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# Young people, physical activity and the everyday: the Life Activity Project

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## Chapter 1

### Young people, physical activity and the everyday: the *Life Activity Project*

Jan Wright

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I want to achieve a lot with my career and work wise so I know I have to put in the hours but then I feel like I'm missing out on the rest; like the social life, you know, just going for a bike ride, taking the kayak out, motorbike. And when you do think, alright, I've got the time to do it you are just so worn out that you just don't want to do it. It's too much effort. So you just feel tired all the time.

(Karin, Interview *Life Activity Project*, 2006)

At first glance, the title of the book is explicit; it looks at young people and the, possibly ordinary, place that physical activity has in their daily lives. However, as this book reveals, for some young people physical activity can bring them regular joy, freedom and sense of accomplishment, while for others, physical activity takes the form of paid work or transport that must be undertaken everyday. For yet others, physical activity represents the constant work that must be done on their bodies, in ways that are obligatory and not always pleasurable, to maintain the 'balance' – energy in, energy out – that promises a healthy, slim body. Further, as there are changes in young people's everyday circumstances – a change of school, shifting house, new friends, a part-time job, an injured limb, homework pressures – so too does young people's physical activity

participation shift. Curiously, we titled the book before seeing Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody's (2006: 170) use of the words 'everyday knowledges' which underpin boys' 'reflective self-construction' that is 'situational, temporal and spatial'. We too are interested in young people's reflective self-construction as they take up and resist physical activity each day.

This anthology comprises a set of papers from the researchers involved in the Life Activity Project and other projects in New Zealand, Hong Kong, Canada and the United States reflecting its purpose and design. The Life Activity Project was motivated in part by the 'moral panic' around young people and the persistent construction of young people, and particularly certain groups of young people, as recalcitrant in their choices around physical activity by dropping out, not being able to 'handle' competition, and becoming sedentary. As researchers working from what might be broadly called a critical socio-cultural perspective, we argue that most of the literature on young people and physical activity ignores the complexity and diversity of young people's lives – that is, it fails to take into account how their choices are made in the context of their personal biographies and the political, economic, cultural and geographical contexts of their everyday lives. The purpose of the Life Activity Project has been to address this gap by documenting the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people, over time, and across a wide range of cultural, social and geographical locations.

This chapter will introduce the focus of the book and more specifically outline the purposes and methodology of the Life Activity Project. It also provides an overview of

literature on young people and physical activity from a range of perspectives and, in particular, it will point to the importance of taking account of the diverse contexts of young people's lives and how their engagement with physical activity changes over time as their circumstances change. This chapter will conclude the books subsequent sections and chapters to enable the reader to navigate the book.

### **The Life Activity Project: Purpose and Methodology**

The Life Activity Project was originally conceived as a four year project to investigate the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people from a range of cultural, social and geographical locations. Further funding from the Australian Research Council allowed us to extend the project for another three years and to include groups of young people that we had, in the first four years, been unable to reach. As a longitudinal study, the Life Activity Project makes a third in a group of Australian studies that have followed cohorts of young people as they moved through school and beyond. Each of these studies in their different ways provides insights into the choices, self-perceptions, values and experiences of young people, as these are influenced by a range of social, cultural and geographic factors and, as they move through key transitional periods in the lives. Yates and McLeod's research (*The 12 to 18 Project* and the *Transition from School Project*) has been concerned with how the self-perceptions and social values young people developed in the contexts of schooling have shaped their aspirations, choices and experiences in their post school lives (McLeod and Yates 2006; Yates 1999). In particular, their work has demonstrated how social class and school contexts, both within and between schools, are implicated in shaping young people's social values and expectations in relation to their future career pathways. Coming from

a different perspective, Dwyer and Wyn have focused on the fundamental aspects of change in the relationship between education and employment by following a cohort of young people through from 1991 to 2004. Through a series of studies, (*Vocational integration and tertiary education participants of the 1990s* and *Flexible career patterns: graduate redefinitions of outcomes in the new labour market*) using surveys and interviews, they investigated the relationship between young people's expectations and aspirations concerning careers and their actual career outcomes as they move through school, tertiary study and beyond (Dwyer and Wyn 2001).

The Life Activity Project complements these studies by focusing specifically on the role of physical activity and related values associated with health as these contribute to the choices, the self-perceptions and embodiments of young people. Like the abovementioned studies, it followed cohorts of young people as they moved beyond school. The Life Activity Project is based on the assumption that longitudinal studies provide essential information about the lives and experiences of a population unavailable from cross sectional research. It is also based on an assumption that identities and the social and economic circumstances of people's lives are not fixed but neither are lives unaffected by what has come before. It assumes biographies to be produced in relation to changing material and discursive circumstances and that attention to the complex and dynamic nature of lives is necessary to more fully understand how identities are constituted. The chapters in this anthology thus map out young people's changing meanings of health, bodies and physical activity produced in contexts such as schools, families, media, government policy and their changing

material circumstances and priorities, such as those associated with geographical location, income, work and relationships.

The research began with a survey of all consenting students (in Australia this meant obtaining parent/guardian consent) in targeted years in eight schools across the three Eastern states of Australia. The schools included: four state funded high schools, an elite privately funded boys' school and an elite girls' school, a non-elite catholic high school, and students identified through Queensland's School of Distance Education for remote and isolated children. The survey was adapted from the NSW Physical Activity Survey (Booth et al. 1997) and was designed to provide a demographic snapshot of the schools, the students and their physical activity patterns.

Via the responses to the survey we were able to identify young people from a range of social, cultural and geographical locations for what we called a 'biographical' interview – that is, an interview that took the student through their experiences and engagement with physical activity and physical culture from childhood to the present. The biographical interviews followed a life history approach and asked the young people about their early experiences of physical activity in relation to family, community and school and the influences on their participation and interest in activity. We also asked about their engagement with physical culture more broadly by asking about choices of brand clothing, interest in spectating (live and electronically), in following particular teams and in 2000, their interest and expectations of the Sydney Olympics. On the basis of this interview, we then selected a smaller group of young people who were invited to

become participants in a more intensive interview process over the next two years and then with further funding, an extra three years.

The extension of the project in 2004 allowed us to explore young people's meanings of health and physical activity and the shifts in their engagement with physical activity beyond school and in relation to changes in location, income, friendships, family structures and relationships, demands (study, work, church etc), and health status. We were able to follow participants through key transitional periods in their schooling, and for some beyond, as these influenced the ways they organized their lives, their relationships, responsibilities and identities around physical activity and leisure. During this period three doctoral students took up specific foci on the intersections of gender and social class (O'Flynn, Chapter 5), gender and geographical location (Lee, Chapter 2) and gender and ethnicity with young Muslim women (Knez, Chapter 8). These students contributed to the data collection across the project but raised specific questions and interviewed and analysed the data of those young people most relevant to their own research. In the second period of the project by involving doctoral students, we were also able to include groups of young people missing from the original research: a cohort of young Indigenous people (Nelson, Chapter 6) and young people who had been homeless (Lavery, Chapter 4).

### ***Data collection***

Fifty-four young people (18 primary students, 18 Year 7/8 students and 18 Year 10 students) were chosen across all of the sites to constitute the major cohort group for the Life Activity Project. The principal form of data collection was a series of themed

interviews with each participant over two-year period and then follow up interviews in the ensuing year, with the analysis of initial interviews informing subsequent ones. The first interview revisited the participants' past and present experiences of participation, perceived influences on participation; the second, explored their meanings of health and fitness; and the third, their perceptions of their bodies. For the young women, this usually involved their talking about magazines that they had brought to the interview; for the young men, we developed a series of media photographs of individual and team athletes in various posed and action shots and invited them to talk about these, in relation to their evaluations of the ideal male body. A fourth interview invited participants to use street maps or draw maps to prompt discussions about how they used their local community for leisure and physical activity. These drawings provided rich sets of meanings about important spaces and places in these young people's lives (see Atencio, Chapter 3; Lee and Abbott 2009). Participants were also provided with cameras and asked to take photographs of people and places important to them. This provided a way to explore the place and meaning of physical activity in relation to other aspects of the participants' everyday lives.

In addition to the interviews, the participants we asked to keep 10-day journals, documenting all activities on a daily basis with room for comments (these have provided very interesting insights into the place of school, work, physical activity and other leisure pursuits in the young people's lives). Where possible, the participants were observed engaging in physical activity (within and beyond school) and their feelings about this were discussed in a later interview. The students' physical education and/or class teachers at the project schools were also interviewed about the schools' health and



physical education and sport programs, and related information concerning the practices and values associated with these programs was gathered.

By the third year of the project (2003) the cohort participants moved into the 'longitudinal' stage of the project; that is, into semi-structured interviews, conducted around the beginning and towards the end of each year. These interviews captured changes in participation patterns, priorities and meanings around physical activity and health and the participants' reflections on what factors relating to schools, communities and families had shaped current behaviours and values. To meet the challenge of following young people beyond school and therefore in many cases out of the family home, the project also explored a range of qualitative methodologies beyond face-to-face interviews such as the use of email, photography, telephone interviews, and self-recording on tape in response to a set of questions (already used successfully with students in Jessica Lee's research with rural and isolated young people).

Several other studies drew on the methodology used for the Life Activity Project. These included: a study by Lisette Burrows of the meanings of physical activity and health for children in New Zealand (Chapter 12); the meanings of health and fitness for adolescents in a number of Canadian sites conducted by Genevieve Rail, Margaret MacNeil and Natalie Beausoleil (Chapter 13); and, the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people in Hong Kong, conducted by Amy Ha and Bonnie Pang (Chapter 7). Matt Atencio completed his doctoral research by investigating the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of young people in an inner city neighbourhood in the United States (Chapters 3 and 11). As is evident from the each of

their chapters, these researchers have theorized their data in ways suitable to their context and the questions that motivated their studies.

The analysis of the qualitative data upon which this book draws has taken two main forms: the development of rich contextualized 'stories' for each of the young people in the study; and, a thematic analysis across the data sets using QSR Nvivo. The various researchers have drawn on different social theories depending on their cohort groups, the particular focus of their analysis and their particular chapters. Common across the chapters, and explored in the final chapter of this book, are the researchers' concerns with critical reflection in relation to power and representation in the researcher/researched relationship.

### **Young People and Physical Activity: The dominant paradigms**

Any database search of young people (or adolescence) and physical activity will produce a flood of articles and reports on young people's physical activity participation: levels of physical activity, motivation to participate, gender and cultural differences in participation and so on (for example, Allen et al. 2007; Pate et al. 2002). The recent proliferation of these has been largely driven by epidemiological studies of young people's body weight (National Health System 2009; National Preventative Health Taskforce 2009). This research tends to take an instrumental view of 'physical activity', defined as 'any bodily movements performed by skeletal muscles that result in an increase in energy expenditure' (Pink 2008: 2). The range of subcategories falling under this broad definition is outlined below:

Exercise: Any structured and/or repetitive physical activity performed or practiced where the main intention is to achieve improved physical fitness.

(Pink 2008: 3)

Physical fitness: A set of health (i.e. cardiorespiratory endurance, muscle strength, flexibility) and performance related (i.e. skill, speed, dexterity, mental concentration) attributes that people have in relation to their ability to perform physical activity.

(Pink 2008: 5)

Sport: An activity involving physical exertion, skill and/or eye-hand coordination as the primary focus of the activity, with elements of competition where rules and patterns of behaviour governing the activity exist formally through organisations.

(Pink 2008: 8)

These categories are important because they inform how physical activity can be talked about in research reporting on physical activity, which then informs government policies and interventions. As we demonstrate through our research, it also becomes the way in which young people (and we would argue people more generally) talk about physical activity and attribute value to their own and others' participation. As will become apparent throughout this book, although there is a good deal of slippage in how the young people used these terms, they often narrow how young people talked about

physical activity, and contributed to their self-doubt around 'appropriate' physical activity.

### **Theorizing 'Young People'**

In the research reported in this collection, we are in part motivated by the need to challenge the deficit model of young people which underpins research on 'declining' rates of participation and consequent increases in the risk to young people's health. Our focus is rather on the young people themselves and how they make sense of physical activity, how it fits into their everyday lives and how and why this might differ for young people from different social, cultural and geographical locations. The Life Activity Project is, therefore, informed by an understanding of *youth* as a social process (Wyn and White 1997), that is, one that understands young people's experience to differ historically and for different social and cultural groups. Such a notion of youth also provides a means of conceptualizing transition periods in young people's lives in ways that assume young people's agency and avoid a linear and deterministic approach to development and change. Wyn and White (1997: 77-8) argue that one of the problems with generalizing and universalizing the characteristics of young people is that it serves to 'trivialise and make abstract the lived practices of different categories of youth in ways which distort the social differences and diversity of experience among young people'. They argue for research that will be 'sensitive to the actual lived reality of young people... if we are adequately to understand the cultural worlds of the young'. It is this challenge we take up in relation to contemporary young people's experiences of physical activity.

The main alternative thus far to large scale epidemiological and population studies has been those from sociology of sport and cultural studies, which have investigated young people's engagements with physical culture. These began with research in the 1970s and 1980s in cultural studies departments in the UK that addressed physical activity in the context of particular cultural and subcultural groups. For example, McRobbie's (1984) study of the relationship between dance and fantasy for young women, Brennan's (1993) study of dance and identity and Robbins' (1982) paper on sport and youth culture. More recently and within contemporary understandings of cultural studies, Giardina and Donnelly (2008) have collected a series of papers that critically examine the cultural meanings of sport for young people, in what Denzin's introduction to the book terms 'the historical present'. The 'present' is one characterized by violence, both symbolic and actual violence against children and young people by terrorists, multinationals and agents of the state (including schooling). In their interrogation of 'the articulation of youth sport to culture through a critical cultural studies lens', Denzin (2008: xii) characterizes the authors as engaging in a 'morally centred, politically interventionist project that argues for a politics of truth that answers to enduring issues concerning what is ethical and just'.

In contrast to this mission, our project in this book seems, on the surface, more mundane. Our focus is on individual young people's everyday lives and the place of physical activity in those lives. For some this means engaging in the kinds of youth movement cultures described in the Giardina and Donnelly (2008) collection of papers (for example, Matt Atencio's description of dance, basketball and skateboarding in Chapter 3). For most of the young people in our study, however, physical activity is

often an individualized activity and one they fit in around other aspects of their lives. This does not mean that it is not important to their social and cultural identities. It is less likely, however, to take forms that contest or challenge dominant values associated with sport and physical activity. Indeed one of our questions is to ask why might this be so and what are the implications of this for young people from different social and cultural backgrounds? In this our project is also political. We take as our context the prevailing discourses of health and individual responsibility, and the well funded campaigns and interventions that disseminate this perspective and act on specific groups of people. We are interested in the kind of citizen subject created by these discourses and how the young people in our study have responded to this (see Chapter 9). We are also interested in challenging a discourse which constantly recites a view of young people as being difficult, deficient and at risk by examining the material conditions of young people's lives and their explanations for the place physical activity has in those lives.

From a sociological perspective a discourse of 'youth at risk' sets up a relationship with young people, which, while it may be well-intentioned, is often adversarial – that is, young people as lacking the capacity to make those decisions that adults believe will make for a better life. At the most extreme, this deficiency is linked to young people's biology, their raging hormones, and most recently the way their brain is wired (Bessant 2008). What such approach ignores, we would argue, are the complex ways young people negotiate their identities in these particular times. It also ignores how the social and cultural context of the present times impact on young people's lives and their life chances. For this book, this includes the place and meaning of physical activity in their

lives, and the social and cultural contexts which both shape their interest in, but also their opportunities to engage in, physical activity. We argue with McLeod and Yates (2006) and Kenway and her colleagues (Kenway et al. 2006) that any investigation of young people's lives must take into account the diversity of their lives and experiences and that this diversity shapes the way they negotiate institutions, relationships and knowledge. We also argue that an analysis of social inequalities is fundamental to an understanding of the 'choices' young people are able to make in their lives. Like the young working class woman in Walkerdine's (2003) paper, so many of the young people (in the Life Activity Project) struggling with making their way, blamed themselves for the 'limited' amount of physical activity in their lives. In this sense they were good moral subjects of a healthism discourse, which lays responsibility with the individual for their health choices and, in the context of our book, their choices around physical activity.

As we demonstrate through our descriptions of young people's everyday lives over time, the choice to be involved in physical activity is rarely one free of constraints; constraints that often flowed from life circumstances that circumscribed their 'choices'. For most of the young people in our study their social, economic and cultural contexts often made it extremely difficult to do the activity they wanted, or believed they needed, to do. As a result they were left feeling guilty and anxious. It was rare for the young people to interpret their participation in more social terms, far less attribute their participation choices to structural inequalities.

In making their experiences and their reflections on the place of physical activity in their everyday lives visible through the following chapters we hope to counter simplistic and universalized deficit versions of young people as making poor choices on the basis of either insufficient knowledge or because they of their wanton disregard for they way they are putting themselves 'at risk' of poor future health. The irony is that, for many of the young people, they accept this version of their choices – we hope that by providing another interpretation we may also mitigate some of the guilt and anxiety they feel.

### **Structure of the Book**

Cultural geographers, and those in physical activity research drawing on their work, have for sometime pointed to the importance of space as a construct for examining social relations and identities. In Part 1 of the book, the three chapters in different ways explore the relationships between space, place and individuals' identities/subjectivities. They examine how spaces operate to include and/or exclude the young people in the study and how meanings around health and physical activity are derived from particular uses of urban and rural spaces. In Chapter 2, Jessica Lee, draws on the data from rural young people across the Life Activity Project to describe how rural settings, including the institutional setting of the school, shape young people's engagement with and meaning making about physical activity. Matt Atencio, in Chapter 3, uses the data collected for his doctoral study to show how the shared understanding of the hierarchical rankings of basketball courts in parks - in an inner city neighborhood, in the United States - served to construct hierarchies of masculinity, which, in turn, worked to exclude those young men (and most young women) who did not measure up. In Chapter 4, Judy Laverly and Jan Wright, draw on Life Activity data and data drawn from



Laverty's doctoral study to examine how the space of the commercial urban gym influences the ways young people in cities, organize the lives and manage their identities around health and their bodies.

Part 2 of the book focuses on the social and cultural locations of young people and how this impacts upon the place and meaning of physical activity. All the chapters in this section drew on the methodology of the Life Activity project, with Chapter 8 a little less so. In Chapter 5, Gabrielle O'Flynn and Jessica Lee use the lens of socio-economic status and its intersection with gender to explore the making of young men and women attending high fee-paying, single-sex, non-government schools in Australia. The lens shifts to Indigenous young people in Chapter 6 led by Alison Nelson with Rebecca Abbott and Doune Macdonald. Nelson et al. draw on Critical Race Theory and post-colonialism to decentre 'white ways of knowing' in exploring the intersection of physical activity and sport with the home, family, school and community for urban, Indigenous young Australians.

Chapters 7 and 8 are framed around formal belief systems: Confucianism and Islam. In an increasingly globalized world, it behoves us to better understand how we falsely other and are constructed as Others. Amy Ha and Bonnie Pang's research was undertaken with families in Hong Kong in an effort to make explicit the relationships between Confucianism, family practices, and physical activity. In Chapter 8, Kelly Knez shares her participants' stories about being young Islamic women in Australia. The young women talk about their negotiation of physical activity and Islam, the significance of their schools as sites for physical activity and, as with many of the

young women across the Life Activity Project, the management of their bodies to conform to dominant notions of the ideal.

In Part 3 the chapters draw on social theory to critically examine the relationship between health, fitness and physical activity. Drawing on data from Life Activity related projects conducted with diverse groups of children and young people, in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, these chapters each point to the ways moral imperatives associated with health and weight have been taken up or resisted by the participants in talking about their meanings of health. Chapter 9 addresses this issue directly, with Doune Macdonald, Jan Wright and Rebecca Abbott exploring how the imperatives associated with active rational citizenship mesh with young people's ideas and bodily practices in relation to physical activity and health. They conclude by asking whether the very limited resources of contemporary hegemonic health discourses best serve young people in 'knowing' themselves and in becoming (politically) active and informed citizens. In Chapter 10, Jan Wright and Judy Laverty use Life Activity Project data (from interviews across the full 6-year span of the project) to demonstrate how 'choices' in relation to physical activity change over time and are negotiated in relation to: competing priorities of work and family commitments, as young people move beyond school; and, in relation to their 'physical activity identities', formed in the school years. In Chapter 11, Matt Atencio draws on his interview data, collected in the United States, to examine how young people from different ethnic backgrounds engage with normative ideas about health in both conformist and resistance ways and in so doing construct particular racial and gendered identities. Lisette Burrows' study involved analyzing the response of children from a

small, rural town in New Zealand to questions about health in the context of ‘childhood obesity’ rhetoric. She demonstrates, in Chapter 12, how physical activity was very much part of the children’s everyday lives, and how, as ‘social actors’, they recognized the influence of economic, familial, social and cultural factors on their engagement in physical culture. She argues for more context specific studies to challenge universalistic (and often deficit) ideas about young people’s participation. In Chapter 13, Margaret MacNeill and Genevieve Rail report on data collected from two sites which were part of the larger ‘Canadian Youth Constructions of Health and Fitness’ Study. They use a postcolonial feminist analysis to explore the ways young people from diverse social and cultural locations make sense of bodily discourses and negotiate practices associated with fitness, nutrition and health.

In our last chapter, Chapter 14, the contributors to the book offer their reflections on methodological issues associated with conducting qualitative research with young people. These include issues of recruiting and maintaining the involvement of the young people, particularly over the longitudinal component of the Life Activity Project, and developing respectful relationships which take into account the contexts of young people’s lives and cultural sensitivities. The chapter also discusses the dilemmas of (re)presenting the voices and stories of the young people respectfully in research, which for the most part has been informed by a poststructuralist approach that understands stories as fictions associated with particular times and places. In sharing our own stories we attempt to make visible at least some of the ‘realities’ of doing research with young people, not as confessions, but in the hope that it will be helpful to other researchers working in similar ways with young people.

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