

A SOCIOLOGY OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTH FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

by

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## **ABSTRACT**



**Background.** Much research suggests that physical activity has important health benefits, yet many young people are disengaged with various forms of exercise. In light of this claim, various policies and interventions have been implemented to promote physical activity but, to date, have been largely unsuccessful and the target of some criticism. Reasons why many young people are relatively physically inactive are not well understood and current explanations rarely attend to sociological issues. **Aims.** The aims of this study were twofold; (1) to investigate the social processes which influence physical activity and health for young people, (2) to investigate ways to better promote physical activity and therefore reduce health inequalities. **Methods.** Twenty-nine participants aged 13-14 from 4 different schools in England took part in the study. Purposeful recruitment ensured sufficient diversity across gender, ethnicity, social class, ability, body shape, and self-reported physical activity. Over a seven-month period, various qualitative methods were used including focus groups, ethnomethodology and visual methods. Salient social theories were used to interpret the data. **Findings.** The interpretation of data resulted in four main findings; (1) health is a socially constructed concept that young people understand through particular structures of language, visual imagery and knowledge; (2) physical activity is sometimes seen as a purposeful practice aimed at increasing physical capital through burning calories and turning fat into muscle; (3) engagement in physical activity is often contingent on whether specific activities are directly endorsed/rejected by peers as socially acceptable/unacceptable activities; (4) physical activities and sedentary activities can be seen as social practices that young people take part in as part of a system of habitual dispositions. **Implications.** In order to reduce health inequalities, physical activity promoters might better account for these social processes. Suggestions for policy and practice include (1) using intervention strategies that move beyond individualistic conceptions of behaviour, (2) introducing a new vocabulary and imagery to the understanding of health, (3) reducing physical capital disparities in spaces where physical activity takes place, (4) encouraging and accommodating friendship groups in intervention designs, and (5) providing activities and spaces where young people's habituses can be enacted. **Conclusions.** Various social processes affect the extent and type of physical activity that young people engage in. Strategies to promote physical activity ought to account for these social processes. Sociologically informed qualitative research methods can contribute to knowledge in the field of physical activity and health.



## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 Background

This PhD thesis develops our understanding of the social processes that shape physical activity and health for young people. Physical activity – a term which I use to encompass sport, exercise, movement and physical education (PE) – has been a matter of interest for sociologists for some time. The matter of young people's health, on the other hand, is more recent and undergoing a new wave of attention amid current health debates. Physical inactivity is now on the United Nations agenda for the prevention of non-communicable disease alongside drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco (United Nations, 2010); esteemed medical journal, *The Lancet*, recently published a special edition on physical activity as preventive medicine (Horton, 2012); and the Chief Medical Officers in the UK have published *Start Active, Stay Active* in an attempt to highlight the risks of physical inactivity (CMO, 2011). Furthermore, the Active People Survey (APS) continues to capture large data sets on UK physical activity levels so that exercise can be tracked and the effectiveness of policies can be assessed. This wave of attention provides the backdrop to this thesis. My interest in physical activity here is premised on the assumption that physical activity can and does have benefits for the health and well-being of individuals and populations. I do not, however, take this assumption lightly. It would, for example, be problematic to claim that health cannot be achieved without physical activity, or that those who are physically active will forever be disease-free, or indeed that physical activity ought to be prescribed like a dose of medical treatment. The health benefits of physical activity are occasionally contested but there is strong evidence, it seems, that physical activity is generally good for one's health (see Okely et al., 2012; Warburton et al., 2006 for reviews). This is nothing new, of course. Physical activity has long been recognized as important for the development of young people (American College of Sports Medicine, 1988) and for public health in general (Department of Health, 2004). What is more recent are the concerns from reports in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and beyond that suggest that a high number of young people do not meet the recommended physical activity levels (Tremblay et al., 2010; Health Survey for England, 2009; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Bauman et al., 2001). This evidence has given rise to the claim that physical inactivity is now the 4th leading cause of global mortality according to the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2014). To remain balanced I should point out that these claims sometimes face criticism. We might, for example,

remind ourselves that measurement issues leave the accuracy of much self report data questionable (Welk et al., 2000). That said, researchers contend that findings may be erroneous but they are reliably erroneous (Bowles, 2012) and, if anything, self-report data underestimates physical activity compared to objective measures (Riddoch et al., 2007). Other critics have questioned the dominance, hyperbole and simplistic acceptance of the physical inactivity ‘meta-narrative’ (Piggin and Bairner, 2014). Indeed, given that epidemiological data demonstrates that people are living longer, healthier lives than ever before, it is perhaps an exaggeration to insist that physical inactivity “should be appropriately described as a pandemic, with far-reaching health, economic, environmental and social consequences” (Horton, 2012). However, if Lee et al. (2012) are correct then reducing global physical inactivity by 25% could prevent the incidence of diabetes and coronary heart disease and avert 1.3 million deaths every year. So even in light of these uncertainties, perhaps physical activity is a topic worth studying.

While my starting assumptions that (a) physical activity has some health benefits, and (b) many young people appear to be insufficiently active, may seem reasonable, there are many other issues that should not be taken for granted so quickly. The details of why many young people are physically inactive are far less clear. Research has pointed to a number of significant challenges to physical activity, at least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world. One of the most popular explanations points the finger at screen-based entertainment (Marshall et al., 2006; Pate et al., 2011) and a reduction in active travel (van Sluijs et al., 2009). These possibilities, along with a number of other psychological correlates and determinants have been well attended to (e.g., Biddle et al., 2011). However, there is a surprising paucity of research in the field of physical activity and health addressing sociological issues. One need not look any further than the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* to substantiate this viewpoint. It is rare to see any publications addressing sociological concerns, and those that do, have a way of approaching sociological concerns which is quite different from how sociologists would (e.g. Martin et al., 2014). In 2014, no publications from the journal included any mention of established social theories. Indeed, of the 44 original research papers published in 2014 (at the time of writing) only 3 included the use of qualitative methods (Hamilton and White, 2014; Eley et al., 2014; Eyler et al., 2014). This is especially surprising given the advocacy of the ‘social-ecological model’ by many in

the field, which claims to account for intrapersonal characteristics, the social environment, policy and the physical environment (Sallis et al., 2008). One might ask, why does this topic require a sociological approach as is so prominently announced in the title of this thesis? The reason for this, I claim, is simply that physical movement is a social activity. Sociology essentially attempts to make sense of the social world, consider how social processes work and understand how 'society' is constructed and reconstructed by individuals and populations. If we think of humans as social beings, and physical activity as a social action, then sociology patently has something to offer the physical activity and public health agenda. It is the intention, therefore, to use sociology as a means to understand physical activity for young people in order to make an interdisciplinary contribution to the field of physical activity and health. Throughout this work I remain committed to the notion that the society in which we find ourselves profoundly shapes our actions and behaviours in a number of interesting ways. This statement in no way denigrates the important contributions of physical, psychological, economic or any other influences on the experience of physical movement, only to say that sociological issues intersect with physical, psychological, economic and other worlds inextricably. Sociology, at least as it is used here, may not supersede or transcend these categories of understanding but may offer an opportunity to illuminate the social processes involved in each of them. By centralising social context in this analytical process, other useful frameworks for analysis are not ignored but rather they are subsumed into a sociological analysis. In this way, authors have quite rigorously demonstrated that the physical body is a canvas of socially inscribed meaning (Burkitt, 1999; Harre, 1986; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/62; Shilling, 2012, 2010, 1991) and that thoughts, feelings and emotions commonly dealt with as 'psychological' can hardly be separated from socially available resources (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999). For Marx "it is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (cited in Jenkins, 1996, p.1). Similarly, as C. Wright Mills (Mills, 1959, p.1) put it "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both". The same might be argued of language, knowledge, power and economics; all can be seen as activities inseparable from the social context. When a girl living in the UK decides to join a rugby club she will likely have to negotiate a number of socially defined gender expectations; when an obese child uses a treadmill to burn calories he/she does so as a result of enabling and constraining social forces; when a school pupil is made to sit out

a PE lesson for transgressing the school rules he/she learns from a socially based pedagogy. The ‘social’ in these examples, will be made clear throughout the following chapters of this thesis.

This study is not only about understanding physical activity and health from a sociological perspective; it is also about promoting physical activity and health. Physical activity has been endorsed and promoted in recent years through a number of policies and interventions for young people. Physical activity promotion for the purposes of health may be a well-intentioned pursuit but its failings to date have been the target of much criticism (e.g. Burrows and Wright, 2004; Cale and Harris, 2013; Gard and Wright, 2005; Lee et al., 2011; Pringle and Pringle, 2012; Rich and Evans, 2005). To provide a little more context to this PhD thesis I will briefly outline some of the key debates here and consider how this study might begin to address some of these criticisms. While adults have not been exempt from obesity prevention, it is clear that interventionists have focused resources on children and young people. Grounded in the notion that children and young people are a section of the population most in need of protection and most easily influenced, children and young people have been the initial target for a number of policies. Indeed, the instrumental role of schools as part of the public health agenda has been heavily endorsed (Cale and Harris, 2013). Between 2003-2008 £1.8 billion was invested by the UK New Labour government with the aim of increasing the percentage of school pupils taking part in two hours of high quality PE and sport to 75% (Bardens et al., 2012). Increasingly, it has been noted that the ‘whole school approach’ as advocated by the *National Healthy Schools Programme* (DofE, 2012) has resulted in pupils becoming immersed in pedagogies targeted at encouraging healthy behaviours (Evans et al., 2011). Looking again beyond the PE lessons, extra curricular activity has been incorporated into physical activity promotion strategies. The PE and School Sport for Young People (PESSYP) (originally Physical Education and School Sport Club Links, PESS-CL) program (2008) in England were set up in order to increase opportunities for participation. While it could be argued that these were more closely aligned with sport policy than the health agenda, the 5x60 programme in Wales (Sport Wales, 2014, online) (so called to be in line with the recommended guidelines for physical activity of 5 times 60 minutes per week) was far more explicitly for the purposes of health. Amidst this backdrop is the not-insignificant matter of the London 2012 Olympic Games. This sporting mega-event was so intimately intertwined with the

political promise of 'legacy' that the marketing slogan 'inspire a generation' could hardly be missed before, during and after the games. Young people, again, clearly the target audience. Furthermore, it is worth noting that physical activity promotion cannot entirely be separated from obesity prevention in policy, research and the popular media. As the preoccupation for obesity has become overwhelmingly pervasive, concerns for physical inactivity have become somewhat secondary to concerns for obesity. As Rich (2010) notes, obesity is often reduced to be simply a matter of energy imbalance, hence obesity prevention strategies place regular physical activity as a crucial component. The UK wide government funded campaign *Change4Life*, for example, encouraged people to 'move more' yet was grounded in the explicit desire to 'reverse the rising tide of obesity', not specifically to increase physical activity (DH, 2008, p.3). In the foregrounding policy document for *Change4Life – Healthy Weight Healthy Lives* (DH & DCSF, 2008) – it is stated that, “children are our first target, by 2020 we want to reduce the amount of overweight and obese children to the 2000 levels” (DH & DCSF, 2008, p. v). The National Obesity Observatory was set up by Public Health England in 2008 as part of this aim and measures the BMI of school children at ages 5 and 11. The parents of children deemed to be overweight or obese receive a letter from their school.

The popular media not only contributes to this context and culture of concern for obesity, but arguably exceeds governmental intervention in terms of invasiveness. As a result of obesity focused television programmes (such as *Honey We're Killing the Kids*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Supersize vs Superskinny*, *Celebrity Fat Camp*, *Too Fat for 15*) social awareness of obesity has reached the level of 'common knowledge'. Perhaps more interestingly, as the production of these programmes is in some large part proportional to their popularity, the public demand for obesity as a spectacle of abnormality is seemingly insatiable. Additionally, the health and fitness industry contributes to this cultural landscape too. Exercise is marketed in public spaces – young people being potentially unwitting consumers – in a way which portrays physical activity as a path to desirable body ideals should the individual be sufficiently willing, determined and disciplined to engage in it. Through this industry, the visual body weaves its way into the meaning of the word 'health'. The popular magazines *Men's Health* and *Women's Health* unfailingly provide images of slim, toned, muscular, attractive exercisers on the front cover encoding 'health' along the way.





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*Figure 1.* One representation of the ‘healthy body’ in Glamour Magazine (2011)

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Similar constructions of health are evident in fashion and ‘gossip’ magazines where readers can find out how to achieve their “healthiest body yet” (e.g. *Glamour* see figure 1). Young people, then, are clearly the recipients (and vessels) of a range of messages about physical activity and health which aim to encourage them to ‘move more’, to take part in PE, to play sport and to exercise.

In spite of this permeating onslaught of messages encouraging young people to be more active, physical activity promotion in the last decade has been largely ineffective. There is little evidence that the London Olympic Games had any impact on physical activity levels. While some popular media was quick to highlight an increase in sport participation post-games as reported in the APS (BBC Online, 2012; Guardian online, 2012), it should be noted that (a) the APS only has comparative data for people aged 16 and over, (b) the 16-25 age group showed no significant increase in sport participation between 2006 and 2013, and (c) the key measure used in the APS is *sports* participation consisting of one bout of 30 minutes per week – ignoring *physical activity* of any other kind. In their discussion of intervention studies in research, Blamey and Mutrie (2004) noted that interventions such as mass media campaigns and family-based support have also shown little evidence for increasing physical activity. More recently, Bauman *et al.* (2012) have shown that although many interventions have been developed, the effect sizes are usually small to moderate. So attempts to reduce physical inactivity seem rather unsuccessful. Skeptics might point out that being unsuccessful is actually more profitable for the diet and fitness industries, and hence there is no commercial incentive for the industries to enhance their efficacy. Not only has their ‘success’ (in terms of effectively increasing levels of physical activity) been questioned, but critical commentators have also raised ethical concerns over their potentially harmful consequences. These authors, largely operating within the physical education and sports pedagogy research community, have drawn attention to a number of concerns involving body anxiety, population surveillance and governmentality (Evans *et al.*, 2008; Lee *et al.*, forthcoming; McDermott, 2007; Pringle & Pringle, 2012; Rich, 2011) which I discuss in more detail later in the findings chapters. For now, it may suffice to say that the attempts to address the purported concerns for physical inactivity have fallen short of the mark – a premise which underlines this PhD study.

## **1.2 General aims of the study**

Physical activity and health for young people is, therefore, a complex matter which warrants further study. In light of this, there are two aims at the core of this project. The first concerns disparities in the physical activity of young people. Put simply, ‘why are some young people active and others not?’ I phrase the question in this way in order to acknowledge that not *all* young people are insufficiently active – far from it – and any concerns ought not to be directed at young people as a whole. Given that so many young people are able to be active, what seems most interesting to me are the social processes that result in heterogeneity and inequality. The second aim concerns physical activity promotion. In other words, ‘what can be done about it?’ Although many health promotion strategies already exist, they have had limited success and have been criticized for their (albeit unintended) potentially harmful effect on young people. Given the scale of this study, both of these objectives must be treated in an exploratory way. I do not intend to be in a position to make broad conclusive claims about physical activity disparities or find the solution to physical activity promotion. The intention is to be in a position to inform our understanding of the social processes that impact young people’s physical activity and health and to make evidence-based suggestions for physical activity promotion. Furthermore, implicit in both of these aims is a desire to bridge a disciplinary gap and investigate whether a theoretical and methodological contribution can be made by sociology to the field of physical activity and public health. More specific research objectives are stated in chapter two, following a review of the literature.

## **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis follows a format that is conventional to the discipline. The next chapter provides a review of the literature which is relevant to the general aims outlined above. Here I show that research into young people’s physical activity highlights interesting disparities between social groups. I also show that there is a low level of success for increasing activity levels beyond the moderate level and beyond the short term. Not only have interventions been relatively unsuccessful to date, the literature

also raises some critical concerns about health promotion. Chapter three provides details of the methodological approach taken and then outlines the particular methods used. I use the chapter to explain, justify and reflect on the collection of data in recognition of how important these details are in the production of knowledge. Equally important is the process of how data is interpreted, contextualized and rearticulated. This is the topic of chapter four which addresses the practical analytical mechanics and the conceptual tools to which data are ‘plugged in’. Having made these processes transparent, I then present findings in chapters five to nine. In those chapters, I explore how social processes influence how physical activity and health is enacted by young people. In doing so, I draw upon various sociological concepts such as discourse, physical capital, norm-circles and habitus. In light of these findings, chapter ten considers what contributions and implications this study might have for the field of physical activity and health. As well as being a discussion about research significance, several speculative suggestions are made about the practice of physical activity promotion. Finally, in the conclusion chapter I offer some reflexive comments about the study as whole and summarise the key messages of the thesis.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

With these two broad research aims in mind it was first important to examine previous research that could be useful and informative to the design and direction of this study. The purpose of this review, as with all reviews, is twofold (i) to establish current knowledge so that it can be built upon, and (ii) to identify current gaps in knowledge so that they can be filled. I have divided the review into two sections reflecting the two broad research aims; first, literature concerning disparities in young people's physical activity, and second, literature concerning young people's physical activity promotion. However, since much of the research included is not sociological in its approach it is necessary to preface the literature review with a brief explanation of how I make sense of it 'through a sociological lens'. The review of literature concludes with the specific aims and research questions that have arisen.

## **2.1 The physical activity and health literature through a sociological lens**

This first section has been included in order to explain how the literature informing this study has been interpreted. Since much of the literature that follows has been drawn from the disciplines of behavioural epidemiology and psychology of sport and exercise, there exist some inevitable tensions with the 'border crossings' (Evans, 2014) required for this thesis. Given that I have decided to include this literature, it is perhaps obvious to say that I find these tensions resolvable, albeit with some pertinent criticisms. The task of 'border crossing' required here presents several difficulties ranging from minor differences of opinion to entire paradigmatic assumptions. First of all, let me suggest why a sociological perspective need not require me to dismiss work from other academic disciplines, but instead translate it and extract its value. The work that I am referring to includes studies that gather large data sets measuring physical activity and, by the categorization of participants by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES) and so on, attempt to observe statistical (ir)regularities. Plenty of these studies exist. Sallis *et al.* (2000) conducted a review including 108 studies measuring a total of 48 different variables for adolescents (age 13-18). There are a number of limitations to studies like this. Social scientists have long been critical of the collectivism associated with assigning individuals to groups as it carries a tendency to homogenise those groups of people. The definition of social categories can be problematic too. All studies of this type will reify terms describing ethnic origin such as

'black' and 'white', and proceed to categorise participants without questioning whether those categories are in some part cultural constructs which partially depend on individual understanding. A person's subjectivity, identity or sense of self (however one wants to frame it) is likely to be far less clear, far less distinct and far less static than these studies invariably presume. This also might be said of gender, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion and however else people can be grouped for the purpose of statistical comparison. Critics of this methodological approach might also draw comparisons to Durkheimian 'social facts' and the assumption of structural determinism that follows. A key underlying question here is; how relevant are large-scale aggregate data for the lives of individuals? That said, I would suggest that this data ought not to be discarded because of these criticisms, but instead treated critically and with knowledge of its limitations. One important way that large-scale data might be helpful is if we were to change the question and ask; how do we know if a person's experience is part of a wider social process? From a sociological perspective we might draw on C. Wright Mills' advocacy of the 'sociological imagination'. This term is essentially an invitation to view personal events as phenomena located in cultural, historical and social context. This idea is not unique to Mills, but his distinction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' is particularly helpful. As he explains, the sociological imagination enables us to:

take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues (Mills, 1959, p.2).

With this in mind, I believe, behavioural epidemiological studies can fruitfully be used to help distinguish between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' regarding physical activity and health. While individual issues of circumstance, resource and choice might seemingly be contributing to personal troubles (i.e. unhealthy behaviours) it may be equally if not more accurate to describe and explain those issues with reference to the social, cultural, historical and economic context in which they are situated. My point here is that we may be in a better position to qualify whether actions are personal troubles or public issues with the support of measurable population variables. The literature that follows in this section will be viewed with this in mind.

An additional point worth noting at this stage is the problematic notion of causality imbedded in much of the literature in physical activity and health. Much work in the behavioural epidemiology framework advocated by Sallis and Owen (1999) attempts to map out not only correlates (variables associated with the behaviour) but also *determinants* (variables which cause behaviour) of physical activity. It is claimed that the purpose of research like this is to "contribute to evidence based planning of public health intervention, because effective programmes will target factors known to cause inactivity" (Bauman *et al.* 2012, p.258). There are several criticisms of the literature on 'determinants' of physical activity. For instance, it is seldom noted in this research literature that causality – for human behaviour at least – is not linear, unidirectional and isolated. The positivistic and Humean notion of causality that permeates this research often attempts to establish cause and effect relationships between particular 'determinants' and physical activity. One example is the relationship between 'obesity' and physical activity. Studies have reported that pupils with high BMI tend to be less physically active (Jago *et al.*, 2005; Utter *et al.*, 2003). Armed with a Humean conception of causality, the biomedical community might assume that low physical activity levels (cause) lead to high BMI (effect) due to lack of exercise. The slightly more astute researcher might point out that this relationship could also act in reverse, with high BMI (cause) leading to low physical activity levels (effect) due to the person being unable to exercise properly. Bauman *et al.* (2012, p.38) reveal this "new idea" in *The Lancet*;

A new idea is that obesity might be a driver of physical inactivity. This notion is quite different to the expected causal direction, in which low total physical activity is assumed to lead to obesity through reduced energy expenditure. The relation might be bidirectional, and high rates of obesity might be a contributing factor to low total physical activity.

However, I would suggest that even this explanation is conceptually constraining. In this version of causality there is no room for the presence of social processes, mechanisms of power and distributions of resource. It might be possible that pupils labeled 'fat' experience sport and PE (in particular settings) in a way which dissuades them from participating. This experience of being 'fat' might be contingent on a set of culturally available and individually interpreted resources which ascribe meaning to physical bodies. If this was the case, then high BMI can hardly be described as the *cause* of low physical activity since the cultural resources clearly hold some



influential and determinant power. However, while most social scientists would not subscribe to this notion of causality, surely something of use can be extracted from findings such as these if read critically? This is basically what I aim to do in the literature review that follows. Another component in much of this literature is the essential quantification of concepts. The very possibility of statistical comparisons rests on the ability to assign a numerical value to a human experience. It is not enough say that a person feels *somewhat* unconfident, incapable and insecure during PE, for example. The experience must be reduced to a numerical value in order to be processed. The Likert scales so prominently used in contemporary sport psychology conform to this model. Obvious criticisms from authors – within this field as well as outside of it (Gratton and Jones, 2010) – are that experience is simply not reducible to numbers, or that experience is temporal, or that experience is context sensitive. While I share these criticisms I am not inclined to outright reject the findings from studies using these methods, but rather, allow them to stimulate discussion in an exploratory way. It would be as naïve to ignore these findings as it would to accept them uncritically. My critical reading of this work is explained throughout the literature review where appropriate.

## **2.2 Literature concerning disparities in physical activity levels**

Studies investigating population physical activity have pointed to a number of interesting disparities between social groups. Perhaps the most consistent and well-known finding is regarding gender. The Health Survey for England (2008) claims that 32% of boys meet the guidelines for physical activity whereas this is the case for only 24% of girls. Self-report data and objective accelerometry demonstrate that girls tend to be less physically active than boys, and this difference becomes most prominent in early teenage years (HSCIC, 2008; Trost et al., 2002). Other research has unpacked these findings a little further. Interestingly, it has been suggested that this difference is most noticeable during the late-afternoon time of day (Jago et al., 2005) which seems consistent with research that claims girls are less likely to engage in formal and informal sports (HSCIS, 2008) as this is when sports practices usually take place. The gender gap in physical activity gets further detailed with other research claiming that gender is a good predictor of weekday activity but not actually for weekend activity (Fairclough et al., 2012). When considering physical activity and health, recent research

has begun taking seriously the idea of sedentary behaviour (time spent sitting) (Biddle et al., 2012; Henning-Brodersen et al., 2007; Saunders et al., 2012). The interest in sedentary behaviour here follows from the premise that sedentary leisure activities have the potential to displace more physically active ones. Sedentary behaviour research has also highlighted gender differences often reporting higher sedentary levels for boys (Van Der Horst, 2007). This finding makes the counter-intuitive point that high sedentary behaviours do not necessarily associate with low physical activity levels. That is, despite boys reporting higher levels of sedentary behaviour, boys are still more likely to meet the guidelines for physical activity. The amount of physical activity that young people do is, of course, only part of the story. In thinking about what *type* of physical activity that young people do, HSCIC (2008) data shows that girls are more likely to spend time walking than boys and their sedentary time is more likely to be in personal care as opposed to boys' sedentary time being more likely in screen time (Jago et al., 2005). Indeed, Kuo (2009) reported that girls tend to accrue daily exercises from house chores, active travel and playing with siblings.

With these findings in mind, it is important to explore the literature that offers partial explanations for *why* gender disparities seem to exist. We might firstly look to the wealth of research in gender studies that shows that gender is a meaningful social category in everyday life. Issues of masculinity and femininity, for example, have been widely published and may be helpful to explain gender differences in the experience of physical activity contexts. There is a strong assertion that the male arena of sport serves to institutionally and culturally exclude girls to some extent (Birrell and Cole, 1994; Scraton, 1992). Wellard (2007) reminds us that the social interpretation of biological sex still persists in asserting that physical exertions are less beneficial for girls' development than boys. Further work has pointed to the association of 'tomboys', lesbianism and sports involvement as a deterrent to physical activity for some girls (Cahn, 1994; Caudwell, 1999, 2002, 2003; Griffin, 1998; Harris, 2005). While this body of literature points to the exclusion of girls in physically active opportunities, we should note that gender plays a role in shaping boys experience too. Some have suggested that sport is often thrust upon boys, thus explaining their higher participation levels. This encouragement to take part in sport may be shaped by the cultural necessity of 'learning to become a man' (Burstyn, 1999; Connell, 2013). The literature typically demonstrates that sport is appealing as it can provide an opportunity to achieve or

perform hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), yet more recent work suggests a shift to social acceptance of diversity and the advocacy of 'inclusive masculinities' (Anderson, 2010). Another school-based survey found a gender difference in how sport is perceived as a status enhancer; true for boys, but not for girls (Shakihb, 2011). In the school environment, then, it seems that taking part in sport is socially meaningful with 'supportiveness' of peers and 'status' among peers having some influence on participation. Exploring the context of physical activity – as distinct from sport *per se* – also helps explain gender differences. In a study investigating the active transport of young people, Nelson (2010) found that girls are more affected by environmental characteristics than boys. This study seems to corroborate Kaczynski's (2012) findings which suggest that perceived neighbourhood 'walkability' can be a predictor of physical activity but only for those who have low self-efficacy, and especially for women. It certainly seems understandable that, in a neighbourhood where risk is perceived, girls are more likely to feel unsafe and avoid walking. The inclusion of 'self-efficacy' is interesting here too. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993) has been well studied by psychologists in physical activity and health and relates to a person's measure of competence to complete a task. So in Kaczynski's (2012) study it was not that *all* girls were less likely to walk in an unsafe neighbourhood, but only the girls reporting low self-efficacy. Spence *et al.* (2010) also investigated self-efficacy. They demonstrated that girls' engagement with exercise was well correlated with self-efficacy but for boys, self-efficacy was much less important. It is curious that there is a gender difference at all for self-efficacy, and even more curious that there is a gender difference in how much self-efficacy matters for influencing physical activity.

Gender seems also to impact on physical activity levels through self-consciousness of one's own body. Sports psychologists have also explored the terms 'self-consciousness' and 'physical self-perception' – concepts which do not require elaboration here, but nevertheless point to some helpful findings. One study using focus groups revealed how teenage girls negotiate body consciousness at swimming pools by making themselves feel less 'visible' (staying in groups or wearing a towel) (James, 2000). Hunter *et al.* (2012) suggests that this physical self-perception may mediate overall activity levels and may be most relevant for girls reaching puberty. Gender also seems to be played out when considering the type of sports engaged in. Not only do we still see gender stereotypes affecting which sport boys and girls participate in – despite

the recent progress made by women's football and women's rugby in particular – but also in the type of embodied concerns which 'masculine' and 'feminine' sports imbue. Crissey (2006) reported a fascinating association between girls who participate in traditionally feminine sports and the engagement in weight loss programmes. This finding, that girls who participate in traditionally feminine sports are more likely to diet, suggests that certain body ideals and expectations form part of the sport and, over time, become important for the participants of that sport. This finding is troubling perhaps for reasons expressed by Scott-Dixon (2008, p.22) who contends that "it is difficult to view women's involvement in sport as personally or politically empowering as it is so often interpreted as a practice of cosmetic enhancement in the context of male objectification". Mulvihill et al. (2000) provide some useful research in considering how age begins to impact on physical activity. Their interviews revealed that as girls reach adolescence, performing femininity and an interest in boyfriends becomes important:

“But I think as we get older we don’t play about in the playground like younger kids. We prefer to sit down.” – Female, 15 years (p.49)

“Older girls like to meet the lads. They don’t care about their health. They care about the lads.” – Female, 12 years (p.49)

So, clearly physical activity is gendered in several complex ways, but these quotes point not only to gender alone, but the intersection of gender with age. It is not, perhaps, *being a girl* or *being a boy* that is most meaningful, but being a girl or boy of a certain *age* that is important.

Age has been consistently shown to be an important variable associated with physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Physical activity levels plateau or decrease between childhood and adolescence (Broderick et al., 2007; HSCIC, 2008) and decline with age into adulthood (Sallis, et al., 2000). These findings are not only cross sectional. Henning-Broderick et al. (2007) carried out a longitudinal study showing that physical activity decreases and sedentary behaviour increases between ages 10-15. With the participants of this PhD study being 13/14 years old there is an opportunity to explore this pattern. The Health Survey for England echoes this finding showing that sedentary behaviour increases between childhood and adolescence (HSCIC, 2008), and tracks strongly into adulthood (Gordon-Larson et al., 2000; Nelson et al., 2005). Seemingly an international trend, Pate (2007) reported that in the United States (US)

pupils participate less between 8th and 12th grade and in Brazil, Guedes (2012) measured a decline in fitness levels over school age. However it is interesting to consider that this decline in young people may be different on school days than on free days. It is crucial, of course, to consider which children this trend is most applicable to. Not all young people experience this decline in physical activity and many meet and exceed the recommended guidelines. A Canadian longitudinal study (Findlay, 2009) showed that some children's organised sport participation declines into adolescence and others stays the same, and advocated that we should see trends in clusters. For the 'maintainers' cluster there was association with parental education for boys and urban location for girls (Findlay, 2009). Boys with more educated parents (and presumably higher income and more resources), according to this study, seem more likely to maintain their sporting participation into teenage years. For girls, parental education was less important but their geographical location in urban areas (presumably with access to more opportunities) rather than rural areas was significant.

A further point for consideration in this literature review is that the popularity of activities changes from childhood to adolescence. For example, into adolescence more time is spent walking, girls do less informal and formal sports whereas there is no significant change in formal and informal sport for boys (HSCIC, 2008). Similarly, in the US sixth graders do more out-of-school clubs than eighth graders (Taber, 2011). Since 2000, a number of reviews have been carried out which have been included in a review of quantitative systematic reviews by Biddle *et al.* (2011). This review includes nine systematic reviews between 2000 and 2010 for young people (<19 years) and reports that physical activity is still correlated with age and gender. While these trends are helpful, there seems to be a lack of research attempting to explain *why* age is important for physical activity. Some suggest that this stage is important due to the biological developments in puberty (Hunter et al., 2012) whereas others have shown that social factors play a role as popularity is less dependent on sporting achievement in high school as it is in middle school (Shakihb, 2011). This notable change over the short time between childhood and adolescence can conceivably have a large bearing on engagement with physical activity. This transitional period and the social barriers which organise and regulate it requires further research.

In addition to gender and age, there is a reasonable amount of research investigating physical activity and social class / socio-economic status (SES). Sociologists might argue that social class remains a profound social structure shaping power, opportunity and behaviour for many social actions. Physical activity is no exception. In the UK, the impact of SES has been investigated widely. Estrabrooks *et al.* (2003) noted that populations with middle and lower SES have less access to free resources in the neighbourhood, and Fairclough (2012) showed that deprivation and school playground size was well correlated with activity levels in children. In lower socio-economic groups, sedentary behaviour is generally higher (van der Horst *et al.*, 2007), fitness is lower (Guedes, 2012), and Body Mass Index (BMI) is higher (Voorhese, 2009). Unpicking these generalisations a little more shows that the relationship between sport participation and SES is stronger for 6-9 year olds than in 10-15 year olds (White, 2012) suggesting that class is a less important contributor during adolescence. Humbert *et al.* (2006) addressed questions of social class using quantitative questionnaire responses with qualitative focus groups discussions. After highlighting that young people in low SES areas are concerned with environmental limitations (such as proximity, cost and safety) and intrapersonal factors (such as perceived skill, and confidence) the research was able to further probe into the issues with focus group discussions. One girl from a low SES group described lack of leisure time as a barrier, saying “I have to do housework, make supper, and watch my little cousin all the time... so most of the time, I don’t get much time [for physical activity]” (2006, p.474). In contrast, physical activity diaries from pupils in private education showed that most met the guidelines everyday. However, those who did not meet the physical activity guidelines reported high levels of homework as a barrier (Sleap, 2001). Class may also impact on physical activity participation in ways beyond simply matters of resource and opportunity. The research from sociology and pedagogy dealing with social class provide a more sophisticated insight. Dunne and Gazeley (2008) write about working class underachievement in education; something relevant perhaps for engagement in PE and school sport. Additionally, Ball *et al.* (2010) uses Bourdieu’s theoretical terms to argue that personal habitus is predisposed through class existence even if opportunity appears accessible to all. So despite physical activities being ‘accessible’ in the most practical sense of the word, they still may be considered ‘not for the likes of us’. As Bourdieu (1984, p.6) puts it:

the primordial, tacit contract whereby they define 'us' as opposed to 'them', 'other people', and which is the basis of the exclusions ('not for the likes of us') and inclusions they perform among the characteristics produced by the common classificatory system.

Evans and Davies (2010) offer an explanation of post-school physical activity patterns related to family and class. Their attention to the 'political economy of embodiment' (p.765) suggests that social class is played out through the embodied self and can impact on how sport and physical activity are engaged in. Furthermore, it has been argued that the family can be considered a pedagogized field enacting class and influencing embodied physicalities (Dagkas, 2012). De-Pian (2012) too has highlighted the importance of social class by comparing school pupils' relationships with their bodies across different schools. Her study reported that children from schools with predominantly white middle-class attendees were more likely to have a positive relationship with their bodies than those in inner-city, working class schools. The sociology of the body has been of interest in sport and exercise literature for some time. As a result, the concept of 'embodiment' has provided a useful theoretical contribution to understanding the corporeal self within social contexts. The importance of embodiment for physical activity engagement, however, has not been fully explored within public health literature for young people, but could provide some useful insights. It has already been suggested that girls' physical self-perception can mediate physical activity engagement (Hunter, 2012), but little is known about whether the various constructions of the body (e.g. fat/thin, sporty/lazy, attractive/unattractive) influence young people's desire to participate. James (2000) suggests that the experience of bodily changes during childhood over which children have little or no control, contributes to a level of anxiety and frustration. The high level of stigma that overweight children are exposed to and are acutely aware of (Stunkard, 2003; Latner and Stunkard, 2003) may further exacerbate such anxieties.

Ethnicity provides another interesting demographic variable for active behaviour. Apart from Irish men and women and Black Caribbean men, age-adjusted participation in any physical activity of at least moderate intensity was lower in minority ethnic groups than in the general population (DH and DSCF, 2004). Participation rates in brisk walking for at least 30 minutes in the four weeks prior to interview were lower in each minority ethnic group than in the general population (32% of men and 27% of women), with the lowest age-adjusted risk ratios among Asian men

and women (HSE, 2004). In the USA, physical activity has been shown to vary among ethnic groups (Anderson et al., 1998; Crespo et al., 1996) and in the UK, white youths report higher activity than Asian and ethnic minority groups (Henning Brodersen et al., 2007). A London based study by Brodersen et al. (2007) measured activity levels in 5863 ethnically diverse young people and found that ethnicity was associated with some differences in behaviour. They reported that Asian students were less active than white students and this was also true of black girls but not black boys. Their results also demonstrated that black students were more sedentary than white students. Johnson (2010) found that ethnic minority girls (but not boys) accumulate less step counts per day than Caucasian children in the same school year. As a good marker of sedentary behaviour, television viewing has also been measured and correlated with ethnic sub-groups showing that ethnic differences are observable (Sisson, 2012). However, it should be noted that the review of reviews carried out by Biddle et al. (2011) reported that ethnic differences with physical activity levels were “inconsistent”. Not only does ethnicity provide an interesting discussion on amount of physical activity, but also an interesting discussion on type of physical activity. Wright et al., (2003) for example note the ethnic/cultural differences in young people where the preferred sports of white students sometimes contrasts with the Bangladeshi preference of cricket and the South American preference of baseball. In the US, ethnic minorities (such as Hispanic and Asian) tended to be more involved in organised school sport than white (Barr-Anderson et al., 2007). It has been noted that perceptions of physical activity are different between ethnic adolescents and that physical activity promotion should consider ethnicity specific interventions (Yoo et al., 2010). While a substantial explanation for these ethnic differences in physical activity so far alludes the literature in physical activity and health it may be worth exploring the contribution of identity and so-called ‘symbolic boundaries’ in British sport (Long and Hylton, 2002).

Another important influence on young people’s behaviour comes from significant others in their lives. Relationships with these key people are likely to play a part in shaping the physical activity levels of individuals. This area has been thoroughly researched and is discussed as part of a recent review (Biddle et al., 2011). The influence of parents on the physical activity of young people is unclear, but studies have begun to reveal some general trends. A study by Trost et al. (2003) found that the levels of physical activity for parents was not associated with levels of physical activity in



their children. Instead, the level of instrumental and motivational parental support was much more important. The consistency of this finding is evident in a review by Gustafson and Rhodes (2006) where across 19 studies, all but one reported a strong positive association between child activity levels and parental encouragement, involvement and facilitation. As this current PhD study focuses on adolescents, it is important to see how parental influence changes as children develop into their teenage years. Edwardsdon and Gorely (2010) carried out a review of parental influence and separately analysed the result from children and adolescents. They found that for children, parents played an important role in physical activity through direct involvement and being active role models and in organised physical activity through a combination of methods such as modelling, transport and encouragement. For adolescents however, parental influence was less clear: parents' physical activity level, attitudes towards physical activity, transport and encouragement were important for them to be physically active. Although much of this evidence remains unclear, it seems the role of parents does change over time, and perhaps gets less important as children get older (Alderman, 2010). An interesting insight into this process can be found in longitudinal studies. Kirby et al. (2011), for example, carried out a 5 year study with 10-15 year olds assessing the influences on physical activity over time. They reported that parental influence became less important over time as independent play increased. This raises the questions about which people play important influential roles in the lives of teenagers. Kirby et al. (2011) also highlight that peer support has most influence on teenagers, more important than parental support during this period, and that people considered 'high socialisers' were 3 times less likely to be physically active than 'low socialisers'. Friendship groups and social networks have been shown to impact motivation towards and physical education (Duncan, 1993) and sports participation also affects social status of pupils up to a certain age (Chase and Dummer, 1992; Shakihb, 2011). The role of peers, it seems, is important.

The literature concerning physical activity levels of young people, then, tells us much about the importance of gender, age, social class, ethnicity and the influence of others. Clearly, there are a range of influences on the lives of young people – of which only a few have been discussed here so far. With so many important influences at play, it might be wise to remain aware of the limitations of knowledge. In light of this complexity, this present PhD study seeks to frame physical activity research in a way

that attends to the complexities of young peoples lives. The literature here points to a few pertinent questions which are summarized at the end of this chapter.

### **2.3 Literature concerning physical activity and health promotion for young people**

With public health goals in mind, many initiatives, policies and interventions have been implemented which explicitly aim to increase physical activity levels. Such strategies have included mass media campaigns, changing local provision, school support and individual motivations (Eden et al., 2002; Kahn et al., 2002). The interventions that appear in the literature have shown varied amounts of success. A review by Van Sluijs et al. (2007) on the effectiveness of physical activity promotion interventions for young people concluded that the evidence for successful behaviour change was weak and inconclusive. A different review by Biddle et al. (2011) was similarly pessimistic;

Overall, therefore, the evidence from controlled trials for successful behaviour change interventions is rather pessimistic. This could be for several reasons, including poor design of trials, weak delivery (fidelity) of the intervention, inadequate statistical power to detect differences, and the difficulty in combating competing behavioural demands outside of the intervention setting. The strongest evidence appears to be for adolescents using multi-component interventions or in the school setting where family components were also included.

Increasing physical activity, it seems, is very difficult and there is much that remains to be learnt. For this literature review, it may be useful to critically examine previous studies to help reveal why physical activity interventions have shown little success.

I will begin with reviewing physical activity promotion strategies that focus on individual-level changes. These interventions include counselling and leaflet information (Patrick et al., 2006), placing information posters encouraging people to use stairs (Eves et al., 2006) and providing people with pedometers to self-monitor physical activity (Bravata et al., 2007). According to reviews (Atkin et al., 2011), intervention strategies that focus on individual level changes have been particularly unsuccessful. In speculating why these interventions have been unsuccessful we might point to the underestimation of the importance of the wider ‘ecology’ that surrounds

individuals. Within what we might call the ‘cognitivist paradigm’ from which these studies often arise there is little room to accommodate the powerful influences of society on individual action. The neo-liberal notion that people are able to make free, rational choices so long as they receive the adequate information and encouragement seems to neglect the highly social aspects of behaviour. In the recent series on physical activity in *The Lancet* (2012), Das and Horton propose that “for too long the focus has been on advising individuals to take an active approach to life. There has been far too little consideration of the social and physical environments that enable such activity to be taken” (p.1). This progress is well recognised by advocates of an ecological and structural approach to physical activity promotion. Afterall, as Dipietro (2012, p.3) reminds us, “changes in highway and car design are more effective than public messages in getting people to wear seatbelts”. Not only are individualist interventions arguably ineffective, we might also be critical of them for apportioning sole responsibility (and therefore blame) on individuals. This is one of the concerns raised in the literature exploring ‘healthism’ (Kirk and Colquhoun, 1989) which I will return to later.

In recent years there has been a move towards interventions that go beyond the individual. Intervention designs which include community and the physical environment clearly address some structural issues which have been shown to be important barriers to exercise. For young people, interventions during school have been attempted by many researchers. A review by Aktin et al. (2011) claimed that programs that were delivered in the school setting were the most effective at increasing physical activity. Barr-Anderson (2012), for example, combined DVD sessions and peer leadership activities in a school-based intervention with some success. Furthermore, Slingerland and Borghouts (2011) showed that PE interventions have been effective in increasing the amount of pupil engagement and overall physical activity during lessons. However, if interventions are to have a long-term impact on physical activity then changes in physical activity should also be seen outside of the school hours. This has not been the case so far. Slingerland and Borghouts (2011) were unable to show that the increases in PE involvement had benefited lifestyle activity outside of school, and Aktin et al. (2011) showed that only three out of the nine studies in their review were successful in promoting physical activity during the ‘critical window’ of time immediately after school. After-school programs delivered in the home or community

settings have been infrequently examined, and many of the reported studies are short-term with no evidence of maintenance. Given that school-based physical activity promotion seems to be the more effective, it is perhaps unsurprising that schools are so often the site of policy interventions. However, their ‘effectiveness’ (narrowly defined in terms of increasing physical activity levels) could in-fact compromise and detract from other goals of education.

As physical inactivity and obesity are seen as national level issues, policy interventions have been implemented on a national scale. The current national intervention in the UK, *Change4life*, includes a focus on young people (NHS, 2011) and promotes ideas to get children active, informs people how much activity children should do and warns us about heart disease and cancer if children do not do it (Evans, et al., 2011; Piggin and Lee, 2011). The National Health Schools Programme, the *5x60* programme in Wales and the *PESS-YP* programme in England are other such examples of the unprecedented amount of school-based, government-funded interventions to challenge physical inactivity. Disseminating information about the recommended 60 minutes per day of physical activity (NHS, 2011) is another version of this promotion. As it is difficult (if not impossible) to properly assess the effectiveness of these promotions and campaigns, I will avoid attempting to do so here. However, my main reason for including these initiatives is to highlight critical concerns that have been raised about their impact on young people. Most notably, some have raised concerns that publicizing the dangers of physical inactivity can actually be dangerous and harmful in itself. This somewhat ironic side-effect of health promotion is argued to be part of an accumulating experience of anxiety, self consciousness and physical inadequacy in what is an increasingly risk-laden society (Evans *et al.*, 2008; Gard & Wright, 2001). This criticism relates to the ‘obesity crisis’ and its related messages rather than physical activity promotion specifically, but the point remains pertinent. Importantly, this criticism rests on the notion that the health dangers of being overweight and obese are exaggerated and individuals can be healthy with a BMI in excess of 30 (Campos, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005; Lee et al., forthcoming). If obesity science is fundamentally flawed, as some claim, then the risk-laden messages through which public health warnings exist may do more harm than good. It is for this reason that Kirk (2006, p.121) concludes that “there is a need for a critical pedagogy in

physical education to provide a morally and educationally defensible form of engagement with obesity discourse”.

Health promotion in schools may also have damaging side-effects on young people’s experience of their own bodies. The body has a role to play in shaping young people’s experience of self, and their following engagement with exercise. It is important to consider how cultural meanings about the body are shaped and regulated by society. It has been suggested that obesity discourses in schools, the media and in other prominent institutions have become embedded in a public interpretation of the body. As Evans et al. (2011, p.2) put it:

The daily drip, drip, of obesity rhetoric mingles with a further avalanche of newsworthy items intended to catch the eye, intended to frame and regulate opinion about the body and health. Sanctioned facts work on consciousness, forging understanding that fat bodies are dangerous and that thinness equals health.

It is argued that this idea has contributed to the prominence of a ‘fat phobia’ (Monaghan, 2008) which not only pathologizes fatness with pervasive medical discourses but also positions the body in a moral context (Murray, 2008). The communication of these particular messages aligning health, active lifestyle and a lean body type, has created a social climate which young people refer to when interpreting their meanings about physical activity. Wright and Burrows (2004, p.4) also assert that,

healthism discourse inevitably positions the body centrally in the creation of health, linking deliberate physical exercise and a range of other bodily practices with the attainment of health, where health and well-being is taken to be indicated by body shape, size and weight.

Furthermore, not only does this message support the triplex of exercise=fitness=health (where health is determined by body size and shape) but it also constitutes health in terms of a moral imperative of self-control (Gard and Wright, 2001). The ubiquity of this ‘moral universe’ which makes the superiority of fit, slim bodies possible, has been criticised due to a concern that children are likely to interpret these discourses negatively (Zanker and Gard, 2008). It is perhaps telling that McCabe et al. (2010) reported that compared to teenagers categorized as ‘normal’ weight, overweight children experience more weight loss messages, have lower body satisfaction and engage in weight loss strategies more. For De Pain (2012) obesity messages clearly have an impact on whether pupils feel satisfied with their bodies or

not. Interestingly, she argues that social class somehow mediates obesity discourse after observing a difference in the proportion of pupils who report body dissatisfaction between middle class, and working class schools. For some authors, it is not only the stigmatisation of obesity, but also the celebration of thinness which is a cause for concern (Hargreaves and Tiggerman, 2003; Tiggerman, 2006). A recent qualitative study by Knowles (2011) showed that girls experience secondary school as a change in environment which increased their concerns for self presentation. This heightened level of body consciousness can not only be a result of self comparisons among peers but also comparisons to (fashion) models (Jones, 200). In light of this research, I would suggest that the discursive construction of the body and the resulting anxieties may have a role to play in young people's activity levels and is yet to be fully explored.

Another criticism of the public health agenda is that population surveillance can lead to the obsessive regulation of behaviour. Population surveillance has also been more thorough and invasive than previously. A National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) and National Obesity Observatory (NOO) (Public Health England, 2014) have been set up to systematically monitor the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the UK. Measuring the BMI of young children at the ages of 4 and 10 inherently means that millions of (mostly healthy) pupils are subjected to this obesity screening and whose parents receive letters if they are outside the acceptable range. Further, with the inclusion of school strategies such as lunchbox checks (Wright et al., 2012), and 'fat laps' (Leahy and Harrison, 2003), pupils are well aware of the significance of their weight. What is problematic about this process of surveillance is not only that individual's bodies are sites of governmentality, but also that the complex concept of 'health' becomes reduced and misinterpreted to the crude measurement of height and weight. Since height is not something that individuals are expected to be able to change (as yet anyway!), weight must be the component to be reduced and regulated. The resulting logic leaves the thin body as the only acceptable marker of health. This preoccupation with the body as the central indicator of health status has added to the cultural meaning of the body in contemporary society. Critical authors have suggested that those whose body appears to be larger than desirable are not only marginalised and alienated for being unattractive, but also for being lazy, unproductive and morally wanting, regardless of their actual health status (Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989; Lee et al., 2009; Pringle & Pringle, 2012). For those young people who do possess

bodies deemed normal or thin may experience their bodies more positively than otherwise. Emboldened bodies, as Evans et al. (2011) put it, are “not necessarily healthy but merely privileged bodies in a culture that endorses slenderness, weight loss and exercise as measures of good citizenship and health”.

The final criticism of health promotion that I will introduce here is in the conflation of physical exercise with cosmetic appearance. Physical culture has also been at the centre of critical health research exploring the link between eating disorders and the prevailing discourses of control and self-discipline. Here, it has been argued that the multiple and complex messages embedded in the exercise and diet control discourse have served to reinforce the internalized behaviour of people coping with anorexia (Evans et al., 2008; Rich & Evans, 2005). The desire to achieve or perform ‘health’ so narrowly defined, is not necessarily a good thing if it leads to obsessive attention to weight loss, excessive exercise and a pathological concern with the body. This issue, in addition to the others already mentioned, leaves physical activity promotion in a difficult position. On one hand, evidence strongly suggests that regular physical activity is beneficial for health so it ought to be promoted. On the other, evidence suggests that health promotion, done in a particular way, can impact negatively on young people by marginalizing fat bodies, simplifying the meaning of health and re-defining the meaning of exercise.

## **2.4 Specific aims of the research**

I have provided an overview of the literature concerning (a) disparities in physical activity and health for young people, and (b) physical activity promotion for young people. In light of this review, the aims of this study can further be refined and specified.

According to the best participation data at hand, it is apparent that girls are less active than boys, and this difference becomes prominent in early teenage years. This might be for a number of reasons. For many girls, the performance of femininity appears to conflict with the expectations of sporting pursuits. It also seems important to note that girls tend to feel less competent while participating in PE and sport which could lead to girls avoiding participation. Another contributing factor might be that girls

report low levels of self-image, which would make exercise settings places of anxiety and stress. Therefore, as a specific research aim, it would be interesting to investigate how social processes contribute to these feelings of low competence, low self-image and anxiety. Within the pedagogies of health promotion, how do young people interpret information about physical activity, health and their bodies? How might that impact on the amount and type of physical activity that they do?

As a reminder about the importance of social class, the literature also reports that young people with less access to facilities are likely to be less active. Indeed, as neighbourhood 'walkability' and local crime also seem to affect physical activity, it is not surprising that young people in areas of socio-economic deprivation have lower levels of participation. However, there seems to be little recent research investigating the cultural and behavioural aspects of social class. As class differences seem to impact on the type of leisure that people engage in, another research aim for this study is to further investigate how class operates to impact on physical activity and health.

The literature also shows that parental influence and social support play a role in shaping the physical activity of young people. However, as most of this research is cross-sectional and quantitative, we are not well informed about how the peers of a young person influence their actions. This study aims to investigate what social processes take place between young people and these significant others? How might we theorise that process?

This review also drew together literature on physical activity promotion for young people. After reviewing the research on physical activity interventions, it is clear that there is a low level of success for increasing activity levels beyond the moderate level and beyond the short term. The review further highlights the importance of intervening beyond the individual. Not only have interventions been relatively unsuccessful to date, the literature also raises some critical concerns about health promotion. Authors have argued that health promotion wrongly apportions responsibility and blame on individuals, over emphasizes the dangers of physical inactivity and obesity, raises body anxieties, marginalizes fat bodies and re-defines exercise as a method for weight control. In light of this, the final research aim is to investigate what social processes lead to the interpretation of health in this way? How might physical activity promotion be improved to reduce these points of criticism? Specifically, this literature review has



lead me to consider how young people themselves would design and implement physical activity intervention strategies. Given the frequent failures of ‘expert’ interventions to increase physical activity for young people, I considered it reasonable to ask “how would they do it?” Having identified the pertinent questions arising from the literature and outlined the emergent research questions, the following chapter will address research methods and methodology.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

It is important for researchers to reflect on the capabilities and limitations of a particular methodology and to critically consider how knowledge is produced. As Enright and Sullivan (2012, p.46) put it, “our questions can never be considered independent of our method, and methods therefore influence how and what knowledge is produced”. The purpose of this chapter is to explain and justify how the data in this study was produced. The first section – justification for critical realism – aims to thoroughly describe the metaphysical problems faced in this study and explain how critical realism is useful in resolving these problems. As this study is somewhat interdisciplinary, it has been necessary to discuss metaphysical issues at length. The second section of this chapter – methods of data production – provides details of the practical process of data production. Again, as much research in physical activity and health relies on quantitative methods, I feel it necessary to provide a detailed justification of the qualitative methods used.

### **3.1 Justification for critical realism**

Doing social research requires careful consideration of methodological and metaphysical issues. For this study, I have decided to ground the methodology on a critical realist approach drawing largely from the work of Roy Bhaskar and Margret Archer. Only through a critical realist approach do my methods, interpretations and conclusions remain consistent and coherent. This is largely because the epistemological and ontological arguments made by critical realists accommodate the hermeneutic processes of social constructionism but maintain a realist conception of causal mechanisms. In doing this, social research can maintain the possibility of generalising principles but understands the highly contingent and interpreted nature of social science. I find this logic more congruent than alternative metaphysical positions (eg. positivism or interpretivism) and I will explain my rationale for this in detail.

Positivistic approaches to research seem to dominate much of the literature in behavioural epidemiology, sports psychology and physical activity and health. While I do not wish to create a caricature of positivism by crudely describing its essential features as has been done elsewhere (Hibberd, 2010; Weed, 2009), I should provide some examples of the research that I am referring to. One such example might be a study by Van der Horst et al., (2007) whereby the authors attempt to identify certain

components of human experience, compartmentalise them, quantify them and treat them as isolated (yet interacting) largely for the purpose of statistical analysis. This one study claims that for adolescents, increased physical activity is associated with being male, higher parental education, higher self-efficacy, and increased friend support (Van der Horst et al., 2007). In another example, this approach has been used to study the interesting sociological experience of transition between primary and secondary school. Jago et al. (2012) report that increased number of friends and friend support for physical activity were associated with increases in girls' moderate-to-vigorous physical activity after the move to secondary school (see table 1). For this study, the researchers administered a questionnaire to participants asking them to report how many friends they had and then to answer questions such as "how often do your good friends encourage you to exercise or play sports" on a four point scale. Studies like this are open to several criticisms that I will elaborate on later.

In contrast to the methodological approach taken by studies such as these, much research in pedagogy, sociology and beyond advocates what might be called an 'interpretive' approach. Again, this approach is philosophically and methodologically diverse and complex so I do not wish to simplify it here. It may be possible, however, to broadly describe the research that I am referring to, based on its underlying principles. Fundamental to an interpretive approach is the anti-realist assumption that the objects of science do not exist independently of observation and representation. For most contemporary social scientists this crucial distinction is one made due to the nature of what is being studied; humans rather than objects. The collapse of the subject-object duality draws into question the notion of objective reality and objective truth and opens up the idea of an interpreted, relativistic and pluralistic reality. Interpretivism draws on this relativistic ontology and rejects the universality of truth. Instead, emphasis is placed on constructed meanings, symbolism and subjective experience. Post-structural sociology since the 1960s has been wedded to this assumption. Sartre's existentialism, Derrida's deconstructionism, Foucault's version of discourse and power, and Butler's post-structural feminism, all share these basic ontological and epistemological principles which impact on the production of knowledge. In sport and exercise literature, many authors retain an interpretive approach and frequently draw from the key theorists mentioned above. For example, Smith and Sparkes (2009) are

<i>Table 1.</i> Results table from a study investigating the relationship between friend support and physical activity for children (Jago et al., 2012)								
Minutes of MVPA after School on a Weekday (Three or More Valid Weekdays) at Time 1								
Boys (n=458)					Girls (n=474)			
	Coeff.	95% CI	t	P	Coeff.	95% CI	t	P
Friend support for PA	3.79	1.64 to 5.94	3.68	<b>0.001</b>	1.37	-0.16 to 2.90	1.87	0.077
General friend support	0.13	-1.91 to 2.17	0.14	0.892	1.57	0.10 to 3.05	2.24	<b>0.037</b>
Friend sedentary preferences	1.46	-3.86 to 0.94	-1.27	0.219	-0.23	-1.63 to 1.17	-0.34	0.738
No. of friends	2.06	-1.36 to 5.48	1.26	0.223	2.23	0.08 to 4.38	2.17	<b>0.043</b>
<i>R(squared)</i> = <b>0.136</b>					<i>R(squared)</i> = <b>0.080</b>			
Minutes of MVPA during the Weekend (One or More Valid Weekend Day) at Time 1								
Boys (n=389)					Girls (n=427)			
	Coeff.	95% CI	t	P	Coeff.	95% CI	t	P
Friend support for PA	1.36	-4.05 to 6.75	0.52	0.607	0.86	-3.32 to 5.05	0.43	0.670
General friend support	0.54	-4.70 to 5.80	0.22	0.831	-1.73	-4.80 to 8.25	0.55	0.586
Friend sedentary preferences	-5.61	-13.69 to 2.47	-1.45	0.163	1.89	-2.38 to 6.16	0.92	0.367
No. of friends	2.48	-3.92 to 8.89	0.81	0.429	7.70	0.56 to 14.84	2.26	<b>0.036</b>
<i>R(squared)</i> = <b>0.024</b>					<i>R(squared)</i> = <b>0.055</b>			
All models are adjusted for BMI SDS, pubertal status, IMD, and hours of daylight after school and school affiliation. PA, physical activity; CI, confidence interval; and Coeff, coefficient. Bold values <i>P</i> <0.05.								

explicit in their alignment with narrative theory and its metaphysical foundation: “with its commitment to interpretivism, narrative inquiry offers an alternative, or counterweight, to (neo)realism and (post)positivism which dominate qualitative sport and exercise psychological research”. Additionally, Quennerstedt (2011, p. 3) draws on John Dewey’s transactional perspective claiming that “knowledge, the knower and the environment are mutually dependent” (p.3) and that “truth is always contextual and temporal” (p.4). As with positivistic research, interpretive research is open to crucial criticisms, which I will discuss later.

The critical realist approach taken in this PhD study distances itself from both positivist and interpretive approaches for a number of reasons. My justification for critical realism rests on four key features of the approach: (1) the social world is stratified into the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical, (2) epistemological relativism does not necessitate ontological pluralism (epistemic fallacy), (3) causality is best treated in non-Humean terms, (4) human action is explained with a transformational model. I will elaborate on these points in turn.

To begin, critical realism contends that reality ought to be conceived on three levels (see table 2). This stratified ontology can be understood as the domains of the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical*. To paraphrase, the *real* can be understood as the causal mechanism and social structures which exist prior to events themselves. This domain is one of potential “whose powers may exist unexercised” (Archer, 2007, p.190). In this domain, for example, exists the power relationship between PE teacher and pupil. Contrary to interpretivism, critical realists contend that this power relationship is not merely an invention of mind. The domain of the *actual* encompasses events that occur, such as, for example, the PE teacher enforcing a punishment for a pupil wearing the non-uniform PE kit. Critical realists distinguish the real from the actual so that we can assume the structured mechanisms of potential are relatively enduring over events across time. That is, the authoritative power possessed by the PE teacher may be manifested in a different future event but still allowed by the same causal potentiality. The domain of the empirical, then, describes the observation of events by whatever empirical means available. This distinction allows for the fact that events may occur without observation, or may be “exercised unrealised” (Archer, 2007, p.190). This also accounts for the epistemological understanding that empirical observation of events

*Table 2.* Bhaskar's three domains: populating entities (Bhaskar 1978, p. 13)

	<i>Domain of Real</i>	<i>Domain of Actual</i>	<i>Domain of Empirical</i>
<i>Mechanisms</i>	x		
<i>Events</i>	x	x	
<i>Experiences</i>	x	x	x

may be different from the actual events themselves. To continue with the example, the actual event of a PE teacher punishing a pupil may be observed by pupils, teachers, and researchers in different ways, from different sensory awareness and interpreted through different theoretical perspectives. As *Table 2* illustrates, the domains are related but separated. Mechanisms, events and experiences thus constitute three overlapping domains of reality (Elder-Vass, 2004).

The metaphysical claim of stratified ontology is a helpful conceptualisation for several reasons. Without the three domains, our understanding of research data can generate false assumptions and misunderstanding. Empiricism, for instance, only offers an explanation of observable possibilities from which causal explanations are often drawn. In Bhaskar's (1989, p.97) words, "by secreting an ontology based on the category of experience, three domains of realities (the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical) are collapsed into one". To provide an example, Archer (2007, p.135) explains;

this absence of ontological depth precludes crucial questions about the *conditions* under which *experience* is possible to agency (observing a cherry tree in England depends on its prior importation from China, just as a experiencing educational discrimination is posterior to a given definition of achievement being institutionalised, or owing rent depends upon antecedent relationships between landlords and tenants).

This stratified ontology brings the importance of theoretical social processes to the fore. Theoretical processes, I contend, remain in the domain of the real (potential mechanisms) and are crucial for our understanding of human behaviour. The empiricism evident in the positivistic studies discussed earlier does not account for these theoretical mechanisms and thus will be incapable of explaining social action.

The second claim of critical realism that I wish to discuss is the epistemic fallacy. The crucial point that I wish to suggest here is that just because our epistemic experience of the social world is highly interpreted and constructed, it does not necessarily follow that the social world itself has no existence independent of our interpretation. This point is important as it implies that, contrary to the view of interpretivism, social structures can exert real forces on individuals and those forces exist outside of our highly contingent individual experience. Crucially, this allows us to make some sort of generalising statements about social behaviour. Archer (2007, p.195) states,



explanation of social matters requires the generic assertion that there is a state of the matter which is what it is, regardless of how we do view it, choose to view it or are somehow manipulated into viewing it. This precludes any collapse of the ontological into the epistemological and convicts those who endorse this move of the epistemic fallacy, namely confusing what is with what we take it to be.

This assertion renounces the idea often presented in research methods literature (e.g. Weed, 2009) which assumes that epistemological positivism must follow ontological realism on the one hand, and that epistemological interpretivism must follow ontological constructionism. In this way, critical realism claims to combine and reconcile ontological realism and epistemological relativism (Bhaskar, 1998). There are two reasons why this point is relevant for this study (a) by using different methods of data collection I am not surrendering the notion that research is about seeking knowledge of the social world. The plurality of methods does not necessarily equate to a plurality of reality, (b) when considering the implications of this research for policy, I can maintain the possibility of generalizability.

Third, central to critical realist claims is a rejection of Humean causality. Much of the positivistic work described at the start of this chapter is embedded with this version of causality, which, put crudely, contends that the observation of constant conjunctions between two events is our best basis for determining a causal relationship<sup>1</sup>. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle sought to establish a doctrine of scientific method which by-and-large dominated science for two thirds of the twentieth century (Archer, 1998). As Bhaskar writes (1998, p.x) “the positivist vision of science pivoted on a *monistic* theory of scientific development and a *deductivist* theory of scientific structure”. Critical realists and interpretivists alike strongly repudiate this notion based on the idea that interactions in the social world are quite different to interactions in the physical world. As Archer (1998) puts it; “football players behave quite differently to billiard balls” (Groff, 2004, p.5). For Bhaskar (1998), the positivist conception of causality is entrenched in an understanding of independent entities (condition X causes event Y). Instead, critical realism assumes a conception of causality which sees social action as a complex, and contingent product of social

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<sup>1</sup> Although interpretations of Hume’s causality are varied and complex, this interpretation has been adopted here in alignment with critical realism literature.

relations whose causal influence operate above the level of the empirical. Positivistic science ignores causal processes above the empirical level and is therefore unable to establish the influences on social action outside of the Humean model. For example, studies have suggested that maternal education is inversely associated with physical inactivity (Gordon-Larson et al, 2000); children of mothers with a graduate degree are less likely to be highly sedentary. This is, of course, an interesting observation. However, without offering some explanation of why this association occurs, we are left with no understanding beyond the aggregate correlation. Maternal education is described as a ‘determinant’ but we are none the wiser about whether maternal education has any causal influence in itself or whether it is an indicator of some other unidentified causal influence which happens to manifest more often in households where the mother is well educated. The *maternal education* → *child inactivity* relationship is investigated and expressed as a closed system. Critical realism rejects this closed system and therefore is cautious of the relevance of this form of research

As the world is open, and agency is real, and as society is only materially present in intentional human action, it follows that social phenomena only ever manifest themselves in open systems. And from this it follows that any possible social (or psychological) laws must be analysed as tendencies (Bhasker, 1998, p.14).

Referring back to the example provided at the start of this chapter, Jago et al. (2012) fail to treat physical activity as an open system. In their study, the attempt to explain why children are physically active (dependent variable) based on their level of friendship support (independent variable) presumes that cause can be empirically assessed based on constant conjunctions. Although the constant conjunctions are reported as ‘associations’ or ‘correlates’ rather than causes, the assumption of causality is implied by the concluding comments calling for a need for “fostering activity with friends” (p.116). This notion of causality ignores the possibility that, for example, high friendship support could be the *effect* of high physical activity, rather than the *cause*. Or indeed, that physical activity and friendships are mutually occurring spontaneous manifestations of leisure-time relationship in children which would fail to occur with the artificial intervention of “fostering activity with friends”. So in this study, I will not subscribe to this Humean notion of causality. The implication of this rejection is both practical and abstract. On a practical level, I will not be categorizing ‘factors’ and ‘variables’ into categories of ‘associates’ and ‘determinants’ and I will not seek to

establish whether one has any impact on another. On a more abstract level, I will not be attempting to reduce causality to a linear process between empirical observations, and instead seek to describe how theoretical social processes influence empirical events.

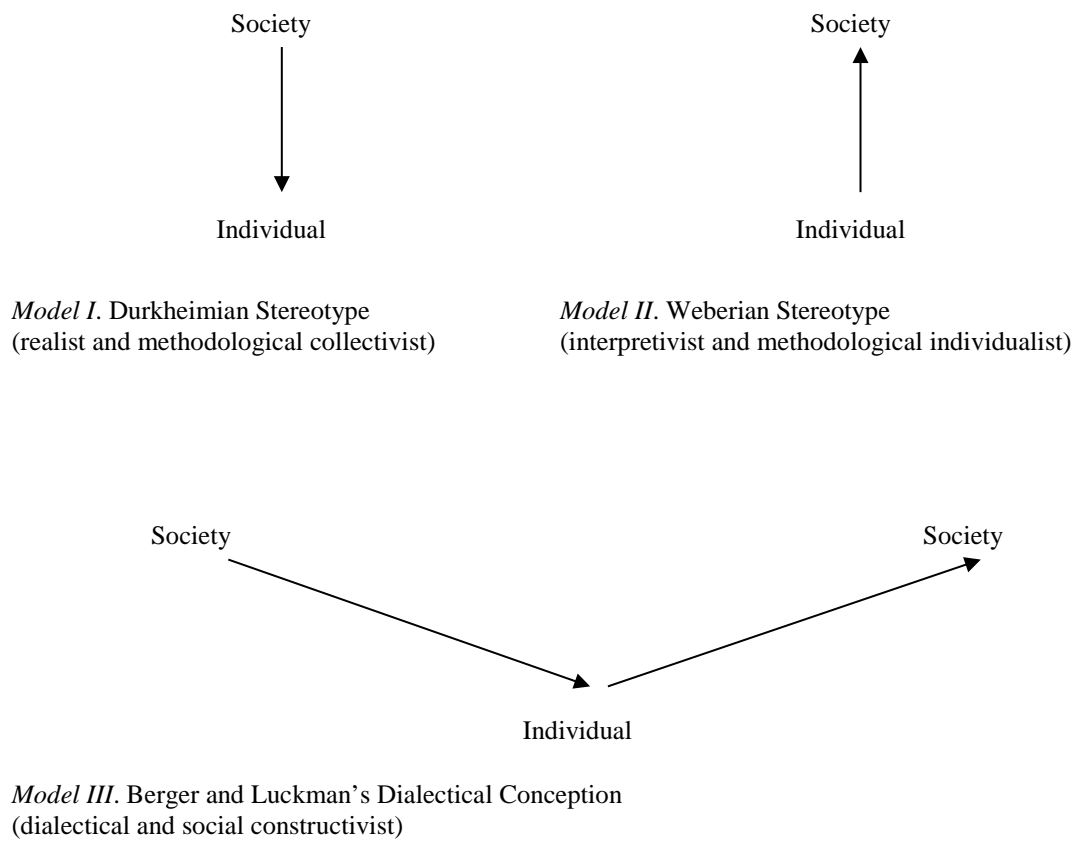
Fourth, I would like to explain that critical realism conceptualises the influence of social structure on human action in a ‘transformational model’. In some way the transformational model of social action is reactionary to previous conceptions of social structure (e.g. Durkheimian, Weberian). For Bhaskar, the Durkheimian model emphasises a deterministic account whereby society acts on the individual, and the Weberian model emphasises an individualistic account whereby the individual has the ultimate power to shape society. In addition, Berger and Luckman’s (1967) account of social structure explains a dialectical relationship between individuals and society. To Berger and Luckman, social reality is a paradoxical experience which humans understand as both external and objective and humanly produced. As they explain;

the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity... Despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it... Man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product (p.78).

While pertaining to the idea of socially constructed reality, they also maintain that society is structured by institutions which have a powerful effect on the individual.

The institutions, as historical and objective facticities, confront the individual as undeniable facts. The institutions are there, external to him (sic), persistent in their reality whether he likes it or not. He cannot wish them away. They resist his attempts to change or evade them. They have coercive power over him, both in themselves, by the sheer force of their facticity, and through the control mechanisms that are usually attached to the most important of them (p.78).

Society shapes the individual but, at the same time, depends entirely on the actions and dispositions of individuals for its own existence (Crossley, 2001). Bhaskar (1989), quite helpfully, illustrates these different methodological conceptualisations diagrammatically (see figure 2). However, one further development of our understanding of social action (one which I argue is adequate and sufficient for



*Figure 2.* Different conceptual approaches to sociological methodology (Bhaskar, 1989)

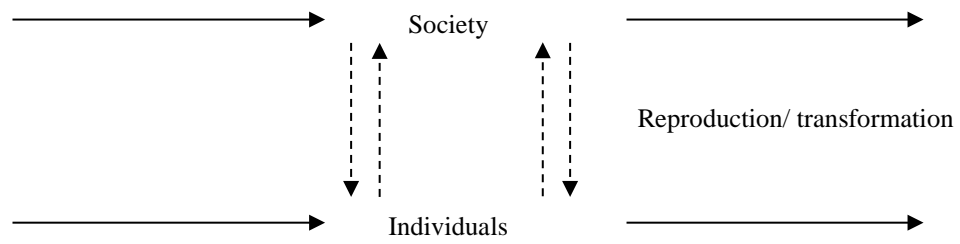
purposes here) is adopted by Bhaskar. He asserts that Berger and Luckman's (1989) analysis is mostly accurate but flawed in a crucial sense. He writes:

it is still true to say that society would not exist without human activity, so that reification remains an error. And it is still true to say that such activity would not occur unless the agents engaging in it had a conception of what they were doing. But it is no longer true to say that human agents create it. Rather we must say: they reproduce or transform (p.76)

This adaptation allows us to see that structures essentially pre-exist human activity, yet they do not exist independently of our actions. Crucially, however, this model also allows us to study institutions as objects which are more stable than other models might suggest (see figure 3). For critical realists, social reality is defined in terms of structures and agents with free will whose actions are conditioned (rather than determined) by social structures (Cruickshank, 2010). For critical realism, individuals are borne into a world of pre-existing structures and norms which help to mould but do not determine their behaviour, which is intentional and has the potential for spontaneous change (Archer, 1995). As Bhaskar (1998, p.xvi) explains;

Thus people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is the necessary condition for, their activity.

Consider the notion that there is decline in physical activity for many girls when they reach the age of 12 for example. The cultural experience of *gender* and *adolescence* can be analysed in terms of their deterministic influence on girls in their early teens. Societal level expectations serve to structure pupils' engagement with physically active practices through which gender and adolescence are enacted, embodied, discursively (re)created as a consequence and a condition of their actions. Each individual girl will, in varying degrees, negotiate a relationship with the structures which may go some way in determining behaviour (predictable tendencies), but will always be contingent on particular situated and unpredictable contexts. Archer (2007, p.200) notes that this conceptualisation is similar to Giddens's 'ontology of praxis' where "structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution". While Pierre Bourdieu was not a self described critical realist, the theoretical tools that he utilised built coherently onto this notion. Brown (2009) explains that Bourdieu wished to subvert structuralism and



*Model IV. The Transformational Model of Social Activity*

*Figure 3. Model of social activity to be used this present study (Bhaskar, 1989)*

announce the active and inventive capacities of the human condition. His concepts of field and habitus describe a social world which is certainly structured yet allows for a bounded agency within it (Brown, 2009). Here, we see that “habitus is contextualised in fields where there are constraints on the actor” (Brown, 2009, p.317). Indeed, Joas (1996, p.128) asserts; “all human action is caught in the tension between unreflected habitual action and acts of creativity”. It is important to acknowledge the influence of social structures within the theoretical framework but not to the point of neglect of agency. This idea is perhaps most succinctly summarised by Bourdieu (1984) by describing habitus as a ‘structured, structuring, structure’. By describing habitus in this way, we contend that our bounded consciousness both moulds and is moulded by the agent (Crossley, 2004). Positively, this provides an account for understanding an ever changing, constantly shifting cultural world where normality, ideology and reality are historically and geographically diverse. The relevance of this ‘transformational model’ for this study is simply that it is now possible to argue that action is enacted by individual agents and therefore can be changed (to increase physical activity for example), yet that change would require the transformation of social norms and institutions. This accounts for the effect of society on an individual but is non-deterministic.

### **3.2 Methods of data production**

Now that I have described and rationalized the metaphysical approach to this study, I would like to describe and rationalize the practical methods<sup>2</sup> of data production. I have decided to use the term ‘data production’ here instead of the more widely used ‘data collection’ in keeping with the notion that the research process actively constructs and generates data itself. Data is always a co-production between researchers and participants and data is not simply lifted from the outside world and brought back to be analysed. In this section I wish to make clear the logistic and technical process that took place. It is important to consider the research aims in deciding what methods are best suited for the task. As the aims were all related to social process, experiences and

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<sup>2</sup> I favour Kelly’s (2010) distinction between methodology and method and use the terms to refer to the broad approach which encompasses philosophical assumptions (methodology) and to refer to the specific techniques applied in practice to produce data (methods)

interpretations (see page 29-31), it was decided that qualitative methods would elicit the most useful data set. To provide a brief overview prior to this discussion, the methods of data production can be summarized as follows: twenty nine participants aged 13-14 from 4 different secondary schools took part in the study. Purposeful recruitment ensured sufficient diversity across gender, ethnicity, social class, ability, body shape, and self-reported physical activity. Over a 7 month period, various qualitative methods were used including focus groups, ethnomethodology and visual methods. This process is detailed in figure 4.

### *The process*

After gaining ethical approval from the Loughborough University Ethics Committee, approval was sought from school Headteachers to carry out research in their school. Following this approval and furthering discussions with PE teachers, individual pupils were asked to take part in the study and were provided with letters of information and consent. Once participants had agreed to take part and had given consent, I arranged to meet pupils and begin research. The data production process lasted 7 months.

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited from 4 schools in a medium sized town in England. Schools were chosen due to the convenience of their proximity and cooperation with previous research in the department. Three contacted schools were unable to take part citing workload responsibilities. In all cases, the Headteacher of the school was contacted by letter and email who then, if willing to take part, facilitated communication with a key point of contact.

Choosing an appropriate number of participants represents an important decision for the direction of this study. There are clearly advantages and disadvantages related to the amount of participants included in the data collection for both pragmatic and theoretical reasons. Essentially, the sample size required depends on a number of factors in the research study. Morse (2000) suggests that we need to consider the quality



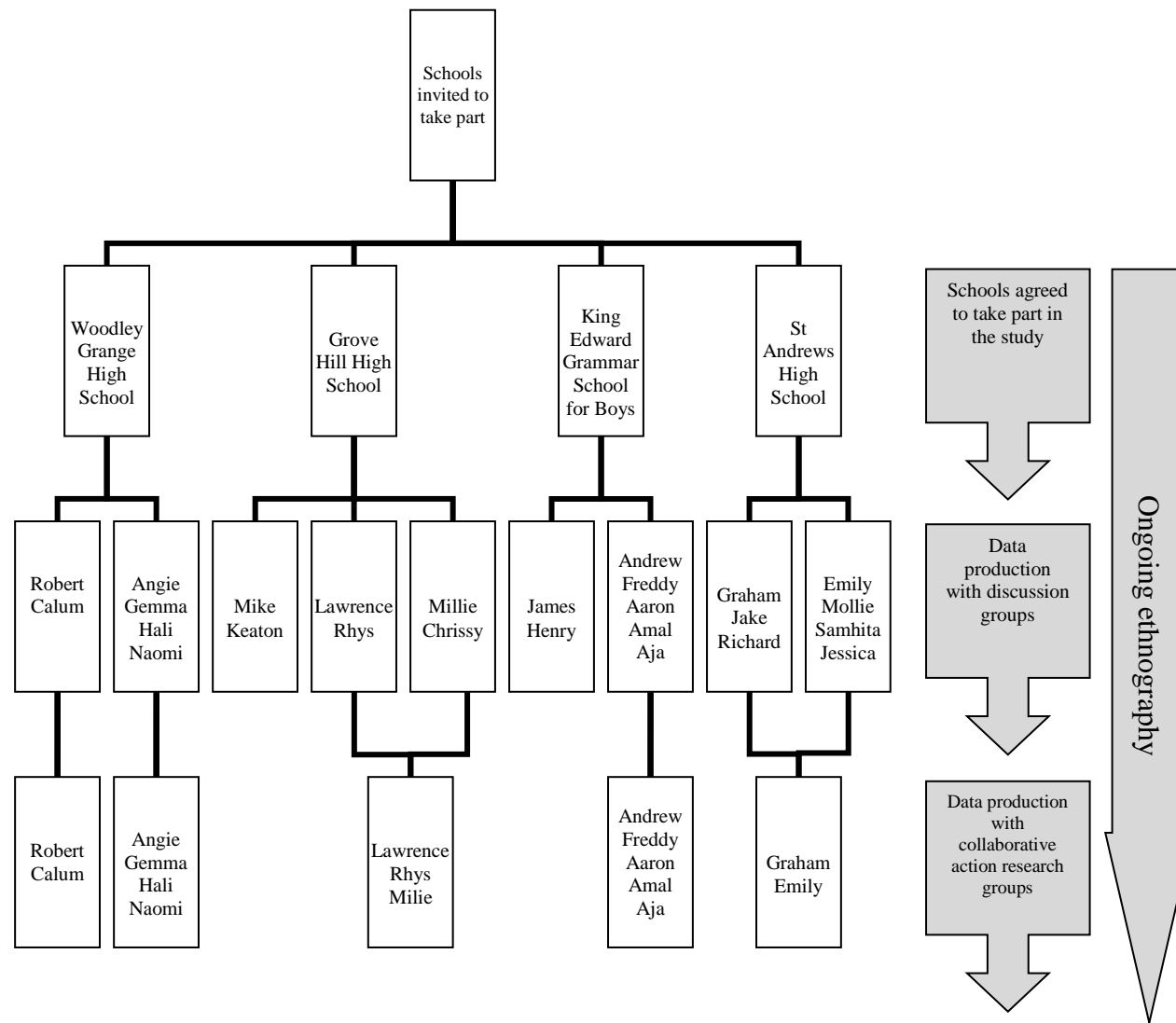


Figure 4. The data production process

of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful data obtained from each topic, the number of interviews per participant. This provides a useful guide for sample size and is perhaps preferable to other more prescriptive suggestions. Fundamentally, for a study to be rigorous enough to claim knowledge of a subject, it ought to be designed in a way which allows saturation (Silverman, 2010). The fewer participants the more opportunity there is for generating rich, thorough data, exploring complex, individual experiences. A researcher will have more chance to build a relationship with the participants, break down barriers of formality and will be able to be immersed into the social world that the participants experience. In contrast, including a large amount of participants in the study would increase the diversity of the sample, the likelihood of encountering a range of views and so increase our confidence of generalisability (Neuman, 2000; Whittlemore et al., 2001; Silverman, 1997). However, with a greater number of participants the contact time between participant and researcher will be reduced and the resulting data may be compromised. Simply put, this decision must strike a careful balance between prioritising richness, quality and thoroughness or diversity, quantity and generality. It was decided that 20-30 participants would be sufficient for the research goals here. In anticipation of participant drop-out I invited 32 to take part. This number, however, was not only arrived at with reference to advice from the literature. For several participants, it became clear that they would be happy to take part in friendship groups. In some cases, this meant that I had to invite more pupils than originally intended.

During participant recruitment, I aimed to invite a diverse group of pupils to be involved in the study. I aimed for diversity in terms of physical activity levels, gender, ethnicity, sporting ability, body type, and socio-economic status. Age remained consistent as all participants were in their third year of secondary school (13-14 years old). The basic rationale for diversity was to reduce the particularity of findings and increase the generalisability of the implications. Moreover, diversity was an attempt to gain access to a wider range of subjectivities and knowledge of social structures. Diversity would encourage, but not ensure, a wider set of perspectives to be heard. To guide this participant diversity, I used several strategies. I asked as many pupils as possible (N=184) to complete a self-report questionnaire (amended PAQ-C) as a rough measure of physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Although we might be critical of

the limitations of self-report physical activity questionnaires, the data was useful as merely a recruitment strategy. A brief analysis of this data however, enabled me to classify pupils as high, medium and low for physical activity and high, medium and low for sedentary behaviour. A tick-box on the PAQ-C was included for pupils' eligibility for free school meals. This was then used as a proxy for low socio-economic status<sup>3</sup>. One of the four schools recruited was a private, fee-paying school. Attendance at this school was used as a proxy for high socio-economic status. Another tick-box on the questionnaire provided information on ethnic origin. Additionally, PE lessons for one class in each school were observed for 3 weeks. This enabled me to identify pupils as members of friendship groups and to roughly classify pupils in terms of their engagement/enjoyment of PE. The final and perhaps most sensitive characteristic for recruitment, was that of body type. My interest in body type stems from the literature that suggests obese and overweight pupils potentially feel objectified and marginalized by body weight messages imbedded in PE and wider pedagogy. For me to investigate this issue, it was important to recruit pupils who might be considered overweight or obese. I did not take height and weight measurements in consideration of pupils' sensitivity and instead simply relied on rough personal judgment. Participants did not know that they were being recruited on the basis of these characteristics.

From the 184 pupils who completed the PAC-Q, 32 pupils were invited to take part in the study, of which 29 accepted with parental consent. The group of 29 participants included physical activity diversity (including 5 high active, 8 low activity, 4 high sedentary), mixed gender (16 boys, 13 girls), ethnic diversity (21 white, 3 south-Asian, 4 mixed race, 1 black), socio-economic diversity (7 from private school, 22 from state schools, 5 eligible for free school meals), body type diversity (a range of body types including 4 pupils who might commonly be considered overweight). However, not all participants were able and willing to take part in the study equally. The contribution of each participant to the data set was not uniform, with some pupils being involved in the whole study and others only attending a small number of discussions. Participant retention was, perhaps, an unavoidable issue given the time consuming nature of the study. Table 3 illustrates what contributions were made in order to clarify

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<sup>3</sup> See Hobbes and Vignoles (2010) on evaluation of FSM as a proxy for socio-economic status

Table 3. Showing participant's contribution to data set (continues on next page)

		Interviews attended	PE observations	Photographs contributed	Videos contributed	Involvement in Collaborative Action Research
Woodley Grange High School	Angie	4	2	4	-	Angie
	Hali	5	2	-	-	Hali Working Group (1)
	Gemma	4	1	-	-	Gemma Attempted change of school PE practices
	Naomi	6	2	7	-	Naomi
	Amy	-	1	-	1	- (did not contribute)
	Callum	6	3	8	1	Callum Working Group (2)
	Robert	6	3	-	-	Robert Organised a lunchtime 'Sports Club' in school
Grove Hill High School	Lawrence	6	4	2	1	Lawrence
	Rhys	5	4	4	5	Rhys Working Group (3)
	Millie	2	4	-	-	Millie Delivered a one-off lesson for Girls Football and Boys Ultimate Frisbee to year 7 pupils
	Keely	1	4	-	-	Keely
	Chrissy	1	3	-	-	- (did not contribute)
	Keith	10	3	1	-	- (did not contribute)
	Michael	9	3	-	-	- (did not contribute)

Table 3. Showing participant's contribution to data set (continued)

		Interviews attended	PE observations	Photographs contributed	Videos contributed	Involvement in Collaborative Action Research	
St Andrews High School	Emily	4	1	-	-	Emily	
	James	3	2	-	-	James	Working Group (4) Organised a school-wide 'Physical Activity Week'
	Richard	4	-	1	-	Richard	
	Jake	4	-	-	-		(did not contribute)
	Shelly	2	1	-	-		(did not contribute)
	Jessica	2	2	-	-		(did not contribute)
	Mollie	3	2	-	-		(did not contribute)
	Samhita	3	2	-	-		(did not contribute)
King Edwards Grammar School	Amal	9	3	10	-	Amal	
	Aaron	7	3	22	3	Aaron	
	Freddy	10	3	-	-	Freddy	Working Group (5) Various attempts to change personal habits
	Aja	7	3	1	-	Aja	
	Andrew	7	3	-	-	Andrew	
	Graham	4	3	5	-		(did not contribute)
	Henry	6	3	9	-		(did not contribute)

the involvement of each participant. As shown in table 3, there were far fewer participants taking part towards the end of the process. For the purposes of this study, this diversity was sufficient.

### *A bricolage approach*

Bricolage is an approach ensuring that otherwise unscientific and unstructured occurrences in the field of data production do not go unrecorded and unnoticed. A methodological framework developed from Claude Levi-Strauss, the French word, *bricoleur*, describes a handyman or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task (Kincheloe, 2005). This idea resonates with the necessarily complex nature of this study. Importantly, the concept of the bricolage allows for an acceptance of an interdisciplinary perspective. As Kincheloe (2005, p.682) explains;

bricolage is concerned not only with multiple methods of inquiry but with diverse theoretical and philosophical notions of the various elements encountered in the research act. Bricoleurs understand that the ways the dynamics are addressed—whether overtly or tacitly—exerts profound influence on the nature of the knowledge produced by researchers.

The methodological eclecticism within this study should not, however, be confused with epistemological inconsistency. Throughout data collection I remained committed to the notion of letting the question guide the method (Whaley and Krane, 2011) rather than letting the method guide the question. Following Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 15) I subscribed to the notion that one's epistemology "does not dictate what specific data collection and data analytic methods researchers must use". As Sparkes (1992, p.89) contends, "the techniques of research are flexible and no method of data collection is inherently linked to any one world view". While some literature outlines a somewhat dogmatic explanation of how the research process ought to be linearly structured based on fundamental assumptions, others would suggest it is important not to be driven by "purist paradigmatic alignment" (Whittemore et al., 2001, p.523). Feyerabend, in his most influential book *Against Method* (1993), advocated a level of methodological anarchism summarised as follows: "all methodologies have their limitations and the only 'rule' that survives is 'anything goes'" (p. 287). For me, this is not a rejection of the scientific attempt to work with rigour and coherence, rather it is an acknowledgement that rational procedure-led methodologies may result in the

foregrounding of method over knowledge. This has also been critically referred to as ‘methodolotry’ (Chamberlain, 2011) and ‘method fetishism’ (Boudieu and Waquant, 1992). As Feyerabend declares, “science is enriched by unscientific methods and unscientific results, while procedures which have often been regarded as essential parts of science are quietly suspended or circumvented”. My justification for using a bricolage approach rests on the knowledge that an inherently open system of social experience requires an open system of scientific research.

In practicality, the fundamental implication for incorporating the bricolage is the notion that multiple methods in conjunction can be revealing and complimentary, rather than confusing and incoherent. In fact, this approach suggests that a combination of methods might be more useful than using any single method. Given that different methods produce different data and in turn emphasise different components in social phenomena, it may be suggested that using multiple methods can reduce this ‘method-centred’ bias. After all, seeing the world through one set of methodological lenses could be a distortive process. As Blaikie (2000, p.51) puts it, “there is no one ideal way to gain knowledge of the social world. All approaches and strategies involve assumptions, judgements and compromises all are claims to have deficiency”. From this point of view, it is not only helpful to use different methods at the appropriate time but also to use different methods at the same time. Several different technical methods were used in this study including interviews, focus groups, participant observations, participant diaries, video diaries, photo elicitation and ethnography. Collaborative Action Research was used in a fairly unstructured way and largely depended on participant preference. Furthermore, the research process also involved spontaneous developments which demanded unexpected use of methods within a certain situated context. Additionally, themes and questions emerged from the abductive (oscillating between inductive and deductive) process of data collection and reflection. As a result, the implemented study could be considered (by some) as unstructured and unscientific. However, these unplanned observations enhanced my understanding of the participants’ social world quite serendipitously and should not be omitted from the research report by virtue of their ‘unscientific’ nature. The following section details the how and why each technique of data production was used. Table 4 illustrates which events of data production took place.

*Table 4.* Showing events of data capture. Each ‘X’ denotes a separate occasion when data was captured.

Recorded discussions	X X X X X X X X X X X X	X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X X	X X X X X X X X X X X X X	X X	X X X X X X X X X X X X	X X X X
Participant photography		X X X X X X X	X X X X X			
Participant video		X X X	X X			
Ethnographic notes	X X X X X X	X X X X X X	X X X X X X	X X X X X X	X X X X X X	X X X X X X
Ethnographic photography					X X X X	X X X
Collaborative action research					X X X	X
Dec 2011	Jan 2012	Feb 2012	Mar 2012	Apr 2012	May 2012	Jun 2012



### *Recorded discussions*

In contrast to other methods, such as questionnaire surveys, recorded discussions allowed for a more meaningful interrogation of participants' experiences. This method placed the young people at the heart of the investigation and aimed to allow them to express their experiences of these complex sociological phenomena (Veal, 2006), and aimed to provide rich and illuminating data (Lincoln and Guba, 1994). Giving the participants the opportunity to articulate their own feelings, motives and thoughts was a valuable practice (Thomas et al. 2011) and one which aided my attempt to understand phenomena from the perspective of the participants (King, 2004). Moreover, this process enabled me to seek clarification and elaboration with the use of probes where necessary (Gratton and Jones, 2010). Discussions in larger groups had the benefit of generating a greater amount and variety of data (David and Sutton, 2004), as well as helping diffuse power relations between myself and the participants. This was especially important considering the age of the participants and the usual, expected role of adults in the school environment. It should also be noted that other measures were also taken to diminish some of the potential social barriers, for example through wearing casual clothes, simplifying language used and bringing biscuits and refreshments. It would, however, be naïve to claim that these minor measures succeeded in diminishing social barriers. Inevitably, power relations do often exist between researchers and participants (Alex and Hammarstrom, 2008). Interviews have been described as an "unnatural situation" for which the interviewer must take responsibility (Ribbens, 1989). Even in more 'naturalistic' research settings, power relationships between adults/children, males/females, Whites/Blacks/Asians etc. would have to be negotiated and taken into consideration. Elwood and Martin (2000) highlight that the interview *site* also influences the positionality of the interviewee in relation to what is discussed in the interview. Conducting interviews in school and asking questions about school may have added to the challenge.

As table 3 illustrates, the corpus of data consists of 60 recorded discussions (approximately 21 hours in total) transcribed verbatim. These recorded discussions took place throughout the 7 month period but were mostly carried out in the early stages. Due to constraints imposed by child protection policy and the university ethics committee, discussions were not conducted one-to-one. Discussions took place with two participants (28/55), three participants (12/55), four participants (10/55), five

participants (3/55), six participants (2/55). Fifty two discussions took place in an allocated meeting room, 2 took place while walking in the playground and 1 took place while observing a PE lesson that the participants were excused from. Most discussions were loosely structured around a topic which I introduced (e.g. PE lessons, leisure time activities), but some discussions involved specific tasks such as commenting on photos (photo elicitation task) (see Frith and Harcourt, 2007; Collier, 1957), drawing a map of localised lunchtime activities (map drawing task) and writing down the words which come to mind following a prompt (word association task). These tasks were used to stimulate discussion on topics related to the study.

On reflection, the most ‘successful’ discussions (defined perhaps as the discussions which elicited the most rich, quality data) were those where participants were not simply responding to questions, but instead entered into a meaningful conversation. This was better achieved later in the interview process once a relationship between myself and participants had been established. Furthermore, I feel that this was most effectively achieved when participants got something out of the process themselves. Much research which positions participants as objects of science inherently benefits the research and not the participants. From the outset, it was made clear to participants that the outcome of this project was to implement change in order to improve something about PE, sport or physical activity for them. With this goal at the center of the study, some (not all) participants seemed to feel involved in the process, willing to participate and genuinely interested in the conversation. In contrast, other participants were somewhat disengaged and good data was more difficult to come by. These participants, for example, were pupils who saw the recorded discussions as an opportunity to be excused from PE or singing lessons or saw it as a compulsory activity as implied by the fact that teachers asked if they would like to participate (in spite of my explicit statements to the contrary). In these cases it was more difficult to build rapport and ‘authentic’ conversations (if there is such a thing) were few and far between. I took this into account when interpreting the data. During the analysis, for example, I would be careful not to take phrases out of context and also reflect on whether participants were meaningfully engaged in the conversation or not. In interviews, as in all conversations, it is quite likely that things are often said for the sake of conversation. I found this difficult to do and do not claim to have solved the problem, only that I was conscious of it.

### *Visual methods*

Visual methods are increasingly being used by social scientists as a way of better understanding the social world (Phoenix, 2010). They have been put to good use in a range of qualitative research for young people as a way of ‘seeing the world’ through the eyes of participants (Woodley-Baker, 2009; Gravestock, 2009; Phoenix, 2010; MacPhail and Kinchin, 2004; Azzarito, 2010; Azzarito and Sterling, 2010). Qualitative researchers using visual data often argue that the visual culture which we experience sometimes ought to be represented as a visual world. That is, to explain a visual image in words would be to distort it through language. In their use of visual diaries, Azzarito and Sterling (2010) claim that photography for young people provides a medium which enables them to communicate a ‘way of seeing’ which might otherwise go unseen. Visual methods, then, are an opportunity to convey meanings that are distinctly visual and need not be interpreted through language. Of course, to claim that visual methods are a *better* way of conveying experience would be problematic. I do not consider visual methods to be epistemically superior to language, but rather auxiliary to language.

Visual methods were introduced to the participants roughly 8 weeks into the research study. Participants were provided with digital cameras to take home for one week each and were essentially asked to ‘show me’ aspects of physical activity in their lives, as opposed to ‘tell me’. I described some examples of what participants might capture but beyond this, very little direction was given. A total of 95 still photos and 11 video clips of varying lengths were taken (7 minutes 20 seconds in total). On many occasions, photos were brought back to the recorded discussion context and participants were asked to explain and elaborate on their pictures. This is called photo elicitation and has been used during research with children by others (Meo, 2010; Clarke, 1999, Hill and Azzarito, 2012). Participants were asked simple questions like, “why did you take this photo?” and “what is important about this photo?” On other occasions, the visual data was self-explanatory and required no verbal explanation. This was the case when elements of their lives were perhaps better expressed in visual form.

In practice, there were aspects of this technique that were of value to the research aims and aspects that were not. One key reason why I found cameras useful

was that it enabled data capture outside of the school context where I was otherwise confined. Although participants were always encouraged to discuss topics outside of school, group discussions tended to focus on the familiar territory of school experiences. This perhaps highlights the influence of the site and space in which interviews are conducted. In other ways, however, I found that the use of cameras did not add much to the research aims. Some pupils were unsure what was being asked of them as I was unable to provide examples. Some pupils were worried about damaging the cameras and didn't actually use them (Robert, Woodley Grange High School). Other pupils simply used the cameras for play and took pictures and images unrelated to the topic. In cases where I suspected photographs were unrelated to the topic, I checked with the participant before disregarding that photograph before analysis.

### *Ethnography*

Ethnographic methods were helpful in gaining further insight into the physical activity and sedentary behaviours of the participants and to gain insight into the school-level structural issues. In addition to the other methods, ethnography allowed me to observe and participate in the experiences which are perhaps not available second-hand (Howe, 2008). Factors such as environment in the school yard, group dynamics in the PE class or safety on the walk home from school will be much more tangible through first-hand ethnographic observations. Through ethnography, this research can attend to the naturally occurring behaviours in the ongoing everyday lives of young people (DuFon, 2002). The peculiarity of interview situations and the inevitable power relations which may exist between adult-interviewer and child-interviewee on a school site, encouraged me to consider different available methods. An ethnographic approach can go some way to resolving these issues. Traditionally, the ethnographic researcher would immerse his/herself in the community and learn more about the experiences of the participant by experiencing cultural practices first hand (Berg and Lune, 2004). It is an important method of being accepted by the participants on a personal level due to the frequent and active engagement with the setting (Barbour, 2008). Foley, (1990, p.215) makes a similar reflection saying, "we started out being rather passive participant-observers, asking few questions, and we ended up actively involved in the community events, people's lives, and animated conversations". Of course, being accepted into the social world of year nine pupils was not possible. Again, Foley recalls "a researcher can

probably never be a friend or be open in the same sense that real members of a family community can". While this was the case, I was able to actively participate in school life through volunteering for various different roles; school visitor, PE lesson observer, PE teaching assistant, Health and PSD lesson observer, action research collaborator and inter-school athletics competition official (see table 5). A valuable asset of ethnographic methods was the sensitivity to otherwise taken-for-granted norms, values and practices at the schools. Prosser (2007, p.14) describes this as the "unconscious culture of the school".

The ethnographic techniques were used were ongoing throughout the whole study. The data set included ethnographic notes, 5 ethnographic still digital photographs and 8 ethnographic video clips (7 minutes 20 seconds in total). Note taking was done following participant observations in PE lessons and Health and Personal Development (HPD) lessons. Ethnographic notes were also made following my engagement with the school community as a lunchtime volunteer (clearing tables and supervising during lunch in the dinner hall), as a teaching assistant in PE and as an official at two inter-school athletics competitions. Table 5 clarifies the roles I took during this ethnography and how frequently I occupied these roles. Visual data was also gathered using photography and video to capture meaningful school imagery. Video was also used to capture the experience of the walk to school for two sites in order to gain first-hand sensory experience of the daily journey that participants took.

To provide a brief reflection on the ethnography used in this study, I should say that this method had its values and its shortcomings. The greatest benefit of using ethnography was that it augmented and contextualized what participants were telling me and showing me during other methods. Being able to observe things for myself allowed for a greater appreciation of what participants were telling me. Indeed, being able to experience things for myself had the same effect. As data on its own, I would suggest that ethnographic notes have little value in this particular study. Ethnography has significant limitations when studying young people's lives partially due to the inaccessibility of the participants. Understandable concerns for child protection meant that it was not possible or appropriate for me to spend large amounts of time with groups of young people as most ethnography demands. For this reason, opportunities for ethnographic data were better used to briefly contextualize data from recorded discussion rather than attempt to fully understand young people's experience firsthand.

Table 5. Showing various roles taken during ethnographic observations

Woodley Grange High School	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor
			-	PE lesson observer			-	PE lesson observer	-	PE teaching assistant	-	Action research collaborator
Grove Hill High School	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor
	-	PE lesson observer			-	PE lesson observer	-	Dining hall volunteer	-	PE lesson observer		-
St Andrew High School	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor
			-	PE lesson observer	-	PE lesson observer			-	Health and Personal Development lesson observer	-	Action research collaborator
King Edwards Grammar School	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor	-	School visitor
	-	PE lesson observer	-	PE lesson observer					-	Action research collaborator	-	Inter-school athletics competition official
<div><div>Dec 2011</div><div>Jan 2012</div><div>Feb 2012</div><div>Mar 2012</div><div>Apr 2012</div><div>May 2012</div><div>Jun 2012</div></div>												

### *Collaborative Action Research*

A collaborative action research design was included for several reasons. Firstly, there has been a shift in physical education research focusing on students as research *subjects* (rather than *objects*) which has helped develop a student perspective and ‘voice’ (Burrows et al., 2002; Enright and Sullivan, 2012; Graham, 1995; Hastie, 2000). However, student involvement in research has also begun to position students as active engagers in the research process itself (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2012; Fitzgerald & Jobling, 2004; Oliver and Lalik, 2004). Furthermore, given that many studies claim that student empowerment and choice is an important factor for PE engagement (Brooker and Macdonald, 1999; Oliver and Oesterreich, 2013) I was interested in exploring this idea with regards to physical activity promotion. Given the frequent failures of ‘expert’ interventions to increase physical activity for young people, I considered it reasonable to ask “how would they do it?” Action research is not easily defined (Evans et al., 2000; Tinning, 1992) but involves a deliberate and planned intent to intervene into one’s own practice (McMahon, 1999). Embedded in the ideological understanding of *praxis*, whereby social action can give rise to social knowledge (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009), the goal of research was to learn something useful through implementing change. As Reason and Bradbury (2001, p.1) describe; “it seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people”. Importantly, action research usually assumes a high degree of participant empowerment – it is never done *on* or *to* them (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

The collaborative action research was introduced to the research process after roughly 5 months. This method involved five independent ‘working groups’, constituted by the same pupils who took part in the earlier parts of research. Each working group was given the following task:

*“Plan and implement a way to promote physical activity for you and your peers”*

Weekly meetings were held to develop projects and reflect on the success of those projects. The action research led to: (1) a change in the structure of girls PE (2) a well attended lunchtime 5-a-side football club (3) an ultimate frisbee and year 7 mentoring session (4) a school wide physical activity week (5) a failed attempt at lunchtime boxing club. Reflections were recorded as ethnographic notes and participant

recordings where appropriate. Table 3 (p.50-51) clarifies which pupils were involved in each of the 'working groups' and table 6 (p.63) summarizes what each project entailed. As this part of the research process involved a more proactive involvement from participants, I issued an informal invitation to the remaining pupils. The invitation consisted of a meeting with the pupils explaining their commitment to a once-a-week meeting to plan, implement and reflect on a form of physical activity promotion of their choice. After 10 participants declined the invitation citing time commitments, there remained fifteen participants across the four schools. Good participant diversity was retained across physical activity level (4 reporting high PA, 7 reporting low PA), gender (8 males, 7 females) and ethnicity (1 black, 3 south Asian, 1 mixed race, 10 white). In three of the schools, pupils from separate discussion groups were combined to form a single 'working group'. In one school (Woodley Grange) the two discussion groups remained separate as all participants agreed to take part. The process of action research for this present study was recorded with ethnographic notes and reflective discussions with the participants.

There were, of course, benefits and limitations to this method too. Positively, the decision making process involved in project planning served to produce some interesting data relevant to the research questions. Decisions about which physical activity promotion ideas ought to be immediately dismissed and which ought to be pursued highlighted the various social barriers and constraints involved when trying to be physically active. These decisions, for example, pivoted around questions such as whether to promote physical activity through sport or through other forms of exercise? Or which activities would be most popular? Or which pupils would be likely to attend? These discussions, I suggest, were valuable in recording how young people make decisions about their physical activity. Presumably, the decisions that were made during the planning of each project somewhat reflected the decisions that young people make in their everyday lives.

It is worth noting that this part of the research study was intended to be a more prominent phase of data collection. Being rather convinced by the literature on 'student voice' and 'empowerment' I was initially very optimistic about the potential of action research to help young people become more physically active. In the end, however, I would be surprised if the projects had any impact on the physical activity levels of the



*Table 6.* Showing the five collaborative action research (CAR) projects

<b>CAR group</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Project objectives</b>	<b>Actual implementation</b>
Working Group 1, Woodley Grange High School (a)	Four female pupils One researcher	Improve enjoyment of PE lessons for girls	Held meeting with PE staff resulting in: (a) student input into curriculum activities (b) student designed PE kit (c) highlighted a concern for teaching quality (d) amended assessment procedures
Working Group 2, Woodley Grange High School (b)	Two male pupils One researcher	Provide an inclusive opportunity for peers to be physically active	Student-run lunchtime sports club ran for 6 weeks with 8-12 regular attendees
Working Group 3, Grove Hill High School	Two male pupils, two female pupils, One member of staff (student support) One researcher	Encourage new pupils to make the most of physically active opportunities at school	Delivered a one-off Ultimate Frisbee and girls football session to year 7 pupils
Working Group 5, King Edward Grammar School for Boys	Five male pupils One researcher	Find an enjoyable leisure time physical activity	Various unsuccessful attempts
Working Group 6, St Andrews High School	Two male pupils, one female pupil, one member of staff (teaching) One researcher	Raise awareness of physical activity opportunities during school	Implemented a school-wide “physical activity week” promoting lunchtime activities with posters and classroom announcements

young people at all. Of course, this does not render the process pointless from a research perspective. The process simply shifted towards a way of gaining understanding about how physical activity might fit into young people's lives through combining theory and practice. This shift is reflected in the narrative of this thesis which frames the collaborative action research as a part of the bricolage approach rather than a separate intervention phase, which otherwise may have been. For the purpose of data production, whether the projects were actually successful or not in increasing physical activity did not matter. The discussion and reflection about why the projects were successful or not was what mattered. As such, this collaborative action research was a worthwhile method to employ as part of this study. However, this method was more worthwhile in some working groups than others. The boys at King Edwards Grammar, for example, never fully committed to their project ideas. There seemed to be, at least, two good reasons for their lack of engagement. Firstly, by this point in the research, participants had already committed much of their free time to this study and some seemed to have lost interest. Secondly, the idea of a project to increase physical activity is only appealing to those pupils who desired to do physical activity but were constrained in some way, not those pupils who had no desire to do physical activity in the first place.

So as I have explained, the methods of data production involved several different techniques but are tied together by research aims and research questions (see section 2.4, p.29). I have justified this as being part of a 'bricolage' approach, making use of every available 'tool' depending on the demands of the study and its participants.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: INTERPRETATION OF DATA**

Now that I have provided an overview of the data production process, it is important to explain how data was interpreted. The purpose of this chapter is essentially to make clear how I have arrived at certain findings from the data at hand. By including this section I explicitly acknowledge that the production of a text involves a significant amount of interpretive work. After all, the findings chapters of this thesis do not simply mirror the data, and nor does the data simply mirror reality. Chamberlain et al., (2011, p.164) remind us that interviews, photographs and videos “have no meaning in and of themselves; they need to be told and interpreted”. Embedded in the production of research findings are a number of practical and intellectual mechanisms which work on and with the data. As a result, findings are perhaps better regarded as moments of thinking which have produced this particular text – one text in a range of possible others. Instead of attempting to conceal these mechanisms and claim that my findings represent an objective reality, this section aims to make them transparent. This is not to go as far as to say that my findings are merely idiosyncratic accounts of phenomena which have no ontological basis at all, only that there are unavoidable epistemological fallacies involved in the research process which are better made transparent than be hidden behind a veil of scientific authority. To explain the processes at work, I draw on Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000) account which describes a tripartite relationship between the corpus of data, the interpreting researcher and the research community. In *Towards a Reflexive Methodology* (2000) they stress the importance of reflexivity in ensuring that research findings avoid the problematic domination of any one of these three. They write:

The process of construction demands something to construct (out there, so long as we are not talking about pure objects of fantasy), a constructing subject (the researcher) and a social context that constructs the researcher (society, language, paradigms, the local research community). To put it simply: reflexivity in the research context, means paying attention to these aspects without letting any one of them dominate. In other words, it is a question of avoiding empiricism, narcissism and different varieties of social and linguistic reductionism (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, p.246).

In order to properly attend to all three concerns this chapter includes an overview of the data followed by three sections; thinking with the data, thinking as a researcher, thinking with theory. Hopefully this will clarify how I have moved from data to findings in this thesis and show that interpretation is a matter of technical work

(organising and coding), theoretical work (using theoretical perspectives) and reflexive work (remaining self conscious throughout).

#### **4.1 Thinking with the data**

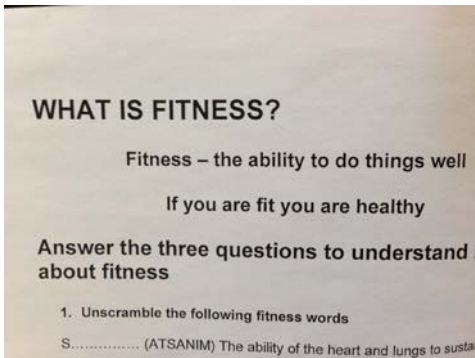
I begin with *thinking with the data* (instead of *thinking with theory* and *thinking reflexively*) because I consider it the primary concern. While the influence of theory and the interpreting researcher must be recognized, by my reasoning they must remain ancillary modes of knowledge production. By raising the status of theory, one risks the research becoming simply a canvas on which to paint pre-established theoretical concepts (Tomlie and Rouncefield, 2013). Similarly, focusing on reflexive interpretations might be criticized for being, merely idiosyncratic individual interpretations and, at the other end, self-indulgent autobiography. In recognition of the primary importance of data, I will explain how my interpretation ‘emerged’ from the body of data at hand. To do this I will outline how the data was organised, reduced and coded to themes.

The data set was stored and organised in the *NVivo 9* software programme before systematic analysis began. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself which provided a preliminary opportunity to re-listen to the conversations after a period of time since conducting the interviews. Once all data was compiled and organised into categories describing its type and source (interview audio, participant photo, etc.) the technical process of coding and categorizing – for which there is a spectrum of approaches available – began. This technical process is most often performed as part of certain established data analysis procedures. Such procedures include thematic analysis (TA), interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded theory (GT), Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), conversation analysis (CA) and narrative analysis – all of which can be found in contemporary textbooks on qualitative research (Sparkes and Smith, 2013; Bryman and Burgess, 1999; Silverman, 2010). I made the decision not to follow any of these prescribed procedures. My decision was based on a concern for ‘off-the-shelf’ methodologies and their inherent alignment with particular theories. As was argued in my justification of data collection methods in the previous chapter, these procedures carry with them a set of assumptions which have enormous value in highlighting certain aspects of the

phenomena but simultaneously *constrain* what can be made visible. Remaining consistent with the bricolage approach taken in data production which allows for the opportunity to use whatever analytic ‘tools’ that are available and place the responsibility on the researcher, not the methodology textbook, I chose to allow a combination of ideas to influence the coding process. Coding, then, became a principle-driven task aiming to identify moments in the data that reveal something relevant for the aims of the research.

This initially was simply a process of data reduction. The first stage involved coding data at ‘nodes’ denoting what topic the data refers to. These nodes began being broad and general with the knowledge that they would be returned later for more detail interrogation. For example, the following interview quote: “I’d say I’m quite healthy. I like to do a couple of sit ups at night before I go to bed” (Richard, St Andrews High School) was coded simply with the node “health”. In this respect, as with coding commonly described in the methods literature, coding was ‘iterative’ and often ‘messy’ (Froggatt, 2001). At times it was unclear how a particular bit of data should be coded, or even if it should be included in the coding process at all. Indeed, the quote above could have coded as ‘exercise’ ‘motivation’ or in a number of other ways. It should also be said that this data reduction was carried out first, but also returned to on occasions when I spontaneously recalled particular moments of data that might be relevant, although were not originally coded. This first stage of coding was somewhat resonant of thematic analysis. Segments of transcript and visual data were coded by themes which were considered relevant. These themes were sometimes broad (such as *PE*, *health*, *leisure time*) and sometimes more specific (such as *competitiveness*, *boredom*, *the Olympics*). To provide an example, Table 7 (p.69) shows how raw data was abstracted into the higher order theme ‘health as fitness’. Savage (2000) notes that thematic analysis can be seen as data reduction if codes are kept at the general level, but also as data expansion through the inclusion of multiple interpretive codes. The end goal was to develop categories and concepts that would be helpful and meaningful in the explanation of the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). It should also be said that this process could be described as ‘abductive’ and perhaps even ‘retroductive’. These terms acknowledge that both inductive and deductive thinking can be helpful (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and that there is a process of thinking ‘backwards’ to consider what

Table 7. Showing the construction of the ‘health as fitness’ theme

Raw data	Early theme	Established theme
<i>Richard:</i> I’d say I’m quite healthy. I like to do a couple of sit ups at night before I go to bed	Exercising perceived as healthy activity	Health as fitness
<i>GW:</i> how healthy would you guys say you are? <i>Aaron:</i> not very! I run up stairs and I get puffed out – I have to go and lie down!	Being out of breathe perceived as sign of poor health	
 <p>[image taken from student PE booklet]</p>	Directly equating fitness with health	

must have been true for the past event to have been possible (Easton, 2010). This on-going process resulted in the clustering of themes and the emergence of hierarchal categories.

## **4.2 Thinking with theory**

Data analysis is not simply the reporting of observation, but also the application of theory to observation. Although this part of the interpretation of data is presented after *thinking with the data*, it does not, in practicality, follow sequentially. Rather, it occurs simultaneously and inseparably. As the purpose of this chapter is to clarify how the data developed into fully formed ideas it is important to explain how theory was used. This might be of particular interest in order to justify the findings chapters of this thesis which, more or less, take the position of different theoretical perspectives: Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice (habitus and capital) and Dave Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles. A justification and explanation of this stage of the thesis may be necessary.

Social science often relies on theory to draw meaningful conclusions from research. Indeed, it might be suggested that no research is 'theory neutral'. For Willig (2013, p.19) "a data set can tell us about a number of different things, depending on the questions we ask of it." For this reason, the interpretation of data in this PhD study was inherently theoretical and should be acknowledged as such. Operating through a Critical Realist epistemology, I consider knowledge available from empirical observation to be fallible and incomplete. In order to move beyond descriptive science offered in simply presenting the data, it is important to consider social activity in the domains of the 'actual' (concerning actual events) and the 'real' (concerning causes and mechanisms) – in accordance with critical realism. Put another way, I would frame empirical data in the domain of the *actual* and theory in the domain of the *real*. Considering social activity above the level of pure empiricism is essential for explaining social activity, hence this task requires the use of social theory. For example, the Foucauldian notion of discourse and its relationship with power and knowledge is fundamentally theoretical as it adds explanation (theoretical) to description (empirical). Bourdieu's concept of capital can be considered in the same way. Both are explanations of the causal mechanism present in social systems that manifest in the empirically



observable social activities of talk, action and experience. Both allow us to view the empirical world in different ways. In this way, data analysis is reliant on theory to understand empirical data and is reliant on empirical data to understand theory.

Various metaphors are often used to describe the work that theory does to make research intelligible such as “lens” – implying that theory enables observations to be seen in a particular way, and “framework” – implying that theory is the scaffolding upon which an explanation is built. In this analysis, I prefer to use the metaphor of “plugging in” offered by Jackson and Mazzei (2013). With this particular metaphor, Jackson and Mazzei explore the implications of using different theories in one research question and highlight that data and theory can be seen as two texts and, once plugged in to each other, produce a certain kind of meaning. They offer three manoeuvres for plugging in:

1. Putting philosophical concepts to work via disrupting the theory/practice binary by decentering each and instead showing how they constitute or make one another;
2. Being deliberate and transparent in what analytical questions are made possible by a specific theoretical concept (e.g., deconstruction or performativity) and how the questions that are used to think with emerged in the middle of “plugging in;” and
3. Working the same “data chunks” repeatedly to “deform [them], to make [them] groan and protest” (Foucault, 1980, p. 22-23) with an overabundance of meaning, which in turn not only creates new knowledge but also shows the suppleness of each when plugged in.

(Jackson and Mazzei, 2013, p.264)

With these three manoeuvres, plugging in to theory (indeed different theories) can reveal new knowledge in ways that a single theory might not allow. In my interpretation of the data I have plugged the data into three main theories. These are; Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice (habitus and capital) and Dave Elder-Vass’s theory of norm circles. These theories, more or less, form the structure of the findings chapters that follow. To some, this could be seen as somewhat unorthodox as interpreting data from multiple perspectives evokes concerns for ‘coherence’ and ‘compatibility’. Writing about analytic pluralism, Bloor (1997, in Frost 2009) suggests that discrepancies between perspectives are ‘not resolvable’. If there are paradigmatic differences between perspectives, I would be inclined to agree or

at least agree that much philosophical work would need to be done to make the findings sensible. However, for this present study I would be more inclined to agree with Frost (2009) in understanding that multiple analyses adds texture to the interpretation and offers knowledge that would not be possible with one method alone. The combination of different theories in the PhD study, therefore, does not fail on the basis of validity; rather, it adds value by opening possible interpretations. I will offer some reflection on the value of this approach in the concluding chapter. What is more, following my experience of using these multiple perspectives I would question the credibility of a status quo which endorses research from the perspective of one theory/theorist. A critical concern here is over how theoretical-monism could encourage the self-perpetuating reinforcement of theories by asking questions, collecting data and analysing data from a single perspective. Feminist researchers may analyse a text and draw out the gender inequality in social life; linguists may analyse a text and conclude that language is central to human experience; and narrative theorists may analyse a text and reveal that stories are important for understanding the self in social context. Theoretical approaches usually follow their corresponding analytical procedure. Narrative theory, for example, utilises narrative analysis which, while maintaining credibility with epistemological consistency, is at risk of producing a ‘hall of mirrors’ effect whereby knowledge is inwardly reflected and perpetually self-affirming. Frost and Nolas (2011, p.116) provide a helpful example:

a study on motherhood (to use the example that launched our own forage into pluralism) would not be a choice between a focus on either identity or issues of power or a choice of either a narrative approach or a discursive one. Instead it would be a study that looked at both identity and issues of power, as well as the ways in which meaning around both is constructed and everyday life negotiated (thus drawing on a range of analytical approaches such as narrative and discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis as well as perhaps grounded theory).

By plugging in to different theories the interpretation of data can disrupt and challenge this outcome.

So different theories ask different questions and do different interpretive work. The resulting interpretations, as will be seen in the findings chapters that follow, means that the same moment of data is read in different ways. As a result, the same data appears more than once in difference findings chapters. However, plugging in to different theories often focuses on parts of data which were otherwise ignored by a

different theoretical perspective. Again, as the following findings chapters will show, different theoretical perspectives seldom actually deal with the exact same empirical events. Instead they focus on the events that they have the capacity to explain. In this work, empirical events that relate to messages about health, for example, are discussed through Foucauldian concepts (knowledge, control, biopolitics etc.), and empirical events that relate to how pupils learn the acceptability of actions are discussed through Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles. This approach required constant reflexivity to decide which theory (or theories) should be used and could be used at various moments in the data. To make this possible I drew on the concept of the 'bricolage' which was put to use during data collection. That is, I made use of whichever theoretical tools were available in order to complete the task (Kincheloe, 2005); rather than being driven by one theory, the research is driven by research questions.

While I claim to be following a bricolage approach to analysis instead of following any prescribed analysis in particular, there were of course notable similarities with established analytical procedures. When thinking with Foucauldian theory, my analysis is somewhat resonant with discourse analysis. In line with discourse analysis, my aim was to understand the meaning and significance of spoken words and visual communication present in the data. Discourse analysis provides a different focus to other approaches allowing scrutiny of symbolism, metaphor and meaning. In this context, discourse does not just refer to the set of ideas spoken by the individual but views those ideas as part of a system through which power and social practices are present (McGannon and Spence, 2012). Burck (2005, p.248) explains that "a basic tenet of discourse analysis is that people use language to construct versions of the social world; that language is not a neutral and transparent medium through which people are able to express themselves, but is constitutive". Crucially, through discourse analysis researchers are able to contextualise the text within wider culturally available discourses highlighting the social repertoires used to make sense of the world. Discourse analysis has been widely used in the current literature (McGannon and Schinke, 2013; McEvilly et al., 2012; Svender et al., 2011). Lee and Macdonald (2010), for example, used discourse analysis to investigate how young women's reproductions of healthism discourse were affiliated with differing kinds of cultural capital and social power. Furthermore, McEvilly et al. (2012) carried out a discourse analysis of curriculum documents in an attempt to reveal how health and wellbeing is constructed

in Physical Education. The attention to discourse for this PhD study is intended to identify and unravel the language that performs active work on the construction of knowledge and power. Further, attempts are made to consider the socio-cultural conditions that make particular discourses possible.

Additionally, at various points when using Bourdieuan concepts, my interpretation was resonant with phenomenological analysis. It should be stressed, however, that at no point would my analysis be recognizable as truly phenomenological since there are major points of departure between Bourdieu and phenomenology (Lau, 2004). However, the usefulness of phenomenology here rests on its emphasis on experience and the body – ideas that are central to Bourdieu and which were adequately visible with the ethnographic methods deployed. Phenomenology, in light of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and Shultz, is concerned with the person's *experience as such*, rather than being concerned with whether the person is right or wrong, or whether the person is in tune with some of actual reality (King et al., 2008). In starting from this constructivist position, phenomenology is immediately in contradiction with Bourdieu's objectivism. This contradiction, I would suggest, is reconcilable in the context of this PhD study if phenomenology is used for epistemological reasons, not ontological ones. That is, one's subjective lived experience can be studied without making claims that subjective lived experience is the only available reality. Ultimately, my interpretation of data applies Bourdieu's objectivist (but not deterministic and reductionist) theory of practice to the phenomenological experiences of participants. In doing so, the analysis shares the common goals of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Eatough 2006; Smith & Osborn 2007). Firstly, my interpretation engaged with the idea of experience, and secondly, it acknowledges the idea of a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith & Osborn, 2007) whereby the researcher must subjectively interpret meaning from the participants' subjective interpretations of experience (Robinson and Smith, 2010). This recognises that in attempting to understand participants' experiences, the researcher's own horizons of experiences and knowledge are implicated (King et al., 2008). The research questions for this study are, to some extent, interested in the *experience* of physical activity and health *as such* and to actively try and see the world how the participant sees it. Particular elements of the ethnographic work were concerned with understanding what it feels like to be a young person in the current socio-cultural context.

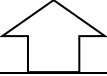
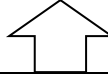
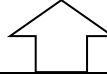
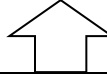
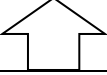

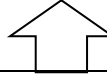

In addition to borrowing ideas from discourse analysis and phenomenological analysis, I also recognize the contribution made from conversation analysis. Although my analytical procedure cannot be adequately compared to conversation analysis in its prescribed form – a process which requires detailed annotated transcriptions (see Stokoe and Smithson, 2001, for an example of the Jefferson system) and a deep appreciation of discursive psychology (Landridge and Hagger-Johnson, 2009) – I should mention that my analysis involved an appreciation of the fact that social phenomena are made manifest during talk. Some empirical events occurring during talk were able to highlight the existence of certain social processes in a way which would otherwise remain invisible.

So far I have explained that this analysis uses different theories to help interpret the data, and that the use of different theories is justifiable and productive. However, I should briefly explain how theory was used when working with the data. This, again, was essentially a process of data coding. Following the initial general coding (described in the previous section) this stage of coding was explicitly theoretical serving to link empirical data with theoretical concepts (such as *social norms*, *habitus*, *social capital*). This, of course, relied on my own knowledge as it was necessary to identify which events were recognizable to which theory. When theoretical concepts were recognized in the data they were coded as such with further notes or memos added. Eventually, theoretical perspectives emerged as the high order categories and therefore formed the overarching theme of each separate findings chapter. Table 8 illustrates this ordering.

#### **4.3 Thinking reflexively**

Qualitative researchers often take seriously the idea of self-awareness in order to analyse their own preconceptions, personal interpretations and subjective decisions (Burke, 2009; Davis et al., 2000; Frost, 2009). While this consideration is not an attempt to remove personal influence, it does encourage a critical engagement with

Table 8. Showing hierarchal ordering of themes leading to findings chapters

Higher order theme	The social construction of health	Physical Capital	Norm circles and the influence of peers	Habitus and physical activity
				
Established themes	Language of health; policy knowledge; visual bodies; active bodies	Visual body; Physical ability	Social groups; Norms of physical activity; Enforcement; Endorsement	Gender; Class; Sedentary
				
Initial nodes	Fitness; Definitions of health; Fruit and veg; Obesity; Knowledge; Sporty	Fat; Lazy; Disgust; Body; Fitness; Attractive; Embarrassment; Muscly	Friends; Nerds; Techy; Sporty	Girly; Boys; Social class; Symbolic; Deviance; Distinction; Aggression; Calories

researcher bias throughout (Landridge, in King et al., 2008). Although this process is seldom mentioned by others in the literature on data analysis, I feel it would be disingenuous not to appreciate the informal discussions, reading of theoretical literature and supervisory meetings which enabled the development of my thoughts. Although pre-analytic, it should be acknowledged that this process, of course, impacted upon the direction of the research, influenced the choice of theory and hence played a significant part of producing the final text. For some, reflexivity is an ongoing intellectual process which pervades the whole research project. Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000) 'reflexive methodology' is one such example. Others publish autobiographical reflections as part of their study methodologies (Carless and Douglas, 2010) almost as a declaration of honesty about one's own position. For me, reflexivity included keeping a 'log-book' and taking part in a series of recorded discussions with a peer which were recorded and transcribed (see table 9 for extract). The major benefit of this reflexive process was that it brought my position as a research subject into conscious realization and thus allowed me to question and re-consider their effects on the production of knowledge. This position related to a few relevant points about me as a practical researcher carrying out data collection, and as a thinking researcher whose ultimate goal was to generate ideas.

To firstly deal with being a researcher in the field of study, I should draw attention to my becoming astutely aware of my own distinguishing characteristics while in the field of study. The distinguishing characteristics varied in relevance between which participants I was talking to and which topic I was dealing with at any particular moment. When talking about gender to all-girl focus groups, my social position as a male became important; when talking to free school meal recipients about social class, my somewhat middle-class appearance and speech tendencies (as I am told by personal friends) became important. As a result of these potential differences between myself and participants, I consciously did some work in an attempt to build rapport and get 'good' data. This work included strategies such as dressing casually to reduce age and profession-related power relations, playing down my personal enthusiasm for sport, and actively distinguishing myself from teachers so that pupils were confident that conversations would remain confidential. On a more subtle level, I tried to follow advice of attempting to 'blend' with participants but not 'mimic' them (Kreuger, 1994) so as appear more friendly and familiar. On occasions, in contrast, I would maintain my

*Table 9.* Showing excerpt from 1 of 8 reflexive interviews with a peer

Pauline:	So you were saying about the tension between the ethnographic data the sense that you got and the actual data that you have.
Gareth:	Yeah I don't think there's a tension, but it's the... how much I am relying on one or the other. So I think that's kind of... I don't know I suppose I'm swinging between the two. Like how am I confidently going to write something and stand in front of experienced professionals telling them one thing and not having anything to back it up apart from my, this sense I was feeling during this school visit. Or while I was walking through the playground. So I don't... if I've got a nice solid quotations or a picture that really sort of demonstrates something then you feel a bit more confident. You feel people will believe you a little bit more.



distance in the social space in order to get participants to better articulate and explain their point of view as if they were explaining it to someone who has no personal experience of it themselves (this was actually the case on many occasions). Nevertheless, my attempts to position myself in various ways were, obviously, quite limited and I found it difficult to get pupils to talk openly about several topics. Issues regarding race and ethnicity, for example, were challenging and as a result not much data materialised on the matter. If I was not white myself, or perhaps was not carrying out interviews in predominantly white schools, this may have been different. Furthermore, I also found it difficult to talk about body image with visibly overweight pupils. I myself have a slim body type (currently at least) which, I believe, made it more difficult for me to raise and discuss issues of body weight management since doing so may have made participants feel objectified or 'othered'. Although it is quite difficult to guess what might have been different had I been perceived differently by the participants, or indeed if an entirely different researcher was conducting interviews, I would suggest that data on ethnicity and body weight may have been richer.

My inclinations towards certain theoretical positions also may have partially influenced the production of knowledge. I find some theories more persuasive and appealing than others. For example, I find French post-structuralism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and Marxism more appealing than existentialism, cognitive psychology and discursive psychology. I have a political leaning towards the left and a personal interest in gender issues. As I have already explained, theoretical choices profoundly impact how data is interpreted and, therefore, how findings are presented. Throughout this project, for example, there is an entire absence of Deleuzian concepts, Bersteinian concepts, figurational sociology, existentialism, deconstructionism, sensory ethnography and a number of other theoretical devices through which the data would appear quite differently. As such, I should acknowledge here that my navigation through the data production process was constrained (and enabled) by the range of theoretical devices that I, as the researching subject, was willing to engage with. That said, in order to avoid the narcissism that would lead to privileging these personal inclinations above others I sought to continually question whether my own interpretations would be justifiable to others. The goal of critical reflexivity, then, was not to ensure that the knowledge that I produce is valid and reliable, but instead to ensure that I have been thorough, transparent and critical of my own assumptions.

This chapter has explained the significant amount of interpretive work that is involved in producing findings of this kind. The findings chapter that follow are the result of this interpretive work which involved thinking with the data, thinking with theory and thinking reflexively.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HEALTH**

*It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx, 1859).*

This chapter is the first of four chapters that presents findings from this research study. As will become clear, the findings chapters do not report data from separate research stages or research methods, but rather from separate interpreted themes. It was decided to present findings according to these themes towards the end of the data interpretation process outlined in chapter four. The focus of this first chapter is the notion of health as a socially constructed concept. Health, I suggest, is socially constructed through a particular language, the visual body, the active body and through various “technologies of power” (Foucault, 1984). I draw on Foucault’s “technologies of power” to explain the process of governmentality involved in health promotion strategies for young people. The investigation of health as a social construct is important as young people are likely to interpret and understand health in that particular way and apply that understanding to their own and others’ bodies.

Health is a highly contested term and one which is likely to have a range of meanings under constant redefinition (Evans et al., 2008; Matthews, 2013; Pringle and Pringle, 2012; Wright, 2004; Wright et al., 2012). Subjective understanding and, indeed, *experience* of health relies crucially on culturally available resources. With the prevalence of UK-wide physical activity promotion campaigns, widely accepted scientific research and a growing health and fitness industry, it is fair to suggest that the health benefits of being physically active are well established in the public domain, and are usually regarded uncritically as ‘common sense’ in popular culture. This relatively recent construction of health – as contingent upon physical activity and good diet – has, however, been of growing interest to a number of authors who have raised some pertinent concerns (Gard and Wright, 2001; Kirk and Colquhoun, 1989; Lee and Macdonald, 2010; Rich and Evans, 2005). One concern is regarding how the body has increasingly become a site where narrow definitions of health are inscribed and made meaningful. The concept of ‘healthism’ (Kirk and Colquhoun, 1989) has consistently been used to describe the problematic set of messages which equate health with the self-regulation of body size. This is a crucial concern for social theorists who recognise that subjectivity is fundamentally constructed through socially available resources. As Burkitt (1991, p.29) notes, “there is no separation between ‘collective consciousness’ and ‘individual consciousness’, for consciousness is always socially based”. With this idea at the heart of this chapter, I explore how health is constructed by/for the young people in this study in order to better understand how this process may impact on

dispositions to be physically active. The task here is to better understand the numerous ways that health acquires meaning for young people. To address this, I will present data in four sections: (1) the language of health, (2) health and governmentality, (3) health and the visual body, and (4) health and the active body. Drawing on key theoretical concepts, I argue that language, discourse and technologies of power encourage young people to interpret health in a particular way and apply that understanding to their own and others' bodies.

### **5.1 The language of health**

One way in which health is co-constructed by and for the young people in this study is through the culturally available resources of language. In light of the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences (Rorty, 1992), this chapter considers the contribution made by language in making sense of the data. To do this, it is worth explaining the role of language in the social system. Firstly, I would point to an understanding of language as a social institution. This follows what Saussure referred to as the 'langue' which emphasises that language is not a creation of the individual speaker; the speaker "passively assimilates" the pre-existing forms that language assumes (Giddens, 1979, p.10-11). Saussure refines this overly structural view of language with the concept 'parole' – the verbal events of communication which are much more fluid and heterogeneous. Nonetheless, the idea of 'the language of health' as something which pre-exists individual speakers and therefore organises how health is interpreted and spoken about has some merit. Secondly, I believe language is important because of the role it plays in perception and understanding. Discursive psychology (DP) centralises this notion and argues that it is impossible to think outside of language;

DP is an approach rather than a method. It starts with discourse not because of an interest in the psychology of language *per se* but because discourse is the fundamental medium for human action. Rather than seeing its fundamental analytic aim as being to attempt to open up the mythic black box where psychology has been thought to be hiding since Descartes and Locke developed their arguments, it is focused on the public realm which people have access to when they are dealing with other people (Potter, 2012, p.4-5).

This idea isn't new, of course, although others stress that understanding is heavily influenced by, although not wholly reliant on, discursive practices (Jenkins, 1990; Shotter, 1993). According to Whitehead (1938/1966, p.32, in Brown and Stenner, 2009) language has two functions: "it is converse with another, and it is converse with oneself". That is, thinking about health is not thinkable without linguistic mediation, and yet neither is it reducible to language. With these principles in mind, it is important to recognise that the language of health is somewhat pre-structured for young people and influences how they can conceive of health itself.

Language is an important starting point for a discussion on the social construction of health because meaning is partially produced through language. Wright and Burrows (2003) argue that choices in language contribute to the production of health and knowledge. Language, in their view, is not just *representative* of health, but *constitutive* of health. The vocabulary available to young people – as I suggest below – is rather limited and leads to health being narrowly defined. Furthermore, within the limited vocabulary of health it is possible to see power structures at play enforcing norms of domination, expectation and value. As Giddens (1979, p.106-7) puts it; "If signification is fundamentally structured in and through language, *language at the same time expresses aspects of domination; and the codes that are involved in signification have normative force.*"

Finally, I would like to explore the idea that the language of health offers a multiplicity of meaning. This follows the work of post-structuralist linguistics which asserts that we cannot assume that words have a meaning independent of the circumstances in which they are used. The multiplicity of the word 'health' poses some interesting questions for interpreting the data in this study. Words can be used to mean different things and the word 'health' should not be understood as a tool to symbolise a fixed entity. As Shotter (1993, p.79) explains; "the significance of our words remains open, vague, ambiguous, until they are used in different particular ways in different particular circumstances". Here, we might consider Wittgenstein's position that;

words do not in themselves have a meaning, but a *use*, and furthermore, a *use only in a context*; they are best thought of not as having already determined meanings, but as means, as tools, or as instruments for use in the 'making' of meanings (Shotter, 1993, p.79).

With these theoretical perspectives I have briefly offered the notion that language is an important part of the construction of health. I have introduced the idea that language is a social institution which pre-exists individual speakers, to some extent shapes their understanding, and is not only representative, but constitutive of meanings that are pluralistic and made in context.

To empirically demonstrate how the concepts above are important for the social construction of health, I will now offer some evidence from this research study. Figure 5 shows which words were used by the young people when asked to describe health. Participants were asked to write down which words came to mind when thinking about health. This task was quietly completed by the participants during a group discussion (see chapter two, page 56). The frequency and limited nature of the words used was illuminating. In most cases, food-related words were written first with words such as ‘fruit and veg’ and ‘5-a-day’ being used most often. With regards to physical activity, participants chose to use both ‘exercise’ and ‘sport’ to describe health. The terms ‘physical activity’ and ‘movement’, it seems, are not part of the vocabulary of health for these young people. ‘Exercise’, I might suggest, is part of the vocabulary because it elicits a particular form of physical activity – one which is closely related to disciplined acts of physical effort. The inclusion of the word ‘gym’, by one participant in figure 5, suggests that ‘exercise’ better describes the deliberate, health-enhancing nature of gym-based activities. It is also apparent, however, that participants were comfortable using ‘sport’ to describe health, both in writing (figure 5) and orally (see extract below). The language of health was also apparent when describing health during focus group discussions. The following description, taken from a discussion with pupils at King Edwards Grammar School, highlights the way that pupils so readily use sport and fitness to describe health.

**Researcher:** What have you learnt about physical activity and health? Do you see physical activity being important for your health? And have you learnt it from PE and school?

**James:** Just stay fit really. Fit in both ways, like body shape, sport fitness, um, like non-laziness, stuff like that.

**Amal:** You need to do sport, to have a healthy diet...

{ fruit & veg }  
{ lifestyle }  
{ Mrs Bennie }

5~ day  
sport  
fruit, veg  
mentally  
physically

diet  
exercise  
Vitamins

Sport, general-health, wellbeing,  
mental health

Food  
exercise  
Fitness  
health  
salad

Jaday Slostu Hedur'i gym

Figure 5. Words associated with 'health' as written by participants.



The participant here also introduces “non-laziness” to the definition. The word “lazy” was also used on several other occasions. During a photo elicitation interview at Woodley Grange High School, Callum described why he took a photograph of his personal computer at home; “that’s my laptop. Um, that’s like a lazy side of me”. Further, on another occasion he spoke about his loss of fitness when he doesn’t play sport for some time; “if I don’t do stuff [exercise] for like a month – if I’m lazy and I don’t do any activities – if I go back to football I can be running for about 5 minutes and then I start [panting]”. James’ use of “non-laziness” rather than other appropriate antonyms of “lazy” such as motivated, driven, lively or active suggests that “lazy” is a term imbedded in the language of health and other alternatives are less familiar in the available discourse. The ease with which “lazy” is used by participants is perhaps concerning and highlights the subtle ways in which health is constructed as a practice to be achieved through effort and discipline; and being unhealthy is a result of lack of effort and discipline. Although the word “lazy” was used on several occasions, the same idea was conveyed in other ways too. For Henry, from King Edwards Grammar School, being unhealthy was about; “not doing sport. Um just basically being at home playing on your X-box or PS3 all the time or watching TV and eating and everything instead of going out for a walk after a meal so you would, like, burn it off.” This point echoes Burrows et al.’s (2002) work which suggests that signifiers of physical health imply moral characteristics upon individuals related to effort and discipline. Although I cannot say that this discourse permeated all discussions about health, or that all participants prescribed to the idea, I can say that it was evident in the data.

For the participants in this study, however, ‘health’ signaled something quite other than health itself as a condition of well-being. On occasion, ‘health’ in the context of conversation was used to mean ‘attractive’, or ‘good looking’. Markula and Pringle (2006, p.81) make note of the congruence between cosmetic beauty and health ideals when discussing the popular magazine *Health and Fitness*:

In the popular consciousness, the boundaries between health and fitness are blurred. While the name of the magazine suggests a connection between fitness and health, we get the impression that healthy, fit people are also beautiful people. The cover portrays a tanned, young and thin model in a bikini smiling at the camera on a summer beach.

It might also be relevant to mention that the word ‘fit’ is used in youth culture parlance to mean ‘attractive’. The blurring of health, fitness and beauty was certainly

evident in the data. In a short video diary clip, Amy stood in front of the camera and spoke about her weekly routine for physical activity and explained why she does it:

Um, Mondays I do Zumba. Tuesdays I go to the gym and at the gym I go on the treadmill, the cross trainer and the rowing machine. Wednesdays I go swimming. Thursdays I go to the gym and do all those activities again and Fridays I go swimming. Saturdays I usually go to town and walk around, and Sundays I go for a walk and I walk to school three times a week. And I do this because, um, I, sometimes it's just about burning off fat, sometimes I just want to keep healthy and I enjoy doing those activities, so that's why I do it.

The terms “burning off fat” and “staying healthy” were coupled together on other occasions too. When acting as a teaching assistant during a PE lesson in Woodley Grange High School, I observed two pupils who had chosen to walk around the perimeter of the school tennis courts instead of sitting on the side to wait their turn. In interest, I asked the two girls why they decided to do this. My own audio notes made following the lesson recalled that one pupil candidly said “because no-one wants to get fat” and “fat people are ugly”. Predictably, the other immediately said “and exercise is good for you”. When describing bodies which conform to an idealised version of attractiveness, it is thus easier to use the word ‘healthy’ than comment on their attractiveness. For a 13 year old in an interview situation, this necessity may even be magnified. Indeed, it may be the case that admitting to exercise for the purpose of vanity would lead to unwelcome moral judgment. Exercising to ‘stay healthy’ is much more a virtuous claim to make. Indeed, as some authors claim, health is synonymous with beauty anyway (Markula, 2001; McGannon and Spence, 2013)

Clearly, language plays a role in structuring discursive representations of health. Language pre-exists individuals and offers available resources to talk about and therefore construct health. Indeed, if we assume that language is also constitutive of meaning, as opposed to merely representative of it, then the limited vocabulary of health evident in health and obesity discourse is a point of critical concern. If the language of health is limited, prescriptive, judgmental and harmful, then the understanding of health will be also. Additionally, words have a plurality of meaning within language. The above analysis suggests that ‘health’ may, in certain cultures and contexts, be used as a proxy for ‘attractive’.

## 5.2 Health and governmentality

While linguistics is a helpful way to understanding the social construction of health, the notion of governmentality, I suggest, is also relevant. I use this term explicitly in line with Foucauldian theorizing. Various theoretical tools offered by Foucault have been used to explore health, sport and exercise in recent years (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 1995; Mcdermott, 2007; Piggitt et al., 2009; Wright and Harwood, 2009) but governmentality has particular relevance in this current discussion because of the biopolitical nature of health promotion (Svendsen et al., 2011). That is, the construction of health is necessarily dependent upon an apparatus of knowledge and power that serves the purpose of managing population health concerns. Foucault focused explanations of human behaviour away from humanist, modernist notions of the rational thinking being and towards locating individual action as the “effect of the workings of power” (Markula and Pringle, 2006, p.28). For Foucault, power is transmitted through knowledge, regimes of truth and discourse and is imposed through what he eventually called ‘technologies of domination’. These technologies exert power in part in through language, such as the language used in the previous section. Foucault argues that discursive constructions not only serve the purpose of communication between people, but also of covertly establishing relations of power. Governmentality, then, refers to the use of this power to control and manage others and might be considered as a continuum which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation, namely “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1978). Practices which serve to produce the workings of power are evident in health related physical education and other pedagogies beyond the school. As Wright (2004, p.21) notes:

particular pedagogical practices in physical education, such as those associated with assessment, the organisation of classes based on ability, the measuring of bodies for weight, fitness and so on, even the ways in which teams are chosen, can work to produce ‘normalising’, ‘regulating’, ‘classifying’, and ‘surveillance’ effects.

With the theoretical tool of governmentality, it is possible to analyse the construction of health as a biopolitical practice aimed at producing knowledge for the purposes of control. The National Child Measurement Programme, the National Obesity Observatory, Change4Life, 5x60 and various other schemes to combat the “rising tide of obesity” (DH & DCSF, 2008, p.3) are all part of contemporary biopolitics. In this case, the exertion of biopolitical power guides and directs the conduct of pupils

specifically relating to increasing their physical activity and controlling their diet. Markula and Pringle (2006, p.25) note that the scientific classification of people (as with BMI measurement and bio-medical labelling) constructs “particular ways of knowing so that people come to recognise themselves as objects and subjects of scientific knowledge”. During a discussion at King Edwards Grammar School, Amal noted “but there is, like, scientific reasons showing that even if you are healthy you still need to do physical activity.” In this example the interplay between knowledge and power (Piggin et al., 2009) is interesting. If we are to accept Foucauldian theorising, then the relevance of ‘scientific’ knowledge about physical activity and the state-endorsed BMI measuring in schools would exert some power on pupils who may come to recognise their own bodies as objects to control.

Discourse plays its part in the process of governmentality too. Foucault (1972, p.49) describes discourse as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses are not about objects; they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention” (Cited in Wright, 2004, p.20). In this way, the knowledge presented in health discourses claiming that physical activity, body size, diet and fitness are key principles in health ensures that pupils know to associate health with certain practices and bodily appearances and bodily experiences. Discourses directing the behaviour of pupils were evident in and around various school sites in this study. The banner outside St Andrews High School with the message “Ditch the ride and walk to school” attempts to promote walking to school as an appealing option for pupils who presumably are likely to be persuaded by the youthful style, choice of colour and particular colloquial language of “ditch” (instead of *abandon*) and “ride” (instead of *lift*) (figure 6). A message like this is important partially because of the content, but also simply because of its existence; a legitimate ‘local’ presence endorsed by a deliberate public policy initiative. Implicit in its existence alone is the assumption that pupils ought to be getting more exercise.

Further evidence of this discourse was visible on wall posters in classrooms. One particular teaching room at St Andrew High School included posters with large font headings with the words; “Do more exercise!” and “Why exercise?” alongside another poster with the words; “What’s on your plate?” Socially available resources about health also make links to obesity. Notably, the nationwide campaign *Change4Life*



*Figure 6.* Photograph of a banner by the school entrance at St Andrews High

provided knowledge about the dangers of excess body fat through television adverts (which most pupils could readily describe) and through leaflets displayed in public areas (see figure 7). While the *change4life* marketing material deliberately avoids representing obesity with body shape, their use of the ‘spare tyre’ conveys the same message; framing fatness as the pathogenic condition to avoid. Helping to construct understandings of ‘health’, the wording includes “how to lose weight and feel healthy”. By coupling these two otherwise separate ideas (losing weight and feeling healthy) together, the phrase ensures that weight and health are understood to equate in some meaningful way.

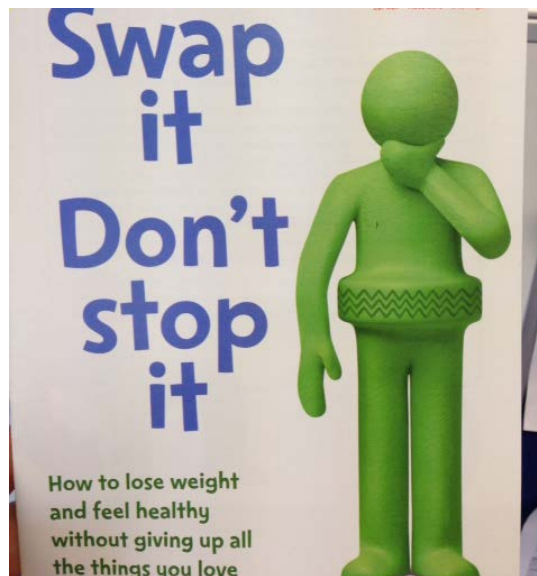
Not only are health discourses evident in health promotion material, but they are also observable in the pedagogies of school curricula. Pupils across all schools in this study drew heavily on the fruit and vegetable eating advice ‘5-a-day’ which seems to have been embedded in schooling for some time. When I asked pupils at St Andrews High School how they come to have knowledge about eating 5-a-day they responded;

**Richard:** It's what you're drilled into thinking at primary isn't it

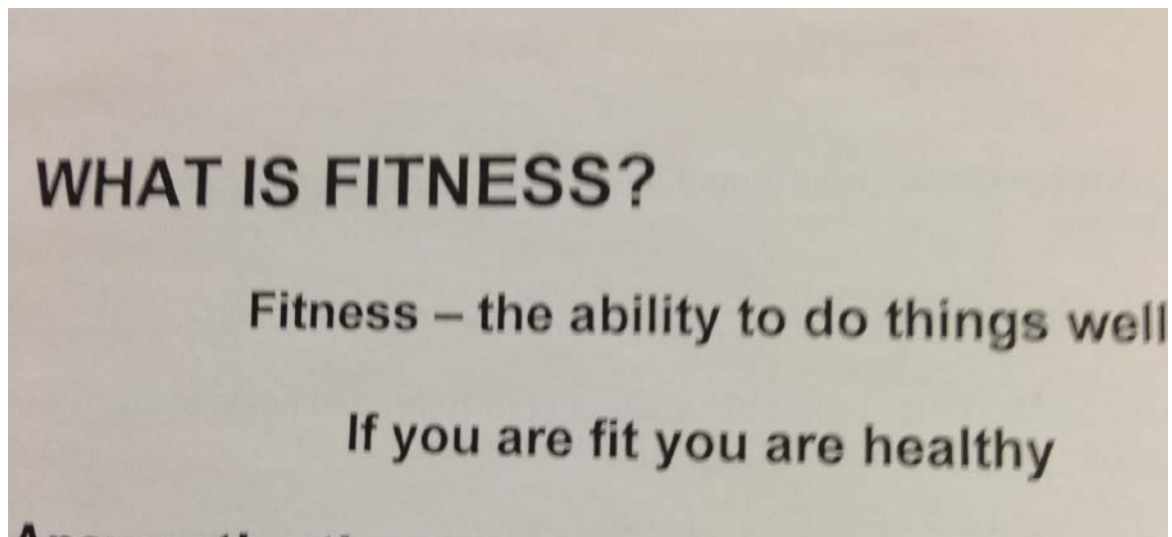
**Graham:** Yeah the equivalent of PE lessons they do a lot of stuff on healthy eating, exercise, 5 fruit and veg a day...

Furthermore, health was always partially defined in relation to fitness. The inclusion of *Health Related Exercise* (HRE) in the PE curriculum at all the schools in this study provided the site for learning about the benefits of fitness. Figure 8 is taken from the introductory page on the PE booklet for students and includes the statement “if you are fit you are healthy” as a grounding for the lessons to follow. If we consider the notion that there is an interplay between knowledge and power then we can see how the knowledge imbued through HRE could guide conduct. Here, the knowledge that fitness = health is intended to direct pupils’ conduct to be physically active, get fit, and thus be healthy citizens. Institutionalised obedience of health messages can be learnt; “from light physical punishments to minor deprivations and petty humiliations ... for the slightest departures from correct behaviour (Foucault, 1991, p.178, in Markula and Pringle, 2006, p.42). In this context, ‘correct behaviour’ can be taken to mean eating fruit and vegetables, exercising regularly and maintaining a healthy weight.

Foucault recognised that the process of normalisation can be understood as a technology of power. According to Foucault (1991, p.184, cited in Markula and Pringle, 2006, p.42) normalisation “imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it



*Figure 7.* Image take from a *Change4Life* leaflet in school foyer at St Andrews High



*Figure 8.* Taken from the Health Related Exercise 'action pack' for PE lessons at Grove Hill High School

possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another”. For one female participant at Woodley Grange High School, normalisation meant achieving the ‘right’ bodily appearance amongst peers; “you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one” (Naomi). For others, norms were affirmed with reference to visual discourses outside of school; “There’s always these clothes ranges... whatever it is, there’s always something that tells you about your body” (Graham, St Andrews High School).

Of course, while these processes are visible and prevalent, their impact on the actual behaviour of critical thinking individuals should not be taken for granted. For Shilling (2010, pp. 155-156) two questions are important to ask: ‘Are ‘embodied subjects inevitably shaped and imprinted by ... cultural ideals, working practices and government initiatives? ... or do they have the capacity to selectively engage with, mediate and even reject these developments?’ So while pupils may have knowledge of what it is to be a ‘good’ citizen and to achieve a ‘healthy’ body, and power is exerted to direct their conduct, it does not necessarily follow that they will passively submit to this power or, indeed, that other opposing discourses exert more power. When I posed this question to two participants at King Edwards Grammar School it was clear that their knowledge of physical activity and health did not really affect their conduct. Amal said, “everybody tells you that you need to exercise to be healthy, but then nobody really is worrying about their health at this age.” Similarly, Andrew said, “I care about keeping active but not necessarily being really serious about it.” This, I take as evidence that, while technologies of power may exist, certain pupils in certain contexts can critically and selectively engage with knowledge. The extent of this critical engagement has not been well investigated in this research but will be discussed in the implications chapter later.

In keeping with a wealth of critical health research, I have so far briefly explained how linguistics and Foucauldian theorising can be used to both facilitate understandings of health as a social construct and implicitly direct healthy behaviours. From this point of view, health discourses circulate knowledge about the benefits of exercise, body shape and diet. This knowledge along with disciplinary practices and surveillance techniques directs individuals towards ‘correct’ behaviour such as eating fruit and veg (figure 5), walking to school (figure 6) and staying fit (figure 8). Normalisation further reinforces a set of somewhat homogenised and idealized



characteristics about health, marginalising bodies that are seen as abnormal or deviant. Although some pupils have demonstrated the ability to resist and critically engage with technologies of power, data from this study cannot verify the extent of the effects of workings of power on individual conduct.

### **5.3 Health and the visual body**

As body size and body shape have been persistent themes in the literature review (pages 27-28), I would like to draw attention to how participants understood health in relation to bodily appearance in this study. For some time, visual representations of the body have been investigated in research which attempts to deal with today's "image saturated world" and the "physical culture" of the health industry (Azzarito and Kirk, 2013; Lee et al., 2009; Pink, 2007; Rich, 2010; Quennerstedt, 2013). In this work, the body is not simply a monadic corpus free from culture to be used purely for the practical purposes of the rational mind that it is attached to. Instead it is perhaps the 'terrain of flesh on which meaning is inscribed, constructed, and reconstituted' (McLaren, 1988, pp. 57-58, cited in Grant, 2006, p.104). A common theme in this work is the appreciation for 'what is seen' instead of (or as well as) 'what is spoken', or 'what is felt'. Research with young people has argued that photos and images can be effective ways to communicating ideas about the body (Barker and Smith, 2012; Enright and O'Sullivan, 2012). Although many make this point as an epistemic strategy, we can also recognise visual approaches as ontologically important. As I suggest in the earlier methodology chapter, *the visual* is not only representative of the meaning of health, it is also constitutive of it. With this in mind, visual signifiers can be seen to define understandings of health for young people and are worthy of investigation here. Healthism centralises the slim, toned body as a key marker of health, hence it is pertinent to consider what the young people in this study understand as a 'healthy *looking* body'. Data from the interviews suggest that the visual body was meaningful for a number of participants' understanding of health. Common in the data was the idea of a 'fat' body signifying someone who is unhealthy. For example, during a discussion about health, one participant said:

I want to keep healthy and, like, I wanna be healthy, I don't want to be, like, fat. (Andrew, King Edwards Grammar School)

The notion of a fat body being an indicator of (ill) health can also be seen in the following exchange:

**Researcher:** Can you describe someone who's not healthy?

**Robert:** Homer Simpson.

**Researcher:** Why's he not healthy?

**Robert:** 'Cos he don't do much exercise. And in his job he just sits in his chair pressing buttons.

**Researcher:** What else?

**Robert:** He's fat.

(Woodley Grange High School)

In both of the examples above, participants recognise the fat body as a meaningful part of health. In the first quote the participant chooses to describe poor health with the visual signifier of 'fat' as opposed to heart disease, diabetes or any other medical illness. In this way, health concerns are directed at the visually obvious fat body, as opposed to the pathogenic conditions which may or may not eventually occur as a result of excessive fat. In the second example, we can see fat body size as a reason for justifying why someone (Homer Simpson) is unhealthy. During an interview at Grove Hill High School with two pupils who were not taking part in PE that day, a similar discourse was evident. I include the extract at length in order to illustrate the number of times that Michael used his "fat" body shape as a primary marker of health, and to show how his body size is dealt with in conversation:

**Researcher:** What do you think about health?

**Michael:** A bag of shite.

**Keith:** Depends what sort of health you're on about.

**Michael:** I'm fat that's what I think.

**Keith:** Do you mean physical health?

**Michael:** ...fat health?

**Keith:** ... or do you mean like eating and that, what you eat?

**Researcher:** Michael, do you think you're healthy?

**Michael:** Nope.

**Researcher:** Do you think you could be healthier?

**Michael:** Yep.

**Researcher:** Why do you say you're not healthy?

**Michael:** Cos I'm not. I'm fat.

**Researcher:** Is that a reason for you to think that you're unhealthy?

**Keith:** Not really, if you think about it. You can be obese yeah but you can like... he's passionate about cricket and that.

**Michael:** No, you remember what I was like in year 7?

**Keith:** His arse yeah, would have taken up about 3 chairs [laughs].

**Researcher:** So what do you mean by physical health?

**Keith:** Like running around, jogging, stuff like that, or like eating crisps or eating a salad.

**Researcher:** So exercise on one hand and diet on the other?

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** So do you think they're both important or what?

**Keith:** Yeah. Eating is important cos if you eat too much stuff, you'll turn out like...

**Michael:** You end up fat like me.

In this conversation, fatness was identified as a marker of health by Michael, but was questioned as the sole marker of health by his friend. Fat bodies were also shown to be something to be laughed at and something to feel ashamed of. I have interpreted the final comment as a moment where Michael steps in to finish Keith's sentence in order to use himself as an example of someone who is fat. This, I presume was a strategy to highlighting his own undesirable characteristic before anyone else had to opportunity to.

It is important to point out, however, that most participants in most schools were very able to offer definitions of health that did not rely on the visual body. Indeed, participants understood that slim bodies were not necessarily healthy and that overweight bodies were not necessarily unhealthy. This critical awareness of the dominant healthism discourse is important to report. This is similar to the way Keith seemed to recognise the conflict between being obese and being passionate about sport in deciding if someone is healthy. Additionally, in a different interview a female pupil at St Andrews High School (who would be considered slim) said that she would only



*Woodley Grange Focus Group (boys)*

**Researcher:** What do you think of her?

**Robert:** Healthy.

**Researcher:** Healthy, yeah?

**Robert:** Well, she looks like she eats her five a day.

**Researcher:** Yeah, at least. Look at that. Loads in there, isn't there. But she's a little bit overweight?

**Robert:** Yeah, a bit podgy.

**Researcher:** So does that impact on whether you think she's healthy or not?

**Robert:** Hmmm.

**Callum:** It looks she is trying, 'cos obviously she's eating her fruit.

*Woodley Grange Focus Group (girls)*

**Angie:** Like in her face she doesn't look like...

**Naomi:** She looks quite happy.

**Angie:** And when you see, like, fat people sometimes they just look all dull and like... ugly.

**Researcher:** Uhum.

**Angie:** But then she doesn't look ugly, she doesn't look dull, she looks happy...

**Researcher:** Yep.

**Naomi:** And like cuddly; like a nice person.

**Angie:** And like colourful 'cos she's wearing a pink top.



*Woodley Grange focus group (girls)*

**Naomi:** I think that's disgusting.

**Angie:** I don't.

**Naomi:** You can see all her bones sticking out.

**Researcher:** Ok yeah she's quite thin isn't she...

**Gemma:** I don't think it's disgusting but cos there's skinnier people than her but... she's skinny.

**Angie:** I think that'd be like the sort of thing that I'd want when I'm older.

**Hali:** Uurrggh, you can see her bones.

*St Andrews High School (girls)*

**Jessica:** why would you do that to yourself?

**Emily:** Like her shoulders on the one on the right, there's nothing round the bone. It's literally completely straight.

**Researcher:** It looks quite normal for a catwalk model though, that sort of shape.

**Emily:** Yuck.

**Researcher:** For any of these you can talk about not just the image but also like the person, what they might be like.

**Mollie:** They might be depressed.

**Researcher:** And also whether you think they might be healthy or not, whether you think they're.

**Aikisha:** Anorexic.

**Mollie:** Probably really conscious of what she eats, because she has this thing to do.

Figure 9. Showing verbal responses to the image shown during interviews

rate her healthiness as 4 out of 10 because “I eat fatty foods all the time and I don't do much exercise”.

Figure 9 shows a comparison of the comments made about two images during recorded discussions. It is clear that while the woman in the first picture does not have the same thin and toned body shape as the catwalk model in the second picture, participants were far more comfortable describing the woman in the first picture as ‘healthy’. Indeed, most participants showed a level of distaste for the catwalk model apart from Angie who said “think that'd be like the sort of thing that I'd want when I'm older”. However, it is also interesting to see how the participants seemed as though they had to somehow make sense of the fact that the woman in the first picture was seen as happy and healthy. It is perhaps telling that this was perceived as paradoxical and confusing at all.

I should be cautious here not to over-emphasise the visual body as a marker for health. The quote below shows that the visual body may be less important than other factors for one pupil at least;

**Emily:** I do eat healthily but I eat... it's all balanced. I don't really snack or anything. I do a lot of exercise and, like, generally I think that helps because I don't get ill very often and I'm always sort of quite up-beat and so... I think it all contributes.

In this example, the visual body is entirely absent in her description of being healthy. Diet and exercise contribute to her being healthy, which she measures by absence of illness and having a positive outlook (being “up-beat”). My point here is that body shape seems to be evident in the data and perhaps even pervasive, but it is certainly not universal. Body shape is one of the ways in which health is understood but its significance varies between individual and indeed across time and context. Others (Evans et al., 2011; De Pian et al, 2009) have explored this notion and suggest that discourses of the body serve to create “troubled bodies” for some pupils while simultaneously serving to create “insouciant bodies” and even “emboldened bodies” for others. The question of which pupils interpret and experience the body in which way has not been properly explored in this study. However, suffice to say that the visual body can be important in the social construction of health and it should be considered within this discussion.

In summary, the data highlights that the articulation and representation of 'health' is somewhat reliant on the visual body. In the most simplistic terms, participants seem to recognise fat bodies as unhealthy, and thin bodies as healthy. However, I have shown that when asked directly, participants are capable of critiquing this idea and rejecting the assumptions which it generates.

#### **5.4 Health and the active body**

In this section I examine the extent to which health is socially constructed through the active body. It is clear already from the data above that young people recognise "being sporty" as a healthy trait and this idea is supported through various pedagogies of the school, such as the inclusion of the words "if you are fit you are healthy" in the HPE booklet. But how well are these discourses understood? And what assumptions are made about the 'active body'? Some simple examples demonstrate that physical activity is understood and related to health for several pupils. With reference to the example used of Homer Simpson again we can see that the first characteristic used to qualify his low health status was his physical inactivity;

**Researcher:** can you describe someone who's not healthy?

**Robert:** Homer Simpson.

**Researcher:** Why's he not healthy?

**Robert:** 'Cos he don't do much exercise. And in his job he just sits in his chair pressing buttons.

As mentioned in the previous section, another participant was asked to rate their own health status on a scale of one to ten and was quick to use food and exercise as justifications;

**Researcher:** Where would you be on this one to ten? And describe why you've chosen the number.

**Jessica:** Four. Because I eat fatty foods all the time and I don't do much exercise.

Moreover, in a passing remark, one participant directly linked physical ability to health;

**Amal:** Your dad has to carry you up the stairs! [laughter]

**Aaron:** No my dad's too unhealthy, he couldn't lift me!

I have included this example in particular because I find the use of the word ‘unhealthy’ to be rather strange when ‘physically weak’ would have made more sense in the sentence. That ‘unhealthy’ and ‘physically weak’ were considered interchangeable in the moment of speaking is evidence of health being constructed as synonymous with fitness. Not only is it clear that the active body plays a part in constructing and understanding health, healthy exercise was also understood as disciplined and rational. For Aikisha, health was about “a balanced diet... exercising regularly. And stick to what you've said you're going to do.” So not only is health understood through diet and the active body, but also as a *disciplined* body. In this way connections can be made to Foucauldian concepts discussed earlier in the chapter. Effective and efficient techniques of governmentality, according to Foucault, produce self-regulating subjects (Dreyfus and Rainbow, 1983). The need to “stick to what you’ve said you’re going to do” is precisely this kind of self-regulation in action.

Additionally, it is possible to draw strong connections between health, corporeal experiences and *lived* experience. Although mediated as they are through meaning and discourse, the visceral sensations experienced by participants were important for their construction of health. One pupil described how he thought exercise was important for health in saying; “you can see the health part when you are working really hard and then you start to sweat. You can feel yourself getting fitter (Henry).” Similarly, another pupil used embodied experience to qualify why he considered himself unhealthy; “[I’m] not very [healthy]. I run up stairs and I get puffed out, and I have to go and lie down!” In this context, it was interesting to hear what some pupils thought of HRE lessons:

**Aaron:** Health Related Exercise! Circuit training, running round a field.

**Researcher:** So what has it taught you about health?

**Aaron:** That there are better ways to exercise.

**Andrew:** And running round a field just tires you out!

For pupils such as Aaron and Andrew, HRE lessons were characterised by feelings of fatigue and discomfort. With these corporeal experiences being central to HRE lessons, it is understandable that ‘health’ may become associated with (or even cemented to) the idea of enduring discomfort for the disciplined achievement of health-related goals.

### *Summary of chapter*

This chapter has highlighted that health is a socially constructed concept. In making sense of their own and others' health, young people must rely on culturally available resources which present health in particular ways. Some of these ways, I suggest, are language, the visual body, the active body and technologies of power. This construction is of particular interest as young people rely on it to understand their own and others health. Data in this study demonstrates that health is constituted by a narrow vocabulary often referring 'exercise' and 'fruit and veg'; a slim body shape (although not exclusively); a fit and physically active body; and informed through an apparatus of governmentality.



## **CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS ON PHYSICAL CAPITAL**

*The increasing trend towards ideological and normative control, and towards self-discipline, creates the experience of the body as a machine, to be mastered and used*  
(Burkitt, 1999)

In this next findings chapter I will introduce the concept of “physical capital” as a theoretical tool used to interpret the research data. I move away from the Foucauldian concepts utilized in the previous chapter in an attempt to reveal the symbolic and embodied nature of young people’s physical activity and health which governmentality, discourse and technologies of power do not adequately do. This chapter both re-articulated and builds on the findings of the previous chapter. For the young people in this study, engaging in physical activity was often, if not always, an act with some symbolic consequences within their particular social milieu. Physical capital refers to the forms of symbolic resource that individuals acquire in order to gain status and power through interactions with others in the social world (Shilling, 1991; 2003). In Bourdieu’s terms; “the notion of symbolic power (or capital) enables one to account for the relations of force that are actualized in and by relations of cognitions (or recognition) and of communication” (Bourdieu, 1999, p.336). In this chapter, I pay particular attention to how physical activity is used as means to gain status, symbolic power, and acceptance amongst peers and in reference to social ideals. In other words, it is a method to accumulate physical capital.

## **6.1 Theoretical grounding**

To guide the discussion on physical activity as a means to accumulate capital, I draw on several concepts from symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Symbolic interactionism is a heterogeneous school of thought, but the underpinning assumption is that human action requires an understanding of the symbolic meanings and values attributed to interactions (Giulianotti, 2004; Malcolm, 2012; Molnar and Kelly, 2013). Molnar and Kelly (2013, p.113) justify the importance of symbolic interactionism by explaining that; “to more fully understand social life, sensitivity is required around how others (and the self) act and modify behaviour when in the company of others”. These interactions are essentially subjective and transient interpretations by individual people which positions the approach as a micro-sociology; focusing less on how ‘society’ determines individual actions, and more on how the individual actions are socially meaningful during every day relations. George Herbert Mead’s (1863-1931) distinction between ‘I’ and ‘me’ is crucial here. For Mead, the ‘me’ is a conception of the self which is always in relation to others in a rule-bound environment and community.

Human behaviour, therefore, is “consciously attuned social conduct” (Burkitt, 1991, p.31). In this way, taking part in forms of movement for school pupils is likely to be affected by the ‘me’, as will be shown later. Any action performed in public contributes to the formation of self. Sport, exercise and physical activity are no exception – indeed, as practices are so often very visible to others, they are particularly important. Goffman stated “the human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and of mutual evaluations will be conveyed by very minor things and these will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed” (1956/1967:33, in Molnar and Kelly, 2013). Evidence of “social worth” could be taken here in a similar way to symbolic capital. Acts of competence and skill in sport as well as the use of ‘ability’ groups in PE lessons are examples of social worth in practice (Hay and Macdonald, 2010). It is understandable then, that pupils will learn the symbolic values within social spaces – PE lessons, playgrounds or sports clubs – and act accordingly. This behaviour of individuals within a setting constitutes a conversation of language and gestures and the type of conversation enacted endorses the values of a social system. As Harré (1983, p.64-5, in Burkitt, 1991, p.61) explains: “conversation is to be thought of as creating a social world just as causality generates a physical one.” Thus, the ‘conversation’ becomes the object of study for symbolic interactionism. Examples in the context of this study may be how pupils learn which behaviours are celebrated in PE lessons, such as demonstrating competence of a skill directed by the teacher, or learning which behaviours are belittled, such as making mistakes. Many more subtle behaviours will be enacted and witnessed during the ongoing conversation of gestures upon which the personality or character of individuals will emerge. Whether this ‘character’ is a true reflection of an individual’s personality is “of no concern” as Goffman;

...does not distinguish between true and false selves. Instead, what is of importance to him, is whether the presentation of the social setting and the self which the individual makes will be credited with respect by others or discredited. Upon this depend the characteristics that will be attributed to the individual by others (Burkitt, 1991, p.59).

So, we can now begin to see how health – constructed as a visual and active body, through language and knowledge – can be seen to hold symbolic value for young people in their social systems. Within the social space whereby peers, teachers and others interact with each other, it is obvious that some bodies are valued more than

others. We can say, then, that the body is symbolic and that those in possession of valued bodies have high physical capital. As Shilling (2010, p.155) explains;

Bodies that are trim, presentable and skilled in the arts of impression management gain status and value within and between these social fields, while the desirability and exchange value of those falling outside of these parameters are correspondingly lower.

Within this system of values, individuals must manage their own presentation of self in order to establish, maintain or acquire physical capital. What is emphasised through this perspective is the embodied nature of the self. Personalities and characters emerge from embodied experiences as the physical presence of a person serves to position that person in a social world. Evans et al. (2013, p.229) make a similar point;

Subjectivities are always realised through somatic selves, changing socio-biological presences whose attributes are not sensed and seen as 'biological/corporal presences', albeit always via discursive categories, classifications and definitions which attribute social value in context, time and place.

In this way, we can see that the body has both symbolic and material dimensions (Hunter, 2004). There are objective, material realities associated with being weak verses being strong, being tall verses being short and so on. But equally there are socially constructed, symbolic values associated with being slim, being fat or being muscly. Plugging-in this theoretical perspective to the data in this study makes visible the occasions that physical activity was part of a system of practices that manage social status. In my interpretation of the data I can articulate two main ways in which physical capital is manifest: (1) visual appearance – in particular avoiding being 'too fat', and (2) physical ability – in particular avoiding embarrassment in spaces of physical activity. Capital, it should be said, can only be understood in the context of the social space in which practices operate. This context is what Bourdieu referred to as 'field' (1977; 1985). This is relevant to mention as it shows why it was vital that the previous chapter was included in this investigation. Without a description of the social construction of health, the body and the relations of power that exist, it would be impossible to investigate capital. The notion of visual appearance as a means to accumulate physical capital, in particular, cannot exist if the social space doesn't hold certain bodies in higher positions than others. Hunter (2004, p.175) uses the term "PE field" to this effect.

## 6.2 Visual appearance: “I’d rather be anorexic than obese”

The social stigma attached to obesity is clear in the data. Participants were well aware of what Evans et al. (2013, p.335) refer to as “the social risks of being fat” and in some cases perpetuate the stigma themselves. For many participants regardless of school setting, obesity seemed to be a sensitive subject and was difficult to talk about. In a discussion following a personal and social development (PSD) lesson at St Andrews High School a teacher told me about how hard it was to openly talk about obesity in the classroom discussions for fear of offending anyone. When asked about his opinions of obesity, one student participant (Richard, St Andrews High School) actually said “I don’t really want to talk about that”. Indeed, during interview conversations some participants felt the need to say “no offence” after using words such as obese or fat. Fatness for some girls could be summarised concisely with the statement “you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one” (Naomi, Woodley Grange High School). For one girl, however, the social risks of being fat were of such magnitude that she reported; “I’d rather be anorexic than obese” (Angie, Woodley Grange High School). Further, when used between friends, the word obese was sometimes used to deliberately offend for humour. In a discussion with a pair of pupils at Grove Hill High School, one joked; “he’s not fat. He’s *obese*! [laughter]”. While I witnessed this interaction during my data collection, it is not unreasonable to assume the same gesture is used elsewhere without humour with the intention of enacting power. I did not have access to interactions where teasing and bullying took place, but there was one occasion which suggested that it does occur:

**Jessica:** I know someone that has a disease that when they just keep putting on weight and weight and just can't lose it at all.

**Researcher:** Really? What, your age?

**Jessica:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** And how do they cope with it?

**Jessica:** [They] get bullied... by her [gestures to Mollie].

**Mollie:** Liar.

Not only were fat bodies the object of derision, they were also the object of pity and disgust. During a word-association task at St Andrews High School, one male participant wrote “feel sorry for them” when referring to the word ‘obese’. When presented with images of obese bodies, pupils often laughed or showed distaste. Bourdieu is helpful here in making sense of this process; he states, “[T]he logic of the

symbolic is fundamentally diacritical, distinction is the specific form of profit that symbolic capital procures” (Bourdieu, 1999, p.337). Constructing fat bodies as objects of ridicule, pity and disgust is therefore part of a process which distances those with ‘normal’ bodies from those with ‘deviant bodies’. In this way, profit is distributed among pupils with ‘normal’ bodies and gains in capital are made for use in the marketplace of the playground.

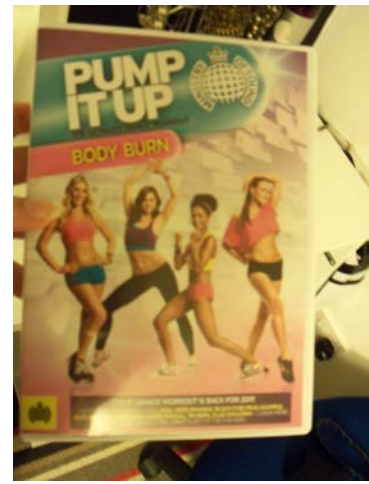
So it is clear that fat bodies are stigmatised and valued less than others for the young people in this study. Pupils considered fat by their peers have low physical capital. The behaviour of pupils will be attuned to this context as part of a system of impression management. For the girl pupils at Woodley Grange High School, this meant doing physical activity to burn calories. The girls’ general agreement to Angie’s statement “you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one” during one discussion, highlighted a pertinent motivation for them. Burning calories was the primary intention for several participants and a secondary intention for others. In this group of girls, both Angie and Naomi said that their physical activity was mostly done at home. Their photographs (figure 10) highlighted this too. While most pictures are self-explanatory, I had to ask Angie why there were photos of the stairs, to which she answered, “I run up the stairs ‘cos it’s a really good way of burning calories, quickly”.

Indeed, on occasion it seemed that any physical activity which did not involve the intensity required to burn calories “quickly” was seen as inefficient or even a waste of time. When Hali (Woodley Grange High School) mentioned that going to the gym “gets it done quicker” I asked what she meant:

**Researcher:** Hali, you said “it gets it done quicker” what do you mean by that?

**Hali:** Say if you do football, the amount of energy or calories that you would burn in your match is probably less than, after all that work and being outside and fighting for the ball and whatever, it’s like probably much less than going to the gym and working out. And it’s, like, more professional.... If you go to the gym for an hour or something, like three times a weeks, it would probably be, I’m just guessing but, I think you’ll probably burn more than if you were playing sport.

The idea of engaging in physical activities for body shape goals was mostly talked about by girls. However, one male pupil said “I like to keep in shape and so I



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*Figure 10.* Participant photographs showing ways to burn calories

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like doing sports ‘cos that helps to keep in shape’. For another pupil (Michael) – who I should mention was significantly larger in body shape than his peers – was keen to turn his “fat into muscle”:

**Researcher:** Does it bother you, about body weight or anything?

**Michael:** [No] does it fuck (spoken quietly). Three years. I'm gonna go to the gym in 3 years.

**Researcher:** So what do you think of those people who are really conscious of it then?

**Keith:** It's good that you're in there exercising but you shouldn't be in there every day. It should be like 3 times a week or something.

**Michael:** When I'm 16 I'm going to the gym, fuck it.

**Researcher:** Yeah? Why will you start going to the gym?

**Michael:** So I can lose all my fat and turn it into muscle. Simple reason.

(Grove Hill high School)

Noting that “3 years” is the soonest that this pupil would be allowed access to weight lifting facilities in the local gym (16 years old), it is significant that he stresses the desire to gain muscle as soon as possible. His quick response of “does it fuck” does the job of presenting himself as unconcerned about his physical appearance; a strategy, perhaps, to ‘show face’ and maintain a level of pride while hiding his anguish and concern. The addition of “fuck it” does similar work to manage his presentation of self. This interview extract indicates that physical activity is considered a vehicle for gaining physical capital. Michael positions himself as an individual with low status and he expressed frustration at not being able to alter his body until he is 16.

I observed another pupil at the same school highlighting impression management in a different way. Lewis, was also visibly much larger in body size than his peers. I described one particular event in my ethnographic notes:

There was an interesting incident with Lewis during the Grove Hill High School activity-day. Pupils had the opportunity to take part in various activities around the school. One such activity involved four volunteer pupils competing in an arcade-type dancing video game in front of an audience of about 20 other pupils. After watching in the audience for one round, Lewis volunteered to take part himself. While stood at the back of the room, I noticed some laughing at Lewis’ expense as he prepared to start the game and I was concerned that the event could end in embarrassment for him. However, it seemed that Lewis took the lead in



bringing humour to the situation by overtly laughing at himself and raising his arms to salute when he was doing well. By leading the humour, it seemed as if others were then ill-equipped and unable to laugh at him and his attempt to dance. He made the situation funny by participating in an ironic way.

This kind of impression management further highlights the embodied nature of subjectivity and the importance of the social context in determining behaviour. What we say and do is dependent on what others expect of us in our social roles and social positions. For Lewis, standing out as “the bigger one” in the polite words of Angie or as “a fucking fat bellend” in the less polite words of Michael, provided the context for the ironic participation that he decided to enact.

### **6.3 Physical ability: “I wouldn’t want to try just in case I made a mistake”**

Physical movement is also a socially meaningful activity in that it differentiates by ability. Pupils who are good at sport can benefit from their ‘officially endorsed’ physical capital, whereas those who are not are often left powerless on the field of play and beyond. Examples from the data demonstrate the various ways in which movement can be used to accumulate physical capital and how avoiding movement can be seen as protecting physical capital from being lost. Pupils were very aware that being skilled and successful in sport and PE was considered valuable by their school, their PE teachers and (most of) their peers. The public displays of trophies and international jerseys in school corridors (figure 11) served on one hand to celebrate achievements of pupils, and on the other, to highlight that sporting achievement is legitimately worthy of celebration. These symbolic artefacts of success were made visible, often in foyers and public areas of the school and always in glass cabinets protected from dust and theft.

Such signs and signifiers of legitimate success were also sometimes provided directly from the behaviour of PE teachers:

**Researcher:** Does your teacher have any favourites?

**Aaron:** Yeah.

[agreement]

**Freddy:** Obviously they do, the ones who are good at sport. They try and get the ones who are good at sport to be better at sport. But the people who aren't good, they don't, say, sort of, you know “do what you want”.

**Researcher:** Yeah? Do you find that?

**Andrew:** They take, like, James. [interrupted]



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*Figure 11.* The celebration of sporting achievement at King Edwards Grammar

**Freddy:** They take James Griffiths and they teach them things and stuff. And they take people like us and they just... [interrupted]

**Aaron:** And they're just timing them like 'yeah you beat your record by one second!' And then we're just like there just [panting] behind everyone and then it's just like... What time did we do? And he's just like "oh it doesn't matter" [laughter] "just carry on".

Aaron and Freddy have learnt that their efforts in PE lessons are less valued than those of other 'able' pupils. In the knowledge that good performances are worthy of praise, there is simultaneous knowledge that poor performances are worthy of shame. Several pupils reported the embarrassment felt when standing out as a low ability pupil.

**Aaron:** I just swim really slow, like. It's kind of embarrassing at the end when I was, like, on the side and I was the last one. And everyone was looking at me like [gestures pointing].

In recognising this shame, the same group of pupils suggested splitting PE lessons into ability groups:

**Researcher:** Is there anything that you would change about PE?

**Aja:** I think it would be better if we could split up into two groups.

**Researcher:** And why would you like that?

**Freddy:** 'Cos then it would be easier. And you wouldn't get embarrassed as much, when you, like, drop the ball.

What is clear from the data above is that the ability to perform well in spaces where sport and physical activity take place has some social value. What follows logically is that young people may practice sport to improve in order to experience being valued. Alternatively, pupils may avoid exposing themselves through sport to prevent embarrassment. Several participants in this study – particularly those who considered themselves to have 'sporty' bodies – lauded the benefits of practicing sport. One high achieving sportsman, James from King Edwards Grammar School, described one of the reasons why he fully engages with Hockey during PE:

I play it for school and for Tigers [local team] which is sort of involved with the school anyway. So I try hard in that, one for fitness and two just to practice... and I think I'll learn faster if I try harder rather than just mess around. But I think everybody tries hard because we want to win on the games on Saturday.

In another example, Henry reported how his father pushes him to go running so that he can be better at other sports; “he encourages me, pushes me to do, like, the running but he doesn't push me to do other sports, ‘cos I like the other sports. I don't really like running but, uh, it's just something for fitness”. Clearly, Henry did not go running because he enjoyed it. Rather, he went because through running he could accumulate physical capital which could be exchanged in other sporting contexts – something understood by his father who “pushes” him to do (note that Henry corrects himself after saying “encourages” initially).

The social credibility that being good at sport brings was not reason enough to engage for all pupils. The alternative impression management strategy in light of physical capital was evident in the actions of pupils who wanted to avoid embarrassment in sporting situations. Richard nicely articulated his concern about engaging in PE in year 7;

I think the only time I've ever been embarrassed or anything is when, I think, in year 7 when you just walk in and you don't know anybody and it's in this open field or whatever, and there's just one or two people you might know, and you're just thinking 'how am I going to do this without looking a fool?' It's just the fear of just going into a place and not knowing what you're doing.

“Not knowing what you're doing” therefore poses an important question for how pupils might protect whatever vestiges of physical capital that pupils possess. This was a common strategy for less-able pupils and was recognized and accepted by the able pupils;

I think for some of the people who aren't so good - because obviously they're watching better people play - then they're not really getting involved and don't want to ‘cos they don't want to make a mistake. (James, King Edwards Grammar School)

Making a mistake is socially damaging for ‘less able’ pupils taking part in physical activity. Embarrassment is essentially a social experience and, for the girls in Woodley Grange, being watched by other pupils was explicitly the reason why competitive lunchtime sport was so poorly attended at school:

**Hali:** They probably would [take part] but not with everybody watching [agreement].

**Angie:** It's embarrassing.

**Researcher:** Is it the boys? Or just anyone watching or...?

**Gemma:** It's just everyone like.

**Naomi:** It's on the Ball-court at lunch so everybody that's outside and everybody that's just having their lunch.

**Angie:** And they're just sat there watching.

**Hali:** And I don't think that anyone takes it seriously because of that. People are just talking on the side and everything.

**Researcher:** So could you be too keen?

**Angie:** Well it's like I don't actually try because in case we go wrong. And everyone would be like “haha Angie”.

**Naomi:** And you'd feel stupid.

In addition to pupils' concerns about lacking skill and competence in the school, a connection could also be made to mis-recognizing and presuming certain body types are more/less skilled than other body types. A similar point is raised by Hunter (2004, p.187) who reported that “several students legitimated their lack of competence through visual markers of fatness. They continued to be seen, or see themselves, as fat, and concurrently, they had no expectation of being competent.”

My analysis so far suggests some ubiquity of meaning across the participants in this study. However, symbolic division, like all social structures, is not a universal determinant of social action. I have argued, for example, that obese bodies are objects of stigma and that sporting ability carries social credibility. Yet it would not be correct to assume that body size and sporting ability are symbolically valued as markers of physical capital for all pupils in the same way. Some participants, displayed ambivalence to health, body size and sporting ability, which meant that physical capital did not have much symbolic value to them and thus did little to shape their behaviour. The causative influence of physical capital relies on individuals' awareness of and sensitivity to social divisions (healthy/unhealthy, normal/obese, sporty/unsporty etc.) and the symbols that are constitutive of them. If a group does not know of, or care about, the importance of physical appearance, then it ceases to carry value;

Symbolic capital is made...by those who are submitted to it but if, and only if, the objective structure of its distribution is as the basis of the cognitive structures that they bring into play in order to produce it – as, for example, with such structuring oppositions as masculine/feminine, young/old, noble/common, rich/poor, white/black, etc. Nobility exists only for and by those who have at their disposal the principle of division between the noble and common (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 336).

This mild symbolic power best epitomised by “I am bothered about keeping active but not really like serious about it” (Aja, King Edwards Grammar School). Indeed, others too seemed like the accumulation of physical capital was not part of their experience of physical movement with statements like “I just do it for fun to be honest” (Andrew, King Edwards Grammar School) and again “I just really like PE. It's just such a fun thing. Just to get out and run and cycle or whatever” (Richard, St Andrews High School). To accommodate cases like this, it is important not to report that physical activity *is* (and always is) a practice woven into a system of symbolic meaning, but rather that it *can be* or, more bravely, that it *often* is.

### *Summary*

Physical activity, according to my interpretation of the research data, is a socially meaningful practice. For the young people in this study, the act of engaging with a physically demanding activity is part of a symbolic enactment with consequences for physical capital. The participants also seem astutely aware of their position in various settings where physical activity takes place and are likely to act accordingly. Physical activity in this social space presents an opportunity to accumulate physical capital (burn off fat, increase muscle, enhance performance) but also offers the prospect of losing physical capital and hence status and value in the immediate social milieu.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: FINDINGS ON NORM CIRCLES AND THE INFLUENCE OF PEERS**

*Whatever beliefs an individual may have about which practices are appropriate are merely idiosyncratic individual beliefs unless they conform to the cultural practices endorsed by a group that influences her; only when the latter occurs do they take on the forms of culture (Elder-Vass, 2012)*

One of the general aims of this thesis is to investigate how social processes shape physical activity and health for young people. Having spent the first two findings chapters exploring the notion of health as a social construction, and the notion of physical capital, I would now like to explore the social processes at play between peer groups within and outside of school. The basic thesis here is that peer groups have a part to play in the dynamic milieu of processes that influence whether or not young people are physically active. The observation that young people – at the age of 13/14 – form social groups, albeit loosely defined, will come of no surprise to teachers, parents and young people themselves. The formation of social groups during schooling has been investigated before (Bennet, 1999; Eckleton, 1989; Willis, 1990; Wyn and Harris, 2004). This research has largely focused on the significance of youth subcultures as political resistance, identity and symbolic meaning-making. My interpretation of social groups in this chapter moves away from this literature and plugs in to a different theoretical apparatus; the theory of norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012). The theory of norm circles, I suggest, can add to and extend the literature on youth subcultures. As I will further explain throughout the chapter, this theory provides an account of a normative social process in which social events are produced within a system of interacting norms and norm-sets. I propose that these norms and norm-sets result in a social context which enables and constrains physical activity for young people and which is dependent upon the power of key proximal norm circles; peer groups. Crucially, this theoretical perspective emphasizes that individuals negotiate an array of intersecting norms that can influence their decisions to do physical activity. The theoretical underpinning for this chapter is outlined below followed by the presentation of empirical examples from this study.

## **7.1 Theory of Norm Circles**

I have found the theory of norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012) particularly useful in understanding how the physical activity of each young person is somehow influenced by the actions of others (pupils, teachers, peers etc.). The term *norm circle* has been developed to conceptualise this influence through the process of normativity in social groups. Elder-Vass (2012, p.22-23) provides a basic definition:



A norm circle is the group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm. Such groups are social entities with people as their parts, and because of the ways in which the members of such groups interact they have the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow standardised practices.

In this definition we can see that a norm circle (a group of people) is described as exerting an influential force on individuals. In the vocabulary of Critical Realism, this influential force is described as ‘causative’, yet is not meant as being deterministic, linear and uni-dimensional in the positivistic sense (see earlier methodology chapter). The critical realist version of causality does not negate human agency or multiplicity and thus does not conflict with earlier findings chapters as will become clear as this chapter goes on. This causative power is exerted, according to the theory, through the actions of actual people who enforce and endorse certain norms. Norms may relate to behaviours expected in certain cultures or in certain settings but, crucially, these norms cannot exist as reified entities influencing behaviour. What Elder-Vass makes clear is that norms do not have any causative power in and of themselves, but their causative power is enacted through people who act as their representatives. To provide an example, consider the norm in soccer of kicking the ball out of play if a player is injured. To re-start play in this circumstance, it is expected that the throw-in be taken towards the goalkeeper of the opposing team so as to not gain an advantage as a result of the injury. This norm (let us call it the ‘thrown-in’ norm) is usually understood as a ‘sporting’ behaviour and is not legislated by the official rules. However, if player A was to misunderstand the throw-in norm (in the case of youth soccer perhaps), or consciously chose to defy it by intercepting the otherwise passive throw-in and commencing an attack (in the case of a win-at-all-costs professional) then player A is likely to experience some consequence. Individuals would voice their disapproval in varying ways with varying conviction. Any other players, coaches or supporters wishing to reprimand player A and therefore endorse and enforce the norm can be seen as constitutive of the norm circle for the throw-in norm. The causative power of this norm circle, then, is in the notion that player A is likely to comply with this norm in future, or even endorse and enforce the norm him/herself in future. For Elder-Vass, conceiving of social structures as circles (rather than groups, or cultures) is advantageous as it accommodates the over-lapping nature of social norms. There are certain norms often observed in sport and exercise research which are strongly gendered, some norms which inform ethnicity, some norms which inform social class

and so on. Many cultural norms associated with gender, ethnicity and class are likely to be learnt from members of those social groups and reproduce normative tendencies in other members of those groups. The emphasis then, is that norms are not abstract entities but materially present in the interactions between actual people. While these interactions are often representative of wider cultural expectations, it is through the actions of people that these norms are learnt. However, Elder-Vass explains that we may think of norm circles in a more complex way by thinking of three types of norm circles. The three types are; (1) proximal norm circles – referring to the individuals who have directly enforced and endorsed a given norm, (2) imagined norm circles – referring to people for whom there is a tacit expectation for them to enforce a given norm, and (3) actual norm circles – referring to the totality of people who would enforce and endorse a particular norm. To a degree, these ideas resonate with symbolic interactionist theory discussed in the previous chapter in that they bring the idea of a self, acting in social context to the fore. Comparisons are clear when Burkitt (1991,p.32), for example, alerts us that “individuals must become aware of the totality of activity in the group, and the place of their own self and that of others within it”. The importance of being aware of one’s social context comes to the fore if we consider, for a moment, the norm (evident in some cultures) of girls not playing the sport of rugby. A girl with an interest in playing rugby may experience some pupils and teachers challenging the idea. Any individual pupils and teachers who directly endorse this norm are part of the *proximal* norm circle for that pupil. It is possible that the girl presumes that more pupils and teachers – perhaps all pupils and teachers – also endorse the norm. This presumption constitutes the *imagined* norm circle for this norm. As Elder-Vass (2012, p.25) writes, this is; “not necessarily the result of any conscious analysis but just because this is the sort of effect that repeated experience tends to have on our tacit expectations”. This distinction between proximal norm circles and imagined norm circles is what brings social awareness into the explanation of behaviour. This is important to consider not only in rationalising why the girl might veer away from playing rugby, but also in rationalising why the other pupils and teachers feel justified in enforcing that norm at all. With the idea of imagined norm circles (similar to Anderson’s *imagined communities*, 1991) people may act as if they are representatives of social groups and act on behalf of something wider than oneself (Elder-Vass, 2012). The enforcement of a particular norm, then, is justified not as merely a personal opinion, but with the full support of a number of actual people. Conceptually, what this

does is ensure that we understand social forces as fundamentally *peopled*. Social institutions, according to structuralist social theory, fail to recognise that the causal power of social forces lies in the actions of individual people and therefore cannot be deterministic in nature:

Like all causal powers in the critical realist model, normative institutions do not *determine* behaviour but only *contribute* causally to its determination, alongside other causal powers with which they interact, and hence they only *tend* to produce a given outcome (Elder-Vass, 2012, p.31).

So for the female pupil who is confronted with the gender norm which does not permit the playing of rugby, the opportunity to refute this norm, or perhaps endorse the contradictory norm (one which endorses females playing rugby), can still be realised. Whether the norm is refuted or not, awareness of normative expectations remains relevant:

This does not necessarily entail that each member of the group is morally committed to the norm as representing a just standard of behaviour; it entails only that they are aware at some level that they are expected to observe it and will face positive consequences when they do so, or negative ones when they do not (Elder-Vass, 2012, p.33).

In this sense, even if norms are understood by people, they still may not produce compliance. All actual social events are multiply determined so norms could be defied in the presence of strong emotional drives, or the belief that the norm can be transgressed without detection, or – most importantly here – that conflicting norms also exist (Elder-Vass, 2010). The notion of conflicting norms is a useful way of theorising the intersectional nature of social lives. As I will show in the following pages, the formation of groups for the participants of this study was loosely defined by a number of characteristics including gender, class, ethnicity and age as well as musical taste, dress sense and a number of other characteristics. In explaining why young people engage with physical activity or not, we need to account for the intersection of influences that make up the social context in which social action takes place. Young people may be conscious of potentially many cross-cutting social norm circles. As this is not a deterministic sociology, we can see this intersectional influence as a way of describing pupils' 'choices' as variously facilitated and/or constrained. Framing the analysis in this way is similar to the approach used in other work:

While people do have choice as to whether or not they exercise, their choices are not infinite. Instead, choices are limited by the discourses within which people (including themselves and others) are positioned when constructing who they are (McGannon and Mauws, 2002, p.77, in Lee and Macdonald, 2010).

For me, thinking about “choices” in this way helps us to understand that decisions are socially based. Choices, according to the above quote, can only be made within the apparatus of “discourses”. What I am adding here is that choices are also made in the apparatus of norm circles which are interconnected with social groups. My intention now is to provide some evidence that demonstrates the normative power of proximal and imagined norm circles. I will start by exploring the evidence for the existence of social groups in the four school settings in this study and then move on to exploring how these social groups are important for understanding young people’s engagement with physical activity.

## **7.2 Social groups**

That there are formations of groups of friends in school will come as no surprise to teachers, parents or, particularly, pupils themselves. The data that I present here, however, goes some way in understanding these groups as more than simply ‘groups of friends’. What I aim to establish is that pupils from all four schools involved in this study were able to confirm the existence of different social groups. These groups, I argue, form part of a proximal norm circle for a set of associated norms which are endorsed and enforced by members of that group. Once endorsed and enforced, these behaviours have a normative influence on pupils within groups, and also make it possible to distinguish differences between groups.

The existence of social groups was not difficult to see during interviews and ethnographic observation. One participant described the situation in King Edwards Grammar as; “Yeah, like, there's groups. Like, we all get along with each other but some people have a lot more in common, and you all seem to be in the four corners of wherever”. On many occasions, it was clear that friendship groups were defined by gender, especially during lunchtime and break-time socialising. Keith, a pupil at Grove Hill High School, highlighted this separation by depicting girls and boys in separate circles (figure, 12). The existence of friendship groups perhaps needs no further support.



**Researcher:** You obviously hang around with your mates, but could you describe a certain group of girls or boys?

**Keith:** Right, the best way to describe them; boys - girls  
[finds a stick nearby]

Rights that's the group of girls  
yeah, 'cos most of the year 9 girls play together.

[draws a circle]

This is the football boys.

[draws a larger circle]

---

*Figure 12.* Extract from discussion with Keith emphasising that girls and boys form somewhat separate friendship groups

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However, the point of interest for this chapter lies in the notion that these friendship groups somehow influence the behaviour of individuals. Angie, a pupil at Woodley Grange High School, explicitly stated that friends influence whether or not she would engage in particular activities:

**Angie:** I would do things if, like, my friends were doing them. I'd feel stupid going somewhere for the first time and seeing no-one you know. And you'd just be standing there like, silent.

This pupil's claims suggests to us that deciding to participate in "things" is not always an individual decision, but instead is a social decision reliant on the collaborative participation of friends. While specific groups of friends may have an influence on the behaviour of individuals in that group, we should also consider that social 'groups' act in ways characteristic of wider social groups. For example, one participant in St Andrews High School acknowledged that there are "types" of people in PE lessons: "we've not got, like, the same type of people in our group" (Emily, St Andrews). Furthermore, the same pupil explained how personal dispositions towards activities (being 'sporty' or being 'musical') acted as ways to associate with social groups, "I am sporty. Um, and um, musical as well. Yeah nothing too out of the ordinary but I think I'm quite well rounded. I've sort of got a foot in quite a few doors, so, yeah". By using the analogy 'foot in the door' the pupil indicates that social groups are perceived as distinct categories and access to them requires some shared interest. Emily, like other pupils in St Andrews High School was aware of these kinds of social groups and had established labels for some in particular:

**Researcher:** I'm interested in, like, how we put ourselves in different groups and different identities and – obviously it happens – it's quite obvious with adults I think quite a lot of the time. And if you look out and have a look at the playground there's quite a lot of different groups as well.

**Samhita:** Chavs [laughter].

**Researcher:** Yeah? So how... Could you say you have different groups in school?

**Samhita:** Yeah I think, it's just, Chavs for instance, many people either take them as a laugh or don't wanna mess with them as they say.

**Emily:** I think yeah we do have, like, groups.

**Samhita:** I don't think they're extreme though.

**Emily:** I don't think they groups in terms of identity as such.

**Samhita:** Yeah.

**Emily:** Like you see in all like the American movies, you got like you know...

**Samhita:** Emos!

**Emily:** People that you can't immediately tell to look at but when you scratch under the surface a little bit you can definitely put people into groups.

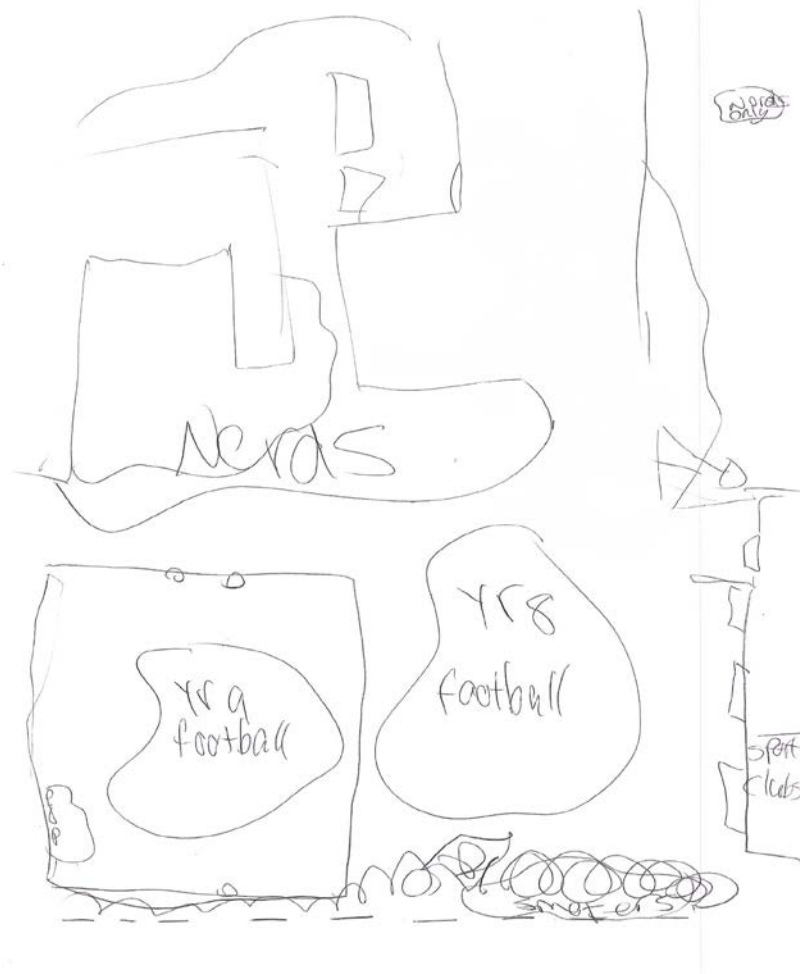
**Samhita:** I think they're more friendship groups than they are identity.

**Researcher:** Yeah, ok.

**Emily:** Yeah and people in the friendship groups tend to be in a certain category anyway, I'd say.

Clearly these pupils were reluctant to caricature different groups like in “the American movies”. At the same time it reveals the existence of labeled groups based, in this case, on musical taste (“Emos”) or more derogatory identifications, “Chavs”, associated with deviance, youth and social class. Both groups seem to be clearly identifiable to pupils if not immediately, then by scratching “under the surface”. This kind of explicit labeling resonates with research in youth subculture (Bennett, 1999; Eckleton, 1989; Wilson, 2002) but perhaps offers new terms and a new context. So while this demonstrates that social groups for young people can simply be derivative of friendships, we can also see the simultaneous tendency for those groups to behave in particular ways (endorse particular norms) which may relate to wider identifiable groups (actual and imagined norm circles for those particular norms). Being able to label a group as “Chav” or “Emo” relies essentially on the existence of other people in those groups and some knowledge of which norms those groups endorse. Furthermore, labeling members of these groups as such implies some level of ‘othering’ which hierarchically distinguishes differences between groups of people.

For George, 14, in King Edwards Grammar School, social groups relied on shared interests and the simplistic polarity of being ‘sporty’ or ‘academic’: “Like there's the sporty group, and then like not-so-sporty and there's like the academic and not-so-academic”. In other schools the label ‘academic’ was habitually replaced with ‘nerd’, which went some way to position certain pupils – and certain norms – within the social hierarchy. A pupil at Grove Hill High School was able to identify ‘nerds’ along with other distinct groups and showed the space that they occupied in the playground with a map (figure 13). Keith identified himself as one of the ‘smokers’ and



*Figure 13.* Showing areas of the school playground occupied by different peer groups; 'nerds', 'pops', 'smokers', 'yr8 football', 'yr9 football'.



cited the formation of the ‘pops’ (short for populars). As one of the ‘smokers’, Keith would socialize with other members of his group in a particular location doing particular things:

**Researcher:** Do you want to hang out with them rather than anyone else?

**Keith:** No, not necessarily. I mainly chill with the smokers ‘cos obviously lunchtimes and break-times you’ve always been in the bush with them ain’t ya?

The formation of groups, as described by this participant, is then part of a normative process whereby members of groups are seen to belong to certain groups (norms circles) with certain characteristics (norms) endorsed by those groups. A pupil at St Andrews High School was also aware of ‘nerds’ and seemed to recognize “nerdy” norms in herself. Emily briefly reflected on this, saying;

**Emily:** Um, I’m very organised. Perhaps over organised. Um, I would say, well I am quite nerdy. But that’s fine in our classes isn’t it?

**Samhita:** Yeah.

**Emily:** People are like that, that’s fine.

Emily recognizes her own actions – being organized for example – as characteristic of being “nerdy”. Accepting this label, however, clearly comes with some uncertainty as she still feels the need to confirm that being ‘nerdy’ is acceptable (“that’s fine isn’t it?”). The response (“yeah”) shows the proximal norm circle for the ‘nerdy norm’ in action. Through interactions like this – which we assume would normally take place outside of the interview setting – pupils learn the boundaries of what is considered normal and acceptable to do in school amongst peers and what consequences, if any, there will be for doing anything outside these boundaries.

Not only can we understand norm circles as idiosyncratic friendship groups, and as wider groups such as ‘emos’, ‘smokers’ and ‘chavs’, but we can also understand them as people who are committed (consciously or not) to endorsing wider social norms such as gender and ethnicity. Elder-Vass (2010) explains that this is a way of talking about ‘structures’ which avoids cultural realism and attributes the actual causal power of ‘structures’ to the people who endorse and enforce particular norms.

I was interested to explore ethnicity with the pupils in this study. The intake in all four school settings were predominantly white, but the semi-rural St Andrews High School in particular had a much lower than average ethnic minority intake.

Emily and Samhita briefly discussed the issue with me (note that Emily identified herself as White-British and Samhita identified herself as British-Asian):

**Researcher:** Ok. What about, like ethnicity or religion or anything like that? Kind of background cultures, is that relevant at all?

**Emily:** We're not a very multicultural school are we?

**Samhita:** Not particularly.

**Researcher:** No?

**Samhita:** But I have been called, like, in the past, like been questioned. I have been called racist names but it doesn't - it's not - it doesn't bother me... It's like they're the ones who look stupid, not me. So, I don't think we have that problem.

**Emily:** Do you think it helps because there aren't many non-white people? Do you think that that makes it less of a problem?

**Samhita:** I don't know. I don't think people are that bothered.

**Emily:** We don't have much of a problem with like abuse towards race or religion, you don't really hear about it much. Like not to specific people, maybe people would say things like...

**Samhita:** About a group.

**Emily:** Like, about a group as a whole, in society, but not individual people.

Despite the insistence that “I don't think we have a problem” and “I don't think people are that bothered”, that Samhita has been called “racist names” at all indicates some level of ‘othering’ at play in this setting. Thinking in terms of norm circles, we can say that being considered ‘other’ by a pupil at school is a particular norm and that any pupil who uses “racist names” towards Samhita is part of the proximal norm circle for this norm. What follows in the theory is that proximal norm circles inform imagined norm circles for a particular norm. That is, British-Asian pupils being seen as ‘othering’ is a norm presumably endorsed by other people and those people could be imagined (even if never actualized) as pupils in the school, or white people in general. While we may assume from “I don't think we have a problem” that not many pupils endorse the ‘othering’ norm, we can also assume that some pupils have and do endorse it. For Samhita and other British-Asian pupils there is a proximal norm circle of actual people who endorse the ‘othering’ norm, and also an imagined norm circle of people who quite possibly could endorse the ‘othering’ norm. Both the proximal norm circle and the imagined norm circle influence her actions. In light of this, we might speculate that pupils such as Samhita feel the need to reduce their ‘otherness’ and attempt to fit in. I noted that while Samhita had a non-British name she was known to everyone as Sam – a shortened, anglicised version of her name. This perhaps goes someway to accomplishing the goal of reducing her otherness in the school context.

What I have established so far in this chapter is that the social experience for pupils in this study involves the formation and recognition of groups. These groups can be small and idiosyncratic (in the instance of friendship groups) but can also be related to established labels (in the instance of emos, chavs and smokers) and also related to wider social 'structures' (in the instance of gender and ethnicity). Following Elder-Vass (2010), I have conceptualized these social groups as constituting norm circles for a range of norms related to those social groups. However, I have not yet explained how these norm circles contribute to physical activity participation.

### 7.3 Social groups and physical activity

In keeping with the theory of norm circles, my basic argument is this: if physical activity of certain kinds is not endorsed by one's norm circles then one would probably avoid it. Equally, if a physical activity of a certain kind is endorsed by your norm circles then one would probably take part. These norm circles may be as small as the circle of friends for a given pupil, but might be as large as a widely established cultural institution such as religion or gender. I will begin with showing that the norms of friendship groups affect the behaviour of individuals before drawing the lens back to see how larger norm circles contribute to the behaviour of individuals.

The notion that young people may / may not take part in certain types of physical activity because of their friends is somewhat straightforward. As Keith explains, a strong reason to take part in football is: "cos my mates do it". While I suspect that this is not a particularly newsworthy research finding, it would be remiss to ignore it given its significance for the participants in this study. Rob described how the actions of his friends sometimes determine his actions as either sedentary or physically active:

**Robert:** Well if your mates ain't coming out then I'll probably just sit at home on my laptop. Like if we're going out we'll play football or go on a bike ride, sometimes have a round of golf. Something like that. Go to town, go to [the] park.

Similarly, Keith explains in simplistic terms that the normalized behaviours of a group of friends – "friends that play football" – results in the obvious activity of football being played; "you've got your friends that play football so you play football with them don't you". In light of the perspective offered in this chapter, this phenomenon could be explained by whether or not practices are endorsed as

acceptable norms for a group of friends. As Hali explains; “with football, I started it ‘cos I wanted to and my friend was there”. This reflection highlights the dual influence of personal choice (“I wanted to”) and friend endorsement (“my friend was there”). Another telling example was captured in the data when pupils were asked to design and carry out a small project aimed at increasing physical activity for themselves and their peers. In one example of this task, carried out by Robert and Callum at Woodley Grange High School, a weekly lunchtime sports club was organised using the school sports hall (figure 14). The sports club ran for 6 weeks with 8-10 pupils attending the club each week. As this project was primarily a knowledge-generating part of the PhD study, Robert and Callum were asked to reflect on their experiences of the sports club. When reflecting on why the attending pupils decided to attend, the pupils said the following:

**Robert:** We know them all don’t we?

**Callum:** Yeah. If most of their friends turned up then they’d turn up as well. You know Joe? The tall one? If Matt and James and Jordan, if they weren’t there, then he wouldn’t have come.

This kind of situation reflects the significance of friendship group endorsement. While pupils can and do make individual decisions about whether or not to attend physical activity opportunities, it is interesting to see that these choices can also be influenced by the friendship group. In terms of norm circles, we can say that attending the lunchtime sports club is one very specific norm, and that Matt, James and Jordan comprise the proximal norm circle for Joe and thus exert some influential power affecting his behaviour. Physical activity promoters would see this relationship as a positive one which has successfully encouraged Joe to engage in a physically active opportunity. Conversely, however, if a friendship group decides not to endorse a given practice, it may be difficult for a member of that group to endorse the practice individually. In this circumstance, physical activity promoters would see the influence of social groups negatively. Robert and Callum reflected on one such case whereby a female pupil initially expressed interest in attending the lunchtime sports club but eventually decided not to after some consideration.

**Researcher:** So think about who didn’t turn up then, and maybe why they didn’t.

**Callum:** Well Hali said she was going to come, but it kind of...

**Robert:** cos it’s just a bunch of lads.

**Callum:** She knew she’d be the only girl?

**Robert:** Yeah. Bit intimidating.



*Figure 14.* Showing two participants explaining their sports club

The theory of norm circles provides but a partial explanation for Hali's decision not to attend the lunchtime sports club – a decision which was probably also contingent on wider cultural notions of sexism, hegemonic masculinity and female subordination in social spaces explicitly defined as 'sporty'. While Robert suggests that the social space occupied by 8 boys playing football would be a bit "intimidating" for a girl, we also might say that the norms being enacted within that social space are not norms which Hali is comfortable endorsing. In turn, Hali would have had a tacit expectation of the norms which are enacted in that social space and an understanding of the extent to which those norms would be endorsed by the proximal norm circle at the sports club. While I was not able to hear Hali's justification for not attending the sports club, the all-girl focus group at Woodley Grange High School described a similar situation when considering attending a gym. Again, we can see the importance of friends, but importantly, the pupils describe an expectation of "awkwardness" in the social space:

**Gemma:** I think if there was a teenage gym, like if other people went it would be awkward. Especially doing exercise.

**Researcher:** What do you mean other people?

**Gemma:** Like people you know, but not your friends like...

**Angie:** People in the year above, or people a few years older than you that used to come here. It's quite awkward having people in the years above and then people in the years below, because it's just like, I don't know why. It's just uncomfortable.

For this group, the expectation of social awkwardness was enough to dissuade them from pursuing gym opportunities for young people – despite finding the actual activity appealing. The apprehension of participating at the gym is not due to the presence of total strangers or not knowing anyone there, but instead, encountering "people you know, but not your friends". Evidently, year group distinctions play a significant role in this process too. With these distinctions in mind, we can assume that the pupils here consider pupils in different year groups as 'other'. As we have seen, small groups of friends can be seen as proximal norm circles for very specific norms. These proximal norms circles can have 'causative' powers which can, in some cases, determine whether an individual engages in a certain practice or not. However, the theory of norm circles contends that norms are often part of a wider cluster of norms related to wider social groups, subcultures and cultures. In this way, specific actions (such as choosing to participate in a particular sport) can be seen not only as an

individual action about a specific event, but a socially conscious action made on behalf of a wider social group. This idea acknowledges that people may act on behalf of a wider group as if they are representatives (Elder-Vass, 2010). The relevant ‘wider groups’ which the participants in this study refer to might be “nerds”, “emos”, “sporty-ones”, “smokers”, “chavs” or a number of different groups perhaps not mentioned in this data set. The people in those groups form what Elder-Vass calls a norm-set circle. These social groups should not be understood as concrete, of course. Young people, indeed all people, are likely to negotiate a range of different norm circles quite fluidly when moving between different social spaces such as in school, at home and with friends. Never-the-less, a very real set of individuals who endorse and enforce a particular set of norms in a particular time and place will influence the actions of individuals. “emos”, for example, might endorse a particular way of dressing, talking, style of hair, taste in music, political persuasion, and with it a particular attitude to sport and physical education. As I have maintained throughout this chapter, the causal influence of the “emo” norm-set circle does not determine that individuals will themselves endorse this cluster of norms, but failure to endorse norms will lead to negative social consequences such as distancing and rejection from others.

Two of the most well recognized norm-sets were “sporty” and “academic”/nerdy”. This distinction between ‘sporty’ pupils and ‘academic’ pupils is recognisable in figure 15, with the picture on the left showing the lunchtime activities of self-labeled ‘sporty’ pupils and on the right an extract describing lunchtime activities of self-labeled ‘academic’ pupils. My observations did not highlight any tensions between these two sets of pupils as is described by Wilson’s (2002) “jocks” and “anti-jocks” but there were notable differences. The norm-set circle for the ‘sporty’ norm-set seemed to endorse norms which were beyond actually taking part in sports. Although, taking part in sport is, of course, important for those considered ‘sporty’, the cluster of norms also included a certain way of dressing, talking and behaving. These signifiers were often quite subtle and included hairstyle (tidy with the use of hair product) or choice of school rucksack (made by a known sports brand). In the same way, the norm-set circle for ‘academic’ norms endorsed norms which were not exclusively oriented towards educational attainment. For Keith, labeling this identifiable group of pupils as ‘nerds’ provided an opportunity to distance himself (and the norms he endorses) from those pupils (and the norms they endorse) in a derogatory way. With remarks such as

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“Sporty”



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“Academic”

**Researcher:** So with those break-time and lunch-time activities, would you prefer to be doing anything different? ☐

**Freddy:** Yeah, we'd prefer to be doing ... gaming club, or...

**Amal:** Homework club! ☐

**Andrew:** Minecraft?! ☐

**Amal:** History is awesome.

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*Figure 15.* Typical lunchtime activities for ‘sporty’ (left) and ‘academic’ (right) pupils at King Edwards Grammar School

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“nerds, they're always playing *tig* and that. Yeah at their age!” By this, Keith attempts to qualify the social inferiority of ‘nerds’ through the type of activity that they engage in while in the playground, insisting that ‘*tig*’ is a game associated with younger pupils and should not be played by pupils in year 9. In making this statement, Keith demonstrates that he is part of a norm circle which endorses age-appropriate activities. If this statement was made in the presence of a *tig*-playing pupil, then we could say that Keith was also enforcing the norm. Any kind of endorsing and enforcing of this norm, which is likely to go on during daily interactions between pupils, will have a normative influence on young people’s activity. This social process is different to the normative process described earlier. Where the theory of norm circles has been a way of describing how a social group complies with particular behaviours while alternative behaviours are rejected and diminished, this example shows the co-existence of alternative, conflicting norms. While Keith’s endorsement and enforcement of this norm (‘*tig*’ is inappropriate for year 9s) may have influential power within his group of friends, we cannot say that he exerts any deterministic force on a distinctly different group of friends. With all conflicting norms, the individual agent is aware of the consequences of endorsing one norm over its alternative and must choose which consequences are preferable. In this circumstance, it is unclear how these choices are made and whether they are conscious or not. What is clear, however, is that the endorsement of the chosen norm plays a part in distinguishing between social circles.

Norm circles are also associated with the notion of ‘social space’. The importance of social space has been recognized in other work which claims that behaviours are constrained, facilitated and organised according to the expectations and behaviours in a particular place (Pink, 2011). Applying norm circles to this phenomenon, we can see that the causal influence of social space is partially due to the specific norms and norm circles endorsing those norms which are materially present in a given physical location. It follows then, that if a social group occupies a given place the behaviours in that place might be contingent on the norms present. For Keith at Grove Hill High School, there was a certain room in school associated with a certain social group: “at lunch time there is. There’s this block that we’re in now ain’t there. Well upstairs there’s this little computer thing and it’s ‘nerd only’. It ain’t nerds only but... it is basically”. A similar situation existed in St Andrew High School where a large number of academic pupils spent lunchtime and break time in the library: “there’s

30 of us or so that are in the library, just doing stuff". In contrast to the groups who spent time in computer rooms and libraries, large groups (mostly boys) spent time in the courtyards playing football. The access to these spaces was socially determined with individuals exerting power over others with the intention of exclusion:

**Researcher:** I think it's interesting that you have this playground territory. So you have people who have high status, people have respect for...

**Keith:** That's me and my mates.

**Researcher:** So who can play football here at lunchtime?

**Keith:** It don't matter if you're good or not just if we want them to play or not. If we don't want them to play then we just tell them to fuck straight off.

The opportunity to take part in this activity is clearly constrained by social conflict. The rejection of certain pupils from that social space is likely to maintain the established cluster of norms which are endorsed by the norm-set circle who occupy that social space.

For Elder-Vass (2010, 2012) norm circles can also be considered much larger in scale and related to wider cultural ideas such as class, gender and ethnicity. Although the proximal norm circles for these wider norms may be similar in size, the actual and imagined norm circles are far larger. In terms of social class, it was clear that certain norms were being endorsed and enforced by key informing individuals for some pupils. In the fee-paying King Edwards Grammar School, pupils discussed how some teachers endorsed a norm distinguishing social class associations with football (soccer). James explained that football is not an option because "football's not posh enough for this school". Aja reported the same thing, saying "it's because they class it as, like, a 'lower-man's-sport'". Furthermore, other pupils described the situation by explaining that most pupils would be happy to play football, but it was the teachers and the school who objected:

**Aaron:** Maybe [we would like to play] football... but our school, like, hates football.

**Aja:** Yeah it's like rugby and hockey – urgh.

**Adam:** Because they do rugby and stuff here that's why.

**Aaron:** Mr Moles calls it 'the F word'.

**Freddy:** Everyone at the grammar school likes football but the teachers don't let us do it.

**Researcher:** So why do you think that is?

**Andrew:** 'Cos it's chavy.

Here we can see a disagreement about the expected behaviour of pupils at King Edwards Grammar School. There is an interplay between the norms of the teachers, the institution of the school, the class-based demarcation between ‘chavs’ and those who attend the grammar school, and the dispositions of the pupils themselves. Football is at the centre of this interplay and has symbolic significance in this social system. Mr Moles – and other teachers – can be described as the proximal norm circle for the ‘football-rejecting norm’. By calling the sport ‘the F word’ and preventing it being included in PE lessons, members of the proximal norm circle are enforcing the norm. Furthermore, with the understanding of football as a “lower man’s game”, the sport is constructed as some not only ‘*not-for-the-likes-of-us*’ (Bourdieu, 1990) but also *for-those-lower-than-us*. This construction is made possible through this particular school as an institution, the historical context of Grammar school education in England, and the enduring structure of social class in the UK. What Elder-Vass makes clear is that these structures do not have any causative power in and of themselves, but their causative power is enacted through people who act as their representatives. In this case, Mr Moles seems to be enforcing the ‘football-rejecting norm’ as a representative of a wider group; this particular school, fee-paying schools in general, and the affluent middle class. What is interesting about this example is the conflict between the different norms that pupils are confronted with. Football is the most highly consumed sport in the UK for boys and so there are clearly a large number of people who would endorse a ‘football-accepting norm’. This obvious conflict is highlighted when one pupil said; “everyone at the grammar school likes football but the teachers don't let us do it”. This situation positions individual pupils between two opposing causal forces (football-rejecting norm versus football-accepting norm) whose power is enacted through norm circles (proximal, imagined and actual) for each pupil, for each norm. While pupils do have a ‘choice’ as to which norm they comply with, they will be aware of the social consequences. Importantly, however, one pupil in this school sample played football for a local team and several played football during lunchtime breaks. According to the participating pupils in this school, it seemed as though the social consequences for individuals who choose not to comply with the school’s ‘football-rejecting norm’ were not significant enough to actually prevent the playing of football. Or, perhaps, that the norm circle for the ‘football-accepting norm’ was more influential given the size of the

actual norm circle (the popularity of football in the UK) and the greater importance placed on the proximal norm circle (football endorsing peers).

The physical activity related norms in other schools were quite different. In contrast to King Edwards Grammar School, Grove Hill High School was a state funded school whose percentage of pupils receiving free school meals is in the second highest quintile (Ofsted, 2014). For the participants at Grove Hill High School, norms related to social class seemed to influence leisure time dispositions. Encountering proximal norm circles (peers, families, teachers etc.) from a socio-economically different demographic to pupils at King Edwards Grammar School could potentially result in different leisure time activities being realised. One such activity was captured by a participant video while out with friends (figure 16). The video shows a group of boys from Grove Hill High School playing on scooters and bikes. In the first clip, the participant making the video (Rhys) looks into the camera and says “Hi, this is scootering” and continued to film himself and his friends moving along a pavement. In the second clip, Rhys is the subject of the clip having instructed a friend to hold the camera and film Rhys performing a trick on the scooter. The activities captured take place in an urban space within a mile of the school site. Most boys pictured are wearing hooded jumpers, denim jeans and flat soled shoes with colourful laces and visible branding. While I have not investigated the details of this clothing, it is noteworthy that choices in clothing seen in this data are distinguishable, deliberate and likely to constitute a part of the norms of the social practice of scootering. My point here is that the endorsement of norms practiced as part of scooting can be seen as contributing to a set of norms associated loosely to social class and also, perhaps, gender.

Gender norms related to physical activity were also endorsed and enforced by norm circles for pupils in this study. There were several occasions where the causal forces of pupils were being enacted during social interactions captured in the data. For girls, norms were endorsed which could help shape dispositions to take part in gender appropriate physical activities. These norms mostly related to specific sports, which have persisting gender associations:

**Researcher:** So handball, dance and gymnastics, do you like them ‘cos they're indoors?



*Figure 16.* Video stills from Rhys' video showing 'scooting' as a pastime

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**Jessica:** Yeah 'cos it's active and, like, it's girly. Where boys like to do... 'cos we have an all girls group PE and we have an all boys. And, like, all the girls - before we did boys sport like rugby - we did gymnastics.

**Shelly:** Like most sport we do is for boys.

**Jessica:** Yeah for girls you should have, like, pink PE kit, rather than plain red and black.

**Researcher:** So you think there are some activities that are for boys and some that are for girls?

**Jessica:** Yeah. Like, rugby and football are for boys and gymnastics and dance are for girls.

**Shelly:** Yeah. I have - um,- I've not done PE because it's too much a boys sport before. It's too rough.

(Girls at St Andrews High School)


**Researcher:** Is there anyone here that has had that? Where, it might have only been for one lesson or one sport, but you feel totally like you can't be bothered?

**Shelly:** Yep, I've been like that. rugby. It was really cold outside and it was raining slightly.

**Mollie:** And obviously with girls, and the PE kit, and the hair, and getting muddy. It just doesn't happen.

(Girls at St Andrews focus group)

In these comments, we can see gender norms related to physical activity being endorsed by several girl pupils. Their blatant endorsement of these is normative and, thus, we can describe them as belonging to the norm circle for these gender norms. Moreover, the norms mentioned here may not be isolated norms, but instead part of a wider norm-set. The norms mentioned – (1) pink being a suitable colour for girls' PE kit (2) gymnastics and dance being suitable girls activities (3) girls should maintain a particular cosmetic image and avoid getting muddy, and (4) rugby is too rough for girls – could be seen as a cluster of norms which somehow exist in cooperation with each other. This norm-set, then, constitutes gendered behaviours related to physical activity which organize (and also constrain) which activities (if any) are possible for girls without encountering negative consequences. Part of this gendered norm-set was also a particular cosmetic bodily appearance. As highlighted in the figure below, muscularity is met with negative reactions ranging from “I don't like muscly girls”, implying a personal preference, to “It's not right”, declaring some universal moral standard.

Image shown during interview	Responses endorsing gender norms
	<p><i>Woodley Grange High School</i></p> <p><b>Angie:</b> I don't like muscles on girls.</p> <p><b>Naomi:</b> I don't like muscly girls. Not...</p> <p><b>Angie:</b> I don't mind, like, little muscles.</p> <p><b>Naomi:</b> I don't mind, like, small muscles but not.</p> <p><b>Angie:</b> But not when you can see without tensing.</p> <p><b>Researcher:</b> So who do you mean like, Madonna and...</p> <p><b>Gemma:</b> Yeah, like that.</p> <p><b>Angie:</b> She just has too much muscle.</p> <p><b>Naomi:</b> She has too much muscle and...</p> <p><b>Angie:</b> She looks too manly. She doesn't look like a woman - like in her body.</p> <p><i>St Andrews High School</i></p> <p><b>Jessica:</b> Yeah I don't like people with like, urr, I think it's wrong.</p> <p><b>Mollie:</b> There's two sides to it, like they're really healthy but then it doesn't look right is you know what I mean.</p> <p><b>Jessica:</b> Like she's healthy but look how big her muscles are. I think it's horrible on girls.</p> <p><b>Mollie:</b> They're not, I wouldn't, it looks unnatural.</p> <p><b>Emily:</b> But if it's like.</p> <p><b>Jessica:</b> Like a little bit of muscle, but when you can see it like that.</p> <p><b>Mollie:</b> I think that looks natural. But if it stands out a lot then, it might look a little bit different.</p> <p><b>Researcher:</b> Yeah sometime it stands out in action shots and...</p> <p><b>Emily:</b> If it's like that then, obviously she's a professional athlete and it's down to all her training and she has to do that to have gotten where she is. And that's fine but with like, if you do body building or something, then that's where it gets a bit... that's not nice.</p> <p><b>Mollie:</b> Like a girl with a six pack, that's not right.</p>

*Figure 17. Showing gender norms endorsed by girls during discussion around muscular women*

The causative power of these norm-set circles lies in the awareness that developing a muscular appearance through certain types of exercise would be met with negative social consequences. Angie, at Woodley Grange High School, explained this during an interview. While the cluster of norms which related gender to physical activity is clearly evident, only a few girls in this study complied with them uncritically. There are many norm circles in a given social space (Elder-Vass, 2010) and several participants demonstrated challenging the gender norms shown above and endorsement of alternative norms. One participant described how she sees gender norms as stereotypes which don't necessarily need to be followed:

**Researcher:** But don't you ever want to just cross those boundaries and just go 'do you know what, I don't care'.

**Emily:** I think like everyone should be comfortable with doing everything. Like... [interrupted].

**Jessica:** You get a choice.

**Emily:** No... I think, with football and all those male sports, I think everyone is capable of doing them. And I don't think you should feel intimidated by them. I think that over time, people have stereotyped, like you say football, rugby and gymnastics and things, into the gender boundaries but they're not at all.

While this point seemed to be understood by many girls, the likelihood of those girls actually defying gender norms may be contingent on a number of important circumstances. One such circumstance might be encountering the alternative norm endorsed by a friend, as with the example described by Hali, below:

I did Judo, I hated it at the beginning. I didn't want to go because I thought it was like a boys' sport. But then I really got into it and started liking it. And same with football I started it 'cos I wanted to and my friend was there and then I really liked it.  
(Hali, Woodley Grange High School)

With this quote, we can see that Hali was initially dissuaded from participating in Judo and Football due to the norm of Judo and Football being "boys' sports". The pervasiveness of the norm due to the significance of the imagined norm circle for this norm has some causative power in preventing girls from participating in these sports. However, in this particular circumstance, participation allowed Hali to encounter a proximal norm circle which endorsed the norm that participation was accepted. Her ability to transcend the norm did not extend to the school context though, as Hali did not participate in the lunch time club as she would have been the only girl.



### *Summary*

In this chapter I have discussed the ways in which social groups have some causal influence on the physical activity of young people. By plugging-in to Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles, I have suggested that these social groups constitute the norm-set circle for a cluster of specific norms related to physical activity. Norm-set circles, whether proximal or imagined, have some normative, influential power over the individual members of the group and therefore can have some influence on actual events and behaviours. Individual pupils are the site of a number of intersecting social norms, with each norm being endorsed and enforced by different norm circles. For each norm, the proximal norm circle seems to consist of peers for the most part. Theorising the social process in this way reveals that beneath a pupil's decision to take part in physically active behaviours – such as playing football in the playground, or going to the gym – there exists a wide range of intersecting social norms which must be endorsed or rejected in the moment of acting. The social consequences of endorsing or rejecting norms can be powerful. Through this theoretical lens, pupils engage in physical activity if (1) the activity is endorsed by their immediate friends, (2) the activity does not take place in a social space where conflicting social norms are expected, and (3) the activity does not involve the rejection of norm-sets related to wider social norms such as gender, class and culture. In analyzing the social groups in this way, I have tried to add to and extend previous articulations of youth subcultures. Plugging into the data using the theory of norm circles has allowed the interpretation to locate some of the detailed ways that young people come to behave. While theoretical concepts in previous chapters point towards the presence of broad, fluid workings of power operating in social spaces, the concept of norm circles offers an explanation of how specific, localized, everyday interactions significantly influence our actions.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: FINDINGS ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE HABITUS**

*The habitus, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993)*

From the outset, this study has explored young people's physical activity and the social processes that influence it. In following this line of enquiry, I would like to utilise the conceptual framework offered by Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*. By taking the data and 'plugging in' to the concept of the habitus, I hope to offer a reading of the data which may have otherwise been omitted. The choice to include habitus here is justified in the first section of this chapter. Following the justification, I put the concept to use in three ways; (1) habitus and social class, (2) habitus and gender, and (3) habitus and being sedentary. By utilizing the concept of the habitus in these three ways, I aim to pay particular attention to how physical activity for young people is part of a system of dispositions which is embodied, durable and inventive.

### **8.1 Bourdieu's Habitus**

In its most basic description, the habitus can be understood as a re-working of habit, inclination or disposition. While a succinct definition can be difficult to find, this description from Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) is a good place to begin for this discussion:

The durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78).

I draw on several key features of the concept from this description: first, the habitus is durable, second, the habitus can generate improvisations, and third, the habitus is reactive to the situated context. A fourth feature of Bourdieu's habitus is that it centralises the importance of the body. Bourdieu (1984, p.2) writes; "it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination". It is these four features which I take as crucial for the use of the concept in this chapter.

Thinking of the habitus as a *durable* system of dispositions is a way of explaining social action as reproductive, regulated and relatively stable. As Bourdieu (1990, p.70) writes; "there are durable ways of standing, speaking, and walking, and thereby feeling and thinking" (in Reay 2004, p.433). Where some symbolic

interactionist work emphasises social context and role (e.g. Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), the habitus reminds us that people have tendencies and dispositions and act in often predictable ways. Empirically, this was supported by such observations as ‘taste’ which tends, for Bourdieu (1984), to be a durable disposition which relates to one’s social category. If we think about young people’s inclinations towards certain physically active leisure time practices as ‘tastes’ then we can begin to see the relevance of the habitus in this study. The words inclination or disposition could, of course, simply be understood as the set of choices that an individual might make. This is far from what is meant by the concept. Instead of ‘choices’, we have a set of historically informed and unconsciously driven “schemes of thought” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.79). Instead of ‘individuals’, we have bodies acting in a social world. Bourdieu’s reluctance to use the word ‘individuals’ is clear – “the organism (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals)” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.85) – and hence there is an implicit assumption that action is inherently social. This underpinning principle is similar to that of Elder-Vass’s theory of norm circles discussed in the previous chapter and indeed much other work (Burkitt, 1991; Shotter, 1993; Mead, 1936). For Bourdieu, as for Elder-Vass, actions are informed by historical interactions which then in turn reproduce practices which become historical: “The habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82). Put simply, over time behaving according to certain norms becomes part of a system of inclinations (Hunter, 2004). However, whereas Elder-Vass discusses the impact of historical interactions (with those in the proximal norm circles endorsing certain norms) as informing an “awareness” of the consequences of actions, Bourdieu’s habitus presents a more unconscious and embodied version of action. Clearly, one’s actions will be determined by both conscious and unconscious influences, but in the “forgetting of history” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.78) Bourdieu emphasises that past experiences are both materially and unconsciously relevant for our actions whether we remember them or not. We are left, then with a conception of the habitus which is durable informed by history and reified through embodied practices.

What should probably follow swiftly from a description of the habitus as durable is a description of the *inventiveness* and creativity of the habitus. Several of Bourdieu’s critics cite the deterministic implications of his account (Jenkins, 1982;

Nash, 1990), yet it should be emphasised that Bourdieu wished to involve the active and inventive capacities of human agents (Brown, 2009). Indeed, according to Bourdieu “the habitus goes hand in hand with vagueness and indeterminacy” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.77, in Reay 2004, p.433). The active and inventive capacities are accommodated for in the term ‘bounded agency’ (Brown, 2009) and also in the description of the habitus as a ‘structured, structuring, structure’ (Bourdieu, 1979/84). By describing habitus in this way, we contend that our bounded consciousness both moulds and is moulded by the agent (Crossley, 2004). In this way, we can conceptualise the actions of young people as being “caught in the tension between unreflected habitual action and acts of creativity” (Joas, 1996, p.128). Acting in this way involves the “*intentionless invention* of regulated improvisations” (1977, p.79).

So the habitus explains human action as durable yet subject to regulated improvisations. It is, however, important to also include how the habitus is also related to social groups and situated context. As has been discussed in previous chapters (and in a wealth of related literature) young people’s engagement with physical activity of certain kinds is partially shaped by social class, gender, race and a number of other interdependent and overlapping categories. For Bourdieu (1977, p.85), it is helpful to think of social class not as the sum of actual individuals in that group but instead a “class habitus”. This is described as “the system of dispositions (partially) common to all products of the same structures”. This is a more sophisticated way of understanding ‘class’ than other abstract structural models which assign class labels from clear objective markers. As a result, this “class habitus” is far more vague and indeterminate than those other structural accounts. Indeed, Bourdieu relates this back to the idea that historical occasions are what inform the habitus and therefore must be to some extent idiosyncratic:

Though it is impossible for *all* members of the same class (or even two of them) to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for the members of that class (Bourdieu, 1977, p.85).

So while he does accommodate idiosyncrasies, he maintains that there is a *likelihood* and *tendency* for people to act in accordance with one’s class. While there are no explicit rules which dictate behaviour, there is an implicit tendency to behave in ways that are expected of “people like us” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.77, in Reay 2004, p.433).

One's actions are highly contingent on the tacit expectations of how one ought to act as defined by social distance and social position. This articulation is worth quoting at length here:

It is their present and past positions on the social structure that biological individuals carry with them, at all times and in all places, in the form of dispositions which are so many marks of *social position* and hence of the social distance between objective positions, that is, between social persons conjecturally brought together (in physical space, which is not the same thing as social space) and correlatively, so many reminders of this distance and of the conduct required in order to "keep ones' distance" or to manipulate it strategically, whether symbolically or actually, to reduce it (easier for the dominant than for the dominated), increase it, or simply maintain it (by not "letting oneself go", not "becoming familiar" in short, "standing on one's dignity", or on the other hand, refusing to "take liberties" and "put oneself forward", in short "knowing one's place" and staying there) (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82).

Conceiving of social space in this way helps us appreciate the symbolic significance of certain dispositions and practices. Implicit in the habitus is an understanding of this symbolic space in which practices (and people) are kept separate (as with the phrase "keep your distance"). For young people who have a tacit understanding of their social position, engaging in physically active practices might involve the negotiation of social space. The challenges encountered by girls wishing to join a boys sports club (or vice versa), or working class pupils wishing to take part in an upper class sport (or vice versa) are good examples of this.

The final point I wish to mention in this brief description of Bourdieu's habitus is the inclusion of the physical body. The role of the body is central in constituting habitus, as well as being constituted by habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, in Hunter, 2004, p.176). With clear influence from Merleau-Ponty, the corporeality of the subject is central for Bourdieu. Interestingly, the body seems to be recognised as both material (objective) and symbolic (subjective) in the concept of the habitus. Social action is dependent upon both. A body builder, for example, may be capable of performing certain physical feats in a very material and objective way. However, a body builder's body also constitutes an important symbolic part of the habitus which, within a subjective social context (field), will affect the dispositions of the body builder and will impact on how the subject relates to the social world and him/herself. This dialectic becomes important in understanding the intertwining of material and symbolic

practices in the construction of the subject (Hunter 2004, p.176). Linking from this emphasis on embodiment, the concept of habitus also attends to practice (Bourdieu, 1998). As Hunter (2004, p.177) explains; “Culture is embodied and reproduced through participation in social practices in day-to-day activities. Through practice, social structures become embedded in the habitus”. Clearly, sport, PE and physical activity can be seen as practices in this way and therefore are fundamentally interconnected to the habitus.

For the rest of this chapter I would like to show how the physical activity and inactivity for the young people in this study can be partially explained by the habitus. For the sake of meaningful discussion I have separated the following sections into *habitus and social class*, *habitus and gender* and, *habitus and being sedentary*. Maintaining an intersectional understanding of human experience, these three parts of the habitus are, of course, not independent of each other. Neither are they the only three relevant parts of the habitus. I have chosen to discuss the habitus in three separate sections merely for the purpose of discussion. In doing so, I will illustrate that social class forms an important part of the habitus and that gender forms an important part of the habitus. That is, the habitus must be enacted in response to gender and class expectations. While I would like to point out the caveat that individual agents are not identifiable and classifiable in distinct practical groups, I follow Bourdieu’s (1985, p.725) assertion that ...

Sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in a similar condition and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interest and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances.

In this way, statements about gender, class and indeed any form of cultural norms can only be cautiously applied to general circumstances beyond the individual. The section on being sedentary is slightly different. By incorporating the habitus into the understanding of physical inactivity I am suggesting that being physically inactive can be seen as an embodied disposition and a social inclination. This is move away from thinking about physical inactivity being the result of there existing ‘barriers’ to physical activity, or physical activity being the result of rational choice by sufficiently



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*Figure 18.* Two contrasting depictions of leisure activities. *Left:* taken by James (King Edwards Grammar). *Right:* taken by Rhys (Grove Hill High School).

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motivated individuals, and a move towards physical inactivity as a habit – both symbolic and material. Symbolically, I will introduce the idea of physically inactive practices (e.g. computer gaming, watching TV, doing homework) as being part of a ‘community of practice’.

## 8.2 Habitus and social class

Proceeding as I do from Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective and terminology, I would like to explore ‘social class’ and its relationship to physical movement of various kinds.

to understand the class distribution of the various sports, one would have to take account of the representation which the different classes costs (economic, cultural and physical) and benefits attached to the different sports (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p.12).

What should be emphasized and reiterated is the vagueness and indeterminacy of the concept. In describing what kinds of social class-related dispositions were observable in this data set, I do not claim that these dispositions are either necessary or essential for individuals in those social groups (however one chooses to classify those groups). Instead, I am merely pointing out the cultural dispositions which – in accordance with my observations and data – appear somewhat resonant with participants who share a common socio-economic and geographical position. As mainly a description of *cultural* dispositions, class habitus can, of course, transgress economic and geographical positions. These cultural distinctions between social class positions were evident in the actions of pupils. As one participating school was a fee-paying grammar school and three others were state schools (see methodology chapter, p.49), it was possible to make some comparative observations, albeit rather limited ones. As noted in a previous chapter, ‘scootering’ was a popular leisure time activity for some pupils, but was much more common with pupils in the school with the lowest socio-economic status (Grove Hill high School).

**Luke:** I don't know if you've heard, there's a new thing called scootering.  
We all do that.

**Rhys:** We normally go to *Morrisons* [supermarket] but we get kicked off there though.

**Luke:** If we're in the car park they kick us out.

**Rhys:** They kick us off though. For some reason people complain about us.

Further, in one state funded school in particular (St Andrews High School) it was clear that there were pupils from a range of socio-economic circumstances in attendance. Although, no participants mentioned the significance of parental income or educational attainment, several teachers talked about the 'range' of pupils which attend the school citing the different geographical locations within the school's catchment area. There was, for example, talk of "those kids" from X estate and "the ones" from Y village. In some cases this led to pupils integrating and sharing commonalities, but in other cases serving as a point of distinction between pupils. The word 'Chav' was a derogatory label used to describe some pupils in the school. When asked to clarify the identification of 'Chavs' in one interview the pupils were able to describe behaviour, clothing, and a certain way of walking:

**Emily:** They don't seem to care. Just like, they're not...

**Samhita:** They don't always seem to turn up to lessons and...

**Researcher:** So they wear any different clothes? Could you see them a different way, or have their hair a different way or?

**Emily:** They'll have like, jackets over uniform.

**Samhita:** Or don't wear uniform.

**Emily:** Or trousers tucked into socks or.

**Samhita:** Don't always wear the uniform.

**Emily:** And their walk.

**Samhita:** It's like a bit of a waddle, I think.

**Emily:** [laughs] One, two, three, dip! Ah, bless 'em, you have to laugh a little bit don't you?

The very fact that a social group can be recognised by a particular way of walking demonstrates the embodied nature of the habitus. Bourdieu (1977, p.87) writes about the "body hexis" and the "motor function" in a way which is pertinent here;

Body *hexis* speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values: in all societies, children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult – a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech, and (how could it be otherwise?) a certain subjective experience.

While the term 'Chav' seemed to serve as a description of *deviant* pupils ("they don't seem to always turn up to lessons", "they don't wear uniform"), the term was certainly intrinsically tied to social class assumptions. The use of the term here resonates with the use of the term in popular culture as a demonisation of the working

class (Jones, 2011). The word chav was only ever used by middle class pupils and only ever towards working class others as a demarcation. Indeed, with the condescending remark “bless ‘em, you have to laugh” we can see a suggestion towards the social position which is implied in the use of the term. Although it was not possible to talk to the specific pupils who were identified by the participants above, two pupils at Grove Hill High School vaguely matched the description given by Emily and Samhita. Both received free school meals and both were highlighted by their teacher as pupils with poor behaviour. This behaviour was verified by the pupils themselves during various interviews:

**Researcher:** I'm sensing that you don't like the teachers that much?

**Keith:** It is funny, ‘cos they tell you not to do something and me and Macca do it!

This deviance and non-compliance was also observable in their disposition to smoke cigarettes which, in this context, remains a taboo and deviant activity:

**Researcher:** So who's the smokers then?

**Michael:** Me.

**Keith:** Me, even though I don't smoke. Cos once you smoke you're always gonna be with the smokers.

This quote demonstrates, firstly, that these two pupils take part in a practice considered deviant within school and wider society, and secondly, that these practices serve in some way to distinguish the pupils as ‘smokers’ and hence showing smoking as a social activity. It is interesting to note Keith's remark that the actual practice of smoking is not a necessary condition for acting in a way expected of the smokers. Bourdieu might argue that the schemes of thought that result in the enactment of smoking as a practice may persist in the absence of that specific incidental practice due to the durability to the habitus. The idea of the ‘working-class-deviant’ pupil becomes important for this discussion as engagement in school activities (especially physical education) and sporting activities is significantly impacted upon. My first encounter with these two pupils during the ethnography was when they both arrived at the PE teachers’ office prior to the PE lesson with written notes of exemption in hand. After acknowledging that both pupils could be excused from taking part in the lesson, the teacher later disclosed to me that he was confident that the notes were not written with adult handwriting and were forged by the pupils themselves. Over the following several months, neither pupil took part in a PE lesson one citing illness and the other a sprained

ankle. Indeed, during an interview one of the pupils claimed, "since I've been to this school I've done PE, like 5, maybe 6 times" (Keith, Grove Hill High School). They were into their 3rd year at this school. With some pride, Keith also declared "we normally go for a fag in PE". With similar enthusiasm, Michael was keen to re-tell his story of deviance; "if you haven't got your kit, like I forgot last week, we walked in and he said, 'if you're not going to take part get out my lesson', and I said 'fuck you then' and walked out. Didn't I Keith?" This kind of disposition towards non-compliance is, of course, not exclusively an issue of class habitus. However, these particular enactments of male defiance are examples of practices which intersect between class, deviance and masculinity in a way which makes social class seemingly essential. Comparison between Keith and Michael and 'the lads' depicted in Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour* are obvious. However, while the actions captured in the data are the actions of individuals, thinking with the habitus draws out the notion that these actions are not 'individual' actions at all:

the habitus could be considered as a subjective, but not individual, system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class.

However, care must be taken with this interpretation of the habitus. To say that deviant behaviours are likely to be enacted by "all members of the same group or class" is, of course, incorrect. The language of Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles is perhaps preferable here. To say that deviant behaviours are often *endorsed* by peers *proximal* to a certain individual gives an account with more specific claims. Tied into this particular habitus was an embodied aggressiveness. This was evident from stories told by both pupils about their aggressive behaviour and also from observing them during interactions at school:

**Michael:** Apparently, we do most of the vandalising?!

**Keith:** Yeah, vandalising people!

**Michael:** Look we only hit people, only when they pee me off but...

**Keith:** I did take up one thing in PE. Like play fighting in the lesson. And then I'm always play fighting.

**Researcher:** That's not like an extra curricular sport though is it?

**Keith:** Yeah, think about it, 'cos you're moving around ain't you? Cos you go like that [gestures punching with fists] and you go in and say there's one behind you, you go whack, then whack, whack, whack!

Moreover, while interviewing Keith in the school playground he would sometimes use his physical body to exert aggression on objects by kicking a litter-bin or grabbing and shaking a metal fence. These practices and embodied dispositions can be seen as constitutive of the habitus for these pupils. Not as a result of some psychological condition or simply as a result of a lack of respect for authority, but instead as part of a system of dispositions and bodily hexis which remains relatively durable across contexts and exist as essentially embodied enactments which constitute the habitus for individual people. This system of dispositions clearly impacts engagement with Physical Education. The behaviour of Keith and Michael was an enactment of masculinity as much as it was an enactment of social class, however, this class-based ‘anti-school’ behaviour was also evident in girls PE lessons, as reported by the participants at Woodley Grange High School.

**Researcher:** So you were saying that there are some people who spoil it in your class?

**Naomi:** There are some people in the class that are...

**Angie:** They're the rebels.

**Gemma:** It's not just Netball, it's like most lessons.

**Naomi:** Not just PE, but they're like that.

**Angie:** ‘cos when you're playing netball and you're just standing around and the teacher just stares at someone or someone doesn't wanna do it. Like, Rebecca goes and sits somewhere else, and then you just like...

**Hali:** And also some students ruin it. Like, they throw a fit or something and we have to wait for them.

The deviant, ‘anti-school’ behaviour of Keith and Michael, and of the girls described here might be connected to class culture and therefore a class habitus. Not only does this habitus influence PE, but also physical activity in other contexts – such is the durability of the habitus. Keith, for example, took part in ‘free running’ (an activity involving running through urban spaces while clearing obstacles) with his friends during the weekends. Keith’s excitement and enthusiasm while talking about this activity was interesting given his reluctance to take part in any other available types of physical activity during PE and school clubs. Indeed, when it was suggested that the school should set up a lunchtime club for ‘free running’, Keith dismissed the idea quickly claiming that “it wouldn’t be the same”. For me this resonates with Bourdieu’s work which takes into account the symbolic nature of the practices inherently



*Figure 19.* Photos taken in the theme of physical activities photographs by a student at Grove Hill High School

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connected to and associated with underlying systems of meaning. Bourdieu himself wrote about playing tennis in a similar way:

Tennis played in Bermuda shorts and a tee shirt, in a tracksuit or even swimming trunks, and Adidas running shoes, is indeed another tennis, both in the way it is played and the satisfaction it gives (1985, p.164).

In a similar way, ‘free running’ in school – under the supervision of teachers, while wearing agreed upon ‘kit’ deemed appropriate, bound by expectations to behave in a particular way, organised to take place in a specific time period and done together ‘inclusively’ with any other pupils who wish to take part – would be another kind of ‘free running’ altogether. In anticipation of this, Keith refused to pursue the idea of setting up a lunchtime club.

My interpretation of the data suggests that social class was also reflected in the habituses of pupils in another way. Several pupils at Grove Hill High School (area of low socio-economic status) used the term “CBA”, a short hand for “can’t be arsed” on a number of occasions. This did not seem to be associated with ‘deviant’ behaviours in particular, but did seem to be used widely in the schools in working class areas. I never heard this term used by participants at King Edwards Grammar or at St Andrews High School. Here are some examples of it in use:

**Researcher:** Are all these reasons the reason why you don't do physical activity?

**Keith:** No.

**Michael:** CBA.

**Researcher:** How’s gymnastics going?

**Millie:** Alright. Doing a championship soon so ... yay.

**Researcher:** Yeah? Preparing for it? Getting ready?

**Millie:** No. CBA! [laughs]

My point here is not to suggest that all working class participants are apathetic and that middle class participants have a high work ethic, only to point out that “CBA” is an idea which seems to operate within class boundaries and could have wider cultural relevance. To repeat Bourdieu’s assertion; “there are durable ways of standing, speaking, and walking, and thereby feeling and thinking” (in Reay 2004, p.433). The use of “CBA” cannot be seen as a mode of speech in isolation, but rather as a way of communicating a disposition which is reluctant to apply personal effort. For Lewis, this notion played a part in his participation in the school football team: “I tried out for the

football team in year 7, but I failed so I couldn't be bothered to try again". One may go further and suggest that this disposition can be recognized in the particular ways of dressing for some pupils (un-tucked shirts, untied shoe laces) and in the particular ways of standing (slouched posture). All assist in achieving what might be called a consistency (perhaps a 'self' or an 'identity') which permeates multiple ways of being and avoids a certain strangeness apparent when one acts in ways not expected of one's social position. In the same way that it might seem odd to find a builder attending the opera, it would also seem odd for a working-class-deviant to attend a tennis club or, perhaps as we have seen, even comply with school-based practices. Thinking of class habitus in this way allows us to think about physical activity as a practice which tends to reproduce class disparities and even class inequalities. By taking class culture into account in this way, this analysis moves beyond thinking about class inequalities as being simply about resource and opportunity. I will develop this point later when discussing the implications of this study.

### **8.3 Habitus and gender**

The habitus also operates within gendered expectations. Data from this study highlights the various ways that young people are physically active within these gendered expectations. Statistical studies (e.g. Sallis et al., 2000; Van Der Horst, 2007) are helpful in demonstrating that girls and boys are likely to differ in their engagement with physically active practices, but do little to locate the gender differences in a structural, embodied and inventive context in the same way that the habitus makes possible. Gender was as important for girls as it was for boys in this study, with notions of femininity and masculinity remaining significant as has been shown in the literature for some time (Scruton, 1992; Birrell and Cole, 1994; Pringle, 2010). What this section of the chapter entails is a description of the gendered aspects of the habitus for participants that relates to physical movement. However, this description would lack credibility if 'girls' and 'boys' were to be treated as homogenous groups without recognizing how the habitus can also challenge and oppose established orders and expectations. Therefore it is useful to discuss gendered dispositions in the context of the undisputed and taken-for-granted (doxa), the discourses of established practices (ortho-doxo), and the discourses of critical opposing practices (hetero-doxo).



Across different research settings, for some girls, it was clear that physical activities were an enactment of orthodox gendered characteristics. Engaging in practices considered as part of the orthodoxy for girls secured their distinctiveness from boys. Perhaps most obviously, a pupil who attends dance lessons outside of school said; “rugby and football are for boys and gymnastics and dance are for girls” (Jessica, St Andrews High School). In a particularly reflective moment offered by Emily during a group interview, it was recognized that these gendered standards are somewhat embedded and persistent;

I think it's just what we've grown up with really. Because when you are remembering things, it will be the boys that tend to play football, it will be the girls that are interested in less contact things. I just think, once that's sort of in your mind it's hard to get it out (Emily, St Andrews High School).

Several other girls were complicit in this kind of logic. Indeed, Millie claimed that “most girls” were reluctant to engage in sport during PE lessons:

**Researcher:** So what about the other girls then? How come they don't get involved, why do they just stand around?

**Millie:** ‘Cos they can't hit it. They're, like, “if I lift it and it hit's them on the head I'm gonna cry”. “I'm just gonna move my hair let me lift it”. “Oh no I broke a nail, I just put my finger on the racquet”.

**Researcher:** So that does happen then? There are girls like that?

**Millie:** Yeah, most girls.

Similarly, Rhys, a pupil at Grove Hill High School, reported that some girls would not try during team games in PE (e.g. Volleyball);

**Rhys:** We were playing volleyball and cos there were some girls that just stand there like that, like 'oh I can't be bothered', it was coming down to a girl and she was just standing there so I tried to get it.

The very fact that this occurred, and that it can be talked about as such, indicates that gender is an important distinguishing category for some young people aged 13-14. There were ways in which girls who enacted an ‘orthodox femininity’ – a femininity characterized by cosmetic hair and make-up concerns, fashion, heterosexuality etc. yet were still able to take part in physical activity. While the habitus set limitations upon engaging in some PE lessons and some types of sports, for many the girls enacting orthodox femininity, they were able to be active in other ways. For example, there

remained an inclination to take part in physical activity as a means of exercise to burn calories;

**Shelly:** It feels like you're doing some good exercise.

**Researcher:** Does anyone else find that? PE as an opportunity to exercise?

**All:** Yeah.

**Mollie:** I think it's a fun way of exercising as well. Cos you've got to do it you might as well make the most of it.

Furthermore, gendered habitus seemed relevant for the girls at Woodley Grange High School who talked about their interest in joining a local fitness gym to burn calories. To revisit data presented earlier;

**Researcher:** Do you think you'd enjoy being on a treadmill or on a...?

**Gemma:** Yeah, yeah.

**Naomi:** I like running.

**Hali:** It gets it done quicker.

**Angie:** It's more focused.

**Gemma:** I think you do more running on a treadmill than you do outside.

**Researcher:** Hali, you said 'it gets it done quicker' what do you mean by that?

**Hali:** Say if you do football, the amount of energy or calories that you would burn in your match is probably less than, after all that work and being outside and fighting for the ball and whatever, it's like probably much less than going to the gym and working out. And it's, like, more professional. If you go to the gym for an hour or something, like three times a week, it would probably be – I'm just guessing but – I think you'll probably burn more than if you were playing sport.

For me, the phrase “it gets it done quicker” indicates the primarily functional purpose of physical movement for these girls and explains a large part of the disposition to engage. Remembering that the habitus exists in a system of meanings and acts accordingly, it is important to consider the symbolic position of the body within the social hierarchy. As discussed at length in chapter 4 of this thesis, health discourses have played a part in constructing the thin, active, fit, healthy body as an object of desire and the fat, lazy, unfit body as an object of disgust. As put succinctly by Angie; “you don’t want to stand out as the bigger one”. What Bourdieu emphasizes is that the physical organism, “the bodily hexus”, is inscribed with cultural meaning. This corpus signifies the social position of each individual, and each individual’s habitus is reactive to that social position. The habitus inclines each pupil towards activities only if the meaning of the activity is one that will have beneficial bodily effects – here defined as

burning calories. In this way, the body becomes an “object of modification” (Crossley, 2004). The disposition to engage in calorie-burning activities was exclusively expressed by girl participants in this study. In the absence of treadmills at fitness gyms (no participants were old enough to hold gym memberships), some girls would exercise by using home equipment, by repeatedly running up and down the stairs and by using active-video-games such as *Pump It Up: body burn* (figure 20). The habitus does not necessarily incline individuals towards orthodox practices in the same way that theories of structural determinism or ‘social norming’ suggest. Bourdieu accounts for opposing opinions and challenging norms at the level of discourse with the term ‘heterodoxy’. Several girls in this study were critical of gendered characteristics.

**Chrissy:** Us two we're like, not girly-girls are we? We're just like...

**Millie:** More like a tomboy.

**Chrissy:** More boyish [laughter] as you can tell from the [shoes].

These pupils show their inclination to act in accordance with the heterodoxy by identifying themselves as distinct from the orthodoxy (“not girly-girls”) and more characteristic of male dispositions (“more boyish”; “like a tomboy”) that was outwardly presented by, among other things, wearing a certain style of shoe. Two other important and related points should be noted for these two pupils in particular. Firstly, they were not considered popular in school and mentioned getting bullied and teased on occasion:

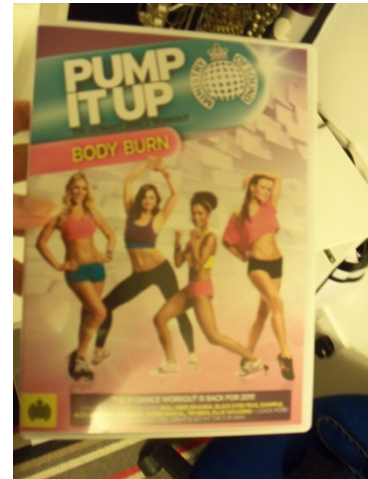
**Chrissy:** They pick on like, the not-so-popular and the more vulnerable people, and it's not nice.

**Millie:** Cos obviously if you're popular then everybody's gonna stick up for you. They ain't gonna like argue with anybody, I'm just this popular person, I'm top and everything. It's like, wow.

**Researcher:** And does that affect the PE lessons sometimes. Not PE cos you haven't got them in your class but does it affect like lunchtimes and break times?

**Millie:** Yeah when they all come over and start calling you a sket and slag.

**Chrissy:** Yeah Sophie did that to me and she come over with Alisha and Jess, and that's when I got mad and punched the door.



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*Figure 20. Showing ways to burn calories for Hali and Angie*

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While their social status among other pupils was not investigated at any depth, it is not unreasonable to suggest that their disposition to dress, talk and act in a way distinguishable from established orthodox gendered expectations would go some way to marginalize them from others. Secondly, I would suggest that the gendered habitus of these two girls is not part of a conscious critical protest about gender boundaries, but instead a compliance with a different system of dispositions unconsciously understood as a result of a history of interactions. This second point positions these individuals within a social context, rather than assuming they have made some personal choice to adopt the heterodoxy. This point echoes one made by Lee and Macdonald (2010, p.214-5) who suggest that this disposition is “neither passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values; it is inscribed through the habitus and becomes the unquestioning logic of practice”. Importantly for promoters of physical activity, the difference between choice and habitus when overcoming gender barriers may need to be better understood. For Emily and Jessica at St Andrews High School, challenging gender orthodoxy is possible, but would require overcoming “stereotypes” in order to “feel comfortable” and “not intimidated”:

**Researcher:** But don't you ever want to just cross those boundaries? And just go 'do you know what, I don't care'.

**Emily:** I think, like, everyone should be comfortable with doing everything. Like...

**Jessica:** You get a choice.

**Jessica:** No... I think, with football and all those male sports, I think everyone is capable of doing them. And I don't think you should feel intimidated by them. I think that over time, people have stereotypes, like you say, football, rugby and gymnastics and things, into the gender boundaries, but they're not at all.

It is clear, then, that young girls involved in this study demonstrate an understanding of gender appropriate practices, and gender appropriate bodies. Girls such as Jessica, who enact and embody this orthodoxy, maintain their symbolic distinction from boys through practices and strategically use these practices to attain cosmetic goals for their bodies. Other girls, such as Emily and Hali, showed an inclination towards the heterodoxy but were aware that their actions and bodies were challenging established norms. By challenging these established norms one would expect that there are social risks attached, but none were empirically observable in the data in this study.

For boys, gendered practices were also inscribed into the habitus. In this study, one particular example highlights the organizing principle of the habitus as a structured, structuring structure. As part of the data collection process in this study, participants were encouraged to plan and implement one strategy for promoting physical activity. For a pair of participants at Woodley Grove High School – Robert and Callum – their idea was to organise a weekly lunchtime sports club to be held in the school sports hall. One key goal of the sports club was to make everyone feel welcome. Strategies to implement this goal included using the phrase “everybody welcome” on the posters and democratically choosing which sport would be played each week. Once the sports club began, however, what actually happened was that a group of competent football-playing boys attended and they played football every week. While this could be seen as successful for the promotion of physical activity, Robert and Callum recognized that their sports club failed to (a) provide an opportunity to do any sport other than football, and (b) failed to involve any girl pupils. There may be a number of reasons for this, but I would suggest that the notion of gendered habitus provides a partial explanation. While it is true that each week the boys who turned up were given a ‘choice’ as to which sport they would like to play, to what extent was the sport of football pre-determined? As a concept with organizing principles, the habitus can be seen as both enabling and constraining. Enabling in the way in which pupils actively influenced the sport to be played during this sports club in accordance with their preference, and constraining in the way in which the habitus permits only certain sports to be played in accordance with the social meaning of those sports and the accepted gender expectations. To understand the lack of girl participation in this club it may be helpful to consider the “spatial grouping” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.173) that often occurs between sexes. When reflecting on the non-attendance of girls to their club, Bobby suggested that they “might feel a bit intimidated”. While observing and participating in this lunchtime sports club, I can appreciate that over a number of weeks the social space of the sports hall became engendered through the practice of football and the range of masculine enactments which accompany the game. This kind of spatio-temporal organization established through practice enabled the habitus of boys to be enacted yet simultaneously restricted the access of girls and some boys. Tuesday lunchtimes in the sports hall became implicitly ‘boys only’. The gendered orthodoxy that is being realized and reproduced here has significant implications in the schooling of these pupils. With a habitus that has embodied inclinations towards certain activities and not others based

on gendered expectations, we can see how young people's available options become limited and restricted. Hali, for example, said in an earlier discussion that she previously played for a football team before her family re-located to the area and that she enjoyed it. If, however, the social processes that I have described dominate the space in the lunchtime sports club to the point that football, masculinity and boys become inseparable, then Hali would be unable to attend such a club without infringing on the 'territory' and significantly compromising her own distinctiveness as a 'girl' not a 'boy'. This might be a personal judgment at first in order to 'fit in', but then might later become a preference and a disposition – part of the habitus. In this way, young people may end up reproducing the very structures that limited them in the first place (Hunter, 2004, p.176).

#### **8.4 Habitus and physical inactivity**

In this final section of the chapter, I would like to explore how the concept of habitus might help explain physical inactivity for young people. Practices that require little physical movement, such as watching TV, playing video-games, sitting in school and traveling by car, have been the target of much research in recent years (e.g. Biddle et al., 2004; Rey-Lopez et al., 2008). What I would like to suggest, is that engaging in these 'sedentary behaviours' is part of the habitus in the same way that engaging in other 'active' practices is part of the habitus. As the habitus constitutes a precondition towards certain perceptions and practices, it is worth considering the extent to which some young people show dispositions towards sedentary practices as *opposed* to physically active practices. What this might suggest is that physical inactivity could be an enactment and a practice in itself, not just the absence of physical activity. As such, it is possible that sedentary practices can be as much an enactment of the habitus for some young people as being physically active is an enactment of the habitus for others. To explore this, I will use data as a documentation of the type of sedentary activities that some young people engage in.

As stated in the methodology chapter of this thesis, some participants were selectively recruited based on high self-reported levels of sedentary behaviour. Some participants' high sedentary time was due to an inclination to dislike physically active

pursuits whether inside or outside school, whereas for others sedentary time was in addition to physically active pursuits. When asked about their PE lessons, Jake said “you're asking the two people who probably hate PE the most. I hate badminton”. He also showed a disinterest in the forthcoming London Olympic Games:

**Researcher:** So do you think the Olympics is going to have a amazing effect on participation? And kick-start a healthier nation?

**Jake:** Not really. I couldn't care less. It's about as interesting as the royal wedding last year. I'm probably just going to be annoyed 'cos they're probably going to force us to do something to do with the Olympics.

In contrast, other boys reported equally high sedentary time yet remained positive about sport, PE and physical activity. Amal was one of these pupils; “they're just fun to play [computer games]. It's not saying that sport isn't. Sports are fun, I do enjoy playing them”. With participant interviews and participant photography (figure 21) it is possible see how sedentary time is accumulated. For Aja at King Edwards Grammar School, a typical weekday evening would consist of homework, computer games and TV: “I get home at 5 or 6, then I do my homework, then I might go and play on the computer – Assassins Creed maybe – then maybe watch TV or... then yeah go to bed.” This was typical of many of Aja's friends. Andrew, explained that he took part in a sports club once a week but spends a lot of time inactive:

**Researcher:** So who thinks they're quite active then? Who does some physical activity outside of school?

**Andrew:** I do. On Fridays I play football for an hour straight.

**Researcher:** And then your other evenings are taken up with what?

**Andrew:** Homework. And on Saturday I play PS3. Or I watch football.

Physical activity, it seems, was not a regular part of the everyday lives of this group of friends at King Edwards Grammar School. Indeed, it was clear that homework was a significant part of the day-to-day schedules for many pupils in this school. As a result, many claimed that it made more physically active activities difficult because of simple time constraints:





*Figure 21.* Showing ‘sedentary’ activities of participants (clockwise from top left) playing X Box, doing homework, playing guitar, spending time on facebook

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**Amal:** The school takes up a lot of your time though. Like by the time you get home it's already dark, it's like 5 o'clock.

**Aja:** By the time I've finished my homework it's already like 8 or something.

**Amal:** I really have like no time when I get home.

**Aja:** I take longer with my homework than most people.

**Amal:** Homework takes about an hour everyday I think.

**Aja:** 'Cos we're meant to have like half an hour of homework each.

**Freddy:** Sometimes you get like four.

**Amal:** Yeah we do some days.

**Freddy:** Yeah sometimes it takes like the whole night.

Although homework is a compulsory activity in this school system – which perhaps suggests we do not require social theory to explain why pupils are doing it – I would suggest that there is a degree of voluntary engagement with homework for which the habitus plays some part. Aja, for example, seemed to spend more time doing homework than other pupils:

**Aja:** For me, I just go home, do homework, which takes a bit longer than 5 minutes!

**Researcher:** So how long? An hour?

**Aja:** A bit longer than that, two hours maybe.

**Freddy:** We don't even get two hours a night... they ask "just do two pages" and he writes 20!

[laughter]

A disposition towards academic efforts should not only be seen as a personal endeavour, but also a highly social activity made possible through the existence of a number of social forces, institutions and expectations through which the habitus operates. With Aja's response to the question below, it is possible to see how Bourdieu's expression of social activity as "unreflected habitual action" appears applicable:

**Researcher:** So why do you want to do well in your grades Aja?

**Aja:** Cos it's your grades. If you do well then you get a better job, I don't know, it's just...[pause]

For other participants there was less inclination to spend time doing homework but a keen interest in music. Here are some examples:

I like to play music, which isn't really that active.  
(Ryan, St Andrews High School)

In my spare time I'm a bit of a nerd. Well I am a nerd really. I am. I'd rather read, I'm really, really into my music so I'll read *NME* or be listening to my music, or writing music.  
(Emily, St Andrews High School)

**Millie:** My life is basically just around music.  
**Chrissy:** Yeah, you like music.

**Millie:** I just like going home from school and turning on my laptop and that's all I actually do... just listening to music all day and that's it.

**Researcher:** Really?

**Millie:** When I eat my dinner I listen to music. I won't go on my Facebook or anything, I'm like, stuff Facebook, I just listen to music. My life is just around listening to music.

**Chrissy:** So as soon as you get home, you just listen to music?

**Millie:** I just go upstairs, turn on the radio. Then get bored of that, turn the radio off. Pop the laptop on and then listen to my own music that I actually like. Then I download some. I download it from *youtube*.

(Grove Hill High School)

**Researcher:** So what do you guys do at breaktimes and lunchtimes?

**Graham:** I just play football all the time.

**Researcher:** Are most people pretty active?

**Graham:** Most people are. But some people, you [gestures towards Jake] are in the library quite a lot. And there's about 5 people everyday that go to music, not the same people but different people different days, but normally about 5-6.

(St Andrews High School)

These extracts offer a clear reminder that 'inactive' hobbies, such as listening to music, playing instruments and reading, are intentional practices engaged in as a result of an inclination towards that activity. Millie's statement that, "my life is just around listening to music" and Emily's statement that, "I'm a nerd really. I am. I'd rather read" provide a strong sense that the *self* – and the enactment of the self through practice – is an interesting point to consider. This represents a move away from thinking about physical inactivity as simply the result of barriers to physical activity. Instead it moved towards seeing physical inactivity as equally as appealing, rewarding, productive and *active*. When asking participants about their leisure activities that were not physically active, many participants talked about TV watching:

**Researcher:** What about TV? Do you have scheduled TV time?

**Callum:** Nah, I always watch out for match of the day, but I just watch anything that interests me. Like documentaries a bit, yeah.

**Researcher:** Reality stuff?

**Callum:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** What other stuff?

**Robert:** Top Gear. Anything that's on. Top Gear, Simpsons, Match of the Day. Whatever's interesting.

**Researcher:** When? Just when you get back?

**Robert:** Yeah, I'll get home, walk the dog, do me homework, and I'll have my dinner and watch TV while I have my dinner, do the pots, then probably sit and watch TV.

**Callum:** I do quite a lot on the computer. And I watch quite a lot of TV too.

**Researcher:** How much do you do?

**Callum:** Um sometime, sometimes I just can't be arsed. There's been days where I just get home from school and I'll go upstairs to my room, I'll just lie down for a second and the next thing I know I'm being woken up! It'll be about two hours later, I've been sleeping. That happens quite a lot.

**Research:** So other times, do you just sit on your computer in your room or?

**Callum:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Facebook or youtube?

**Callum:** Yeah.

(Robert and Callum, Woodley Grove High School)

In contrast to music and homework, watching TV seemed to be pursued out of a lack of having other things to do, rather than because of a drive or inclination. For some participants, watching TV was a way to “pass the time” (George, King Edwards Grammar), but it was not without purpose. Not only would TV provide a space to relax, but I also noticed some participants discussing events and characters from TV shows with each other. By providing a topic of conversation, TV might be beneficial for facilitating conversations and relationships between pupils. Sedentary activities can be seen as more than simply “passing the time”. Bell (2011) argued that young people may use the “feel” of being sedentary to resist the “feel” of being busy on what is an increasingly instantaneous and fast-paced technological world. Furthermore, other sedentary activities like checking facebook and using mobiles was a way of regularly communicating with friends. Shelly and Jessica (St Andrews High School) used their mobile phones a lot and often used them during our interviews. In their words:

**Shelly:** I'm just on my phone all the time.

**Jessica:** Yeah always on it.

**Shelly:** You get facebook on your phone. I'm addicted to it. It's like as soon as it beep you're on it and you put it down and it beeps again.

Both girls noted that phone use might inhibit their physical activity in some ways but were reluctant to accept their parents' opinions that they should be "playing out" more:

**Researcher:** Does your phone distract you from other stuff?

**Jessica & Shelly:** Yeah.

**Jessica:** I get my phone taken off me.

**Researcher:** How does having a phone impact on your leisure?

**Shelly:** You'd probably be out more, like talking to your friends. 'Cos now you might as well just text them instead of walking and knocking on their door.

**Jessica:** My dad made me walk around to my uncle's, which is right round the corner. He wouldn't give me his phone number, he made me walk. It was pointless!

**Shelly:** My mum is always on about, "in my day we were playing out all the time".

**Researcher:** And what do you say to that?

**Shelly:** I say well that was back in your day not mine!

Shelly's final remark hints towards the notion that socializing via mobile technologies is part of the daily practices that are embedded in this particular cultural space and time. Communicating in this way is not only a practical solution to the problem of proximity (i.e. enabling a conversation which would otherwise be impossible) but also a highly social activity intertwined with etiquette, an esoteric language and involving the use of devices which can act as signifiers of social position. It was evident, for example, that pupils with the latest phone models would proudly draw attention to their phones during focus group discussions. In the same focus group discussion, however, another girl showed that she did not share the same inclination to use her mobile phone in the same way and to the same extent: "it's just to waste the time like that, I think well, what have I achieved? Oh, I've spoken to someone. I'm gonna see them later anyway." Extensive use of technologies while being physically inactive was also reported by a group of boys at King Edwards Grammar School. This group of pupils spoke to each other using the internet phone service, *Skype*, on "most nights" and also interacted while playing online computer games:

**Researcher:** So tell me what you do with your spare time?

**Freddy:** Well I'll give you a sort of thing that happens. I go home, I do my homework, which takes about 5 minutes – because I'm so skilled – I go on Skype with Chris and Alex and...

**Aja:** Yeah what was your longest Skype call?

**Freddy:** Like 14 hours!

[laughter]

**Amal:** What do you do on Skype for 14 hours?

**Freddy:** We play some COD, we play some TF2, play some Portal...

**Amal:** So you're on Skype while you're playing the game?

**Freddy:** Obviously.

**Amal:** There's a picture of him on Facebook with 3 screens playing on something.

**Researcher:** So every night do you go on Skype then?

**Freddy:** Well most nights, yeah. 'Cos, you know, it counts as social activity.

For these pupils, playing computer games was far more than simply a way to “pass the time”. One participant compared the achievement satisfaction of computer games to scoring a goal in football:

**Freddy:** It's sort of like an achievement, you know, it's great to score a goal in football, but you know its, great when you get your first Diamond, or you know you make your first TNT, you go to the Nether for the first time, you get your first Obsidion! You mine your first Glowstone, or get your first Moan.

This clear sense of achievement was not only an individual experience, but was socially reinforced through narrating particularly newsworthy events to friends. Amal shared his story of getting a ‘mobile’ during a recent game of *Modern Warfare 3*:

**Freddy:** Are you gonna talk us through how you got your mobile?

**Amal:** Yeah ok. It was all set. I was in Hardhat.

**Researcher:** What's that?

**Amal:** It's this map on Modern Warfare 3. And there's this tunnel, and I camped on top of the tunnel for like 20 minutes, and I was watching all these like bad guys come through. I put a motion sensor down so I could see everyone, and I jumped down when I was on 24 kills, and I got shot by someone with a sniper rifle, and I was on final stand, but I saw the guy quickly and he was on final stand too.

**Researcher:** What's final stand?

**Amal:** It's when you're like almost dead. So I threw a flash bang at him and he died. So that's how I got the mobile. And I was about to use it but the match ended! And then when I did that I tried to get a juganaut, and I opened it up, but then the match ended.

**Researcher:** What's a juganaut?

**Amal:** It's like a massive armour suit that you walk around in.

The enthusiasm and pride shown by Amal when telling this story is partly demonstrates that telling others of his skill, ability and competence at playing this game is important. The achievement of certain in-game accolades served as a symbolic marker of his ability and commitment to that practice. Further, it was obvious that using the game-related terminology was a way of highlighting their own knowledge of each game and therefore affiliation to an exclusive set of practices. This exclusivity has the effect of marginalizing people whose expertise in gaming has not yet been proved, and also marginalizing people who cannot afford such technologies. The appropriation of such language by each member of this social group clearly contributes to a collective history shared within the social group. These practices contribute to a shared experience, a commonality between individuals who play these games and begin to form what might be considered a 'community of practice' or even a 'type of person' and with it, a system of dispositions and expectations associated with that community. Furthermore, Freddy's hobby of making *youtube* videos (figure 22) further highlights that sedentary behaviours can often be highly social activities that go some way to constitute the habitus. With 32 videos uploaded and one video having had over 20,000 views, Freddy had demonstrated technical abilities that clearly impressed his peers:

**Amal:** What about your youtube videos?

**Freddy:** Oh yeah.

**Aja:** He's got like half a million views.

**Freddy:** More than that, it's like 800, 000.

**Amal:** Aja you're not up to date with these things! We should put his video on now!

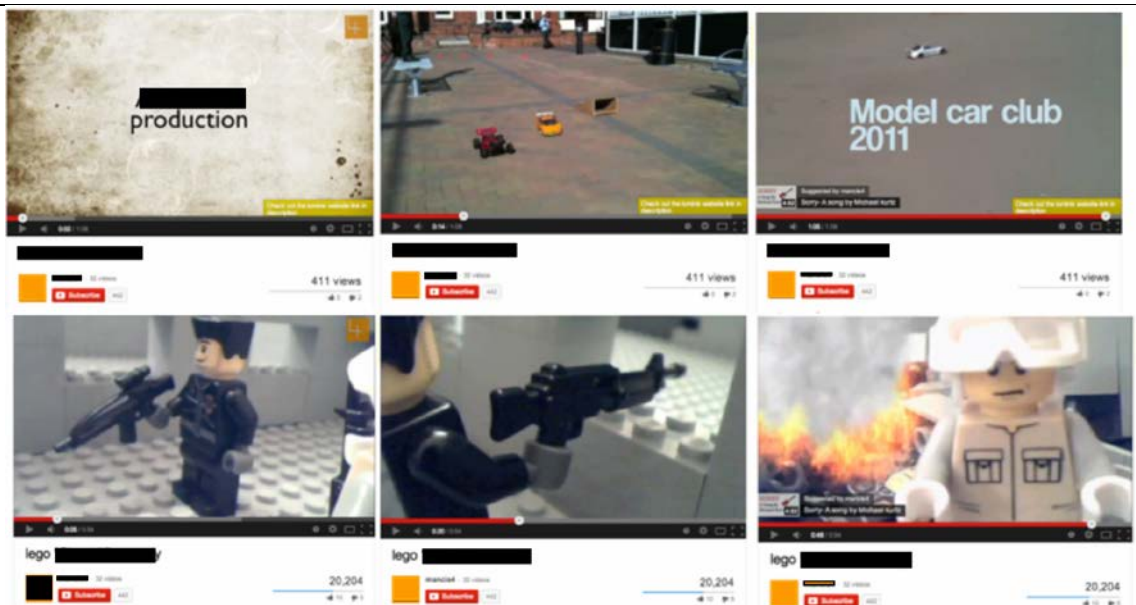
**Aja:** Seriously it's legend! It must be good to get 800, 000 views.

**Amal:** Let's get it up now...

[loads computer and searches in youtube]

**Aja:** Look it's coming up on the suggestion. That's amazing!

Some pupils played games because "it's just fun" (Freddy, King Edwards Grammar School) and others extended gaming as a way to take part in social events such as "gaming festivals" (Amal, King Edwards Grammar). With the opportunities to interact with peers and the sense of achievement experienced, we might say that the participants in the group demonstrate that gaming was appealing in and of itself.



*Figure 22.* Screen shots from Freddy's *youtube* channel showing model car club (top row) and lego animation (bottom row)



However, there was one remark which suggested that gaming might also be related to a lack of physical competence:

**Freddy:** We can't really say why [we do it], I guess we do it 'cos we can't really play football or something.

**Amal:** And it's in your own bedroom.

**Researcher:** What do you mean you can't really play football?

**Freddy:** Well we're not very good.

**Amal:** Like your body's got to be athletically fit to do it.

Citing his own physical body as reason why he does not play football and therefore why he plays video-games is a strong statement about the importance of the body in the context of sport. Being “not very good” and not “athletically fit” could also be articulated as possessing low physical capital. Their material bodies (in addition to their symbolic selves) serve to influence what they can and can't do in their leisure time. As a result, the pupils in this group seem to have gravitated towards an activity where competence can be achieved without possessing the physical capital that football, for example, requires. Something might also be said here of the gendered nature of video-gaming. While the activity seems to cross class boundaries (Keith and Michael from Grove Hill High School also showed an interest in gaming), there were *no* girls in this study who mentioned playing computer games.

### *Summary*

In this chapter I have used Bourdieu's *habitus* to explore the relevance of gender, class and physical inactivity. This concept suggests – or perhaps insists – that actions can be seen as *practices* that are simultaneously driven by and constitutive of a system of durable, embodied dispositions. While remembering that these dispositions retain inventive capacities, I have suggested that dispositions, by virtue of being socially based, can be vaguely identified as associated with gender (boys are inclined to do different activities to girls), social class (working classes are inclined to do different activities to middle classes), and communities of practice ('gamers' and 'techys' are inclined to prefer sedentary activities). I will again emphasise the point that these categories are not taken as practical categories independent of each other, but rather only categories on paper which are far more intersectional in practice. The data presented has allowed me to offer partial explanations as to why the *habitus* for certain

pupils inclines them towards physical activities appropriate for their class and gender position and towards sedentary activities at the expense of physically active ones. As a theoretical perspective, habitus differs from previous chapters as it emphasizes the body (material and symbolic) and moves beyond thinking about physical activity as a rational activity, but instead more of a practice intertwined with social meaning.

## **CHAPTER NINE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

In chapters 5-8 I have presented the empirical findings of this study having been interpreted in ways intended to explore, unpack and reveal the social processes involved with young people's physical activity and health. Although these findings chapters are presented as if they account for discrete moments of experience (in part for the purpose of readability) the content of each chapter (or rather the experiences they represent) is interconnected in a way which is not so distinct, layered or sequential. Indeed, the representations of social phenomena that have emerged throughout this process have, thus far, been carefully located within the bounds of particular theoretical representations. This brief section has therefore been included in an attempt to summarise the findings but also to dislocate the representations and elucidate the connections between representations.

Based on the data collected from 29 pupils aged 13-14 and in 4 different schools I have argued that social processes influence both the amount and type of physical activity engaged in by young people. The generative forces that exert influence in various ways might be referred to in Critical Realist terms as existing in the 'domain of the real' (concerning mechanisms). In the vocabulary of Critical Realism the influence of these mechanisms can be described as 'causally' significant. That is not to say, of course, that individual agents do not causally influence social contexts, or that causality is seen as deterministic without being highly contingent, or even that the actualisation of social action is not dependent on other things (material, emotional or psychological for example). This is only to say that social processes are causally related to physical activity: the physical activity of a young person is partially determined by interactions with other people and other things in society. To explore these relationships, each chapter addressed a different way that the social processes matter: by constructing a particular version of health, by assigning meaning to physical movement, by endorsing and enforcing particular norms, and by inscribing a system of movement-related dispositions.

Chapter 5 highlighted that health is a socially constructed, context sensitive concept. Using some Foucauldian concepts to explore the construction of health, it soon became clear that language, visual imagery and discourses of 'health' provided a framework through which health could be interpreted and understood. Words like 'obesity', 'lazy', 'exercise', '5-a-day' and 'sporty' helped encode the meaning of health for the participants in this study irrespective of class, gender, age and disposition.

Consequently, their talk about health was reliant on these words and concepts. Visual imagery, as one might expect, was similarly understood in relation to health. Fat bodies, thin bodies, muscular bodies and smiling faces all served as meaningful signs helping to construct health. Indeed, the knowledge learnt from various health pedagogies inside and outside of school helped in the construction of health as a medical and moral imperative with exercise being beneficial for sustained health/weight and also the duty of a good student/citizen. This language, imagery and knowledge, provided *for* young people (by schools, media, government health campaigns etc.) was also reproduced *by* them. As society pre-exists the individual, these symbolic structures have some causal influence on how young people can understand and engage with physical activity and health.

The representation of 'health' as a social construct is antecedent to the assertions of chapter 6. For physical activity and inactivity to be a purposeful practice (as I argue it is for many participants) a particular apparatus must exist within which meaning can be made. The entrepreneur, for example, can only seek to make money in the capitalist system where the necessary structures, opportunities and inclinations exist. In a similar way, the pursuit of physical capital is only sought when the symbolic difference between bodies brings sufficient rewards. And these rewards are only possible within the structures that position fat bodies as objects of disgust, teasing and pity owned by lazy, unhappy children. As a result, physical activity is sometimes seen as a meaningful opportunity to increase physical capital through burning calories and turning fat into muscle. Some strategies included home gym equipment, Zumba, active "body pump" video games and running up the stairs. These activities were seen (by some) as enjoyable, but importantly, were also as a way to "get it done quicker" in respect to purposefully burning calories. The connection between 'health' as a social construct and the manifestation of physical activity as a purposeful practice, however, is much more unstable than this depiction presumes. Young peoples' engagement with 'health' is highly contingent on individual experiences, which can be varied. Chapter 7 explored the individual experiences a little further.

Working simultaneously with symbolic forces are the powerfully normative forces of actual people. Broadly speaking, humans are social beings whose behaviours are learnt, at least partially, from the actions of others. This was the topic of chapter 7. Here, I used the theory of norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012) to describe how

engagement in physical activity is often contingent on social norms relating social circles ranging from a very local level (proximal norm circles) to broader level (imagined norm circles). I claim that these social groups constitute the norm-set circle for a cluster of specific norms related to physical activity. One example was the cluster of norms that we often describe as 'femininity' being enforced by some as incompatible with sports like Rugby. Norm-set circles, whether proximal or imagined, have some normative power over the individual members of the group and can have some influence on actual events and behaviours. Not only does the theory of norm circles account for the normative influences of people, but it has also allowed me to account for intersectional thinking claiming that individual pupils are the site of a number of intersecting social norms. For each norm, the proximal norm circle seems to consist of peers for the most part – at least in the context of school. Theorising the social process in this way reveals that a pupil's decision to take part in physically active behaviours – such as playing football in the playground, or going to the gym – involves a wide range of intersecting social norms which must be endorsed or rejected in the moment of acting. The social consequences of endorsing or rejecting norms can be powerful. Through this theoretical lens, pupils engage in physical movements if (1) the activity is endorsed by their immediate friends, (2) the activity does not take place in a social space where conflicting social norms are expected, and (3) the activity does not involve the rejection of norm-sets related to wider cultural norms such as gender, class and culture. Interpreting the data in this way is useful and accounts for the importance of practical interactions between people. However, by emphasising the causal power of *others* on *individuals* it fails to recognise that socialised individuals may come to embody those norm-sets and eventually act out of unreflective habit. For this reason I plugged in to Bourdieu's habitus in chapter 8.

Using the concept of the habitus (Bourdieu), I argued that young people also do physical activity as a part of a system of habitual dispositions. The habitus suggests that young people have an inclination to do physical activities appropriate for their gender, their class and – in some cases – as part of their highly sedentary communities of practice. The concept suggests – or perhaps insists – that actions can be seen as *practices* which are simultaneously driven *by* and constitutive *of* a system of durable, embodied dispositions. Given that the habitus is somewhat reactive to social systems (what Bourdieu calls 'fields') this chapter is also contingent on earlier chapters

describing the social context. Indeed, I have described my use of the habitus as an extension of the findings of the previous chapter on norm circles but with a different emphasis. The crucial difference being that social actions are in the first instance performed under an astute awareness of social consequences, and in the second instance are enacted and embodied more unconsciously as part of a durable system of dispositions. While remembering that these dispositions retain inventive capacities, I have suggested that the habitus, by virtue of being socially based, can be vaguely identified as associated with gender (boys are inclined to do different activities to girls), social class (working classes are inclined to do different activities to middle classes), and communities of practice ('gamers' and 'techys' are inclined to prefer sedentary activities). Put simply, this chapter suggests that young people might participate in physical activities and sedentary activities not out of conscious rationalization but out of inculcated habitual inclinations related to their social position.

In this summary I have made connections between chapters a little clearer. The relationships between my representations of reality are far more fluid and interconnected than the chapters originally suggest. Representations do, at times, complement each other and reveal something about the experience of young people that might have otherwise been missed. At other times, different representations are disruptive and dislocated. It is important now to reflect on what the implications and contributions might be. This is the task of the next chapter where the basic aim is to address the question "so what?"

## **CHAPTER TEN: IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**



This chapter is dedicated to discussing the relevance of this study for physical activity and health promotion for young people. Moving towards the question of 'so what?' presents a difficult challenge in research. There are two main areas that I wish to discuss: implications for physical activity and health promotion, and contributions to methodology and theory. While I am confident that this study has some contributions to the research community and implications for practice it may be valuable to remain modest and self-critical by recognizing the limitations of the study too. The findings that I have presented in chapters 5 - 8 have been an attempt to represent the knowledge produced as a result of this research project. In describing my findings in this way, hopefully I make it clear that these findings should not be read as conclusive or finalized, but instead as ambiguous and inconclusive. Far from being objective 'findings' in the positivistic sense of the word, what I have presented is the result of connecting the body of data at hand with various theoretical devices during a three-year period of research. With this in mind, a discussion on the implications of research should be treated with caution. Rather than asserting conclusive statements, I will tentatively suggest what might be learnt from the findings of this study.

### **10.1 Implications for physical activity and health promotion**

Current physical activity and health promotion strategies range from small-scale individual interventions to community interventions, and to large-scale mass media campaigns. As shown in the literature review of this thesis, much of the work attempting to increase physical activity in children has shown little or moderate success in the medium-to-long term (Biddle et al., 2011; Van Sluijs et al., 2007) and have been criticized for various reasons (Cale and Harris, 2009; Lee et al. forthcoming; Piggin, 2012; Rich and Evans, 2005). As the aims of this study were not to design, implement or evaluate any particular intervention I cannot confirm or dismiss intervention designs with confidence here. Nevertheless, I would contend that the knowledge gained from this study can offer some insight into the nature of some social processes that influence whether young people can or would like to be physically active. On these grounds, I would like to offer criticisms of current promotion strategies and offer some suggestions for future directions.

### *Moving beyond neoliberalism*

My first suggestion is that physical activity promotion ought not to rely on individualistic strategies that presume young people make free choices about their physical activity participation. My use of the term neoliberalism is included to capture the political and economic backdrop that promotes market competition and reduced state influence (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013) in all matters and institutions considered public or private. The contribution of Thatcherism and Reaganism in Western political discourse since the 1980's may be of note even in these contemporary debates. Indeed, the present UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's notion of the 'Big Society' is reliant on the reduction of state influence and the increase of individual responsibility. Like others (Hatcher and Jones, 2011; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010) I suggest that neoliberalism has been ideologically "rolled-out" (Peck and Tickell, 2002) beyond the economic marketplace to influence many and various cultural and social spaces – not least those of education, health and sport. The neoliberal idea that places ultimate responsibility on young people to change behaviours themselves is evident in current health promotion strategies. The *Change4Life* campaign outlines that one of the purposes of social marketing is to "help citizens to change their lifestyles (for example by making improvements to their diets, starting a programme of physical activity, giving up smoking or reducing alcohol to within recommended guidelines)". The social marketing goals clearly set out to disseminate knowledge about the health risks of physical inactivity. Through TV adverts and leaflets, children are encouraged to "move more" in order to avoid "nasty things like heart disease, diabetes and cancer" (Change4Life, 2011). *Fit for girls*, a Youth Sport Trust intervention programme, also attempted to increase knowledge of the benefits of physical activity and claim – in their final evaluative report – that they were successful as there were more girls by the end of the programme "who correctly stated the current recommended level of physical activity for their age group, from 18.9% to 30%". Besides this being a rather erroneous way to assess whether girls had learned about the benefits of physical activity, its very inclusion in the evaluative report highlights that knowledge is seen as an important part of health promotion. The idea that knowledge is sufficient to bring about changes in behaviour relies on the notion that young people are more rational, independent thinkers than they actually are. Implicit in this idea is that young people with enough knowledge

will make rational choices based on that knowledge. The faith in personal choice and individual responsibility runs contrary to the findings of this study which highlight the influence of social systems, processes and structures. Indeed, Das and Horton (2012) propose that “for too long the focus has been on advising individuals to take an active approach to life. There has been far too little consideration of the social and physical environments that enable such activity to be taken” (p.1).

Even though there is a growing body of literature advocating the social-ecological model, the political and ideological discourse is reflected in scientific intervention studies. One example of this approach might be Sallis et al.’s (2006) study which used “goal-setting” and “monthly mail and telephone counseling” to try and increase physical activity. Similarly, on the *Change4Life* website the first tip about how to get children physically active is to use the *Change4Life* “active planner”. The website says; “Try our activity planner - it can help you think about how much active time the kids are getting through the week” (Change4Life, 2014). Again, implicit in this strategy is the notion that sufficient individual planning, reminding and monitoring will supersede the social processes that otherwise constrain and limit less active children. Another example might be the public health banner at St Andrews High School in this study that read “Ditch the ride and walk to school”. Again, this makes the assumption that pupils can simply *choose* to walk instead of getting the bus. My basic critical claim here is that these approaches largely neglect the vast array of social processes that constrain and enable the lives of young people. This study reveals (or rather reminds) that culture acts in many ways, all of which provide well-established resources for young people to operate within. It is impossible to act outside of language, discourse and the social context which society partially determines. That given, how optimistic should one be when, for example, designing an intervention which attempts to improve physical activity levels by simply providing an individual exercise plan, or suggesting a list of available activities? Or by increasing a young person’s self-confidence (defined as a characteristic of the individual, not the result of an intimidating social space)? This is not to say that a young person has no control over their actions, only that they are always bound by a social context. Being a 'sociology' of physical activity and health for young people, this PhD study has attended to the contribution of the social, the cultural and the historical, so it is perhaps a little obvious that this would be my first suggestion. However, not only do I think that accounting for social processes would be beneficial

because social processes are largely neglected in current strategies, but also because this study demonstrates that social processes make a significant contribution to the actions of individuals. We cannot understand the actions of an individual without understanding their social environment. Therefore, the practical promotion of physical activity and health would be improved by moving beyond the individual towards the social. The social remains intimately intertwined with personal experience and to ignore it, or to misunderstand it is likely to lead to ineffective interventions. If the powerfully influential social processes remain unchanged then social actions are likely to continue to reproduce social processes and structures, regardless of whether certain characteristics of personality have been successfully manipulated or not. My criticism is not to say that knowledge plays no part in the decision making of human behaviour, but much less so than social marketing (and interventionists) seem to rely on.

An additional problem with knowledge-based health promotion strategies might be in the presentation of knowledge as scientific fact. While much of the research upon which health promotion campaigns draws on remains scientifically modest and inconclusive (Evans et al, 2008; Evans et al., 2004; Gard, 2010; Gard and Wright 2005), governments and health promotion ‘experts’ seem to prefer to make assertive truth claims about the benefits of physical activity and the risks of physical inactivity and obesity from an authoritative position. This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least for being potentially inaccurate (and therefore potentially dangerous). One such criticism is that population-level statistical regularities are inevitably going to misrepresent individual-level phenomena. So even though, for example, there is a general trend that physical inactivity is statistically associated with cardio-vascular disease across a population, the many additional contributing factors involved (genetics, diet and fitness to name a few) will play a part in determining whether an individual actually acquires a cardio-vascular disease. Furthermore, we might be critical of how physically inactive people (however defined in accordance with the latest science) are labeled, positioned and moralized through health promotion discourse (Burrows and Wright, 2004; Cale and Harris, 2013; Gard and Wright, 2005; Pringle and Pringle, 2012; Rich and Evans, 2005;). With that said, one possible solution to the truth claims of health promotion is to ensure that young people are critical consumers of such messages and to problematize their knowledge claims so that they are capable of selectively engaging with information. Much research on critical health pedagogies

already exists (Fitzpatrick, 2012; Macdonald, 2002; Quennerstedt, 2008; Wright and Harwood, 2012) and alternative critical methods have been included in educational curricula (Evans et al. 2008; Pringle and Pringle, 2012). I follow on from much of this work and would suggest that a critical understanding of health messages can help avoid the prevalence of an overly simplistic narrative about health which, in reality, is complex and uncertain (Gard and Wright, 2001). Many participants in this study showed a good critical understanding of health and were capable of challenging and rejecting certain ideas after some thought. Some examples were “you can be fat and still be healthy”, and “you can be thin but still be unhealthy” (chapter 5). However, it should be said that the conscious ability to make these critical comments is somewhat different to the embodiment and enactment of critical understanding. While critical health pedagogy might be a ‘good’ thing in the face of problematic and dangerous messages about health, it is far from a solution. Similar to how cognitive approaches to physical activity interventions may fail on the grounds that humans have social, emotional, embodied capabilities rather than just rational ones, we could say that critical thinkers may *know* the problems with health discourse but still act in ways that are uncritical of it.

Of course, there are plenty of researchers in physical activity and health who advocate strategies to incorporate the wider system of influential factors affecting behaviour and do not overly rely on knowledge and education. The social-ecological model takes into account several layers beyond the individual in an attempt to conceptualise physical activity as part of a system of structures which include policy, physical environment, social environment and the individual (Sallis et al., 2008). The findings of this study, then, are supportive of the general aims of the social-ecological model.

### *Introducing a new visual imagery and vocabulary to health*

A clear aim of this project was to contribute to the sociological understanding of why some young people are physically active and why some are not. The next suggestion that I would like to make is that young people’s physical activity is significantly influenced by the particular version of health that is currently prevailing. As described in chapter 5, the social construction of health helps to define it in

reference to a particular visual body and a particular vocabulary. This construction of health is problematic, I suggest, because bodies and activities outside of this narrow definition are marginalized and considered unhealthy regardless of actual health status. Introducing a new visual imagery and vocabulary to health could help disrupt its narrow definition.

The visual body is significant for a number of reasons and in a number of ways. Data from this study clearly highlight that physical activity is often part of a body project for participants attempting to burn calories and or to build muscle. In this way, body dissatisfaction seemed to motivate participants to increase their levels of physical activity – a process for physical activity promoters to be very cautious of. Of course the visual body doesn't just serve to motivate young people to exercise; it profoundly stifles physical activity too. It seems that pupils with overweight and obese bodies must self-consciously negotiate the additional challenges of avoiding ridicule, disgust and pity in settings where physical activity takes place. In much literature (and indeed popular opinion) being overweight or obese is framed as the *result* of physical inactivity. This PhD makes the case that the reverse (physical inactivity is the result of being overweight or obese) ought to be taken into account. Although it would be wrong to claim that causality operates in this simplistic way, the general principle deserves some consideration. This is a situation that can only operate in a social context which privileges certain bodies over others. The vocabulary of health works in unison with the visual construction of health. As described in chapter 5, the participants in the study relied on a narrow discourse to understand the meaning of health. This included 'obesity', 'lazy', 'exercise', '5-a-day' and 'sporty'. Although this point has been made for some years by researchers in the field of PE and sport pedagogy, unfortunately it receives very little attention in the field of physical activity and health. As a result, health promotion strategies still contribute to the false and damaging alignment of slim bodies = healthy and fat bodies = unhealthy. The characters in the *Change4Life* marketing material are all slim, apart from when they are depicted with a 'spare tyre' when explaining that we should avoid excess fat (see figure 23). Much more overtly, the *strong4life* campaign in California exclusively used obese children in their health promotion material (see figure 24). While this visual information serves to confirm and consolidate the idea that fat bodies are unhealthy and unwanted, other visual

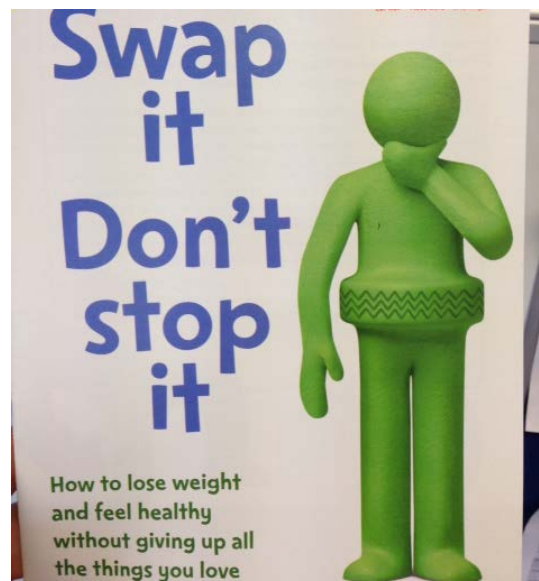


Figure 23. Image take from a *Change4Life* leaflet in school foyer



Figure 24. Poster used as part of the *Strong4Life* campaign, California

information works at the other end of the continuum. As discussed in the earlier chapters, the ‘health and fitness’ magazines perpetuate the desirability of slim, toned, muscular bodies and encode them as ‘healthy’ in the process. In terms of implications for physical activity promotion, a logical suggestion might be to disrupt the normalization of health as a visual phenomenon. This disruption could involve the presentation of healthy, happy people who have a range of body types. If we are to challenge the narrative that overweight children will grow up to be unfit, unhealthy burdens to the NHS then counter narratives should be made available in curricula and in public pedagogy. Indeed, health promoters might also consider introducing a new vocabulary to health. Being able to talk about health with a wider range of words, and therefore concepts, might enable health to be redefined as something less constrained and limited. I would hesitate to suggest those particular words at this point, but would advocate further research.

### *Reducing importance of physical capital*

My third suggested implication for physical activity promoters is to reduce the unequal distribution of physical capital when physical activity takes place. By ‘physical capital’ I mean the status of the corporeal body in social space which is afforded symbolic value (Shilling, 1991). In chapter 6, I demonstrated that young people draw from various resources which materially and symbolically position them in certain social spaces. In the context of PE and school sport this most often refers to physical skill and sporting ability, but – as has been shown – also refers to the visual body. What I am suggesting here is that what limits individuals from engaging in physical activity is not only their objective ‘ability’ to perform sporting action, or their psychological ‘confidence’, but also their being positioned as a body with low physical capital. As physical capital describes a material and symbolic status, it might be possible to change the social position of bodies by changing either the physical bodies of young people (let us call these ‘body projects’ after Shilling, 2012) or the social space (let us call these ‘social projects’). There are a number of possible body projects and social projects that physical activity promoters could utilize. Improving movement skills of young people is an idea which is central to the Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) research and Physical Literacy (Whitehead, 2001, 2010). The basic premise behind FMS: improve



the physical capital of the individual and they will be more likely to engage in all forms of physical activity. Weight loss programs and muscle building programs might also be referred to as body projects. The aim here is to encourage physical activity by trapping individuals in a cyclical logic of: improve physical ability + look good = do more exercise. As many young people in this study showed an astute awareness of the social position of bodies (their own and others') I would argue – in line with a wealth of other research – that centralizing the obese and overweight body encourages 'body projects' and has some problematic implications. Overweight and obese pupils may be seen as lazy, unhappy and worthy of pity. It is quite possible, then, that obesity discourse magnifies and intensifies body image anxieties (Evans et al, 2008; Rich and Evans, 2005; De Pian, 2014). "Standing out as the bigger one", in the words of one participant (Angie, Woodley Grange High School) is perhaps difficult enough for school pupils without the additional stigma inscribed on fat bodies through the moral imperatives of healthism. The ultimate impact of this process is the unequal distribution of capital in the PE lesson, the sports club and the exercise setting. Fat bodies, being encoded with meaning, are unable to draw on the same resources as thin or muscular bodies, and are more likely to experience those spaces with anxiety. When described in this way it is perhaps unsurprising that young people who are overweight often don't enjoy physical activity. Attempting to address this criticism is a major challenge with solutions far from being clear. However, given the post structural understanding of social processes that I have often drawn from, one possible starting point is to challenge the problematic dissemination of knowledge which serves to define fat bodies as objects of the obesity agenda and promotes the permeating discourse that has become embedded in contemporary culture. Furthermore, the emphasis on weight control and calorie burning as the primary function physical exercise opens the possibility of purposeful exercise to a group of young people who, up to this point, have probably engaged with physical activity through enjoyment (as with play), necessity (as with walking with family) and without choice (as with Physical Education). Now there is another available reason to be physically active; to control one's weight and body size and achieve an ideal body shape. At first, some promoters of physical activity might see this as appealing - another way to motivate young people to improve their otherwise poor levels of fitness. As an 'effective' motivation they would probably be correct. After all, several participants in this study talked about their exercise strategies to burn calories and prevent excessive fat. Following as I do from a body of literature (much operating

through feminist lenses) which raises concerns over the objectification of bodies, the celebration of slim bodies and the dangers of perfectionist tendencies, we might want to warn against endorsing visual body goals as a means of motivating young people to be active.

It might be argued that body project strategies fail to address the fundamental problem of unequal distribution of capital in the first place. By improving one's fundamental movement skills and hence their physical capital, the experience of physical activity might be more positive for that individual but the social context that produces the inequality remains unaltered. Therefore it might be important for PE teachers and practitioners to recognize that capital is derived from a social context. Social projects, then, shift focus away from the individual and towards the context from which individual's experiences are derived. For example, rather than building confidence of pupils, it may be equally effective for PE teachers to utilize ability groups so that the physical capital of the less competent participants is much less visible and pronounced. Similarly, PE teachers may wish to use novel activities such as Ultimate Frisbee or Dodgeball which may be preferable to more established sports as pupils will be less able to differentiate between experienced and inexperienced players. Even in these games, however, some pupils will still be better than others and the novelty of novel games will, in time, disappear after learning takes place.

#### *Encouraging and accommodating participation of friendship groups*

My next suggested implication for physical activity promotion draws mainly on the findings from chapter 7. In this chapter it was argued that young people should be understood as the sites of numerous intersecting social norms. Further, it was also argued – in line with Elder-Vass' theory of norm circles – that participation in physical activity involves the rejection or acceptance of peer-defined social norms. Beneath a pupil's decision to take part in physical activities – such as playing football in the playground, or going to the gym – there exists a wide range of intersecting social norms which must be endorsed or rejected in the moment of acting. The social consequences of endorsing or rejecting norms can be powerful. Through this theoretical lens, pupils engage in physical activity if (1) the activity is endorsed by their immediate friends, (2)

the activity does not take place in a social space where social conflicting norms are expected, and (3) the activity does not involve the rejection of norm-sets related to wider cultural social norms such as gender, class and culture. With this in mind, practitioners might be more aware that pupils' involvement in physical activity is not only reliant on whether the pupils enjoy the activity, whether they are good at that activity, but whether their friends endorse that activity or not. This might seem like common sense, but I consider it a newsworthy finding in response to physical activity promotion strategies which are aimed at a particular demographic group (e.g. *Fit for Girls*, Youth Sport Trust, 2014) or strategies which motivate individuals rather than friendship groups or families. Many programmes and interventions have a tendency to treat young people as a homogenous group. The success or failure of physical activity interventions may rest on whether whole friendships groups consider the activity appealing. Thinking with intersectionality, physical activity promoters need to consider that each pupil is a subject who acts in response to norms related to gender, age, class, ethnicity, ability and a range of other socially meaningful categories, not just one category alone. Friendship groups, in this study, often consisted of pupils from a milieu of social categories who were tied together by common interests (musical, sporting etc.) and practical commonalities (being in the same class, walking the same route to school). If physical activity promotion is to be successful, I would suggest that schemes should target friendship groups as a whole and not focus on specific social groups (such as girls, ethnic minorities, or socio-economically deprived pupils) or individuals. What this study underlines here is that these broad categories are simply not good enough as a starting point of research or intervention design regardless of how convenient they are to measure and simple to define. Movement opportunities should appeal to the social groups and involve the development of social relationships. In chapter 7 I dealt with the importance of friendship groups attending activities together. This, I feel is not only something to remember when designing programmes, but also a hugely important point to remember when evaluating the success of those programmes. Having observed the participants' attempts to promote physical activity, it is clear that joint participation between groups of friends is often critical in determining whether individuals find the activity appealing or not.

### *Accounting for the habitus*

My final suggestion for the promotion of physical activity is that interventions should be designed to take into account the habitus as embodied, enacted and related to social practices. Similarly to the emphasis on intersectionality described above, the habitus ensures young people are viewed as complex, multi dimensional, dynamic bodies who behave and interact with social space. The concept of habitus allows us to do just that. Bairner, 2007 p.27) explains that with the concept of habitus;

a class or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production, as identified through indices such as occupation, income or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated (this is the case with ethnic origin and sex).

This is a less rigid and more sophisticated approach to social class, gender, ethnicity or any other social groups which are relevant. For many participants in this study, their musical taste or affiliation to loosely defined social groups was as significant, if not essential, to shaping their participation in physical activity. It seems sensible, then, that interventions and programmes should be designed with the habitus in mind. Activities, it seems, are an opportunity to enact and embody the system of dispositions that each young person has habitually learnt. For example, the two male pupils who enacted and embodied a kind of working class deviant masculinity with their physical (in)activity clearly highlights the importance of practices in constituting their personal dispositions. Certain activities were an opportunity for the habitus to be enacted. Despite ample opportunities provided by the school in PE and clubs, participation in any of these activities would symbolically represent compliance, submission to authority and co-occupation of a social space closely associated with teachers and the 'good' students. In this case, the actual activity would be irrelevant. As described in chapter 7, at one point there was an opportunity to initiate a school 'free-running' club - an activity that Keith enthusiastically practices outside of school. Keith immediately and strongly dismissed the idea despite my persistence. For this pupil, as with others, the *meaning* of free-running was contingent on it being practiced in a particular way symbolically and practically consistent with his habitus. Attempting to artificially imitate this meaning through offering the activity as part of a school club, complete with qualified

supervision, safety rules, 'appropriate' uniform, and open to all other pupils would be an entirely different practice altogether. Keith was physically active, but in ways which he wanted to be physically active. Ways that were 'free' of the authority and control of adults and consistent with his particular dispositions. It is understandable that organisations responsible for promoting physical activity are accountable, professional and well organized, but perhaps for young people like Keith, that is not what is needed.

While it would be a misleading criticism to say that physical activity promoters entirely ignore the socially based system of dispositions that structure a person's engagement in physical activity, it certainly seems as though many programmes overlook it. In order to provide opportunities for young people who have rejected organised sport then perhaps simply providing time, the space and the encouragement is enough. What practitioners must attend to, then, is the social meaning inscribed on particular practices and spaces. This is a recognition that the appeal of certain activities lies not only in the inherent content of the activities chosen but the social circumstances of those activities. Sedentary activities can be seen in the same way. For many pupils in this study, taking part in activities which happened to be sedentary was not an expression of laziness or of insurmountable barriers preventing alternative 'active' hobbies, but rather because sedentary activities like playing computer games, doing homework and watching TV were an opportunity to enact their habitual dispositions – often as social activities. The evidence in this study suggests that a lack of physical activity may be a result of physically active practices not being part of a young person's habitual dispositions. As much literature on physical inactivity focuses on 'barriers' to participation (Allison et al., 1999; Chinn et al, 1999; Cantel et al., 2014; Moschny, 2011), this evidence sheds new light on our understanding.

Furthermore, when designing physical activity initiatives, accounting for habitus might shift focus away from highlighting physical activity as a method of disease prevention. Social marketing messages in the *Change4Life* materials and TV adverts ensure that the public consumers are made aware of the disease-prevention benefits of physical activity. Figure 25, for example, is taken from a 2013 *Change4Life* advert that uses the imagery of bodily fat and commentary from a child's voice which says "food gets stored as fat in our bodies which means we could grow up to have heart disease,



*Figure 25. Images taken from a change4life advert (2013) warning of the health risks of excess fat. The advert includes commentary from a child's voice which says "food gets stored as fat in our bodies which means we could grow up to have heart disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes"*

cancer and type 2 diabetes”. Indeed the HRE in the UK curriculum, as elsewhere, rest on the assumption that young people are either health conscious already, or will be health conscious following the knowledge gained from the available information. It seems as though the central strategy to encourage consumers to ‘move more’ is by highlighting the disease-prevention benefits of physical activity. Being disease-free, is, of course, a powerful motivation for many people. However, as the young people in this study seemed ambivalent about health concerns so distant in the future (chapter 6), perhaps thinking about the habitus is a more effective way of engaging young people. There are many prominent values that are important in the lives of the young people in this study and that could engage them in certain activities; health is not one of them. This is consistent with other studies, reporting that chronic disease does not motivate young people to be physically active (Belanger et al., 2011). My alternative suggestion, then, is that promoters of physical activity attempt to provide spaces and activities that allow and enable young people to enact their habitus.

## **10.2 Contributions to methodology and theory**

Throughout this study I have attempted to utilize a range of methods and theoretical tools in the production of knowledge. In doing so, I have had to negotiate the direction of the study within an emerging methodological and theoretical landscape. The purpose of including this brief section, therefore, is to reflect on what has been learnt in completing this project and explain what the contributions might be for other researchers in the field. Several parts to this thesis involve the use of methodology and theory that may be considered by some as novel. However, I will preface this discussion by saying that I would not make this claim and that any originality is perhaps better described as a reconfiguration or even simply the translation of orthodoxies from one field of study to another. The methods used in this study have not been without their problems, all of which can be learnt from.

### *The legitimacy of qualitative research*

My first suggestion is basic but pertinent in the context of current research orthodoxies. It might be possible to say that this study contributes to the field of

physical activity and health by demonstrating the use of multiple qualitative methods. It would not be hyperbolic to say that the discipline in general is dominated by quantitative methods. In fact, taking the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (the official journal of the International Society for Physical Activity and Health) as an example, of the 44 original research papers published in 2014 (at the point of writing) only 3 included the use of qualitative methods (Eyler et al., 2014; Eley et al., 2014; Hamilton and White, 2014). Indeed, when qualitative methods were used, they were largely restricted to basic interview protocols and seldom stretch beyond thematic or content analytical representations. This failure to incorporate the wealth of different methods (and indeed methodological approaches) long established in other fields of study might greatly limit the generation of knowledge and potentially misrepresent human experience. While I would hope that the value of methods used in this thesis are self-evident, it is necessary to be more specific. Comparing the approach taken in this study against existing studies may be helpful in highlighting my point. A study by Belanger et al. (2011) illustrates well the orthodoxies of the current physical activity and health research. In this study, researchers used focus groups with young people to investigate the decline and maintenance of physical activity during adolescence. In contrast to how data was produced in this PhD study, Belanger et al. (2011) only held one-off discussions with participants. Reflecting on my research here, I would suggest that the most valuable data was generated after multiple visits, having had enough time to build a rapport with participants and having learnt which questions are most relevant to ask for each individual. Of course, single interviews have the advantage of being far more practical than multiple interviews, so they are understandable. However, no critical reflection was provided on the potential problems with one-off interviews, nor was there any critical reflection on the fact that participants were “randomly selected” (Belanger et al., 2011). The data from the Belanger et al. (2011) study were thematically analysed independently by three researchers. Separate analyses were performed presumably to increase ‘validity’ and minimize any personal interpretations. As they explain, “together they agreed on common themes and used them to code elements of the discussions” (p.3). We could be critical of this by saying the process of identifying “common themes” inherently silences alternative, marginal or minor observations in the data. Despite also claiming that thematic analysis has the advantage of informing policy or intervention development (p.3), thematic analysis entirely omits critical interpretation of text. The lack of criticality is perhaps also observable in the



suggested implications of their study. The following extract, for example, is taken from the discussion;

Adolescents who maintained PA in this study perceived that this behaviour provided them with a sense of competence and contributed positively to their body-image. Previous reports have also shown that highly physically active adolescents value muscularity and feel empowered by the social recognition associated with their sport performances. Analogously, it has been suggested that PA could be promoted as a measure for adolescents to obtain positive social feedback and improve body shape.

Here, it is clear that their discussion focuses on the perceptions of the individual at the expense of the social. The resulting logic leads to the suggestion that young people could be encouraged to be physically active if we emphasise that it may give them a better body shape and bring popularity. While I would accept that these motivations might be relevant for the lives of young people, I am sure I would not be alone in questioning whether these motivations ought to be stimulated by health promoters. My methodological point here is that this example justifies the inclusion of interpretive theoretical analyses beyond simply reporting the ‘objective’ content of the data. Critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis and feminist interpretations for example, are explicitly tied to theoretical positions which inform the interpretation of data. From a positivistic perspective, these subjective analyses might be viewed as biased or opinionated which somewhat misses the point. From an interpretive perspective, these analyses offer a critical reading of data and also encourage the types of questions which are capable revealing power relations and problematizing important concepts in the data.

Beyond using theoretical perspectives in the interpretation of data, I would also suggest that qualitative methods of data production could be better utilized in physical activity and health research. It is not often that ethnomethodologies or visual methods are used when carrying out research about young people’s physical activity, but both of which have added value to this work. If we are to better understand why young people are physically active and inform interventions and policy, then we must use methods that are capable of capturing experience, meaning and certain unquantifiable qualities. However, this is not to claim that the methods in this study were not without their limitations (which are discussed in chapter 3). Several contributions can be made here in recognizing what certain methods *cannot* do, as well as what they *can* do. For one, there

is certainly scope to develop visual methodologies further, especially when working with young people. Authors who write about visual methods often argue for their efficacy and espouse how valuable they are for our understanding of cultural phenomena (Fitzgerald, 2007; Hill and Azzarito, 2012; Pink, 2007). However, I found that there was a vast difference in how each participant engaged with the visual methods tasks, hence making the interpretation of images and video a difficult process. I would not like to suggest that there is a correct way and an incorrect way to take photographs, but it certainly was the case that several participants didn't have the skill, confidence or information to "tell a visual story" as was hoped (Pink, 2007). Some images were no more revealing than spoken words in an interview (e.g. photographs of fruit in a bowl) and some videos were taken to be playful and were not related to the task. As a result, much judgment was used in determining which photos were reflective of 'serious' research and which were just the participants 'playing around'. Indeed, much clarification is needed in order to understand how one should interpret visual data when it is treated within a corpus of data in other forms. Visual methods, then, are not 'better' than other methods, but are another mediating device through which social realities can be captured and interpreted.

It might also be pertinent to reflect on the limitations of ethnomethodologies in this study. When working with young people, ethnography presents some particular problems. It is fair to say that certain observations, sensory experiences and fine details about this study could only have been captured by an ethnographic approach. However, when researching young people I should also recognize that this approach is fundamentally limited due to my restricted access to their lives. It would not have been appropriate or possible for me to spend prolonged amounts of time with the participants outside of school for example. Therefore, my understanding of the environments where participants are physically inactive was highly restricted. Researching in the confines of school required me to do a large amount of inter-personal work to undermine the assumed power relationship between adults and pupils. I was aware that some pupils were quite reluctant to speak openly, at first, about their criticisms of certain teachers or to tell stories about bad behaviour in school for fear that I would pass the information on to teachers. These issues ought to be considered for future ethnographic research in schools.

### *Bridging an inter-disciplinary gap*

A major challenge throughout this project has been in the attempt to make meaningful contributions across different disciplinary fields of research. Namely, between the somewhat distinct fields of physical activity/public health research and pedagogical/sociological research. Since both of these fields have a shared interest in the health of young people, there are no essential demarcations between them. Yet the two fields often seem to operate within and through contrasting modalities with regard to methods, methodologies, terminologies and perspectives. There are likely to be a number of historical, political and social reasons for this, none of which I wish to discuss here. What I do wish to convey, however, is one possible suggestion as to how differences can be resolvable in theoretical and practical terms.

One key difference apparent from the review of literature is that research in physical activity/public health is heavily dependent on a methodology that assumes that aspects of experience can be separated, objectively defined and used to inform general laws about behaviour. Predictability is an important goal for many studies in this field. In contrast, pedagogical/sociological research has a tendency to presume experiences are so highly constructed, interpreted and contingent on personal contexts that any hope to generalize findings becomes very difficult to argue. This study is perhaps best described as sitting between these two modalities, borrowing from both where appropriate. An important research goal ensuring that I move away from highly interpretivist and constructionist concepts is the goal of informing policy and practice. If research is to have any applicability to policy and practice then studies must remain attached to the idea that findings are not particular to each study, but can be generalized to some extent. In order to inform policy, perhaps we need to go beyond the rhetoric of interpretivism, pluralism and post modernism. Equally, if research is to represent and explain the lived experience of young people, then perhaps we should go beyond representing research in realist terms of correlates, determinantes and demographic variables. This is an important point, not least because the research which relies on correlates essentially compartmentalizes experience into separate entities. Researchers then make an attempt to investigate the interaction of those entities, but they remain separate. As Biddle et al. (2011) point out, this research strategy remains in the dark:

Beyond age and gender, though, most [correlates] are likely to have only small or small-to-moderate effects in isolation and may work best in interaction with other influences. Regrettably, we are still not close to identifying the nature of these interactions (Biddle et al., 2011, p.47).

My suggestion here is that it is impossible to “identify the nature of these interactions” because they are not interactions in the first place. To illustrate my point with two ‘variables’, gender does not interact with class because gender and class are merely constructed concepts used to describe and classify people with certain identifiable characteristics. Each individual acts simultaneously in relation to intersecting social norms associated with both gender and class which are continually re-worked and re-made in each social context. It is not therefore accurate to take gender or class as having an ontological existence external to our conception of them. However, neither is it accurate to take gender and class as having no ontological existence outside of our conception of them. The transformative model of social action (Bhaskar, 2002) has helped me bridge the gap here in understanding social institutions as both pre-existing the individual and being interpreted by the individual. In this way, gender and class can be seen as both realist and constructed. Indeed, gender has its material and embodied realities (albeit inscribed with meaning) and class has its objective realities too (economic and material).

### *Pluralistic interpretation*

The four findings chapters of this study utilize different theoretical concepts in the interpretation of data. This interpretive approach is quite unorthodox and might have some implications for methodologies in the field. By alluding to multiple ways of understanding the data, I would suggest that otherwise invisible forms of knowledge were made apparent. However, it has not been without its problems, and I am sure it will not be without its criticisms. If, however, these criticisms are resolvable then this study might contribute to research by advocating this approach for others.

A number of authors have critically engaged with multiple qualitative analyses and reflected on its potential to yield beneficial findings (Burke, 2009; Frost, 2009; Frost et al., 2011; King et al., 2008). A common theme from this literature is the ability of multiple forms of analysis to reveal a plurality of meanings that would otherwise be

invisible through the use of one single analysis. Honan et al. (2000) describe the value of separate “readings” of the same text, while Frost (2009) uses the term “layers” of understanding. I would argue that the multiple interpretive chapters in this thesis are resonant with analytical pluralism in that it offers researchers an alternative to the orthodox approach of adopting a specific, recognised mono-methodology; the uncritical adoption of which can lead to methodolatry (the reification and privileging of methods) and a reluctance to adapt methods to suit the research context (Chamberlain, 2000; 2011; Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan, & Dupuis, 2011). Chamberlain et al. (2011, p. 164) note that “complex issues demand complex methodologies and methods. The use of multiple methods, and the complexity they can bring, is one useful and effective way forward”. Similarly, Smith and Sparkes (2005, p.214) contend that;

life stories need to be subjected to multiple forms of analysis. If lives, stories, bodies, identities, and selves in sport and physical activity are multidimensional, constructed, complex, and changing in time and with context, then researchers might seek forms of analysis that are sensitive to, and respectful of, this complexity and multiplicity.

This kind of approach, however, may be open to criticism for several reasons. Crucial differences between social theories do exist, after all. If the goal is to produce generalizable findings then perhaps interpretations should seek to find a consensus of understanding (Simons et al., 2008; Robinson and Smith, 2010; Savage, 2000). In other words, which findings remain consistent whichever way the data is interpreted? Alternatively, should ‘consensus’ be the goal at all? If the power of using alternative theoretical tools lies in their ability to yield alternative perspectives, then consensus ought not to be important.

Another challenge of this approach has been in the complexity and uncertainty of analysis. At no point were the findings on ‘stable ground’ resting on the ‘validated’ methods of previous work. Neither can I input data into a well-established mathematical programme and report the results as they are generated. Interpretative work like this relies on a somewhat creative negotiation of epistemological principles while making sense of data through a variety of lenses. This was not a “painting by numbers” approach to research (Stronach et al. 2007, p. 197), where the protocols of methodology, method and analysis can be easily prescribed. Indeed, as Foley (1990, p.230) describes, “a complex process of hermeneutic reflection cannot be easily described as a tidy set of repeatable technical procedures”. This being the case, there

seems scope to develop the 'bricoleur' approach in a field in where emerging qualitative research methods are being used in social sciences all offering different forms of data. This study may contribute to the field by beginning this debate for its use in research with young people.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this final section of the thesis I would like to spend some time reflecting on the research process before offering a general summary of the study. This is important because, as I have alluded to on multiple occasions, the knowledge produced as a result of this study is not simply a matter of data collection and reporting. The knowledge that this thesis offers could have been different if not for the particular methodological and theoretical devices used and if not for the interpretive decisions made throughout the process.

I began the research with the aspiration of intervening in the lives of the young people who would volunteer to participate. On reflection this was a rather ambitious (naive even) aim. Largely following the literature, the two central intervention strategies were drawn from ‘empowerment’ and ‘critical health pedagogies’. While these two themes remained part of the project, they were not as prominent as originally imagined. Indeed, the interventionism became part of the process of understanding, rather than a process of behaviour change. This was the case, I believe, because pupil empowerment is only a driver of social change if pupils are motivated to change something in the first place. Ambivalence about health and physical activity is unlikely to lead to changes in health and physical activity. Moreover, critical health pedagogies are very difficult to implement if participants are either already critical of health messages or, contrastingly, are so embedded in contemporary health narratives that a few minutes of discussion with myself once a week would not make a difference. As a result of these issues, the aim of the research soon shifted away from investigating the effectiveness of intervention, towards the understanding of social processes in the midst of action research interventions. This decision was made during the months of data production with ongoing discussion with supervisors.

Another decision that has strongly influenced the production of the thesis is the decision to include four discussion chapters, each utilizing different theoretical concepts and perspectives. There is a case to argue that this decision has resulted in *breadth* of knowledge at the expense of *depth*. Each chapter could certainly have been expanded to further investigate the questions which the different theoretical tools raise. Perhaps, for example, Foucauldians (see chapter 5) would have looked deeper into the school curriculum and mapped how the language of policy is woven into lesson plans, teachers’ talk and eventually pupils’ knowledge; perhaps physical capital (see chapter 6) could have drawn more on phenomenology and questions of lived, embodied



experience. Similarly, Elder-Vass's norm-circles (chapter 7) could have been used as a framework to analyze how pupils cope with multiple, conflicting messages from their friends, teachers, parents and other significant people in their lives. Indeed, while Bourdieu's habitus (chapter 8) generated some interesting findings, perhaps Bourdieu's concepts of field, doxa and hetero-doxa could have been explored to further illuminate how the habitus is situated in contexts. Each chapter could have quite possibly been a thesis in itself. However, in defense of breadth over depth, I would suggest that interpreting and presenting data through the framework of only one theoretical perspective risks indulging that perspective and operating with only narrow scope. Moreover, the breadth offered in this work was not an intention from the outset, but an emergent quality resulting from my desire to represent the data as best I witnessed it. In this case, with the research aim in mind, breadth of knowledge seemed more appropriate than depth. If new questions have emerged from this study, then perhaps future directions would warrant a different approach.

As the possible implications of this study have been discussed in the previous chapter, I shall only briefly note how this study might be embraced within policy. While the idiosyncrasies typical of a small-scale study of this kind have inevitably made this thesis highly particular, I remain optimistic that findings are relevant for young people throughout the UK and perhaps further. The principles of the social theories in this research, I argue, make the findings applicable beyond merely the 29 participants in this study. These theories, however, can only offer partial explanations. As such, I cannot be conclusive in my claims here. Nevertheless, with some confidence we can be critical of some approaches to physical activity and health promotion which can be not only ineffective but potentially damaging (see chapter 9). In line with evidence-based practice this study, and others like it, ought to be considered as informative despite the methodological contrasts to orthodoxies in physical activity and health research. The contributions of this study to research in physical education and sports pedagogy are less methodologically incoherent but just as relevant. Questions of body anxiety, knowledge and control will not come as news to researchers in the field. However, what might be relevant are the issues of new possibilities (and lack of) which became apparent during action research. So too is the new theoretical perspective offered in Elder-Vass's theory of norm circles which makes visible the importance of actual interactions between pupils and their peers in shaping social action.

Physical activity and health, then, is a highly social issue. If one subscribes to the notion that physical activity has important health benefits, and that many young people are remain disengaged with forms exercise, then health promoters might look to sociology as a way of explaining and addressing the issue. I have attempted to shed some light on how theoretical tools borrowed from sociology might help us understand the topic. This is not a claim that there are no psychological, biological, political or other ways that young people's physical activity is influenced, only that social processes have some influence; and they matter. They matter because social processes construct a particular version of health, they assign meaning to physical movement, they endorse and enforce particular norms, and they help inscribe a system of movement-related dispositions on the body. The extent of these processes remains unclear and is a matter for further research. Following my claim that these social processes matter, I have made some sensible – but entirely untested – suggestions for how to allow more young people to engage with physical activity. These include using intervention strategies that move beyond individualistic conceptions of behaviour, introducing a new vocabulary and imagery to the understanding of health, reducing physical capital disparities in spaces where physical activity takes place, encouraging and accommodating friendship groups in intervention designs, and providing activities and spaces where young people's habitus' can be enacted. It is not yet known if these suggestions would make a difference, or even if they are possible. They exist here merely as key messages and tentative suggestions based on this body of work. These suggestions speak to the health imperatives of schooling and add to the body of literature that is concerned about the portrayal of fit bodies, fat bodies and the role of physical activity to control those bodies. Furthermore, findings are also relevant for physical activity promoters, health promoters and exercise practitioners aiming to involve, include and engage young people.

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