



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Education - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Social Sciences

2010

Going to the gym: the new urban 'it' space

Judith Laverty

University of Wollongong

Jan Wright

University of Wollongong, jwright@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Laverty, J. & Wright, J. (2010) Going to the gym: the new urban 'it' space, in J. Wright, J. & D. Macdonald (eds), *Young people, physical activity and the everyday*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 42-55

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Chapter 4

Going to the gym – the new urban ‘it’ space

Judy Lavery

Jan Wright

Introduction

At a time of increasing hype about the health consequences of obesity, it is unsurprising that ‘going to the gym’ has become increasingly popular amongst most age groups.

Tailored children’s gyms for the 8 to 14 year olds are being established in some western countries as the new antidote for childhood obesity. Such developments illustrate

Fusco’s (2007: 46) point that urban spaces are increasingly subjected to ‘neoliberal ideologies of healthism, active living and consumerism’ and reflect the overlays and interactions between health and space in neo-liberal cities. At the same Fusco suggests young people’s health geographies are missing from current depictions of life in the city, while van Ingen (2003) also draws attention to the need to better ‘narrate’ notions of identity and the practices that normalize particular health discourses in the physical activity context.

In this chapter we attempt to present such narrations using interviews with young people across three Australian cities. These interviews were collected for the Life Activity Project and as part of a small, related study (Lavery 2008) to explore the intersections between young people’s negotiation of local geographies and other aspects

of their biographies in shaping notions of ‘possibility’. In particular, we focus on how young people from a range of backgrounds talked about physical recreation and the meanings they attributed to this as part of their daily lives. Some of the young people in the studies lived in the inner city, while others lived on the urban fringes. Some came from privileged backgrounds and others from families that struggled economically.

Our attention in this chapter is particularly focused on the role played by the commercial gym to understand how young people, in city contexts, organize their lives and manage their identities around health and their bodies. We chose to focus on the ‘gym’ because it began to feature as the main space for talk about purposive physical activity for most of the young urban dwellers in the Life Activity Project. For some it became a space where they could continue to be involved in physical activity when they could no longer make the commitment to organized sport. For others, it was a new venture into physical activity, made possible by changing relationships and life circumstances; and for still others, it was present in their talk as a potential but not yet realized mechanism for taking more control of their health and their bodies. In contrast, for the young mothers in the Lavery (2008) study, managing daily life with children, mostly without family support was challenging enough and the gym was not even on their ‘radar’. Data from the Life Activity Project demonstrate that while the gym was construed as a convenient solution to busy lives and a flexible space for physical activity and self-improvement, the commercial gym also represented a mechanism for regulation, through the modelling of self-modification practices linked to neo-liberal notions of the young self (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). We also argue it is a mechanism for both inclusion and exclusion as young people with the capacity to pay

accessed the gym and had a chance to realize the preferred, neo-liberal 'gym' body and the 'goods' that are assumed to follow. Others without this economic capacity are excluded from accessing these goods and the physical activity pleasures and sociality that going to the gym can afford.

In this chapter we use of notions of 'space' to reflect this interplay between physical activity, the body and notions of self. We draw on van Ingen's (2003) and Fusco's (2007) analyses to discuss space as relational, symbolic and material, and constructed as both the 'medium and outcome of social relations' (van Ingen 2003: 204). As pointed out by Fusco, notions of space are closely aligned to the current discussions of 'place', where power relations play out over spatial dimensions. In using such notions it is possible to understand how the gym has become a space where health discourses are concurrently represented, imagined, resisted and/or taken up by young people as they construct multiple and fluid identities.

Theorizing physical activity and the role of the gym

Health maintenance, and by association physical activity, is constructed in current policy contexts as a risk management strategy. Lupton (1997) suggests health is being 'repackaged' as a personal responsibility and individual obligation, which includes the management and minimization of risk through self-monitoring, self-regulation and increasingly self-insurance. In a similar way, Fusco's (2007: 44) exploration of Canadian health policy demonstrates how 'individuals in neoliberal societies are increasingly asked to be concerned with their health and wellbeing', and how physical activity and sports landscapes act as sites for regulation and discipline. Fusco's (2007)

analysis in particular illustrates how sports spaces and involvements operate to normalize certain behaviours and engender particular ways of being. At the same time within health/sports policy young people or 'youth' are often represented in contradictory ways. For example, in Australian policy, young people are often positioned as healthy, productive [future] economic citizens involved in the practicing of self-regulating health related practice. Alternatively, they are depicted as disordered, problem children, no longer cute and cuddly and in need of significant intervention and modification.

This contrast in how the young neo-liberal self is described and interpreted has a spatial dimension. For example, Fusco (2007: 55) argues young people's use and access to space, is framed in current 'discursive imaginations of youth, health and the city' as being about the dangers of uncontrolled youth deviance and the urgent need to save youth from themselves. She points out that such discourses have the potential to not only inscribe and prescribe 'space' in such a way to engage youth as civic participants, but also to construct 'youth as problem'. In this way discussions of youth, health and the city not only articulate how to be a young citizen in the new public health of the city (Fusco 2007), but also who and what constitutes the undesirable, young urban citizen.

The space of the gym

Much has been written in feminist literature of the place of the commercial gym in contributing to stereotypical notions of the female body as slim, toned and youthful (Featherstone 1991). Since that time the gym has become a diversified space; there are now public and private gyms and commercial gyms, women only gyms, gyms in

aquatic centres, hotels and shopping centres; gyms which offer a wide range of activities from yoga, to pump, to weights and aerobics. Gyms have become almost synonymous with machines, so you can now have your own 'gym experience' at home, including a tailored mix of machines and programs. While gyms are still sites for the kind of extreme bodywork described in studies by Monaghan (2001) and others (Klein 1993; Lowe 1998), the responses of the young people in the Life Activity Project demonstrate how the meanings of the gym, and the kind of work that happens in gyms is now much more varied, inclusive and linked to healthism discourses. At the same time gyms have become part of the repertoire of possibilities that people are expected to take up in 'becoming healthy'. As the discourses around weight have come to include 'everyone everywhere' (Burrows and Wright 2007), so too the gym (home or otherwise) has become part of the weekly repertoire for those who want to be active, particularly to maintain or gain fitness and 'keep in shape' (which for many is synonymous). What gyms have to offer now exceeds the simple idea of body shaping. 'Going to the gym' is therefore no longer able to be understood as the practice of someone obsessed with their body. It has become more acceptable for all ages, and if you choose your gym or activity, for all body shapes.

Despite the normalizing of the gym as a more everyday, mainstream experience and space, it could be argued that the gym or fitness centre is still about surveillance, measurement and the disciplining of bodies. Markula and Pringle (2006: 83) demonstrate how through 'their space and exercise practices gyms are designed to discipline ... bodies towards normalcy', towards the ideal male (increased muscularity) or female (thin and toned) body. At the same time, we would argue that fitness is

increasingly being constructed as a mainstream moral responsibility, where going to the gym is in itself a demonstration of desire to be a good citizen, to achieve and practice individual health responsibilities. For example, in relation to the female body Markula and Pringle (2006: 83) argue that it ‘has come to signify a controlled mind and healthy self-confidence’. The opposite then also holds; the body that is not fit, does not demonstrate its health, and is not a normal body. The imperative to work on the body, and in the case of the young people mentioned in this chapter, to work out at the gym, is one that is either taken up or confessed as an absence – as a practice that should be part of a normal life.

Participants profiled in this chapter

Young participants from the Life Activity Project who are featured in this analysis came from five different schools in three different parts of Australia. These schools were: Bloomsbury, an elite independent girls school in a major city (see Melinda, Natalie, Faye and Tomiko’s interview texts); Sunnydale, a government school on the urban fringes of a large city (see the texts of Chrissie, Angela, Felicia, Felipe and Steve); the Malcos, an elite independent school for boys located in a large Australian city (see Aaron’s texts); Seachrist College, a non-elite catholic high school situated in a regional coastal city (see Rachel’s texts) and Mondo High, an inner city coeducational high school (see Maria and Helena’s texts). As indicated in a number of other chapters in this book, we use the elite independent schools as markers of social class, while recognising some of the young people attending these schools and their families were far from affluent (for example, Tomiko and Melinda). Six young people from the schools in the project (Angela, Felipe, Felicia, Melinda, Faye and Tomiko) were from culturally and

linguistically diverse communities. Like many other young people, each one was involved in managing close, but sometimes conflictual, family ties at different stages in the interview process.

Two of the three participants in the Lavery (2008) study (Jane and Alison) also featured in this chapter; these were young women with children living on the urban fringes of a major city. The third participant (Arlie) lived in an inner urban area in semi-supported accommodation for people leaving drug rehabilitation. All three of these young people had been homeless in the 18 months prior to the project interviews.

‘In your own time’ - the gym as flexible space and mechanism for physical activity

As described in Chapter 10, the juggling of work/study commitments with other social activities and family was a theme that continued for all participants during their last years of school and further intensified in the four to five years immediately after school. What was new about this latter time was the lack of the school structure to define and order young people’s daily life. Within the less certain post school context, ‘going to the gym’ emerged from the Life Activity Project interviews as a relevant activity and destination for young people across socio-economic groups (as defined by school type). However, the meanings assigned to going to the gym varied. For example, the young women from Bloomsbury High had access to more extensive physical activity programs and resources while at school including a school gym, compared to Sunnyside High. Most of these young women positioned the gym as part of a broader continuum of ongoing physical activity that would be part of their life and available to them over time. Some other young people had already started going to the gym when at school,

while others such as Angela (Sunnydale High), talked about the gym as providing a more enabling, less marginalizing physical activity experience, *compared* to school. For example, she describes below the difference for her between team sports participation at school and the new found freedoms associated with ‘going to the gym’:

I think the difference is with the past [at school] there were instructions to follow, rules to follow and you had to keep up with other people’s pace as a team. So basically I was a bad member of the team because I was letting everyone slow down. With the gym because I’m doing it individually and I’m doing it on my own and it’s easier and that’s probably why I enjoy it more, because I don’t have anyone yelling at me that I am slowing someone down or I’m not doing this right, I’m not doing that right. So I think that’s part of the reason I like it more.

(Angela, interview 2005)

In the following quote, Chrissie (Sunnydale) also reflects on the gym as more self-directed and ‘fun’ compared to school sports:

There’s nothing I don’t like about it [the gym], it’s heaps of fun and you can do whatever you want and you go at your own pace and you don’t have someone leaning over your shoulder asking you how you are or anything and that’s good.

(Chrissie, interview 2001)

Like Angela and Chrissie, others in the study talked about the gym as a convenient and flexible form of physical activity, where you could go when you wanted and as often as you wanted. A workout or class at the gym was seen as easier to fit around work/study schedules than organized team sports. In the following texts Steve, a young man who previously attended Sunnydale High, reflects this view:

I start work at eight o'clock and I finish by four at the latest. I come home get changed, go to the gym, something that I've just picked up. So yeah I've started going to the gym every single day of the week.

So I can go to the gym, jump on the treadmill for a couple of minutes and then go home.

(Steve, interview 2005)

Like almost all the young women interviewed from Bloomsbury, Natalie had a very planned approach to most aspects of her life particularly career and future. She talked about physical activity as critical to her daily life and her notions of self. In the post school years she had integrated physical activity into her schedule, going to the university gym when studying and mixing this with jogging and playing soccer with a local team. Over the period of interviews her career had progressed and by the last interview (aged 23) she had bought a unit on the southern outskirts of the city with her long-term boyfriend. While Natalie experienced a knee injury and struggled with the realities of her new outer suburban life (commuting, lack of local facilities and absence of street activity at night) she valued her gym membership. This enabled her to go to

gyms in different locations, either close to work or her new home. The gym was a constant in her changed life:

Natalie: I'm going to the gym usually Monday. I do pretty well; I usually go four days a week so I usually go Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday after work. So I start work at eight, have a half hour break and finish at four-thirty and then go to the gym for an hour and a half.

Int: Is that here?

Natalie: Yes here. But it is actually really good because it is the same one as in [her new suburb]. So if I don't go after work and I want to go later I can go at [unclear] or if I want to go on Sunday mornings or something, which is good. So start at eight, finish at four-thirty, go to the gym and then go home. I haven't really been doing anything when I get home, you know, just cook dinner, watch TV, that sort of stuff.

(Natalie, interview 2007)

For Melinda, another young woman from Bloomsbury High, the gym provided a more intense physical activity challenge, compared to other options:

I also like the gym because it works more muscles than running does. You know how in running you only work the same muscles all the time or bike riding you the same muscles. If you go to the gym you can work different muscles and

concentrate more on it... You have weights and I was trying to work my triceps and I was doing this thing and I wasn't doing it correctly and I had the gym guy fix it up and it hurt like crazy. But at least I'm doing it right, like they've got that method and they've got variety there... It's just more of a challenge to me than just running the same path.

(Melinda, interview 2002)

Going to the gym – a normalized site for socializing

While the commercial gym provided convenient, flexible forms of physical activity, some young people in the Life Activity Project identified the gym as an important urban space for socializing. 'Gym as social space' was a multiple construction, with young people talking about going to the gym with their friends, current partners or to meet people.

Steve, for example, talked about how the gym had become a central part of his social life:

It [going to the gym] has become a social event as well. You meet lots of people at the gym...

... physical activity is actually taking a big part of my life now. The gym has become a very social event and I guess that is what keeps me going there as well. We all sit there and while were working out we have this big chat.

(Steve, interview 2005)

And for Aaron, a young man from Queensland (Malcos), going to the gym was synonymous with 'hanging out':

I like to have a couple of mates over or I go to their place or we head to the Gym pretty much. Those are the main places we'll hang out.

(Aaron, interview 2006)

For some young people who had been reluctant participants in physical activity at school, the role of friends and particularly the encouragement of partners were important influences. For example, in the following quote, Angela describes how her partner Ahmed was a big influence in her joining the gym:

Before he [Ahmed] got married he used to go to the gym every second day with his friends. So he just wanted to go back to gym so he was happy to do that. I joined [gym name] and then because Ahmed was doing it so it was good company and so I did it with him...

I used to love going to that gym. I mean even if I just spend one and a half hours on it, just going there and coming out I feel really, really good. It's like you feel refreshed, new or something like that, you know what I mean? So yeah I loved going there... I think as long as I've got someone there supporting me or pushing me [husband] I am more motivated to do something and I care more ... So I think other people or friends influence me more.

(Angela, interview 2005)

Unlike most of the other young women interviewed from Bloomsbury, Tomiko had not enjoyed physical activity at school and had spent much more time on her music.

However, in 2007 after meeting and moving in with her boyfriend (Josh) she found a new confidence, interest and means of accessing physical activity that she enjoyed. In her last interview when asked about her priorities, she responded:

Health, physical activity really, yeah those two are at the top of my agenda, which has really changed. Then finances are a bit of a concern because at the moment I just need to get some saving going which I have slacked off a bit and I've kind of decreased my workload to start teaching. So I think I need to build on, preferably teaching but I need to get a bit more money. And yeah, those two. When I say physical activity then it comes hand in hand with Josh so I don't need to put Josh in there I don't think because preferably I would do that with him. So we have a good time when we do something together and it will be that.

(Tomiko, interview 2007)

Family members also played a role in supporting some young people's participation. This included practical support, such as travelling together to the gym, or in terms of exemplifying 'gym going' behaviours. For example, for both Maria (Mondo) and Rachel (Bloomsbury), going to the gym was something they did with their mothers. For Rachel going to the gym was also explicitly explained (with an apologetic laugh) in terms of managing her weight:

Rachel: And some of my friends go.

Int: And that adds more incentive for you.

Rachel: Yeah and my mum goes as well.

Int: Same class or?

Rachel: Yeah, mum does some of the same but she just changed gyms recently.

Int: So is it just to feel better or?

Rachel: Um, I'm very self-conscious about my weight [laughs].

(Rachel, interview 2003)

Constructing notions of self and self-management

Threaded through much of the young people's discussions about going to the gym was the link between their desire to 'feel good about themselves' through managing their weight, building muscle, being fit and capable and the performance of physical activity. The majority of young women from Bloomsbury, in particular, described how physical activity was an inherent part of their identity, with the gym providing an easily accessible mechanism for practicing self-development and body management.

Faye, a young women from Bloomsbury, had described consistently throughout her interviews how important it was to her to do well – academically and in managing her body (see Chapter 9, 10). The following excerpt, illustrates how, for Faye, her strong work ethic translated into how she felt about her body. The gym provided an individualized mechanism for self-achievement:

...when you usually go and do more physical fitness it's more aimed at a self goal so in the end what you feel is more self-achievement, in terms of like you've gained more physically, you've actually dragged yourself out to go to the gym to do something by yourself.

It makes you feel better about yourself, and it makes you feel stronger...

... for example at one point I told you I went to the gym a lot because I think I was feeling a bit restless and I was starting to feel I was getting a bit lazy because I wasn't really doing much like I was sitting around. I think that's when I usually end up not being happy with how I look and I end up thinking that I'm lazy, so that's when I'll go and do something.

(Faye, interview 2002)

Like Faye, Helena, a young women living in Melbourne also talked about the gym as a mechanism for feeling purposeful, productive and looking good:

Int: So what prompted the decision to go to the gym?

Helena: Basically getting in shape for summer and yes just sometimes I have nothing to do after school. I just feel useless so I have to find something to do.

(Helena, interview 2002)

Faye and Helena's descriptions help us to understand how the socially constructed pressure to 'do looks' is internalized and the 'hierarchical valuing of some bodies' (lean, toned, gym styled) over others (larger, less toned and not gym styled) is practiced (Frost 2003: 54).

Staying with Faye's account, it is possible to see how over time her notion of self, closely tied to achievement, was strengthened as her career plans firmed up. Faye continued to use physical activity as a way of balancing multiple demands and defining a sense of self-control in her life:

I think that [physical activity] has always been really important actually, to me sort of, whatever I do. For example with my last job I was working in the city so I joined the gym next door to keep myself busy because I feel that I need to do that every time. I sort of need that balance, otherwise I'm not as happy... it just makes me feel better [laughs].

(Faye, interview 2005)

Like Faye, Steve and Melinda talked about physical activity, and in particular the gym, as an 'enabling' mechanism and space, that helped them get 'balance' in their lives.

My last interview I was managing two of our practices at [city locations] so I was working 140 hour fortnights ... I was very stressed but it's very much more relaxed now so it's really good and I feel better now by going to the gym and felt that burst of energy...

I am really happy that I have made a lot of changes. I would never have gone to the gym or ventured out to find another job but I am really happy that I have.

(Steve, interview 2005)

In five years time I'll be 23. I'll be finished my degree ... I'll still be single, not married or anything, because it's too early, work would be very high on my list; very high, because it is sort of like the goal that you've always worked towards... Heath and stuff I think it's gonna be behind my job, so the job will come first and then maybe going to the gym.

(Melinda, interview 2002)

Faye and to some extent Steve and Melinda's accounts describe the multiple ways that young people integrate and use healthism discourses in their daily lives. Their texts reflect the interaction of neo-liberal notions of individual responsibility, self-management with the enjoyment of physical activity. Their descriptions link body, self and citizenship and situate and normalize gym life as a core space and activity in their urban lives. The intricacy of these linkages is demonstrated through some young people's descriptions of *not getting to* the gym. Here Melinda and Chrissie describe their sense of disappointment and guilt when not doing (enough) physical activity, emphasizing the strength of 'healthism' as a normalizing discourse:

You can feel it, like you get really flabby after a while ... you can't do things as quickly and stuff. You feel more tired ... like I can tell at the moment I'm not

doing as much exercise as I should and that's why I feel really mad about it and that's why I want to try going to the gym.

(Melinda, interview 2002)

... we used to go to the gym and we used to do the swimming thing but it has completely fallen by the wayside now and I feel so guilty. I think "ooh I should be doing something".

(Chrissie, when at university 2005)

The gym as an exclusionary mechanism

Within the participant group, access to the gym (that is who could/couldn't go) was in part explained along class lines, with people's participation in the workforce and their capacity to pay being critical influences. While at university and/or in low paid or uncertain employment some young people faced financial pressures. Gym memberships meant the young people often had to make a long-term commitment (e.g. six or twelve months) that was costly. For some getting to the gym was a stop-start activity linked to their changing economic circumstances and work shifts. Here Angela talks about how access to the gym was closely linked to her job and financial considerations:

Angela: Well before we were members of the gym and then we had to quit because I was [unclear] I quit that job and so there was a financial problem. Then finally now that we have the chance to join in again because we don't have the financial problem, we only have one car between us and I do day shift and he does night shift.

Int: So that is hard to manage that.

Angela: Yes, that's right because he definitely needs the car and the one that I really liked is the one where I started which is in Aqua fitness in Campbelltown and that would be a drive from here.

... I know if I join the gym now I would probably just go on Saturdays. So it wouldn't be much point in spending so much money for just that.

(Angela, interview 2005)

The recent trend for local councils to locate gym facilities within multi-purpose aquatic facilities was also highlighted by some young people. For example, the following quote is typical of comments from Faye, Melinda and Natalie, who found these facilities to be expensive and less accessible:

I'm in the Sutherland Shire now, I was thinking about joining the Sutherland Aquatic Centre instead of the gym here because you can use the pool as well. But it was about three times as expensive and there [are] not really any other pools. There is one at Caringbah but that is a lot further to go and yeah, there is nothing around near me, there [are] no swimming pools. They do have a fairly new basketball stadium across the road from me but it is mostly kid's sports. ... I don't know, sometimes it just gets too expensive.

(Natalie, interview 2007)

For some young people living in urban areas 'going to the gym' was talked about as something they would like to do, and which would be a 'good thing' to be able to do, but which they presently could not include in their lives. Here Felipe (Sunnydale), a young man from the outer suburbs of Sydney describes how he wanted to go the gym and had a possible pathway for doing this, but not the commitment at the time:

Probably like a two out of ten; it is not where I want to be like that is another thing I feel like Uni is tying me down because I want to go to the gym or something to do some sort of fitness because one of my workmates before he goes to work he goes to the gym and then he can have a shower at the office and I was thinking that it's a really good idea just to keep healthy. And I could probably go with him because he just goes to the gym in the city and then he goes to work.

(Felipe, interview 2005)

In later interviews Felipe had more time for physical activity after leaving university. He talked about working out, at home, with his older brother, to increase his weight and build muscle.

Felicia however, a young woman also from Sunnydale who by the end of the interview period was a young mother with four children, described going to the gym as something she wanted and planned to do in the future. Arguably this was for all kinds of reasons including (but not only) to get back into shape:

Oh yes I plan to do a lot of exercise after the baby is born ... and book myself in the gym, monthly or three monthly and I can go any day, any time as many times as I want during the day. And right across from the gym is the local swimming pool.

(Felicia, interview 2003)

Later interviews indicate that Felicia never made it to the gym; looking after a home, a baby/children and a partner who worked very long hours were higher priorities.

While Felipe, Felicia and indeed most of the young people in the cities in the Life Activity Project could imagine going to the gym and talked about it as either a part or a missing part of their life, mentions of purposive physical activity and specifically 'going to the gym' were absent from the descriptions of young people in the Lavery (2008) study. All 13 participants in the study had experienced homelessness in the two years prior to the interviews and their descriptions of an average week reflected lives on low incomes with few economic, material and familial resources.

For example, Jane and Alison, young women with young children dependent on government welfare payments, did not mention 'going to the gym' at all in their interviews, despite being asked similar questions about health as the young people in the Life Activity Project. Both young women were able to recite healthism discourses about getting fit, but neither linked their very regular and extensive walking in an average week to health or fitness outcomes. Instead they talked about walking to the shops or pre-school/child care as something they had to do due to limited transport and

a lack of access to a car/driving lessons. Walking was constructed as a constraint rather than a purposive physical activity:

I get up in the morning, go get his bottle, get his food, get a coffee, go to the toilet, change his nappy, feed him, play, watch TV, have breakfast, get dressed... This is who I am and I am always here. I spend most of my time with [her partner's] family. I don't drive, I don't go anywhere, I don't see my friends.

(Jane, interview 2005)

I was actually walking my boy to school this morning, walking up the hill through the baseball park and I thought I'm not as fit as I used to be.

(Jane, interview 2006)

I go out a lot, usually I look after Kelly, take her out, take her [walk] to the park, go and have lunch, just have some fun; on pay day I go out shopping, get Kelly some new clothes and stuff.

(Alison, interview 2005)

The only young person in the Lavery (2008) study who mentioned going to the gym was Arlie, who used the gym as a site and mechanism for staying off drugs. Arlie had recently exited a rehabilitation program after years of substance abuse and was very driven to construct a new drug free life. He talked about using inner city spaces, including the gym, as a tool for self-improvement and as a structure to perform a 'clean' life with others like him:

A typical week – gee... get up spend time on the computer/writing lyrics, the guys are around, ...usually it is just go to the gym in the afternoon; wake up at nine o'clock. Usually my mates come around and wake me up at nine o'clock and we just dig around until about ten-thirty, go up and eat heaps.

(Arlie, interview 2006)

Conclusions

Jane, Alison and to a certain extent Felicia's accounts raise important issues about the type of physical activity that is available or missing for young people experiencing economic disadvantage and with family commitments in the post school years. If anything the commercial gym appeared to reinforce absences and inequalities in physical activity experiences. The commercial gym was structured around the needs of time poor young people with a capacity to pay, rather than those with the least economic resources and physical activity supports within society.

Similarly, the Life Activity Project data indicated the gym has taken on new meaning as a mainstream space for self-making, although still recognizing that spatial and social orderings around access and participation continue to occur in sports settings. Through this interplay of space, self and processes of differentiation young people are participating in or are excluded from constructing related desires around self/body within a neo-liberal context. Such notions support Frost's (2003: 54) suggestions that the market offers not just goods, but 'goods attached to versions of selfhood'. In this way, the gym offers unified notions of 'selves' and participation built around individual

improvement, entrepreneurship and a particular type of body that is privileged and promoted in a neo-liberal context. The gym therefore can be defined as the perfect neo-liberal urban space, operating to intensively speed up the self/body modification process, complete with tools and machines for self-intervention, self-surveillance and regulation. Such interventions have a cross-generational dimension (as reflected in Rachel and Maria's accounts), where mothers going to the gym normalized gym behaviours in family life and created a different place from the 'body building gyms' that were written about ten years ago by feminists and that still feature in current literature. Such changes demonstrate van Ingen's (2003: 210) understanding of 'space, the body and the re/production of power'.

While young people's engagement with the gym was relatively fluid, the narratives of young people within the Life Activity Project (covering a range of school contexts) indicate that young people's school experiences - both positive and negative - had ongoing relevance for how these young people enacted notions of physical activity over time. This included Angela's resistance to past school discourses of a unified version of experiencing physical activity, her new found engagement with the gym as a source of autonomy through her partner and her constrained, ad-hoc access resulting from financial pressures and changing employment. Uncertain work arrangements and changing or limited capacity to pay created variance in some young people's access to the gym. At the same time hanging out at the gym was an important development in young people's use of sport and recreation spaces for broader socializing purposes.

If continuing physical activity throughout the lifecycle is a government policy goal and part of the current health agenda, more needs to be developed around how young people structure everyday routines, demands, influences and drivers for physical activity as part their post school lives. At the same time more diverse flexible options (commercial and less expensive non-commercial) are also required to expand the range of 'self models' available to individual young people in urban contexts.

References

- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization*, London: Sage.
- Burrows, L. and Wright, J. (2007) 'Prescribing practices: shaping healthy children in schools', *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15:1-16.
- Featherstone, M. (1991) 'The body in consumer culture', in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (eds) *The Body: social process and cultural theory*, London: Sage.
- Frost, L. (2003) 'Doing bodies differently? Gender, youth, appearance and damage', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 6(1): 53-70.
- Fusco, C. (2007) "'Healthification" and the promises of urban space: a textual analysis of place, activity, youth (PLAY-ing) in the city', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 42(1): 43-63.
- Klein, A. (1993) *Little Big Men: bodybuilding subculture and gender construction*, Albany, New York: University of New York Press.
- Laverty, J. (2008) *Finding Social Relevance: young people, wellbeing and regulated support*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Wollongong (Unpublished).

- Lowe, M. (1998) *Women of Steel: female bodybuilders and the struggle for self definition*, New York: New York University Press.
- Lupton, D. (1997) 'Foucault and the medicalisation critique', in A. Petersen and R. Bunton (eds) *Foucault, Health and Medicine*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Markula, P. and Pringle, R. (2006) *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: power, knowledge and transforming the self*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Monaghan, L.F. (2001) 'Looking good, feeling good: the embodied pleasures of vibrant physicality', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 23(3): 330-56.
- van Ingen, C. (2003) 'Geographies of gender, sexuality and race: reframing the focus on space in sport sociology', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38(2): 201-16.