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**Responsible girlhood and ‘healthy’ anxieties: girls’ bodily learning in school sport**

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***Introduction***

This chapter situates girls’ involvement in sport in the UK within the context of public health concerns around childhood obesity and its generation of ‘discourses of anxiety’ (Tsaliki and Chronaki 2017). Growing anxieties around obesity in the developed world more broadly have recently turned public attention towards young people’s physical activities within an increasingly influential health agenda (Fullagar 2009, Leahy 2009, Evans et al. 2008). As an underrepresented group in UK sport participation (WSFF 2012), girls are of particular interest to policy makers and stakeholders who seek to design physical activity programmes (Chawansky 2012, Chawansky and Hayhurst 2015). Accordingly, attempts to persuade girls in particular to increase their physical activity levels have been the impetus of media campaigns such as “ThisGirlCan,”<sup>i</sup> where health is an intended benefit. A more regulatory approach to public health is reflected in the UK government’s *Childhood Obesity Strategy*, which seeks to evaluate schools in their efforts to “prevent obesity by helping children to eat better and move more” (DoH 2016, 8). This reliance and emphasis on individual young people and their families in the prevention of obesity has been identified as a broader trend towards ‘healthification’, where keeping fit has come to be seen as a new form of civic responsibility (Fusco 2007). This chapter focuses on how girls came to understand and learn about their bodies as ‘healthy subjects’ within a wider context where obesity and its threat as a discourse of anxiety have taken on a growing significance in our everyday understanding of health as personal imperative.

For the purposes of my research, health and its enactment, for example through physical activity, are understood as a form of embodied 'identity work' (Shilling 2008), which allows individuals to narrate personal choices in processes of self-making as 'healthy citizens' by moving and shaping their bodies within particular cultural discourses. I draw on recent work on the body and schooling (Shilling 2008, Shilling 2010, Evans et al. 2008, Paechter 2006), which emphasises the embodied aspects of such identity practices where bodies simultaneously act on the world and translate cultural codes (such as morality, attractiveness and value) to others. Drawing on longitudinal research into girls' sports involvement in the UK, this chapter thereby considers how girls came to see sport and physical activity as practices of a 'healthy lifestyle' and therefore as important in their constructions of 'successful girlhood.' The research suggests that obesity discourse as it intersects with discourses of successful girlhood is manifested in girls' responsible 'body projects' in contexts where bodies were intensely managed and scrutinised. The data also suggests other ways in which sport could or did act as a site of gendered bodily learning.

### **Healthy bodies as risk management**

The research is situated in a growing body of critical gender, health and family leisure studies which have sought to understand children and parents' health choices within particular cultural contexts including schools (Evans, Rich, and Holroyd 2004, Evans et al. 2008, Fullagar 2009, Wright and Harwood 2009). I make use of the concepts of risk, responsabilisation and body pedagogies in attempting to understand how girls learn to take up responsible, embodied subjectivities through participation in healthy lifestyles. The ways in which childhood obesity and its risk(s) have come to be conceptualised as a problem or 'discourse of anxiety' can be understood in relation to both obesity discourse and particular constructions of childhood. Gard (2003) describes the 'obesity epidemic' discourse as an alarmist set of truth claims steeped in a

pervasive biomedical model and concerned with the calorific ‘ingoings and outgoings’ of physical bodies. Within this context, he suggests, anxieties around obesity and its risk(s) take on both a moral and common sense urgency that at the same time fails to recognise social contexts and structural inequalities. Obesity has been perceived as particularly problematic within the rise of ‘healthism’ where emphasis is placed on the responsibilities of the individual in managing their bodily health by regulating their own physical activities and eating patterns (Benson 1997). As Harrington and Fullagar (2013, 3) describe, risk aversion in this context includes the cultivation of healthy lifestyles within a neoliberal model of responsibility which draws on “flawed notions of personal choice.” Peter Kelly has also argued that ‘risk’ has become a dominant means of regulating childhood and youth as policies and strategies seek to target ‘at risk’ children (Kelly 2001). He suggests that processes of ‘responsibilisation’ for young people in particular are a key feature of our risk society where ‘keeping fit’ is seen as an individual responsibility and those unable to manage these risks as morally culpable. A gendered analysis of risk further suggests that current constructions of girlhood rely on distinctions of ‘at risk’ versus ‘successful’ girls whose orientation to the future relies on a willingness to embrace instability with a ‘can do’ attitude (Harris 2004). Drawing on empirical research, Rich and Evans (2013) found that girls’ imagined futures were constructed around their (unequal) access to ‘healthy lifestyles.’ Thus risk avoidance or ‘keeping healthy’ operated as a ‘future proofing’ strategy involving investment in both bodily and academic achievements. These insights jointly express concerns around the structural inequalities that beset access to health provision as well as the shifting cultural understandings of health which themselves can be potentially damaging to young people.

Childhood obesity as ‘discourse of anxiety’ is granted a particular urgency in what Philip Jenkins (1992) describes as the ‘child-as-victim’ trope where obese or ‘at risk’ children are represented as victims of ‘bad parenting’ or of irresponsible food marketing for example in the recent sugary drinks ban (Meikle 2016). This perspective has been documented in media analyses through what Evans et al. (2008) describe as a particular “child-saving movement” located within a range of sensationalist news stories and television programming where familiar tropes of “fast food diets,” and “too much television” serve to visually invoke the threat of the “morbidly obese child” (2011: 3). Within these representations, the body of the ‘overweight or obese child’ is cast as both victim and as spectre of future health problems. Therefore ‘childhood obesity’ and its construction within the UK in particular might be regarded as a traditional moral or ‘media’ panic in which fears around broader social problems (in this case public health and sedentary lifestyles) become located in particular ‘spectres’ of blame – in this case the body of the obese child. Here I seek to unpick the complex social contexts in which decisions around girls’ physical activities are made and the very different structural positions from which they originate. Girls’ relationships to their body have been described in previous research (Frost 2001, Oliver and Lalik 2001) as characterised by insecurity, bodily anxieties and as subject to the take up of disciplinary bodily regimes within a ‘cult of slenderness’ (Bordo 1993, 212). Risk in this sense might therefore be understood as a regulatory discourse which serves to construct particular versions of girlhood as acceptable, desirable and importantly responsible in ongoing efforts to avoid certain dangers including obesity. Obesity as risk discourse or ‘discourse of anxiety’ therefore comes to regulate girls’ activities and available identities particularly where they are ‘acted upon’ by external forces such as dieting regimes and advertising campaigns. However, the concept of risk may be less able to explain how girls ‘act back’ upon such forces or use their

bodies in particular ways within different contexts and I therefore draw on the concept of body pedagogies to further elaborate on girls' ongoing bodily identity work.

### **Body Pedagogies**

In line with Evans et al.'s (2008) work I seek to situate girls' bodily learning or 'body pedagogies' within a competitive UK schooling system where health is increasingly managed and monitored through programs such as the Healthy Schools Campaign and the National Child Measurement Initiative. Recent research describes a rise in community and school-based health interventions which target young people in particular (Wright and Harwood 2009, Tinning and Glasby 2002, Barker-Ruchti et al. 2013, Rail 2009, Wright, Burrows, and Rich 2012). Paechter argues that a Cartesian split in schools has meant that overwhelmingly, "children's bodies feature in school as things to be policed, subdued and got out of the way" (Paechter 2006, 6). Evans et al.'s (2008, 2004) research argues that body pedagogies (or messages about the body) in schools meant that 'achievement' could be equated with emaciation and bodily deprivation through 'perfection and performance' codes in an already intensely competitive school setting. As Shilling (2010, 154) describes, body pedagogies have evolved where obesity has come to represent a deviation from the health role which "equates obesity and infirmity with moral culpability." The process of 'keeping fit' in this sense becomes an ongoing set of practices haunted by the spectre of obesity as moral failure or the 'unhealthy other' (Crawford 1994, 1347). As a result, Shilling suggests that "body maintenance" practices act as "thoroughly daily affairs to be reflected upon, worked upon and routinized as an integral part of everyday life" (2010, 155). This daily identity work can be described as individual 'body projects' (Brumberg 1997) undertaken by gendered subjects within particular contexts such as schools, sports clubs and families where young people learn about and engage with their bodies. The avoidance of

‘risk’ in this context by taking up responsible practices and identity work such as sports participation and weight management may thus be one means of constructing versions of ‘successful girlhood.’ This focus on health and risk may represent an emergent kind of relationship between sport and the construction of young femininities.

Sport and its construction as a practice of hegemonic masculinity has been understood as leading to many girls’ marginal participation and positioning therein (Hargreaves 1994, Choi 2000). However, recent feminist analyses have also suggested that sport is increasingly becoming a site for the production of ‘successful alpha femininities’ through achievement discourses ensconced in a neoliberal postfeminist sensibility (Azzarito 2010, Heywood 2007, Cooky and McDonald 2005, Chawansky 2012). Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce (2017, 370) suggest that within a neoliberal postfeminist sensibility, “young women are invited to perform” their gendered selves as an “unproblematic celebration of individualism, bodily capital and consumer choice” so that sexy, sporty personas become one more way of marketing the self. As they point out, not all bodies are able to capitalise on such performances and size, ethnicity and physical beauty provide differential value within the cultural and media landscape. Some research suggests that health and fitness increasingly dominate young women’s understandings and motivation for participation in sport and physical activity (Flintoff and Scraton 2001, Garrett 2004). Robyne Garrett’s (2004) research describes how girls came to conceptualise themselves as ‘good body, bad body, different body’ within the health norms and codes of their physical education lessons. Research in other settings also suggests that sport can act as a site of gendered and embodied resistance to social norms, where young women’s physical capacities and sense of power can be challenged and expanded (Theberge 2003, Evaldsson 2003). As Maddie Breeze’s (2015, 4) research on women’s participation in roller derby argues, it is likely that gender ‘is both crossed

and preserved' in sporting sites (2015: 4). Here I am particularly interested in girls' relationships to their bodies engendered through sport within the context of schooling in particular.

## **The Research**

The qualitative, longitudinal research this chapter draws on took place over a period of 4 years in which I traced the sporting and identity practices of 6 'sporty girls' through their experiences in Year 5 (age 10) to Year 8 (age 13) as they attended various schools in London, UK. The transition to secondary school is a particular point at which many young women decide to drop out of sport (WSFF 2012). Accordingly, the qualitative, longitudinal research approach taken served to illuminate some of the shifting and complex meanings and processes whereby young women came to understand themselves and their relationship to sport over time (McLeod and Thomson 2009). The girls had originally attended two primary schools. The first school, Holly Bank, had an intake that was affluent and middle class with a primarily 'white British' ethnic composition. The second, Benjamin Laurence primary school, reflected a less well off, and much more ethnically diverse group of children, many of whom lived in government subsidised housing near the school. At the transition from primary school, my research followed up with girls from both schools as they moved on to a variety of single and mixed sex secondary schools throughout the city with varying access to extracurricular activities. Children at each school chose their own pseudonyms (often in Year 5) and these do not necessarily reflect their ethnicity. The research involved twice yearly interviews with the girls as well as interviews with their parents, friends, classmates and coaches. I also carried out ongoing observations at lunch breaks, school PE lessons, extracurricular activities the girls attended (including sports days) as well as sports clubs they attended outside of school. All interviews and fieldnotes were subsequently

written up and transcribed and these were entered into NVivo where they were coded thematically using inductive, emergent coding.

### **Growing up as process of bodily surveillance and scrutiny**

In the United Kingdom, the transition to secondary school or Year 7 (age 12) of the schooling system, simultaneously marks a point at which young people enter the phase commonly understood as ‘adolescence’ and the expected onset of puberty. The transition is both a point of trepidation and excitement for many girls and their families as they seek to understand what this new phase of both schooling and development will hold (George 2004). Nancy Lesko has argued that the “development-in-time” narrative functions as a key means through which “adolescents are known, consumed and governed” thereby coming to understand their own experiences (2001, 35). She therefore suggests that age- graded schools and the transition between phases of schooling accordingly function as “an intensification of age and related norms” (Lesko 2001, 49) in relation to phases of “normal physical development.” Bodily changes and their relationship to sport were already being highlighted in primary school by girls involved in the research. Best friends Nadine and Chevonne explained one of the reasons they no longer wanted to engage in playground football with their male peers.

Nadine: Yeah cos now we’ve got our period [whispered] now we’ve grown up a little bit...

Chevonne: We’re into like girly stuff, but not as much now.

(Year 6 interview, Benjamin Laurence School)

In common with many of their female peers, Nadine and Chevonne constructed football as a ‘childish’ pursuit that would need to be put aside as they ‘grew up’ and moved to secondary school. In their Year 7 interviews, many girls further suggested that their bodies had become the site of increasing evaluation and judgment and this intense gaze was often exacerbated in PE and



sports contexts where bodies are more obviously ‘on display’ (Cockburn and Clarke 2002). The schools themselves placed an overt emphasis on girls’ physical appearance by outlining restrictions around comportment and particularly school uniform. This is in line with broader disciplinary shifts in UK education (e.g. Morris 2017) in which students’ correct adherence to the school uniform is taken to be a primary means of behavioural enforcement. At lunch and other points of the day I frequently observed teachers stopping girls to roll down a skirt, do up a button or simply to stop running and to walk instead. The message to girls seemed to be that their bodies were both increasingly visible, subject to surveillance and potentially dangerous/unruly. The following girls who attended a private (fee paying) girls’ school described the emphasis put on their physical appearance by the school. This involved both purchasing the requisite uniform components as well as wearing them in the right way, thereby managing sometimes varying sets of expectations around their comportment and bodily presentation.

Fiona: The school wants us to look smart, both kinds of smart.

... [later]

Mary: Cos no one ever takes their jumper off cos you have to tuck your shirt in and it looks really odd if you’ve got a white shirt tucked under a grey skirt.

Sheryl: Really? Do you get in trouble for not having your shirt tucked in?

Fiona: I do.

Mary: Yeah, I do.

Rehana: It’s kind of quite scary cos in our first Latin lesson with the head mistress, I don’t know what year it was. This girl hadn’t got her shirt tucked in and she said ‘can you tuck it in

please? She saw her go in and not do anything about it so she said ‘excuse me a minute’ and took the girl outside.

Fiona: Cos they take appearance quite – seriously [others repeat this].

Within the scenario described by the girls, their bodies are taken to be physical representatives of the school, both smart as in ‘intelligent and clever’ as well as correctly turned out. Research by Alexandra Allan (2009) and Rebecca Raby (2010) has also documented the complex negotiations girls undertake in balancing codes of ‘sexiness’ and ‘being a lady’ as Allan’s participants described it. Similarly here the girls’ appearance is measured through an ongoing self-scrutiny undertaken in the context of both teacher and peer evaluations. Tucking one’s shirt in ‘looks really odd’ to your peers and yet is expected by the school regulations and thus the girls undertake a complex, even duplicitous negotiation of adjustments, subterfuge and conformity in relation to the weather, physical comfort and the visible spaces of surveillance in and around the school. The fear of being made an example of, like their classmate in this scenario, seems to remind the girls of the need for vigilance through threat of public humiliation and discipline. The monitoring of both girls’ clothing and physical comportment (such as running on school grounds) was common at each of the research schools I visited. The surveillance it represented was also repeated in their peer cultures where girls were frequently being evaluated by boys and other girls alike. Lindsay and Gazza, who were close friends in primary school and now attended a comprehensive (non-fee paying) mixed sex secondary together, described the intense scrutiny their bodies had become subjected to within the sexualised and heteronormative environment of their peer cultures. The school was located in an area of relative economic deprivation in inner city London with a larger than average ethnically diverse intake of students. In primary school, both Lindsay and Gazza had avidly enjoyed playground and extracurricular

football but neither felt comfortable engaging in these activities at their secondary school and they noted the increased surveillance they felt subject to. Peer hierarchies and the normative demands around appearance had become of increasing importance to the girls and thus a more frequent topic of conversation in our interviews.

Sheryl: So what makes a girl popular in school?

Lindsay: It's how you dress. Like, I wanna wear what I wanna wear but if I wear something really disgusting then the girls start laughing or talking behind your back, or backbiting and you just feel, weird.

Gazza: And it's just if you're popular with the boys as well. These boys are really fussy for like little things.

Sheryl: Like what?

Lindsay: It's like, what you're wearing, dunno.

Gazza: They take the mick out of you like, if like...

Lindsay: If you're ugly or not, if you're pretty or not.

Gazza: And it's like, if you have no boobies. [laughs] Like that.

The girls here describe experiences of both bodily shame and scrutiny as their appearance and bodily development are inscribed within evaluative hierarchies of school peer cultures against a normative backdrop of bodily development. The premium placed on cultural markers of beauty 'if you're ugly or not, if you're pretty or not' has both a divisive and evaluative function – to mark out girls in relation to other girls and to evaluate their looks accordingly. The development

of breasts as “normative pubertal processes” in Lesko’s (2001, 39) phrase are here translated both as markers of sexual maturity and desirability against a “messy, sexualized adolescence” full of innuendo and the risk of rejection. In this scenario, not to have breasts is constructed as both a failure of development and of heteronormative attractiveness, something the girls must guard against. Lindsay’s sense that the boys “are really fussy for little things” similarly describes a panoptical gaze in which the female body is permanently at risk of being scrutinised and judged as ‘failing’. The impossibility of bodily acceptance and normalcy manufactures what Tincknell (2013, 83) describes as a “relentless drive for physical perfectibility” within modern feminine identity constructions. Lindsay also struggles here with her desire for self-realisation through dress as personal style- “what I wanna wear” and the fear that her own choices will be judged harshly – “you just feel weird.” Lindsay, whose family had emigrated from Pakistan, had in other interviews described her discomfort at wearing a headscarf in a school with few Muslim girls and she decided in Year 8 to remove the scarf, at least temporarily. Thus ethnicity alongside social class and bodily physical capital further created hierarchies and divisions within the heteronormative economy of the school. The pervasive sexual harassment often used to reinforce social peer hierarchies have been documented extensively in primary, secondary and higher education contexts (Renold 2002, Draper 1993, Phipps and Young 2015, Youdell 2005, Ringrose and Renold 2009). Similar to Oliver and Lalik (2000) I am here concerned with the forms of bodily learning taking place through the ongoing scrutiny of the female body and its sexual objectification within the school. In this context the body is both the potential site of value within the heteronormative economy and yet constantly at risk of being deemed unattractive, unacceptable and shameful. Thus bodies become a site of self-scrutiny as the potential for judgment and evaluation is imagined and anticipated on an ongoing basis. When I

asked Nirvana, who had recently entered Year 7 about the transition to secondary school she described the daily process of getting ready for school and the ritual this entailed.

Nirvana: Well it gets kind of annoying cos you always gotta try and look right. So I spend a couple of hours, seriously, on my fringe. Not hours, but I get really annoyed with it. It never really looks right. And my hair is really bugging me cause it's like super thick. Yeah I dunno...

The bodily maintenance Nirvana describes here represents again a large investment of time and energy in the presentation of self. Investing in one's appearance could bring both social approval and recognition but importantly, avoidance of critical judgments and ridicule. Obesity or excess body weight in this context acutely intensified the possibility that the body might become a site of shame and humiliation. This type of instance occurs in the following incident recounted by the girls in a group interview which took place following observations in PE class.

Lindsay: And also they laugh at Joana because she's got a big belly.

Sheryl: Was that what was happening today in PE?

Lindsay: Yeah, remember when she stood up and did the jumps and her shirt went like that and they started to laugh about it.

Danny: Yeah, cos she's not exactly popular. And, cos like everyone cusses her about the way she dresses and things. But like she's tried to improve and I just think, obviously, if you don't like someone you can say it to someone else.

In the heteronormative economy of the school, fatness in particular took on a pariah status and the bodily display involved in PE (physical education) and other sporting activities particularly

risked exposing this ‘excess.’ The stigma surrounding fat and the ways in which school PE and other sporting sites marginalise non-normative bodies have been documented in research on young people’s experiences of sport and PE (Sykes 2011, Wellard 2006). Obesity discourse can be said to have further stigmatised particular bodies by constructing fatness or obesity as an individual moral failing or lack of responsibility. Here the girls suggest that Joana has “tried to improve” but this is an impossible, unachievable goal since self-improvement as bodily project is, as Shilling (2003, 188) describes “meaningless in the absence of moral criteria” and thus subject to continual interrogation. Over the course of Year 7 then and in the process of transition, the girls learned that their bodies were increasingly being evaluated and on display as well as a site of responsibility and identity work – something they could work on in order to demonstrate their commitment to self-improvement. Danny’s suggestion that Joanna has “tried to improve” is offered almost as a form of redemption and yet she comes back to the legitimacy of “not liking someone” even if this is only due to a lack of conformity. As friends, the girls frequently engaged in shared projects of self-improvement by suggesting a new hairstyle to one another, different clothing and occasionally alongside affirmations that each *was* beautiful, despite any lack of sexual approval or a harsh judgment from others. Attempting to change one’s dress, to “improve” or to lose weight were nonetheless understood as a form of self-management, a personal body project through which a girl could demonstrate her commitment to the project of ‘successful girlhood’ here constructed as a particular beauty project. The addition of sport or physical activity as identity practice could further act as a form of responsible body project and while some girls gave up sport in order to concentrate on their schooling, others incorporated sport as a means of constructing versions of successful girlhood. This difference in participation

was specifically linked to the schools that girls attended where girls at middle class schools in particular were frequently involved in intense extracurricular schedules.

### **Responsible girlhood and the role of sport**

In addition to an increased scrutiny of their physical appearance and the self-management this entailed, an additional feature of the transition to secondary school involved for many of the girls an intensification of their already busy schedules. Academic, health and sporting achievements have been described as a means of creating social distinction or ‘concerted cultivation’ through extracurricular activities (Maxwell and Aggleton 2013, Vincent and Ball 2007). This ‘overscheduling’ of extracurricular activities intensified in secondary school where longer journeys and higher fees combined with an emphasis on academic achievement. Here Nirvana attempts to recount for me the after school activities and clubs she has been involved with.

Nirvana: Okay, well...this could take a while. Um, I’m trying to remember everything. I used to do cross-country and netball and maybe that was it, I’m not sure. Oh yeah, badminton. Um, and I did Orchestra, I did my flute lessons, I did my piano lessons. I had a singing lesson and I did my Youth Music Trust on Saturdays.

(Year 7 Interview)

With both parents in professional employment and a secure housing and income situation, access to the range of activities described above was readily available and even expected of similar middle class children at Nirvana’s school. The girls often greatly enjoyed their participation in these extracurricular activities and they were frequently sites of friendship, accomplishment and pleasure for them. Extracurricular activities were also of course, sites of identity work where the sense of being a ‘sporty’, ‘musical’ or ‘academic’ girl (and indeed frequently all of these) was

performed and practiced by the girls. As the girls approached secondary school there was increasingly a sense that they would need to focus on one or two of these activities in which they were particularly ‘talented’ in (Clark 2012) as a complement to their academic achievement. Thus Nirvana described how she no longer participated in sport or cross country running and instead focused on her musical pursuits which she particularly excelled at. Sport was linked both to a discourse of achievement as well as a bodily project of ‘keeping oneself fit.’ This was often mentioned by the girls as they described why they enjoyed sport or continued to undertake physical activities despite other time commitments and pressures. Rhiannon, who participated in football, trampolining, running and a range of Scouting activities expressed a sense of bodily pleasure in the way that sport made her feel about her body.

Rhiannon: I definitely feel better about my body when I’ve been running cos it makes me feel a lot fitter. And able to do more things.

Wellard (2012) has argued that bodily pleasure in sport acts as a sustaining motivation for young people and yet is often overlooked or ignored in many youth sport contexts including physical education classes in school. There is somewhat of a discursive slippage here for Rhiannon in thinking about her bodily pleasure – does she feel good because she is fit (and this is perceived as a worthwhile pursuit) or because physically her body is more capable and stronger? This latter sentiment is expressed when she says that she is ‘able to do more things’ and thus seems to experience a stronger sense of capacity and overall wellness through her participation in sport as a form of physical capital. A similar kind of pleasure is expressed by Spirit below, who at the same time seems to experience a sense of expectation and commitment that is external to her own expressed goals within running. Spirit’s running at primary school had been deemed impressive by coaches and teachers when she regularly placed first in races and this had led to an



invitation to join the nearby athletics club. The club itself, set within an affluent middle class (and predominantly white) suburb of London was overtly competitive and particularly invested in its youth division. Her coach had described Spirit's performances to me as 'disappointing' given their expectations for her ongoing improvement. She described in Year 7 why she had continued with the sport where many of her friends had dropped out.

Spirit: Well I've got a lot of history behind it, obviously. It's like, I don't know I just keep it up. Plus it keeps me fit, which I like. Cos I like knowing that my body feels good as well. But then I dunno, it's just cos I've got such. Cause in my old school all the PE teachers were like 'You're doing really well. Don't stop, just keep going.' So I kind of don't want to stop cos I don't want to let anybody down and stuff. It's like, I just don't think about stopping.

The idea of history here seems to relay an expected trajectory that Spirit feels she should continue on because not to do so would be disappointing to other adults invested in her success (and perhaps to herself). Lesko (2001, 51) suggests that youth are contained within an "expectant mode" which creates experiences of "becoming but not being" within a development model of adolescence. Certainly Spirit was aware of expectations of both her career and sporting achievements and the idea that activities undertaken in youth represented a particular investment in one's future adult self. Here the expectation of future achievement in sport serves to carve out a particular path that has little to do with Spirit's own experiences of running and more with the intensified expectations of others. The project of health and fitness for Spirit was also undertaken through her relationship to food and she described later in our interview how she had begun running in Year 4 in an attempt to lose weight. Managing food, including the need for 'balance' had become a common experience for her and a means of controlling certain elements of her life.

She explained later in the interview, “I mean I eat healthy food, I eat my nuts and stuff. But then occasionally I have a little treat. But I mean like, you’re supposed to have that really.” Spirit’s relationship to her running and to her body within this context convey a strong sense of responsibility and perceived expectation around the types of progress and achievements she should be making. Spirit displayed a highly conscientious approach to her project of selfhood which balanced a tight schedule of sport, school, homework and family. She described the project of managing expectations at her private school, her elite running club and with her parents who ‘want me to go to [Oxbridge].’ The project of successful girlhood simultaneously included the project of ‘keeping fit’ which for Spirit here seems to act as a form of both pleasure and accomplishment – a bodily undertaking that allows her to manage both her appearance and size through food and exercise. This same idea of ‘balance’ is expressed by Danny, below, who suggests that sport allows her to eat what she likes. The idea is initially presented by her friend during our group interview.

Gazza: Assuming she eats so much, look how skinny she is. And she eats basically like that everyday.

Danny: [laughs]

Gazza: No offence.

Danny: No cos I do so much sport that it just runs off me. So I eat more each day. I think, so it doesn’t matter.

Gazza: If she sat on her bum she’d be like that [motions huge belly with her hands]

Danny: Yeah, I'm not overweight. But if I didn't eat and did so much exercise, I'd be underweight. So I gotta balance.

Danny was active and highly achieving in a wide range of extracurricular sports including figure skating, cross-country running and football. Although Danny's family were not particularly wealthy and she did not possess the middle class capital of some of the girls at the other schools, her family were still able to invest in her sporting pursuits to a great extent. They transported her to lessons and paid for expensive figure skating outfits and other equipment. Danny expressed in other interviews the pleasure she took in her sporting accomplishments particularly since she did not consider herself to be particularly academic. Here she describes the physical capital that sport affords her within a peer context of bodily scrutiny. Danny's self-construction here as 'responsible' (not overweight) subject is clearly invested in a wider obesity discourse where calorie consumption and physical exercise form a simple idea of 'balance' and self-regulation/moderation. Danny's friends described her as (unusually) confident about her appearance, something they struggled to be, and here Danny seems to relate this confidence to her participation in sport and the normative (slender) body shaped in and through this participation.

## **Conclusion**

The project of girlhood and its construction within a modern, 'postfeminist' era in the UK and elsewhere has been described as a particularly complex and often contradictory process of self-making in which discourses of female achievement or 'successful girlhood' are still beset by ongoing structural inequalities and divisions (Bettie 2003, Pomerantz and Raby 2011, Ringrose 2013). My research also situates obesity discourse and its role in girls' embodied identity

constructions within the context of schooling and the heteronormative peer economies therein. These bodily hierarchies served as a particularly relevant backdrop to the girls' ongoing sports participation. In line with Nancy Lesko's (2001) work, I have suggested that age and gender in particular formed powerful narratives through which girls came to understand their bodies and their role within the competitive, heteronormative economy of the school. The girls' bodies were judged particularly harshly within this context where sized, gendered, age-based (physical development), racialised and class based norms created particular bodily hierarchies. The sexualisation and objectification of girls' bodies against this set of normative demands created a particular kind of self-conscious body work in which the girls both sought validation and more importantly, the avoidance of shame and humiliation. Checking their hair, adjusting their skirt length, changing the way they dressed or trying to lose weight by playing sport or eating less were all practices through which girls could demonstrate their commitment to self-improvement and the important project of girlhood within the punitive hierarchies of their school environments. However, these norms were also constantly shifting and unstable so that hypervigilance was required in a quest for 'physical perfectibility' as an impossible yet necessary ideal. Thus an important form of bodily learning that took place was achieved through the ongoing scrutiny of girls' bodies and their growing awareness of how they might adjust and manage their bodies in this context. This hypervigilance was upheld both through their peer culture and the school itself which actively monitored and scrutinised girls' physical appearance as a means of creating 'successful' pupils who were 'both kinds of smart.' This relentless competitiveness is increasingly engendered in a schooling system modelled on market forces and where students and schools are pitted against one another in a high stakes achievement 'game' (Ball 2003). Involvement in sport and other extracurricular activities and the physical and

cultural capital accrued therein might thus be seen as a ‘risk avoidance’ strategy in an increasingly competitive and unequal schooling system and society.

Within this chapter I have argued that the increasing influence of obesity and healthism discourses as a means of framing young people’s sports participation has created particular tensions for gendered subjects already under heightened scrutiny. Discourses of risk and obesity served to underscore girls’ understanding that they were increasingly responsible for their bodies and the choices they made in relation to their health and schooling. Therefore the project of successful girlhood could include managing food intake, scheduling and attending a host of extracurricular activities, and academic achievement, alongside a focus on one’s appearance and ‘looking the right way.’ Girls’ bodily learning frequently included the need to be responsible for their own bodies by carving out and managing particular schedules and healthy practices. In this context, the project of ‘keeping fit’ and managing one’s body could be undertaken as a particular project of successful girlhood. These ‘healthy’ anxieties, generated in the context of obesity discourse, may thus be seen to take on an enormous psychic and emotional toll as girls attempt to successfully manage the project of girlhood as responsible, healthy subjects. Commenting on the limitations of modern body projects, Shilling suggests that they are subject to fluctuating goals and fashions as well as engendering a “chronic reflexivity” so that satisfaction or “body confidence” are unattainable (Shilling 2003, 188).

Discourses of anxiety around childhood obesity seem both to overstate the prevalence of the problem and to underestimate children’s (and girls in particular) willingness and indeed compulsion in managing their bodies through an endless scrutiny further amplified by the pervasive forms of gendered harassment and surveillance already taking place at school and sports clubs. However, some of the girls’ experiences in sport also suggested that this

involvement could create heightened feelings of bodily capacity, pleasure and strength and thus act as a possible means of resistance towards the increased objectification of these bodies within their peer hierarchies. This potential might be explored through critical physical literacy approaches which seek to situate and understand bodies within contexts of racism, sexism, sizeism and other forms of discrimination in ways that engage young people in such discussions.

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<sup>i</sup> ThisGirlCan is a National media marketing campaign developed by Sport England, which aims to encourage more women and girls to take up sport by sharing positive images and messages of participation.  
<http://www.thisgirlcan.co.uk/>