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## **Fitness, fatness and healthism discourse: girls constructing ‘healthy’ identities in school**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on longitudinal, qualitative research into girls’ participation in physical activity and sport in the UK, this article will explore girls’ embodied constructions of ‘healthy’ identities. My research with girls (aged 10-13) found that over the transition to secondary school, classed and gendered healthism discourses had come to powerfully frame girls’ sports participation by condoning the achievement of slender embodied femininities through physical activity. The findings suggest that while neoliberal indictments of self-care through physical activity can usefully frame girls’ individual ‘body projects,’ these discourses also contribute to a hierarchisation of bodies within physical activity settings and to increasingly narrow standards of acceptable bodies able to take part in physical activity. Within the article I consider how healthism discourses both regulate and are resisted by the girls as they work to construct physical identities within their school settings.

**Keywords: physical activity, sport, friendships, girls, healthism, health**

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade in the United Kingdom and other developed nations, sport and physical education have been increasingly promoted within an incentive of health characterised by interventions aimed at changing behaviours around eating and exercise. In the UK this is evidenced in national interventions including the Healthy Schools initiative, the Change4life public health campaign (a social marketing campaign designed to combat obesity) and the National Child Measurement Programme (DoH & DCSF 2008). Similar government-initiated health campaigns are also operating in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan in a shift towards preventative health measures aimed at regulating both individuals and target populations (Wright & Harwood 2009). Such interventions frequently target the bodies of young people (often through schools) and are substantiated within the construction of an impending ‘obesity epidemic’ (Gard and Wright 2005; Wright and Harwood 2009). A growing body of work has sought to understand the impact of these overarching health initiatives on young people’s embodied subjectivities, particularly as they are enacted in schools (Evans et al. 2008; Rail 2009; Powell and Fitzpatrick 2015; Cale, Harris, and Chen 2014). My research with young women suggests that over the transition to secondary school, girls increasingly came to understand their participation in sport and physical activity as the obligation of responsible, ‘healthy’ subjects within a wider discourse of healthism. The term ‘healthism’ seeks to

describe the growing focus on preventative health measures that are constructed as a form of both personal responsibility and culpability for individuals. Within this article, I explore some of the gendered implications of these broader healthism discourses particularly as they relate to the increasing impetus placed on girls to both perform and embody ‘successful girlhood’ at school and in other contexts.

### **Healthism and active girlhood**

Girls’ participation in physical education (PE) at school has often been characterised as problematic (Cockburn & Clarke 2002; Flintoff & Scraton 2001; Green et al. 2007). Many girls’ negative experiences in physical education have also contributed to their underrepresentation in sport and physical activity more generally (Wellard 2007; WSFF 2007). One resounding explanation for this lack of participation has been sport’s association with muscularity, strength and competitive physical prowess as conflicting with dominant constructions of femininity, therefore compelling girls either to disengage or to compensate for their sporting participation through overt performances of femininity elsewhere (Choi 2000; Cockburn and Clarke 2002; Evans 2006). More recently, concerns around obesity in the UK and elsewhere have shifted a focus on girls’ physical activity participation away from questions of equity towards performative health and competition goals (Evans et al. 2008). In practice this has meant that girls are increasingly asked to take part in sport and PE not to resolve gender imbalances in a discourse of liberal equality but because it is ‘good for them’ or because they are considered ‘good at sport.’ While I have elsewhere explored the operation of ability discourses in relation to girls’ physical activity participation (Clark 2012) this article focuses on healthism discourses and their mediation of active girlhood.

The impetus on young women to actively manage their own health is entrenched within broader healthism discourses aimed at changing individual behaviours by ‘nudging’ individuals towards more responsible choices (DoH and DCSF 2008). ‘Healthism’ therefore describes a broad social incentivisation towards individual responsibility for bodily health through a series of preventative measures enacted by individuals (Evans, Davies, and Wright 2004). Within this preventative model, behaviours such as smoking, overeating and lack of exercise become ‘risky behaviours’ that individuals are expected to avoid (Tinning and Glasby 2002). Conversely, activities such as exercise, ‘healthy’ eating and weight monitoring are cast as preventative strategies through which individuals are able to demonstrate self-management and individual responsibility within personal body projects (Benson 1997, 127). Peter Kelly (2001) outlines some of the problematic ways in which young people in particular are implicated in risk discourses through what he terms processes of “compulsive responsabilisation” within a neoliberal framework of governmentality. This conceptualisation describes the ways in which young people are expected to manage their future trajectories in a series of risk-adverse choice biographies which include decisions in relation to their health. Kelly cautions: “these processes of individualisation also visit new forms of responsibility on young people and their

families to prudently manage individual reflexive biographical projects” (2001, 23). These insights are particularly useful in trying to understand the ways in which girls take up healthism discourses through specifically gendered body projects within highly normative social settings such as the competitive and performance-based context of the school.

Girls’ specifically gendered take up of bodily regimes around diet and exercise have been read as symptomatic of cultural sexism particularly as it is manifest in the widespread bodily anxieties and insecurity that seem to characterize so many young women’s relationships to their bodies (Frost 2001; Oliver and Lalik 2001). Although these critiques of the ‘cult of slenderness’ are not new (Bordo 1993; Bartky 1997), a renewed emphasis on slenderness in the wake of concerns over obesity provides a further ‘health’ justification that creates its own regimes of truth around weight, health and ideal bodies. Recent research suggests that ‘healthism’ as a moral imperative provides dominant discourses through which young women might construct physical identities and thereby frame their participation in physical activity (Garrett 2004; Evans et al. 2008). This research suggests that within wider healthism discourses, girls have come under “intensifying pressures to regulate their bodies” by scrutinising their daily eating habits and physical activities in the enactment of responsible subjectivities (Rich and Evans 2013, 7). An important connection in this work is the ways in which a specific embodiment and the performance of particular ‘health’ practices have come to signify ‘successful’ girlhood in the construction of young femininities.

Recent perspectives have thus sought to understand how this broader characterisation of girls as neoliberal, postfeminist success stories further positions girls as ideal healthy subjects expected to manage their health through preventative strategies (Rich and Evans 2013; Heywood 2007; Azzarito 2010). Azzarito (2010) contends that highly successful and competitive young femininities cast in the media as ‘Alpha girls’ must be accompanied by the embodiment of a slender, toned physique involved in physical fitness routines. In line with such insights, my analysis seeks to problematize the gendered and classed implications of young women’s ability to take up healthism discourses through individual body projects. Indeed participation in extracurricular activities such as competitive sport can be seen to characterize successful middle class perceptions of a ‘well-rounded’ education for many young women (Clark, 2009). Schools and the gendered peer settings within them therefore form an important context for exploring the operation of healthism discourses and their mediation of active girlhood.

### **Schooled bodies**

A large body of feminist research in schools has documented peer groupings as important sites for girls’ ongoing identity constructions (Hey 1997; George 2007; Paechter & Clark 2015; Renold 2005; Pomerantz 2008). These peer hierarchies and social groupings can be seen to represent the social order through which girls accomplish themselves as socially recognizable subjects and are therefore key sites in which healthism discourses and bodily norms are recontextualized as ‘body pedagogies’

in schools (Shilling 2010; Evans et al. 2008). Body pedagogies can be understood as the processes through which broader health discourses become “filtered, mediated and re-contextualized within the educational field” for example by validating certain bodies and behaviours along moralistic, culturally constructed lines of social inequalities (Shilling 2010, 152). In practice such meanings translate across contexts and are interpreted according to understandings of girls’ social and cultural positioning most easily read through their physical embodiment within the school. Judgements about girls’ bodies occur in harsh peer evaluations where bodies are hierarchically organised along culturally coded lines of attractiveness, slenderness and physical ability. This is often brutally evident to the girls, even as they at times perpetuate these hierarchies.

While many of the girls in my research are critical of imposed health standards and the increasing scrutiny of their own and other women’s bodies, they do so often within highly regulated and gendered contexts where their bodies are also a means of agency and identity in the social order. The girls are thereby engaged in a series of complex social and embodied manoeuvres by which they seek both to ‘fit in’ socially and to ‘be somebody’ within the competitive gendered social hierarchies of the school. This article seeks to explain some of the ways in which healthism discourses “come to bear upon [young women’s] subjectivities” (Rich and Evans 2013, 8). As Rich (2013, 8) explains, the increasing impetus on young women to “demonstrate their capacity to be healthy” has specific consequences and here I have sought to understand how those consequences play out in relation to young women’s sports participation and more broadly to their construction of ‘healthy’ subjectivities within the heterosexualised social economies of their schools.

### **The research**

The research conducted for this study was qualitative and longitudinal as it traced the experiences of a group of physically active girls as they moved from Year 5 (9-10 years) of their schooling through to Year 8 (12-13 years). Longitudinal research such as this has been said to capture “something of the process through which the self is made over time” (McLeod and Thomson 2009), at a point when many girls disengage from sport. The girls were originally involved in research into tomboy identities where sports participation acted as one important way in which such identities were performed in school (Paechter and Clark 2007). I continued to focus on six girls from this earlier research as they made the transition to secondary school as well as interviewing ten of their friends in groups and on their own. In total this amounted to 25 successive interviews with the girls (8 of these being group interviews). My research questions focused on the girls’ construction of gendered identities in the context of their sports participation. I conducted interviews with each girl twice a year as well as interviewing friends, family members, teachers and coaches. Over this period I also carried out 45 observations at school PE lessons, school sports clubs and one athletics club, which spanned the girls’ transition into separate secondary schools.

The girls' social class locations roughly map on to their original attendance at two different primary school classes in a largely suburban, white middle class area and an ethnically diverse, economically deprived school in inner city London. The girls carried on to four separate secondary schools in London. Adlington was an inner city mixed sex comprehensive (where Danny, Lindsay and Gazza attended), Spirit attended Folkestone – a private girls' school, Deniz attended Blythe Vale, a diverse, inner city girls' comprehensive, and Nirvana and Lucy both attended a largely middle class girls' comprehensive, Wellington Gardens, which modelled itself on nearby private schools. The single sex girls' schools in particular were very proud of their sporting successes and of the variety of activities on offer although girls' participation in PE was recognised as a problem by teachers, particularly for Muslim girls. Over the course of the research, Wellington Gardens became a sports college and Adlington School had recently achieved "healthy school status"<sup>1</sup>. Such designations, while holding particular consequences for young people, can also be considered as a means by which schools seek to add distinction and value in an increasingly competitive, 'choice' economy of school provision (Ball 1994). All of the girls involved in the research had been particularly 'sporty' at primary school and this involved participation in a variety of activities including football, karate and cross country running. At primary school this participation had often been described as 'fun' and was rooted in social engagement with friends. Over the transition to secondary school girls became increasingly likely to justify their sports participation within healthism discourse – as something 'healthy' they should do to keep fit.

The following sections document the increasing relevance of healthism discourses in framing girls' physical activities (and inactivity). I then move on to discuss the ways in which healthism discourses contribute to moral hierarchies of bodies that mediate girls' participation. I demonstrate how these hierarchies function as a means of regulating girls' own and others' bodies within the complex social configurations of their school and friendship groups.

### **Health as an enactment of successful girlhood**

As the girls approached secondary school, concerns about academic achievement became increasingly prioritised and therefore decisions around sports participation often rested in girls' and their families' understandings of successful girlhood and a 'good education'. This section looks at the ways in which 'health' as an embodied practice could serve as an additional means of enacting successful girlhood where girls were unequally able to access this ideal. Overall at secondary school girls found they had less time to participate in unstructured physical activities and were compelled to do so in highly structured physical activity settings such as teams and after-school clubs which are increasingly competitive. Fees and the necessity of lifts to lessons mean that girls from financially better off families are more likely to continue with their physical activities into secondary school, an expectation that is coupled with high levels of academic achievement. Within a performative, high

stakes culture, models of achievement are often echoed across academic and sporting pursuits, thus creating pressurised contexts for young women (Evans et al. 2004).

As girls made the transition to secondary school, their lives became more sedentary due to increasing homework and school commitments, restrictions on playtime activities and the ongoing surveillance of their outdoor activities. Girls in the research reported fewer opportunities to go to the park or run around at playtime and more time sat at their desks carrying out revision. This shift towards academic priorities had been anticipated by many of the girls who viewed secondary school as a place where they expected to ‘get serious’ about their studies. Nilay, an active participant in playground football in primary school, participated in the early research but declined to continue with the study at the transition to secondary school. This was linked to her decision to attend a single sex Islamic secondary school where she did not think that football would be provided, something she was unconcerned about. In imagining her transition to secondary school, Nilay explained: “I’m not gonna want to play it’s gonna be like I’ve just gotten old and I’ve got to more concentrate on my work.” (Year 5 interview, Asian, working class). Nilay invests in an aspirational discourse of academic success through hard work which for her precluded physical activity understood as simply ‘play’ and therefore unproductive.

This shift away from physical activity as a ‘fun’ pursuit did indeed take place for most of the girls while healthism discourses took on an increasing relevance in relation to both physical activities and eating patterns. As suggested earlier, healthism discourse is intensely invested in notions of hard work and self-improvement and thus for some girls, ‘health’ behaviours and schoolwork remain aligned as the practices of responsible subjects. As Erica describes, the boredom and monotony of studying often provoked excursions to the fridge and this was a process fraught with parental and self-regulation around food.

Erica: Um, when I eat a lot of snacks my parents always tell me that I shouldn’t eat so much.

Sheryl: Really?

Erica: Well I don’t eat that much but if I have like a packet of crisps and then a chocolate bar I feel quite self-conscious.

(White, middle class girl at Wellington Gardens, Year 8 interview)

Erica’s commitment to studying and her investment in academic success seemed to align unproblematically with the self-control and responsibility she assumes in relation to her healthy body work. Despite embodying a very slender frame, Erica here describes feelings of ‘self-consciousness’ in relation to snacks suggesting a moralising of food intake into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ categories. This is also an affective embodiment in its ability to induce feelings of shame and guilt in relation to food. Similarly, Spirit described her initial interest in running within health related terms as an individual ‘body project’ tied to weight loss goals.

Spirit: I think, I think when I was doing it before; I was more doing it for health, fitness and just to keep myself in shape really. Because even though I was quite young, in year four I started getting concerned about my weight and stuff, if you know like-

Sheryl: Really?

Spirit: Yeah, and I was like concerned about what I was eating, like only low fat foods.

(White, middle class girl at Folkestone, Year 7 interview)

Both Erica and Spirit attended high-achieving, single sex girls' schools (although Spirit's was private) where academic and sporting accomplishments were both celebrated and expected (Allan 2007; Evans, Rich, and Holroyd 2004; Maxwell and Aggleton 2013). The girls describe a relationship with food and physical activity which is surveillant, judgmental and binary in its categorisations of 'good' and 'bad' food and behaviours. Spirit's accomplishments in running were much celebrated by teachers and peers alike and she was viewed as a star athlete at her primary school. This disclosure of her initial motivations for taking up running might therefore seem surprising. However, links between running and attempted weight loss are not remarkable among young women, and it is only Spirit's young age that sets this admission apart. The connection of limited food intake and negative body image make it difficult to square with the perceived benefits of physical fitness. While dieting might be criticised for its short-termism and superficiality, fitness or health have here acquired a status of superior moral value to the extent that they become difficult to criticise or question as motives for behaviours that might otherwise be deemed damaging or even obsessive.

Erica and Spirit's construction of a 'healthy' subjectivity is performed through an ongoing monitoring and individual responsibility for personal health 'choices' set within accepted truths about body size, weight and food in interpretations that are hierarchical, moralistic and complex (Evans et al. 2008). Importantly, body pedagogies acquire the power to mediate thoughts and feelings around food, physical activities and other health related behaviours. As responsible healthy subjects, it is up to Erica and Spirit to make the 'right' health decisions and yet these must be done in a way that is complementary rather than adversarial to their academic achievement.

The elevation of 'slenderness' as a corporeal ideal and its health associations had also become an incentive for taking part in physical education for Deniz who had repeatedly 'opted out' of PE in Year 7.

Deniz: Yeah, 'cause I don't do PE that much. And she [her mum] tells me off, like 'why aren't you doing PE?' and everything. 'It's good.'

Sheryl: Your mum says that?

Deniz: Yeah.



Sheryl: I thought your mum didn't mind if you skipped PE and things.

Deniz: That was last year. But now, I've gone a bit fat and then she goes 'you should lose weight and everything and do PE.'

(Asian, working class girl at Blythe Vale, Year 8 Interview)

Similarly, findings from Flintoff and Scraton's (2001) research into girls' physical activity levels found that physical activity (and PE by implication) was frequently related to short-term weight-loss goals tied to idealised feminine bodies. Deniz was resistant to an 'idealised [white] femininity' in many ways and this was underscored by her position as a veiled Turkish Muslim immigrant to Britain. Yet here the impending fear of 'fat' becomes sufficient incentive for a renewed participation in PE. This differs strongly from Deniz's orientation towards PE in primary school, which was characterised as enthusiastic and assertive by her teachers, particularly in mixed playground football. The fearful threat of 'going a bit fat' draws heavily on obesity discourses which implicate young people in an impending 'crisis.' Here this fear is used as an incentive towards engaging in PE lessons, though clearly with a different orientation than her experiences in primary school.

Yet Deniz's gendered performance as a veiled Muslim girl in a diverse, inner city girls' school renders her participation in physical education classes frequently problematic. Having been shunned by her initial group of ethnically diverse friends in Year 7, Deniz had actively shifted her allegiance to the group of covered Muslim girls in her class who she describes as 'even more religious than me.' (Year 8 Interview, Blythe Vale School). Deniz and her friends' visual and ethnic difference from a wider peer group in which they felt marginalised and excluded was constructed through their active resistance to PE lessons where the girls stood on the side and brought in notes from home to excuse their participation. This was seen as particularly problematic by their PE teacher who noted "quite generally across the year groups we're having difficulty with getting those [Muslim] girls to participate" (Teacher interview, Blythe Vale School). As Laura Hills' (2007) research demonstrates, girls' friendship groups and peer hierarchies are an important consideration for their enjoyment of PE and may represent key determinants in girls' ability to take part. This seems to create a contradictory position for Deniz where health imperatives are confounded by peer politics and the ongoing construction of an ethnicised femininity set in opposition to her peers.

For Deniz, Spirit, Erica and Nilay, their decisions around physical activity are tied to neoliberal notions of responsible citizenship whether through a commitment to academic success or through responsible self-care invested in healthism discourses. These projects are inaccessible for Nilay and Deniz whose religious and ethnic identities as Asian Muslims becomes more important to them at secondary school. Nilay's Islamic identity and beliefs might therefore be said to represent an alternative to the performative requirements of otherwise compulsory health-related body projects. However, at secondary school the influence of healthism discourses comes to bear on Deniz's bodily understanding as her body becomes defined as outside the ideal, 'slender' norm. A sporting and

academic identity are seen as exclusive for Nilay, who could not contemplate time for play amidst her studies, and contradictory for Deniz who would have liked to join in but felt unable to do so. However, for white middle class girls such as Spirit who continued to run competitively and Erica who played high level tennis, their investment in their studies was clearly echoed in 'health' related bodily investments and achievement codes.

### **Creating moral hierarchies of bodies**

Where healthism seemed to haunt girls' physical activity participation as both a legitimising and regulatory discourse, it simultaneously contributed to a moral hierarchy of bodies through which the girls could position both themselves and others. In the girls' understandings, ideas around health often worked interchangeably with issues of body size, so that being skinny might discursively equate to being fit and healthy and this related to their evaluative judgments around body size and physical activity. Although the girls were often critical of normative discourses endorsing a 'cult of slenderness' further comments or behaviours revealed a more ambivalent relationship towards food and weight that did not necessarily conform to earlier comments they had made. For example, Gazza's insistence that she ate when she was hungry and was happy with her body was somewhat belied by her daily habit of skipping both breakfast and lunch, in line with many of her friends. Oliver and Lalik's (2001) research revealed that girls' outward bodily acceptance during group interviews was contradicted by an obsessive concern with bodily appearance and functions, as documented in their journal entries. However, in the case of Lucy, her bodily acceptance is directly related to her evaluation of other girls' bodies. During our interview, I asked how she felt about her body.

Lucy: I don't really mind. I know some people are quite... large. They get really upset and they don't do anything. They don't go swimming or anything like that. But then they don't try and stop it. They don't stop eating they just don't do the fun activities. Like say I was quite a lot bigger and I didn't want to go swimming because of it. Then I'd try and sort myself out and put myself on a diet or something but some people don't do that. They just cut out all the fun activities. Which is the thing that's gonna get them thin.

(White, middle class girl at Wellington Gardens, Year 8 Interview)

Lucy begins by telling me that she is content with her body and appearance, 'I don't really mind' and this self-acceptance is legitimated through her participation in physical activities and presumably by her own slender frame. Although Lucy mentions dieting as a solution to overweight, she primarily emphasises physical activity as a means of bodily regulation and restriction. In addition to swimming, Lucy regularly took part in physical activities such as rock climbing and sailing which she often did through her Scouts participation. Lucy can be seen to produce her 'healthy' (thin) identity by contrasting her own behaviours with those of her overweight peers who seemingly lack the moral willpower to 'sort themselves out' and whose unwillingness to expose their 'unregulated' bodies in

revealing swimsuits is read as irrational and counterproductive. Crawford (1994, 1348) argues that 'health' and the healthy body are discursively reliant on the construction of the 'unhealthy other.' Thus an (outward) bodily acceptance may be linked to the projection of fatness and lack of exercise onto irresponsible 'others,' thereby validating one's own 'healthy' lifestyle. Health as the corporeal embodiment of slenderness becomes moralised and held up for scrutiny, with the linked understanding that 'fatness' equates to laziness and lack of willpower. Responsibility for health is strongly individualised in this excerpt suggesting that extra weight is a sign of personal failure. The assumed conclusion of this sentiment is that those who embody a corporeal slenderness have already 'sorted themselves out', demonstrating a neoliberal form of responsibility and self-care here seen noteworthy. Within the 'moral economy of virtue' constructed through healthism discourses, good and bad citizens are classified according to their adherence to 'healthy choices' as through free from structural and cultural constraints (Evans et al. 2008, 55). In other contexts, girls were often critical of inequalities that prevented them from taking part in physical activities however the 'commonsensical' appearance of healthism seemed to remove this possibility.

Instead the normalisation of healthism behaviours establishes a context wherein those who do not conform to its requirements become stigmatised and held to blame for their lack of responsible behaviours. The hierarchisation of bodies along moralised codes of slenderness meant that physical education classes, where such bodies were on display, could be excruciating experiences for many girls. As Sykes (2011, 154) describes, "fatness" has come to represent a "deviation from the health role" and is therefore demonised as the quality of an irresponsible subject constructed as an "unproductive burden on the health system." Although deviant bodies have long been marginalised within PE and sport settings, "fatness" takes on an increasing stigma within healthism discourse (Leahy 2009).

As one of the few middle class girls in her year group at Adlington School, Joanna's commitment to academic success as well as her embodiment of a larger physicality often positioned her on the outskirts of female friendship groups. Joanna was not an original participant in the research but was introduced to me via another participant during a group interview. On this particular day in PE, the all-girls class were practising gymnastic floor routines. My fieldnotes recorded an incident in which Joanna's bodily display is brutally judged and she is ostracized by the other girls in the group.

Next they are going to design their own routines and the teacher wants some girls to demonstrate the set of balances and jumps they can use. Joanna puts up her hand.

There seems to be some conflict over Joanna getting up and Elana makes a comment I can't quite make out. On the first jump Joanna's shirt comes up, exposing her soft, rounded belly. There are some snickers in the group and one girl covers her face and turns her head in an obvious act of shaming. Joanna quickly pulls her shirt down and carries on but seems a bit upset. Afterwards I speak to her and she is on the verge of

tears. She tells me “Elana just hates me” for no particular reason she can make out. With tear rimmed eyes she also explains that she will have to go alone for the mat routines since Amira, a former friend, refuses to be her partner and the rest of the girls are already grouped. Joanna adds “Sometimes I just feel like I don’t fit in.”

(Fieldnotes, Adlington School, Year 7)

The tears and sense of despair speak of the intense emotions involved in bodily regulation within the heightened context of girls’ intimate social complexities. Bodily anxieties and their affective regulation in feminist research are also recalled in a reflective piece by Kehily (2004: 366) where she recounts rolling on the ground with the girls pinching their “fat bits” and moaning. In this situation, my role as observer of girls who are already under intense scrutiny was particularly uncomfortable and this is manifested in my desire to somehow ‘console’ Joanna after her friends deserted her. Joanna’s experience represents simply one instance of the myriad ways in which girls’ bodies were evaluated and critiqued by themselves and their peers and yet this particular incident recalls the excruciating humiliation of having one’s bodily performance so distinctly held up for inspection. Joanna is compelled to perform her bodily display in front of both an evaluative teacher and classmates who she is convinced ‘hate me.’ Bodily displays in PE classes have been implicated as particularly problematic for girls, specifically because of the extent to which their bodies are already so harshly judged within the heteronormative gaze of their social contexts. Using Butler’s terms, the softly protruding belly might be read as a discourse which is “excessive, confounding the very norms by which it is enabled” (Butler 1999, 20). This excess, as outside the slender ideal of PE participation seems to interrupt normative discourses of body size and is thus intensely troubled and troubling for the observers who apparently imagine themselves as potential victims of such scrutiny. It seemed to me that for the other girls, the idea of having one’s soft belly exposed to their harshest critics was among the worst imaginable tortures. Indeed this fear is so acute that Amira, a friend of Joanna’s, cannot bear the idea of partnering with her later and thus risking contamination through association. Fat phobia in this instance takes on a very tangible and socially loaded significance as it regulates both the girls’ physical performances and social interactions as pathological ‘other’ (Bordo 1993; Murray 2009; Sykes 2011).

### **Resistance and regulation through bodily norms**

In queues at the canteen, sitting on the floor waiting for PE to begin and other hallway conversations girls frequently spoke with each other about dieting, offering one another advice in empathetic tones of confidentiality. However, girls’ discussions of food and dieting were frequently ambivalent, whereby girls attempted to tread the line between ‘healthy’ self-care’ and an ‘unhealthy’ ‘obsession’ with their weight. Although many of the girls engaged in weight loss practices; skipping lunch,

chewing gum to ward off hunger or restricting certain foods from their diets, such activities were subject to an ongoing scrutiny and generalised illicitness.

In my fieldnotes at Adlington one day, I recorded a conversation carried out by a mixed sex group of young people – four girls and one boy. It was sports day, which in practice meant a lot of sitting around waiting to take part in various events headlined by a select number of school sports ‘stars.’ The process of selection for individual events by class representatives had been fraught with disappointment and social politics. Several girls had lamented to me their hurt at not being chosen for their preferred event or worse, being chosen for an event they had no training for and which therefore represented the distinct possibility of school-wide humiliation. During one such lull in the events, the girls flipped through a magazine featuring dieting tips as well as commentary on the weight of various female celebrities. Such magazines have been implicated as facets of a “pervasive celebrity culture” (Tincknell 2013, 183) in which young female celebrities’ bodies are relentlessly scrutinised for signs of imperfection and where health and physical appearance are often equated. However, young people’s consumption of these messages and their interpretations will invariably relate to the specific gender and social configurations of their immediate contexts.

Seemingly prompted by the dieting tips or flawed female bodies on display, the girls began discussing the diet that Bridget had recently begun, prompting a boy in the group to ask incredulously, “Why are you on a diet?” Her friends jumped in to explain.

Gazza: She wants to be skinny!

Rufus: Why do you want to be skinny?

Bridget: I don’t want to be skinny, I just don’t want to be fat.

Lindsay: She wants to be fit.

Bridget : Yeah.

Rene: Danny doesn’t eat anything, hardly anything. Lily doesn’t either but she’s not as tiny.

Rufus : She’s not that small.

(Fieldnotes, Adlington School, Year 7)

Bartky (1997) suggests that as techniques of the ‘fashion-beauty complex’, dieting and weight loss rely on shame and secrecy for their continued power and here the revelation around Bridget’s diet seems to represent a disloyalty. Somewhat contradicting this, Nichter (2000) suggests that girls’ ‘fat talk’ functioned as a social ritual among girls – as a way of creating or maintaining social solidarity. However this seems to ignore the context of girls’ discussions around dieting and body size which were also firmly located within the ‘heterosexual economy’ (Hey 1997, 106) of the school in which girls competed for recognition and prestige through heterosexualised validation. In this sense Gazza’s accusation, ‘she wants to be skinny’ can be viewed as a betrayal of her friend’s confidence in an act that negates social solidarity. Lindsay’s defensive interjection seems to support this possibility. In another interpretation, however, Gazza’s accusation (and perhaps Rufus’s as well) might be read as a

resistance against the oppressive notion that girls must constantly manage their weight by striving for ever thinner bodies.

Yet while dieting and weight loss are cast as secretive, even shameful practices ‘health’ and ‘fitness’ seemed to represent an acceptable, even desirable justification for weight loss which removed girls from the prospect of criticism. Confidentiality is breached in this interaction as Rufus’s questioning of Bridget’s motives puts her on the defensive, questioning the necessity of a diet in relation to her body size. Bridget’s attempt at an explanation might also be made sense of in light of ‘too skinny’ celebrities that are often accused of eating disorders and an unhealthy attitude towards food.

However, it is Lindsay’s explanation “she just wants to be fit” which puts an end to the interrogation and with which Bridget readily agrees. In fact the interrogation quickly moves on to their female peers who are accused of attempting to lose weight for the ‘wrong’ reasons.

Within this exchange, ‘fitness’ provides a justifiable and morally defensible discourse which allows girls to position themselves as responsible and healthy subjects where simply seeking to be ‘skinny’ could be perceived as a trivial or irresponsible desire. However, the girls’ attempts to classify one another using body size are scuppered by Rufus who confidently claims of Lily, “She’s not that small.” He seems to assume an authority in the conversation thereby throwing their previous assumptions into array around who is too fat or too thin and this process is revealed as a ‘no win’ situation. In this way, bodily norms and the health discourses around them served to regulate the girls’ behaviours as well as acting as yet another mechanism in their complex social positioning.

The interchanging of fitness and weight could be confusing for girls as it probably is for adult women. The harassment they experienced often impelled girls to insist that they *did* eat and to hide any dieting behaviour from friends and peers, or to explain it as otherwise, such as in the following conversation with Danny, a girl who became involved in the research in Year 7 after taking part in a group interview with her friend.

Sheryl: But do people make comments about it a lot?

Danny: Some boys, like Connor, he says I’m anorexic and things. And I said ‘what’s anorexic?’ And he said ‘when you be sick’ and I said ‘No, that’s bulimic.’ He doesn’t even know what he’s saying.

[follow up in later interview]

Sheryl: So last time you mentioned that some boys call you anorexic in class?

Danny: Oh, yeah. It’s only like a couple but like some girls will say ‘but she eats a lot, you don’t know how much she eats. And she just burns it off.’ Cause I’m in proportion.

Sometimes it gets me down

Sheryl: When they say it?

Danny: Yeah, cause like but then everyone will say ‘oh just shut up’ cause everyone sticks up for me. Which is quite nice. But I know myself that I’m not anorexic. I like my food. So I’m just like ‘if you think of me that way then don’t speak to me.’

(White, working class girl at Adlington School, Year 7 Interview)

In relation to the other girls I spoke with, Danny might be said to represent a more resistant narrative around body size, diet and exercise. She happily discussed the large amounts of food she consumed

with friends but this was done in the context of a slender frame and as Danny claims ‘I’m in proportion’ thus justifying her ongoing food consumption. In this excerpt, Danny is able to resist a male classmate’s negative comments around her body weight by positioning him as ignorant in relation to eating disorders and therefore lacking in authority. There are several reasons that Danny seemed better able to defend herself than her peers and these included an embodied slender frame, intense sporting commitment and performances and a sense of female solidarity where she perceived her friends as defending her. The previous extract, however, belies this expectation – “Danny doesn’t eat anything, hardly anything” thus suggesting the immense extent to which girls’ eating behaviours were policed by both themselves and others. Danny’s reaction to being called anorexic was to insist that the reason she was so slender was due to the large amount of sports she engaged in. Danny ran cross-country at a competitive level but she also participated in figure skating, a more stereotypically feminine sport. At the same time, she was less likely than her peers to engage in overtly feminised performances such as makeup or short skirts and her long blonde hair was often unkempt. Yet these gendered performances never seemed to compromise her popularity and instead her friends admired this seeming lack of attention to her looks. Danny’s physical performances of both sport and femininity seem to suggest that sport involvement can serve as a legitimating discourse through which girls are able to justify their bodily practices and shapes, but only if these fit within other normative constructions. In other words, Danny’s ability to resist healthism discourses in many ways is premised on a normative (slender) body size, in addition to sporting ability.

In each of these exchanges, body size and girls’ eating practices are harshly interrogated, forming a powerful lens through which to scrutinize each other’s motives and bodies. The girls’ constant negotiations over social positioning and sexualised attention as manifest in these interactions must be read within a highly charged social context where girls were subject to unequally distributed, sometimes desirable but often humiliating scrutiny of their bodies. Adlington is a formerly single sex boys’ school and as such, girls at the school were considerably outnumbered by their male peers which created a further imbalance in gender relations. Accusations that girls were either ‘fat’ or ‘anorexic’ were coupled with rampant yet normalised sexual harassment and this contributed to the girls’ vigilant caution around the way both their bodies and their eating habits were viewed by others. The extracts also demonstrate how girls’ embodiment of a slender physique must appear effortless and ‘natural’ rather than as the result of food restriction or excessive exercise. The policing of girls’ bodies, conversations and practices was commonplace and as both extracts demonstrate, it was enacted by girls and boys alike. Thus body size, weight, eating and physical activity become entangled in a series of complex, contradictory mechanisms requiring equivocations, concealment and subtle manipulation on the part of girls in explaining and justifying their bodies and behaviours.

### **Conclusion**

The research findings demonstrate some of the ways in which healthism as a system of governmentality links with neoliberal expectations that individuals should mediate risk through an

ongoing construction of individual biographies narrated by the correct 'choices.' The girls' take up of healthism discourses and their construction of healthy identities come into relief at the transition to secondary school where a perceived enhancement of accountability around academic achievement forced girls to make calculated decisions about their participation in physical activity. Just as the girls were expected to make decisions about secondary school, academic study and their extracurricular activities, so too were they attempting to make the 'right' choices around their health-related body projects. In this sense, health can be considered as an enactment of successful girlhood which functioned to position girls as either responsible, good, 'healthy' subjects or as irresponsible, lazy, 'unhealthy' others. The findings therefore diverge somewhat from Garrett's 2004 research where in addition to 'good bodies' and 'bad bodies' girls were able to construct a further 'different body' identity that did not align with a normative body size as well as Azzarito and Solmon's (2006) research where girls could create compliant, resistant and transformative subject positions in relation to health and body size. Although Danny's gender performances were often resistant, they did not seem to be transformative. To some extent, healthism discourses allowed the girls to legitimate and justify their participation in physical activities that were not otherwise particularly valued or valuable in the peer context of the school. This included Danny and Spirit's participation in cross-country running, Gazza's in football and Lucy's participation in sailing and rock climbing. However, healthism discourses simultaneously worked to exclude and shame other girls such as Joanna and Deniz whose bodies did not fit the normative, corporeal constructions of physical activity participation. In the performative context of schooling (Evans et al. 2008) and the competitive peer hierarchies therein, healthism discourses operated as yet another set of expectations that at the same time conflated 'health' with slender bodies in moralising narratives of 'good' and 'bad' behaviours and subjectivities.

Further, while healthism discourses could legitimate girls' physical activities and eating practices as 'responsible' behaviours, they also came to regulate these activities and the girls' self-concepts. The interviews demonstrate the affective dimensions of subjectification as a means of inducing feelings of guilt and shame in relation to body size and food intake in processes of 'compulsive responsabilisation' (Kelly 2001). Thus when girls framed their sporting experiences in terms of health and fitness it came across through a sense that they *should* be exercising regularly or eating healthily, but perhaps were not. It could result in feelings of guilt that they were not doing better by eating less or being more active. This sense of guilt was present despite the many overriding factors that made physical activity and 'healthy' eating often challenging for these young, gendered subjects.

The data also demonstrates the moralising effect of health discourses which worked to establish bodily hierarchies contributing to a narrowing of possibilities for girls' sports participation as well as the marginalisation of 'abject' bodies. Health discourses, and the binaries they reinforce between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy', 'fat' and 'thin', 'good' and 'bad' were used to regulate girls' behaviour within the heterosexual economy of the school. 'Health' as an enactment of successful girlhood thus



seems to set up winners and losers since it is unequally attainable to different girls. In practice, healthism discourses act as one more means by which girls are unable to perform idealised femininities since their bodies always seem to come up short. Healthism discourses are translated in school contexts through a variety of means including a school's 'healthy school status', offhand remarks by teachers on weight loss and the embedding of health initiatives in school PE as is outlined in the 2013 National Curriculum in England, which aims "to ensure that all pupils lead healthy, active lives" (DfE, 2013: 1). My research suggests that healthism was often translated by teachers and students alike through the performative measurement of body size or slenderness. By relying on short-term, performative indicators of 'health,' rather than on a more holistic model of participation based in wellness, healthism does not seem to provide a sustainable model for girls' sports participation.

Although the schools had different 'healthy school credentials' it is difficult to say whether this had any direct bearing on the girls' experiences or whether girls at a less credentialised school are better able to resist healthism. This relationship seems to bear further investigation in understanding whether some schools promote healthism discourses more than others.

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<sup>1</sup>The National Healthy Schools Programme was initiated in 1999 by the Department of Health and the Department for Education and set out guidance for a whole school approach to 'health and wellbeing.' A 2011 evaluation of the programme by the National Centre for Social Research concluded that despite many implemented changes by schools, the impact of the programme on individual pupils was not significant over a two year time frame (NatCen 2011: 4).