociology of sport has maintained an interest in capital, class and physical activity (e.g. Bairner, 2007; Foote, 2003; Mehus, 2005; Miller, 1999; Stempel, 2005). However, Rowe (1998) argues that while social class retains significant explanatory weight in the analysis of inequality, its use is limited in contemporary studies of popular practices. He suggests instead that, “[t]he politics of the popular are far too compromised by overlapping constituencies, interests and affiliations that stubbornly refuse to follow the contours of class – which are themselves subject to shifts and realignments” (p. 425). Nevertheless, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) and Evans and Davies (in press) maintain that as a structural category, social class is still one of the most powerful factors shaping lives and life chances although they
also acknowledge the tensions experienced in working with class alongside poststructural
imperatives of complexity.

If we acknowledge along with others (e.g., Bairner, 2007; Evans & Davies, in press; Walkerdine et al., 2001) that social class is a useful analytical and explanatory tool, then definitional
questions follow. Frequently class is equated with socioeconomic status, occupation, education
or geographical location and read as a demographic variable. Offe (1985), however, maintains
that the effects of social class go beyond occupational category or education. With the changing
face of the labor market, he suggests that other variables such as gender, age, family status,
health, and ethnic identity have contributed to a decentering of work relative to these other
spheres of life. Bourdieu (1987) also contends that the notion of social class runs deeper than
socioeconomic categories suggesting that “social distances are inscribed on the body” (p. 5).
Indeed, Laberge and Kay (2002) in their interpretation of Bourdieu’s theories propose that “a
social class refers to a group of social agents who share the same social conditions of existence,
interests, social experience, and value system, and who tend to define themselves in relation to
other groups of agents” (p. 241, emphasis in original). In this way, social class does not only
refer to economic categories but can be “characterized by any kind of socially constructed trait,
such as gender, age, or ethnicity” (Laberge & Kay, 2002, p. 241). This embodiment of class
makes visible the signs of distinction through actions and patterns of consumption.

While previously reported data suggest that social class status has an equivalent impact on
both young women’s and young men’s physical activity patterns, epidemiological, critical,
feminist and poststructuralist research highlights how gender plays a significant role in
physical activity and physical culture. In western societies it is difficult, particularly for young men, not to construct their identity in relation to physical activity and/or sport, even if it is in rejecting it as part of one’s social and cultural life. Historically, in western culture sport has been framed as character building for young men, promoting courage, chivalry, moral strength and military patriotism (Dowling Naess, 2001) and a medium through which to learn values such as being competitive, successful, and strong (McKay, 1991). In addition, young men who display sporting prowess in male dominated sports such as football, are often accorded a high-status of masculinity and thus, popularity amongst peers both male and female (Martino, 1999; Phoenix & Frosh, 2001).

In their study of masculinity and sport in Canada, Laberge and Albert (2001) demonstrate an intersection between the construction of masculinities and social class, such that the boys in their study from upper and middle classes valued intelligence and sociability as characteristics of masculinity, whereas the working class boys respected “male chauvinism and masculine showing-off” (p. 201). These differences were attributed to the differential living conditions between the social classes where the upper class boys were most often:

socialized with the aim of occupying management or leadership positions in the labor force… Their class position means that they are unlikely to aspire to occupations requiring physical strength, thereby lessening the importance of physical sturdiness in the evaluation of maleness (p. 202).
On the other hand, the working class boys were more likely to display exaggerated embodiments and verbalizations of masculinity in order to express power over others within a context of perceived powerlessness (Laberge & Albert, 2001).

Given the importance of the school in young people’s lives (at least in the amount of time they spend there), the kind of school attended becomes a key factor in the transmission of culture and opportunity (McGregor, 1997). The mere fact that both public (fully government funded) and private (fee paying) schools exist denotes an element of class division. McGregor (1997) notes that through certain traditions and practices (blazers, school songs, speech nights, sports, competitions), private schools openly seek to provide a different education for their selected pupils and emphasize the difference between them and students at other schools. High fee paying schools frequently use physical activity and sport as pivotal in the construction of the school’s ethos and the reproduction of privilege (e.g., Courtice, 1999). Brown and Macdonald (in press) demonstrate how, in the context of physical education (and related school subjects) in particular, how dominant masculinities are displayed and reproduced by both students and teachers. The following section introduces the work of Bourdieu and outlines its usefulness in understanding the intersections of social class, physical activity and masculinities as discussed above.

**Bourdieu: Capital, physical activity and the body**

The diverse patterns of young people’s engagement with physical activity and physical culture are consistent with Bourdieu’s (1978) concepts of *habitus* and *capital*, which, when
applied to physical activity, suggest in broad terms that physical activity participation is shaped by social structures. Bourdieu’s work allows us to highlight how the structures of class, location, family and sex interact in complex ways with gender, physicality, sexuality, ethnicity, and life opportunities.

Bourdieu described the embodiment of social rules, values, and dispositions as the habitus, which he defined as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations … [which produces] practices” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). One’s apparently spontaneous choice of personal practices, including participation in sport and physical activity, are thus the product of embodied dispositions and norms that are derived from, and are indicative of, social conditions (Harvey & Sparks, 1991). The habitus reflects a configuration of capital comprising aspects of social currency that individuals possess in varying degrees (unequally distributed amongst the social classes). Economic capital refers to actual economic assets. Other forms of capital, such as social and cultural, can be transformed into economic capital. Cultural capital refers to the amount of competence in legitimate (or dominant) social codes and social capital is understood to be potential resources linked to a social network, or in other words, membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1986). The possession of capital, especially economic and cultural, has the potential to mediate one’s participation in a particular field such as physical activity (Bourdieu, 1978).

Sport and physical activity as a social field incorporates struggles for power between social groups. Cultural capital can shape decisions regarding physical activity as some activities require particular cultural and social knowledge in order to participate. However, according
to Bourdieu (1978, p. 834), the most essential element is the “variation in the meaning and function given to the various practices by the various social classes and class fractions”. In an Australian study, Light and Kirk (2001) used Bourdieu’s concept of capital to explain how, through the playing of rugby union at an elite boys’ independent school, boys converted their physical, social and cultural capital gained from participation in rugby to economic capital in lucrative future careers. For these young men of privileged, upper-middle class backgrounds, sport was integral to their lives and functioned as a means for personal gain in terms of both cultural and economic capital.

The choices and meanings attributed by each social class to sporting practices are also directly associated with their relation to the body (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 212). This relation to the body becomes evident in the manner in which the body is carried, groomed, nourished, and cared for (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988). Bourdieu proposed that the working class he studied in France had an instrumental relation to the body that was evident in their practices such as dieting and beauty care, relation to illness, as well as their choice of sport and physical activity. From this perspective, the body itself was seen by the working classes as a means to an end, and sporting choices (e.g., football and boxing) as a means for excitement (Bourdieu, 1978). In contrast, for the more privileged classes the body was an end in itself, which leads to an emphasis on health or personal appearance (Bourdieu, 1978). According to this model, different social groups will seek particular external and internal effects on the body as a product or result of participation in certain physical activities (Laberge & Kay, 2002). A study of “taste” by Bennett, Emmison and Frow, (2001) demonstrates evidence of these patterns and privileges in the contemporary Australian population.
Bourdieu (1978) highlights the importance of cultural obstacles or “hidden entry requirements” (p. 838), such as family tradition and early training, clothing, and techniques of sociability that keep certain sports, and their privileges, closed to people of lower classes. These hidden requirements of particular forms of cultural and social capital are less obvious markers of distinctions, however they underscore how inequalities are not simply about money, but linked to subtle forms of differentiation that are taken as natural attributes of individuals. Foote (2003) observes how different forms of class related capital are valued in the sport of figure skating in her analysis of the media representation of U.S. figure skater, Tonya Harding. Foote reveals that Harding’s working class background as inscribed on her body and is emphasized in descriptions of her public persona, and indeed in analyses of her sporting performances in terms of her skating style, deportment, and costumes. Harding’s lack of the dominant and gendered cultural capital in that particular sport resulted in perceptions of her behavior as vulgar and revealing of her trailer park background (Foote, 2003).

Bourdieu’s work enables the use of double vision by attending to biography and social structure. This paper draws on this process by exploring how young men’s interactions with physical activity and physical culture differ as they move in and out of the fields that they have available to them. It takes up the challenge of a poststructural investigation of inequality in that it makes use of structural categories (social class, geographical location, schooling etc) as ways of understanding how young men construct masculinities, while at the same time acknowledging and exploring difference and complexity. As demonstrated by other
researchers in this field (e.g., Bradley, 1996; Walkerdine et al., 2001), the focus will remain on local manifestations of inequality in the specific contexts of the lives of the four young men. In the following sections we attempt to make visible these subtleties and complexities through our explications of four young men’s engagements with physical activity and physical culture as they are constituted through the capital or resources available to them.

**Description of the study**

The data used to produce the stories of the young men described in this paper was part of the interview data collected for a larger national longitudinal project, the Life Activity Project. The cohort of young people for the project were identified from the results of a survey administered to all students in two key transitional years - the final year of primary school and the last year of compulsory schooling - in nine schools across the three Eastern states of Australia (total n=1333).

The interview sample (n=97) identified from the survey results, was chosen to include young women (n=58) and young men (n=39) from different socioeconomic 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 six semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant around specific topics such as: current participation patterns; feelings about physical activity; meanings of health; responses to events and issues taken up in the media and current feelings about physical education and school sport. The theoretical framework
informing the study assumed that the young people’s identity(ies) - their beliefs, values, emotions and desires – and their experience of physical activity was constituted in the context of the cultural and institutional discourses to which they had access.

Data analysis drew 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 conceptualize the negotiation of identity in different social worlds” (p. 81). For this paper, the social worlds we sought to explore were those of two young men from each of two Queensland school cohorts. This choice was made because of the significantly different survey results for the boys from each of these schools in terms of the types of sports and physical activities in which the male students participated, as well as perceptions of availability of appropriate facilities and social support. In their responses to the survey, the young men from the lower socioeconomic status (SES), semi-rural location reported that they were more self-conscious about their looks, did not enjoy exercise or sport as much, perceived that they did not have adequate skills, and felt that the right facilities were not available, in contrast to those from the high socio-economic, urban, private boys’ school whose responses to the same items were significantly more positive (Authors, 2001).

**Case studies**

The case studies begin with the stories of two of the young men, Brett and Adam (note that all names of people and places have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants) from the lower SES semi-rural school, which we have named Greenvally High. These will be contrasted with the stories of two young men, David and Thanh from the
elite private boys’ school, Malcos College. The four young men were chosen as case studies as they were of similar age and therefore comparable to each other and their stories provided typical characterizations of the differences that were evident between the two locations.

**Brett and Adam: young men living in a semi-rural, lower SES community**

Greenvalley High, a regional government secondary school, is located in a small community approximately 100km from a major city. The town has a population of about 1700 people and agriculture is the main industry with small farms and acreages. The unemployment rate is high (approximately 11%) with limited opportunities for part-time work. Although physical distance is not great, public transport to city and regional centers is very limited resulting in a sense of physical isolation. The school has about 700 students enrolled in years 8-12 and claims to have “[g]ood quality but limited school sporting facilities” (cited on school website). The new indoor sports complex was recently completed and houses a basketball/volleyball court as well as a performing arts stage. Other facilities include two tennis/netball courts and two ovals. Whilst offering some opportunities for participation in school sporting teams, available sports are limited and teams are hard to fill. For years 8 to 10 the school’s health and physical education (HPE) program comprises of a core HPE subject as well as *P.E. Extension*, an elective physical education unit offered to seniors (years 11 and 12).

While the community does have a large indoor sports complex, this had been closed down due to lack of use by local sporting organizations such as the community netball competition which had been discontinued through lack of interest. Clubs and facilities that are available in
the town include a junior rugby league club, 25-metre swimming pool and swimming club, golf course, and a touch football competition.

_Brett_ lived with his parents, paternal grandparents, and older brother on a small property (300 acres) about eight kilometers outside Palmdale, a small community near Greenvally. He was of average height and build, in the interviews he spoke with confidence, and usually turned up wearing a _Fox_ brand (associated with motorcycle riding) baseball-style cap. His father earned the family’s sole income as a shop owner. While his mother occasionally baby-sat for extra income, her primary role was with home duties. Brett described his physical environment as “secluded” and claimed to spend most of his time with his family, “just for the basic fact that I’m always around them, like yeah, I don’t really get out and do much … I would say most time would be spent with my family”.

Brett did not participate in any school-based organized sport, however was heavily involved in pistol shooting. He belonged to a club and trained regularly at home with his father and grandfather. He competed in competitions most weekends, traveling to these with his father. He regarded his father and grandfather as inspirational role models and hoped to follow in his father’s footsteps as an internationally ranked pistol shooter. “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”. In addition to pistol shooting, Brett’s recreation time with his family (including extended family) also involved motorbike riding around his property with his brother, and going on fishing trips to the nearby dam. Apart from pistol shooting events, Brett had never attended any major sporting events as a spectator because “[it’s] just too much money for the seats and that”.
When asked to define health, Brett described it in terms of “exercising regularly… eating right, trying to stay as stress free as possible, getting plenty of sleep, can't live without sleep, and probably getting to see friends and that sort of thing”. Despite his lifestyle oriented view, Brett stated that being healthy was important for him because it enabled him do daily activities:

   Basically because I want to be, I don't like the idea of not being able to run around if I want to, I'm a fairly active person. So I'd like to be able to say I'm going to run over to the shed and be able to do it and not get tired.

Brett was not particularly comfortable with the way he looked and described himself as being “tall, lanky to a certain extent, fairly skinny. I think I’m out of proportion. I think my legs are too long for my body”.

After finishing school, Brett began working full-time as an assistant at a local propagation nursery. The job served its purpose as a regular income, however it remained a short-term endeavor and at this stage, Brett was still unsure about his future: “It was just a means of money really, while I worked out what I was going to do”. After six months in the job, Brett decided to study information technology at a college of technical and further education (TAFE) because:

   I wasn’t going to get anywhere without going to TAFE. Like I didn’t have any qualifications or anything and I couldn’t just rely on my school marks to get me
through, so I just decided, worked out a course that I would be interested in doing and went to that.

Brett’s social network consisted mainly of his family on whom he relied for income support, transport, and recreational activities. Despite the family’s lack of economic capital, Brett did not formerly acknowledge this as a barrier to physical and social activities. The family network was so strong that most of their leisure time was consumed by low cost family activities. Brett considered his life to be quite busy. “I sort of do shooting on the weekends and that, but other than that, that’s basically all I’m doing because it’s [work] five days a week and I don’t have time for anything else”.

Adam lived at home with his mother in a timber, three bedroom house on a small residential block in the center of the Greenvalley High community. Adam was of average height and slim build with an untidy appearance. He said he did not enjoy school because he did not fit in with the people there. He also spoke very confidently in his interview and mentioned an interest in working with young people in his community. He had worked part-time since the age of fifteen to supplement the family income as his mother worked only part-time as a primary school teacher.

Adam began playing organized sport at the age of six, with rugby league and later on with Little Athletics. Little Athletics required some travel to competitions and he relied on his mother for transport. His mother was also a coach at the rugby league club. He stopped both athletics and rugby league before he started high school due to a knee injury. In early high
school Adam joined the State Emergency Service cadets and eventually became a member of the State Emergency Service (a volunteer organization). This involved weekly meetings and physical and practical training sessions in building and community maintenance and fire fighting. He also started playing cricket at the local club but discontinued because it was no longer enjoyable, and there was some fighting within the team. Once he began high school, Adam was responsible for his own transport and regularly rode his push-bike long distances to train stations and later on to work in the next town. While he had been to see one state cricket match as a child when he lived in a larger regional town, he admitted this was a one off occasion as he preferred to watch the cricket on television. Adam did not value sporting brand clothes saying, “I reckon brand names really suck”, and would prefer to “go out and buy [himself] a suit, even just to look, I like looking good but yeah, a pair of long baggy pants and a collared shirt or something like that”.

Like Brett, Adam’s view of health and fitness was associated with his ability to do everyday tasks and to be able to do the work he wanted to do. He described being healthy as, “not being too overweight, just generally being able to do what you want to do, so walk to school and not be puffed, things like that” and the most important part of being healthy was, “Probably being able to join the fire brigade”. Similarly, he described fitness as, “being able to do the things that you need to in life just to sort of get by” and the importance of being fit was, “The fact I'm in [the State Emergency Service] and all that and sort of, I need to be fit to do the jobs I get asked to do… carrying heavy objects, things like that”. Even to improve his fitness Adam believed that he needed to work harder at his job (e.g. carrying heavy objects). Adam had difficulty describing the way he looked and chose a favorite photo of himself as
one where he was connected to safety equipment while repairing a roof with the State Emergency Service.

Early in year 11, Adam left school and began an apprenticeship in the local bakery. After working there for a few months, he left the apprenticeship because his working hours were too long. At the beginning of the next year he started year 11 again.

Like it started off really good, I used to do a couple hours over time a day but by the end I was working seven days a week and sort of 12 hours a day so it was just a long haul. [I went back to school because] I wanted to become, sort of do a bit of youth work afterwards, so I had to come back and get an education. A lot of people wanted me to do it so I guess I did it because they wanted me to.

On returning to school, he took up cross-country with the school running group and participated in a lunch-time soccer competition. Still uncertain about his future however, he left school again in September. He soon began part-time work packing shelves at the local supermarket while continuing to participate in the State Emergency Service. “I can’t see myself doing this forever, but it’ll do for now. I really enjoy working”. His mother was coaching a local women’s soccer team and Adam was the team manager for the season. He also became a member of a youth consultative committee of the local council.

The following year Adam joined the Army Reserve and, having completed his initial training schedule, continued to train once a week. During this time he also began working full-time at
the supermarket as part of a traineeship in management. Early the next year he was accepted into the full-time Army and began training as an engineer. He was deployed on his first mission as part of a peace-keeping force 18 months later.

Despite growing-up in a working class semi-rural community, it could be argued that Adam had more, or at least different cultural and economic capital as compared to Brett. His mother was a teacher and a coach of the local women’s soccer team, but also a sole parent, working only part-time. When he left school he was working full time so at least at this time he could be regarded as having more economic capital than his peers, but still limited capital compared to professional workers. Having no formal qualifications and limited leisure options in the community, limited his cultural capital, however his work for the State Emergency Services enhanced both his physical capital and social capital in terms of social networks, which arguably positioned him positively for the Army.

Thanh and David: young men attending a private boys’ school

Thanh and David both attended Malcos College, an independent boys’ school, located in an inner suburb of a major city. The parents of students at the school tend to be in managerial/professional occupations and contribute to a strong ‘old boy’ tradition and network (Authors, 2003). The school boasts a newly refurbished sports complex that is “one of the best school facilities available in [the city]” (cited on school website). The complex houses a weights room “considered to be the best in [elite] schools in Queensland, if not Australia” (cited on school website), two basketball courts, specific gymnastic training area, complete with dive pit and performance floor, a rowing ergo room and hosts a variety of
sports including volleyball, basketball, gymnastics, and futsal. In addition to the indoor sports complex, the college has a number of tennis courts and fields as well as a 50-meter swimming pool. The College offers a wide range of competitive sports (athletics, Australian Rules, basketball, cricket, cross-country, gymnastics, mountain bike, rowing, rugby, sailing, soccer, swimming, tennis, volleyball, waterpolo) and strongly recommends that “each student be involved in at least one physical activity per year” (cited on school website).

Thanh lived with both his parents in a small three-bedroom, brick house in an outer-city suburb. The suburb had a large proportion of rental and government housing and a high crime rate. His parents were retired small business owners of Vietnamese origin. Thanh was born in Australia and spoke Vietnamese at home with his family. He was tall, average build, and always appeared well groomed. He spoke very confidently and passionately about cultural and educational issues.

At Malcos College, Thanh participated in both school-based and club organized sports, including cricket and soccer. He had competed competitively in karate since he was eight years old with some success, having won medals at both state and national levels. At the time of his early interviews, Thanh aimed to compete at the Commonwealth Games once he finished high school. Whilst at school he also enjoyed playing recreational tennis with friends and was involved heavily in debating. Thanh was an Australian Football League (AFL) supporter and attended some matches in his home city but usually preferred to watch them on television.
For Thanh, there were “two types of health, mental and physical. Physical being fit, not too overweight, you’re eating in moderation, exercising in moderation. Mental I think is not being over-stressed; I think the main word is moderation”. He considered keeping healthy and fit as important for karate, “In a small [karate] tournament I can last for the whole tournament, but when I have to do six or seven fights then I’m usually tired if I get through to the finals, so I’m disadvantaged”. Thanh described himself as “[m]oderately tall, athletic, slim… Asian” and seemed to be satisfied with his appearance insisting, “Like I said I don't mind having my photo taken especially”.

After finishing secondary school and continuing onto a university degree in international business, Thanh stopped playing cricket and soccer. He still trained for karate but said that he had lost his ambition to compete at an international level. He found that his life had become much less structured and his priorities had changed once starting university. Study, part-time work, and friends became more important to him and he felt that by continuing to train for karate he would be sacrificing more important things, part-time work in particular.

Working part-time allowed Thanh to pay for his university expenses as well as supporting his very full social life. Since starting university he had established a new social network, breaking ties with most of his school friends, although he did acknowledge that having been to a large school helped him to blend into the busy university environment. Thanh’s social group included both males and females who shared an interest in photography, modeling, and web design. He was working on photography with a teacher from school on what had become
a three year design project, “for a [photography] competition”. Thus, ties with Malcos College continued to provide Thanh with cultural and social capital beyond school.

Thanh could be said to not have started off with a great deal of the kind of social and cultural capital from his family which could be easily exchanged for economic capital. However their investment in Malcos College did provide Thanh with a wide range of cultural and social capital which supported an easy transition to university, a new network of friends and continued connection with the school.

Whereas Thanh’s background was not typical of the majority of Malcos students, David’s family and habitus, conformed more closely to the historical profile of the school. David was the youngest (by nine years) of three children and lived at home with his parents who both worked full-time in white-collar jobs. They lived in a large four-bedroom house with swimming pool and landscaped gardens on the outskirts of a major city. David was tall with an average build, well spoken and confident in the interviews and appeared very comfortable in his reasonably privileged lifestyle.

David began playing organized sport when he was six years old. He played basketball with a club and tennis at primary school. In addition to organized sport, he played Australian Rules football with his brothers and friends in the backyard. At Malcos College he played basketball and tennis for the school as well as continuing to play club basketball. He also took up rugby union and rowing at school. Throughout high school David participated in non-school based, organized and recreational physical activity. Recreationally, he frequently
enjoyed a round of social golf with his brother. He was a member of the air training corps, which involved weekly physical training sessions as well as monthly weekend camps. In order to keep fit for his team sports David also had a regular weights and fitness routine which he did a few times a week before school using the school gym equipment.

By his middle high school years, David had stopped playing club basketball due to lack of time and an increased commitment to his school studies. For the same reason in his final year of high school he also stopped playing rugby union and the air training corps. He continued with basketball and rowing for the school as well as his weights training regime, and social golf and tennis with his mother. Although he said he would prefer to play sport than watch it, David was a regular spectator at major sporting events.

[I] usually go to the State of Origin (rugby league), we’re going to the Indy (major motor racing event) on Saturday … we usually go ‘cause we usually get a box at all the rugby matches at [the stadium]. I went to the Isle of Mann once where they have the motor cycle races … the good thing about going to the Indy is that my dad usually can get pit passes as well so you get to go down into the pits and check out the cars as well.

He also preferred to wear sporting brand clothes because “it’s really just the good quality of the brand name… If I’m getting some stuff for training, like for basketball training, I’d go for Nike or something ‘cause you know, or my sport shoes which are Nike and my good shorts”.

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Like Thanh, David regarded health as keeping everything in moderation, “I’d say having everything in moderation, like physical activity and sport and your academic and your social life, all sort of in moderation… I guess social life is pretty good you know, you need to have friends”. Fitness was an important part of his life as he said it generally boosted his confidence and allowed him to feel “more energized”. David was fairly confident with his general appearance, describing himself as having “tanned skin, about 5’11, fairly athletic”.

After finishing school, David began a four-year university degree in engineering. He no longer played any organized sport nor any social physical activities. He regularly commented that his life was much less organized and he often felt lazy.

I’ve sort of become very slack lately, you know, just lazing about … Uni life is really good, it’s really relaxed … I think I prefer the relaxed lifestyle but it makes you become a bit more lazy in way which isn’t always a good thing. But I think uni life is pretty good compared to school.

David made an uncomplicated transition to university. Many of his friends from school attended the same university so he always had company during lectures and breaks in his schedule. When he decided he needed part-time work so as not to rely on his parents for money for leisure activities, he “just walked in and asked for a job” at a café on the university campus. David also had a car that his brother bought for him which was a valuable asset for university transport as well as activities with his friends such as going to the movies, parties at friends’ houses, and day-trips to the beach.
Discussion

The following discussion will use Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and capital to interpret the, albeit brief, descriptions of the four young men’s lives at school and beyond in relation to the ways social class, capital and masculinities intersect in shaping the young men’s engagements with physical activity and physical culture. What these examples provide are indications of how inequalities are linked to social and cultural capital as they provide resources for study and employment that in turn enhance access to economic capital. These examples all demonstrate how closely certain sports and physical activities are associated with social class and how they provide differential access to cultural and social capital that has high exchange value and constitute different relations to the body that are also markers of class. On the other hand the specificity of the cases also demonstrates how geographical and school location are not sufficient to predict the future capitals of these young men in any kind of totalizing way. Adam, for example, lived in a lower socio-economic area with few resources for sport and physical activity. However, his habitus has also been shaped by a mother who is a teacher and a soccer coach, a social network which includes local government and a commitment to the emergency services and later the army reserve, which required hard physical training for instrumental ends. His masculine identity is clearly associated with this accumulation of capital, which has also provided opportunities for accruing future economic capital through its value to the Army which is providing him with training for a career.
In terms of a more general analysis however, David’s and Thanh’s participation in a variety of team and individual sports (e.g., rugby, rowing, basketball, karate, golf, and tennis) through their school and clubs has provided them with forms of physical capital and dispositions to health and physical activity that have higher symbolic value in contemporary western societies (Bennett et al., 2001). In contrast, for Brett and Adam, the semi-rural context provided a less frenetic, more loosely managed daily life. Their physical activity experiences were narrower than those of David and Thanh and centered on more typically rural pursuits, and arguably instrumental pursuits such as shooting, emergency services, fishing, and motorbike riding.

The ways in which Adam and Brett expressed their masculinity were consistent with those hegemonic within their geographical, social, and cultural locations. Adam engaged in hard physical labor with the State Emergency Service and army training, and while Brett’s participation in pistol shooting and motorbike riding was less physically demanding, they had the elements of risk and excitement that Bourdieu associates with working class sports. After finishing school, David discontinued his involvement in sport and physical activities and Thanh reduced his participation in karate to a much less competitive level. For both of these young men, time previously devoted to organized sports was replaced by a focus on university study (engineering and international business respectively) and part-time work. As Laberge and Albert (2002) propose, “[c]onceptions of masculinity are shaped by the range of possibilities, interests, and the experiences of everyday life” (p. 202), which for more privileged young men such as David and Thanh, means that “they are unlikely to aspire to
occupations requiring physical strength, thereby lessening the importance of physical
sturdiness in the evaluation of maleness” (p. 202).

On the other hand, David and Thanh’s understandings of health suggest that these young men
had developed a relation to the body which included a desire to maintain its athletic
appearance. Both young men valued physical activity for the effect it had on their
appearance. Their relation to their bodies was consistent with what Smith Maguire (2002)
calls a “lifestyle discourse” where there is a focus on “care and improvement of the body
rather than as a means to do work” (p. 454). As Bourdieu (1978) suggests viewing the body
as “an object of cultivation for its own sake” is a trait of the upper classes or those with
greater cultural capital (Wilson, 2002, p. 6). Conversely, Adam and Brett tended to have a
more ‘instrumental’ relation to the body, a characteristic of the working classes (Bourdieu,
1978), where they valued health and fitness as a means to acquiring gainful employment and
undertaking daily tasks. In this analysis it is evident that David and Thanh’s possession of
greater economic and cultural capital goes beyond the simple understanding of
socioeconomic status which is evidenced by income, occupation and schooling. The profits
of their social standing are inscribed on their bodies both in the way they work on it and care
for it through physical activity and outwardly present it by placing and high value on wearing
expensive sports brand clothing.

The advantages accrued through the possession of social capital are also evident for the
young men from Malcos. David and Thanh appeared to have more “creative networks”
allowing them access to support structures and a greater number of opportunities (Florida,
2002) particularly for leisure and recreation as well as a wider set of post-school options in terms of education and employment. In contrast, working class networks such as those of Adam and Brett were relatively smaller, more homogenous, tightly knit, and turf-bound (Florida, 2002), and provided them with relatively fewer opportunities and a less certain pathway into mainstream options. David’s and Thanh’s access to social and cultural capital was reflected in their natural progression to university where they were surrounded by old and new friends compared to Adam and Brett’s post-compulsory schooling uncertainty and limited set of relationships.

The reproduction of class positions and the associated habitus was also observed among the families of the young men. While the investment of all the families in physical activity was substantial, for Adam and Brett it was through co-participation and for David and Thanh it was mainly through management, transport, and payment either to the school or outside providers. It seems that Thanh and his family, through Malcos College, had literally bought into cultural and social fields that required particular types of sports participation that statistical data would suggest is atypical given their Vietnamese heritage. Having said this, we note that Thanh maintained his karate, an activity that O’Donnell and Sharpe (2004) suggest is stereotypical of Asian masculinity with its physical and technical control and elaborate ritual. However, Thanh chose to give this up as a serious pursuit due to his prioritizing the accumulation of other cultural, social and economic forms of capital.

What is striking for each of the young men was their sense of ‘everydayness’ about their own ‘lifestyles’. This is the observable relationship between the habitus and the field. Bourdieu
(1992) explains this connection as being like a “fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted” (p. 127). It is evident in the data in the way that the young men describe their lifestyles. Whilst they are markedly diverse, particularly between the locations, each tells their story with an unquestioning ease and show no obvious desire for their circumstances to be different. DiMaggio (1987) however, suggested we were emerging (at least in the late 1980s) into a period of cultural declassification where boundaries between social groups were more porous and choices more diverse. Yet, we generally saw little evidence of the young men moving outside their delimited life courses although it could be argued that Thanh drew upon discourses and practices from Asian-Australian cultures. Participants from these cohorts (and others), as proposed by Bourdieu (1990), formed a habitus consistent with their social and cultural fields, and geographical location. Structural factors such as gender, place, schooling and socioeconomic status clearly had a powerful influence on identity construction. We concur with Evans (2002) and others that we see an interplay of structural forces with an individual’s (and their family’s) agency in taking up physical activity and physical culture practices and dispositions in nuanced ways not acknowledged in epidemiological studies.

Conclusion

The data analyzed in this paper has reinforced the notion proposed by Walkerdine et al. (2001) that social class continues to be one of the most powerful factors in shaping lives. Our observation of the consistency of the young men’s discourses with class norms also coincides with Messner’s (1996) view that, “differential access to resources, opportunities, and
different relationship to structural constraints shape the contexts in which people think, interact…” (p. 228). Gender stereotypes and inequalities linked to social class were still evident in these young men’s engagements with physical activity and physical culture. Furthermore, Bourdieu’s theory of capital and habitus was useful in deconstructing structural categories and allowing for an acknowledgement of individual agency. In this way structuralist concepts such as class, sex, and geography were analyzed from a poststructuralist perspective to explore issues of difference, diversity and complexity. This approach is consistent with recent calls to retain our ‘structuralist memory’ (e.g., Crotty, 1998; McLaren & Farandmandpur, 2000).

The analysis provided in this paper has furthered the aim of the larger national project by providing a more nuanced understanding of the influences on physical activity participation that are often controlled for or cleaned out of quantitative analyses. While it is acknowledged that results of the current analysis are based on a small sample, qualitative data of this kind have the benefit of being longitudinal, in-depth and drawn from multiple methods. These characteristics of qualitative research we argue, allow us to come to understand the particularities of the groups that statistics identify as the least active, such as those from lower social classes, which have been the targets of, mostly unsuccessful, physical activity and health promotion campaigns. We call for a continuation of qualitative research of this kind to add to the somewhat hollow stories of participation statistics and to contribute to a greater understanding of inequalities and differences in participation in physical activities outside the realm of elite sports.
References


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