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Footballing Femininities: The Lived Experiences of Young Females Negotiating "The Beautiful Game"

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Introduction

This paper explores adolescent girls' lived experiences of participating in football[1] in the UK. Football is an interesting sporting context for this research as it has long-standing associations with masculinity, Whiteness and British nationality (Silk, Francombe, & Andrews, 2014). Previous studies have shown that femininities and sexualities are embodied in complex ways when females are participating in "male sports" (Scraton, Fasting, Pfister, & Bunuel, 1999). Traditionally, masculine attributes such as strength, power and competitiveness have been associated with successful and "appropriate" participation in football and therefore it is a site in which females' presence is seen to be transgressing gender boundaries (Williams, 2003). Thus far research has attempted to challenge and

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deconstruct some of the dominant societal discourses of femininity, heterosexuality and women's football in order to illuminate the influence of these upon female participation (Caudwell, 2007, 2012). However there is a need to build upon the important work by Palmer (2009) and Ahamad (2011) and focus on the day-to-day, lived experiences of adolescent girls as they become involved in football. As such the central purpose of this chapter is to map the experiences of adolescent girls as they are introduced to, and begin participating in, football as part of extra-curricular physical education. We do this by analysing the experiences of privileged rather than marginalised young women in order to shed light on the complexities and nuances of sports participation for women in what is considered, by some, to be a postfeminist era.

Why Football?

Football has become one of the most popular team sports for women and girls in the UK, overtaking sports such as netball and hockey. But participation rates vary amongst women (Ahamad, 2011) so initiatives aim to continue to break down the barriers to female participation in order to enable and encourage growth in numbers. Yet, Jayne Caudwell (2007, p. 184) has encouraged us to undertake in-depth analyses "of football's gendered power relations and the regulation of women's footballing bodies … before the increases in participation can be taken as an indicator of successful challenge to male domination." Caudwell's (2012, p. 1) work has provided us with an overview of women's football in the UK and an analysis of the enduring presence of "'common sense' beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions which influence the entitlement to football, present obdurate, and often impenetrable barriers that women and girls continually negotiate in their quest to be actively involved." Likewise, research with female footballers carried out by Jeanes (2011) and Cox and Thompson (2001) has demonstrated the importance of a focus on the experiential and embodied. They found that females' performances on the field are still heavily restricted and governed by powerful dominant notions of femininity (Jeanes, 2011) that result in a "multiplicity of corporeal tensions" (Cox & Thompson, 2001, p. 17).

Theorising Footballing Femininities

We look to shed light on the complex discourses of young femininity by theorising their lived experiences of football. This chapter is guided by a feminist physical cultural studies approach that looks to understand footballing femininities that are experienced on the field as well as the broader social context whereby football becomes situated as one competing context within the materiality of the girls' everyday lives. Somewhat reworking Duits and van Zoonen (2011, p. 494), this theoretical approach articulates young femininities "within the wider context of neoliberalism as the dominant economic and cultural modus of contemporary western societies that encourages girls to turn themselves and their bodies into a vehicle for individual achievements."

As we have done so elsewhere (Francombe, 2014; Francombe-Webb & Silk, 2016), we contend that in order to understand sport or leisure as a gendered sphere we need to understand the wider socio-cultural context and how individuals negotiate their femininities in ways that are localised and radically contextualised. By allocating the space to theoretically locate this project from the outset, we hope to allow for a more nuanced reading of the girls' embodied experiences of football, that contends with the ways women's sporting practices are tethered to broader cultural forces that (re)establish normative expressions of femininity, yet does not delimit the sense of enjoyment and autonomy women derive from making certain sporting choices. With Arthurs (2003), we feel that these oscillations need not be discussed as dichotomous, alternative, competing positions, rather we need to advance our theoretical perspectives in order to contend with the complex relationship between "choice," agency, power and subjectivity. Therefore, with Evans, Riley and Shankar (2010, p. 127), our feminist scholarship aims to "avoid positioning other women as problematic (either in terms of their 'choices' or their 'agency' to make 'choices'), while also drawing attention to the regimes of power operating within neo-liberal postfeminist rhetoric."

Like Evans et al. (2010, p. 127) before us, we mobilise an approach to agency and choice within sporting contexts that allows for "complex analyses of enacting agency within the limitations and possibilities of gender identities and mediated subjectivities." Employing this frame-

work requires a combination of socio-cultural analysis with first person accounts in a way that contends with the subjective and the socio-cultural as being inextricably linked.

Recognising and contending with the relationality of subjectivities *and* the socio-cultural is imperative within our conjuncture because, within the Global North, females are being regarded as the vanguards of neoliberal, individualised subjectivities (Harris, 2004a, 2004b). Allan and Charles (2014, p. 335) draw on girlhood studies scholars to argue that "images of the successful and/or failed neoliberal subject often gather around the figure of the feminine, and particularly the young woman." As such women's bodies are more visible within sports, and beyond, and girls are being celebrated or chastised for their determination, their drive to succeed and their ability to seize life chances—they are construed as powerful actors with freedom to choose (what to buy, what sports to play, where to work). Anita Harris (2004a) and Angela McRobbie (2007) eloquently represent these new "celebrated" female subjectivities in the image of the "Future Girls" and "Top Girls" who are thought to have successfully transgressed gender barriers. Although Harris (2004a) and McRobbie (2007) do not focus on sport, this imagery is easily applied in the sporting realm with quintessential "Top Girls" like Jessica Ennis-Hill (British Olympic gold medalist) and Karren Brady (Vice-Chairman [sic] of West Ham Football Club) being prime examples in the UK. Of course, what is problematic about these (re)constructions of contemporary female subjectivities is that they are individualised and offer a narrow reading of Westernised femininity, one that is predicated upon a White, middle class, able-bodied subjectivity. Harris (2004a), McRobbie (2007) and many more engaged in critical girlhood studies (Gonick, 2004; Renold & Ringrose, 2008) critique the postfeminist sentiment for a failure to adequately contend with the intersectional experiences of women in contemporary society. The focus of many of these articles and books is the vexed question of young female sexuality and yet these debates around empowerment are echoed as we think about the way the *moving* female body is experienced, governed and represented. For us it is precisely these tensions and contradictions that require further exploration, as we see that postfeminism is a sentiment rather than a political, socio-cultural reality. That is, we see the postfeminist rhetoric of gender equality across

key factions of society—politics, education, employment, health, sport—as illusionary and dangerous because it is based on increased individualisation whereby "direct intervention and guidance by institutions have been replaced by self-governance; power has been developed on to individuals to regulate themselves through the right choices" (Harris, 2004a, p. 2). The postfeminist sentiment is thus devoid of any consideration of the intersections of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability inequalities that may operate to prevent all females achieving the freedoms and choices of the "Future Girls" and "Top Girls." It also fails to account for the pressures associated with the performativity of the postfeminist subjectivity and the affective relations of stress, burden, anxiety, panic, desire and hope.

Future Girls, Top Girls, Education & Football

This research focused on the experiences of young women who occupy positions of relative privilege due to their socio-cultural location, their private education and the "material, cultural and ideological resources accessible to this particular group" (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014, p. 190). From a British Cultural Studies perspective, the working classes have often been the focus of research with analyses of middle-upper class experiences more limited. We recognise, though, a need to move beyond traditional categorisations of class that risk homogenous conceptualisations and that give insufficient consideration given to the way that discursive and material relations of class are negotiated, become visible and manifest in various mechanisms of, and meanings about, inclusion, exclusion, pathology and normalisation. As such, our focus is not simply on subjectivity formation within football but is also concerned with the broader ways that young women's success and failure has become intensified and reconfigured within privileged education contexts (Allan & Charles, 2014; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). Simply put, we are interested in the way that young women, who occupy positions of privilege, experience their sporting subjectivities and how these border their educational "projects of the self" that are shaped by expectations of school, family and friendships. Allan and Charles (2014, p. 338), for instance, explored the

educational and embodied discourses of responsibility and self-determination that were drawn upon by the privately educated girls in their study "in their constitution of successful femininities." Their findings showed that girls silence or avoid failure and activities that might risk their "choice biography" (Harris, 2004a).

Schools are significant sites within the everyday lives of young people and through teaching styles, the curriculum, disciplinary procedures and dress codes individual subjectivities are said to be produced. Harris (2004a, p. 99) understands schools to be both "a physical space where young people spend considerable amounts of time, as well as a symbolic space where discourses about how to be young people can be circulated and taken up." Interestingly, and importantly given our focus on physicality and the footballing body, schools are also thought to generate a body-focused knowledge economy (Evans, Rich, Allwood, & Davies, 2008) or, as Oliver and Lalik (2004) purport, a hidden body curriculum. The school context is then significant methodologically and theoretically as we seek to understand the way that footballing femininities are negotiated when girls play football for the first time.

Methods

The data for this chapter derives from a six-week qualitative study involving a group of privately educated, 11–13 year old girls and their day-to-day experiences of becoming involved in, and engaging with football. Within this project participatory, moving methods (see Francombe-Webb, 2017) were utilised including football workshops, training diaries, drawing tasks and focus groups, in order to explore active girlhood and draw out the way that dominant discourses pertaining to femininity, heterosexuality and sport were embedded in the girls' everyday experiences.

Research Setting

The setting for this study was a private (fee-paying[2]), co-educational boarding school located within the South of England with a diverse multicultural student population. In a sporting context this school exceeds

the national average for curriculum time dedicated to sport (DfE, 2013), and encouraged both sporting participation and excellence. It also had high-quality facilities and expert coaches for a range of girls' sports: hockey (winter term), netball (spring term) and tennis (summer term). The school was chosen as football was not available for female pupils and the participants in this study had not played football before. This meant we could probe into the girls' perceptions of football before their participation and the way that this altered and changed alongside their embodied experiences of the sport. Ethical approval for this project was gained from the University of Bath's ethics committee. Both the participants and school are given pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity.

Methods That Move: Football Workshops

This project was guided by an interventionist methodology that sought to introduce a new sporting activity to a group of girls and to observe them and collect data whilst they were active and inactive. The data collection involved four football workshops that were open to all girls in the school aged 11–13 years. Recruitment was voluntary and the participants self-identified as White females. Each workshop was co-ordinated by Laura (second author)—a qualified Level 2 Football Coach—and involved skill-based practices and game play; they also provided an opportunity for informal conversation and observation. After each session the girls were encouraged to engage with personal "training diaries" "within which each girl could express herself without condescension or disapproval from peers" (Oliver & Lalik, 2001, p. 310). Ongoing participant observations were also included within Laura's "training diary."

Six participants participated in two focus groups at the start and the end of the football workshops. The initial focus group offered the participants an opportunity to consider their perceptions and attitudes towards football prior to their own involvement in the sport and the follow-up focus group allowed the participants to reflect upon their sporting experiences and explore whether their own involvement in football had challenged or altered the perceptions that they previously held. Focus groups are beneficial as they allow for the "multivocality of

participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (Madriz, 2003, p. 364) to be shared in a safe and understanding environment.

Alongside extensive discussions, participatory tasks such as drawing and free-writing were used to prompt and encourage further conversation within the group (Oliver & Lalik, 2001). Eliciting guidance from MacPhail and Kinchin's (2004) study, the adolescent girls were asked to create individual drawings to depict their own interpretations of what a "footballer" embodies. Creating artwork within this setting was advantageous because, as Thompson (2008, p. 11) indicates, "images communicate in different ways than words, they quickly elicit aesthetic and emotional responses as well as intellectual ones."

This multi-modal qualitative material was analysed using a four stage dialogic textual analysis whereby, written, spoken and drawn data are "read" as "texts":

> *The first reading* focuses on an interpretation of the meanings of actors. *A second mode* of reading involves an analysis of the cultural forms that actors use—or that use them—as a means of organizing meanings and practice in their lives. *The third reading* involves a fuller analysis, less site or text specific, of the contexts and relations of power and difference and how they delimit the actions and meaning of actors. *Finally, there is a reading* that focuses on self-production or self-representation. (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004, p. 227, our emphasis)

Discussion

Informed by our feminist physical cultural studies approach, in particular our mobilising of feminist poststructural knowledge(s), our analysis "recognizes the fluid and contradictory ways individuals position themselves and are positioned by others within discursive practices" (Azzarito, Soloman, & Harrison, 2006, pp. 224–225). The structure of our discussion, therefore, reflects the complexities of the data as we shift within and between the nexus of lived experiences, shared social practices and the material and discursive ways that the girls made sense of their participation in football.

Reproducing and Resisting Footballing Femininities

At the beginning of the first focus group, before any football had been played, the girls were asked to imagine what a footballer looked like and they were asked to capture this visually:

The drawings in Figs. 9.1, 9.2 and 9.3 provide immediate insight into the initial perceptions and attitudes of the Dean Court School girls, as well as highlight the ways that their sports (non)participation to date has been shaped by discourses of football as a distinctly gendered domain.

Fig. 9.1 Drawings of footballers created prior to the football workshops

Fig. 9.2 Drawings of footballers created prior to the football workshops

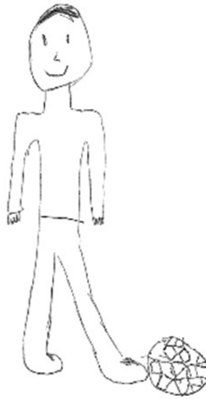

Fig. 9.3 Drawings of footballers created prior to the football workshops

When asked to expand on their decision to draw male figures the girls responded:

> Grace: Um, because I think football is mostly played by men, so that's what I think of when I think of a footballer.
>
> Charlee: Um, when you asked us to draw a footballer, I just had this image in my head of a guy playing football, like a picture and so that's what I've drawn.

Despite an increase in the number of girls taking part in football within the UK, the perceptions of football as a male preserve evidently persists for the girls in this study:

> Charlee: There's not really much girls sport on TV anyway, so I don't really think of girls playing football.
>
> Researcher: Why do you think that is?
>
> Charlee: Because, um, girls aren't very strong.

Charlee's articulation of essentialist understandings of female participation in biological terms, demonstrates the legacy of such biomedical responses

and wrapped up within this assertion is the notion that girls' and women's bodies are less powerful than men's. Power and strength were contentious issues for the girls as they sought to negotiate their own assumptions alongside their imminent gendered physicality (as they were about to participate in football). The girls' proclamations within this initial focus group articulated football as antithetical to femininity, they deemed girls' football to be a "strange" activity and they wanted to avoid developing a muscular and athletic frame that transgressed bodily boundaries and could become the subject of condemnation from their male and female peers (Paetcher & Clark, 2007):

> Grace: [the boys would laugh] because they think it is only a boy's sport. And then some girls would too.

The girls were, at this stage, anticipating that the gaze of other males and females would accompany their participation. Already, the practices of looking upon the body were being invoked as a technique in the governance, maintenance and performance of femininity. From their initial proclamations we can see that gazing, and the discursive "truths" fixed in the look, operated to regulate how the girls would negotiate their performative footballing femininities. The probable gaze of the "boys" was central in the girls' imagining of themselves as (in)active subjects. Yet, Grace's comment not only establishes the gaze as a phallocentric mechanism of regulation but also the gaze of their female peers (James, 2000). So even before a ball had been kicked it was clear that the surveillance of the "self" through the looks of others operated to make the girls critically self-aware of the body and its performance; this was a dialogic gaze that required not just authoritative looking but also a reciprocal looking back.

The girls' initial reservations about football as a female sport and their overt dislike of the footballing body clearly demonstrates that football, sport in general, is not—and has never been—politically or culturally neutral. For the girls, this was a result of the media's lack of coverage of female football and was compounded by the lack of football on the girls' PE and Games curriculum at Dean Court School. As such the girls' exposure to football has been restricted in ways that reinforced it as a sphere that they could not, and were not supposed, to enter.

The physical cultural studies sensibility that guides our research is predicated not just on theorising the experiences we encounter, it is also dedicated to intervening in ways that promote social justice and start to overcome everyday inequities. This commitment to praxis is at both the macro and micro level, where we can impact in ways that create change for our participants. Raising the critical consciousness of the girls and providing them with an opportunity to not only imagine but also experience an alternative reality was one of the aspirations of this project. Through the football workshops we aimed for football to become an increasingly viable and accessible physical activity for the girls to engage with. The mobile methods gave the girls an opportunity to play football in an all-girl environment for the first time; and the focus groups provided a space in which the girls could "try out" a vocabulary of "change." Our critical pedagogical approach (Giroux, 2001) meant that we facilitated discussions whereby the girls became more confident and equipped to question and challenge pervasive societal assumptions associated with females playing football (Caudwell, 2011).

The idea that sport and leisure offer an opportunity for females to challenge heterosexual norms is not new. For the Dean Court School girls, their involvement in this research has challenged not only their assumptions about females that play football but also their own footballing subjectivities. This was most clearly represented through their discussions about wearing makeup. In the first focus group the girls fixated on how female footballers looked on television:

Grace: They look confident and strong.
Charlee: They do wear makeup though and stuff.
Libby: Yea, they still looked like girly, but strong at the same time.
Ruby: And they have their hair tied up neat and pretty.

In line with Azzarito's (2010, p. 263) findings, the girls described the female footballers as still performing and displaying "conventional feminine corporeal symbols." Although the conventional dichotomy of "girly" versus "strong" was not irreconcilable, there remained a preoccupation with the appearance and beautification of the footballers and an appreciation of their ability to actively (re)present their body in a feminine way

whilst participating in football (Chapman, 1997). Comparatively, when asked in the final focus group, after playing football for a number of weeks, about the way they think the female body should be (re)presented during sporting activities the girls were much more forthright in their opinions that we should not even be thinking about appearance:

> Researcher: Would you be worried about how you looked when you played football?
> Ruby: No, not really.
> Charlee: No I wouldn't.
> Libby: It doesn't bother me at all, I don't mind running about and being sweaty … I think the sweatier I am the better I've played.

Rather than sweat representing something unfeminine it was seen as a marker of hard work and ultimately the presence of sweat was equated with success in sport. The girls' footballing femininities were in a constant state of becoming as they sought to actively legitimise their participation and rework the traditional assumptions of what it means to be feminine *and* athletic:

> Grace: [wearing make-up is] Really un-useful.
> Hannah: Yea, it doesn't make them a better player at all …
> Beth: They're not less concerned about their looks, it's just they don't have to be with makeup on to play football. It is unnecessary.

The girls not only developed the confidence and terminology to begin to name the social struggles they encountered, they also began to negotiate newly emerging forms of footballing embodiment. Throughout the football sessions the girls' embodied behaviours and attitudes on the field noticeably changed. In the beginning the majority of the girls were unwilling to use their bodies to be physically assertive, especially while performing skills such as tackling, striking the ball and heading. Although some completely refused to perform these skills, others made attempts but excessive "squealing" and "giggles" accompanied these. The girls' early encounters and early forms of engagement revealed that they were happier to be "playing the feminine way" (Scraton et al., 1999)—they

were reproducing "appropriate" feminine ideals of not asserting oneself too much, not being excessively aggressive. This speaks to previous research (Francombe-Webb & Silk, 2016) that found that privileged femininities are managed and sculpted according to strict appearance, behaviour and moral discourses of excess. In this instance also, excessive performances were considered undesirable and as such the Dean Court School girls embodied a "discourse of 'niceness', 'gentleness' and 'supportiveness' … [and] football became a site for further imposition of restrictive norms and was 'feminised'" (Jeanes, 2011, p. 414). However, over the subsequent weeks the girls became more willing and confident in their engagement with all aspects of the game, even those that could potentially hurt them. At this point, and having been exposed to a number of football sessions, the girls' femininities were diversifying (Jeanes, 2011) and they were benefitting from opportunities to experience "alternative forms of embodiment that are grounded in the experience of strength, competency and agency" (Theberge, 2003, p. 514). Playing like a girl thus took on a different meaning as they learnt to embrace their experiences of bodily creativity and power:

Libby: I just feel free, like I can run and run forever.

Libby's everyday experiences of football have been an opportunity for her to begin to contest some of the gender constraints that the girls had previously identified. For Libby, being on the football pitch was associated with a sense of freedom and a site in which she can display speed, competitiveness and strength. Like the participants in Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar and Kauer's (2004, p. 326) study, the girls "expressed empowerment, satisfaction and enjoyment through physically assertive sports" such as football. What is more, when the girls participated in another drawing task they started to think "it was important to draw a boy and a girl … because it's not only a boy's sport, just like there shouldn't only be girl sports" (Grace). The girls' second pictures all included female footballers alongside their original male depictions (see Figs. 9.4, 9.5 and 9.6):

Charlee: Mine's [picture] mixed too. A boy and a girl … how it should be.
Ruby: Same.

Fig. 9.4 Drawings of footballers created after participation in the football workshops

Fig. 9.5 Drawings of footballers created after participation in the football workshops

Libby: Yea same as the others really, like um, boys and girls playing football should be seen together and in the same way.

Researcher: What do you mean "seen in the same way?"

Libby: Like, it should be equal, like equally publicised and err, be able to play at the same standard.

Fig. 9.6 Drawings of footballers created after participation in the football workshops

The drawings completed as part of the first focus group affirmed the "norm" of males playing football and reflected the taken for granted assumptions to do with the entitlement of football (Caudwell, 2012). However, through the football sessions and focus groups the girls developed their own understanding of the inequalities that they, and other girls, face when they negotiate male dominated sports and they critically encountered their own (non)participation:

> Grace: Maybe males don't recognise girls' football and they don't trust it can be good.
>
> Researcher: who do you mean by males?
>
> Grace: Like, the people who, who organise it … and maybe the other teams, maybe they see them and think they might be quite good and they don't want them to be better. Like the men's teams might not want the women's teams to be as good.

For the Dean Court School girls there was a clear determination and desire to succeed; they didn't just want to participate they wanted to be "as good" as the boys. Although they recognised the social conditions that

might impact upon their ability to succeed in certain areas and not in others, they overwhelmingly considered their sports participation as one of many choices they had to make. As Jeanes (2011) asserted within her research, girls from privileged backgrounds are advantaged by their freedom to choose and engage in gender-resistant activities without risking their heterosexy femininity.

These findings are important for critical postfeminist scholars of sport and physical culture to consider as these girls were afforded a broader range of active possibilities as a result of their privileged backgrounds. Within what remains we will critically interrogate the nature of these affordances to ensure that, firstly, we locate them within the wider processes currently impacting upon the social organisation of girls' sporting choices; considering the pressure that these young women felt and the potential impact of this on their mental health and wellbeing. We conclude by interrogating the often taken for granted assumption that the experiences of girls from similar backgrounds are the universal experience for *all* young women.

The Pressure of Performing Footballing Femininities

The current context is one of ambiguity when it comes to the embodied performance of femininity—the female body should be productive (heterosexually and in labour intensive terms), educated, healthy, strong, alluring and active. Therefore, as the Dean Court School girls navigated their daily lives, there was a palpable sense of them carving out an understanding of who they were and who they wanted to be, and it was in these moments of contestation that the girls located their sporting choices. Whilst the girls participated in physical activity and valued it as part of their school life, participation was continually negotiated alongside their broader "project of the self." When asked about what prevents girls from trying new sports such as football this negotiation became more evident:

> Libby: but I think the other girls in the year would um probably get a bit embarrassed, cause um they might not be as good.

Within this study Dean Court School is significant due to its physical proximity within the girls' lives and also as a discursive space in which powerful pedagogies of young femininity emulate and are permitted to circulate (Harris, 2004a). In line with wider neoliberal governance and individualised politics, educational success has become a key symbol of an individual's investment in the "self," their self-determination and their productivity. For this reason, the middle-upper classes have taken seriously the value of education (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Skeggs, 2005), particularly in terms of the exchange value it provides as young girls are positioned as "the ideal subjects of the new socio-economic order" (Harris, 2004a, p. 97)—they are constructed as being ideally placed to benefit from societal changes such as the expansion of higher education, previous feminist gains and changing notions of female identity. However, this "Can-Do," "Future Girl" or "Top Girl" subjectivity is, according to Harris (2004a, 2004b), a risky business that requires careful navigation. Ruby's remarks when practising shots on goal highlights the way that boys' and girls' engagement with different activities differs on the basis that the boys "don't care about making a fool of themselves" whereas the girls would.

So while girls are considered to have "the world at their feet" (Harris, 2004a, p. 13), their success is also contingent on their own investment in their projects of the "self" and their ability to demonstrate their educational and corporeal capabilities. With this individualisation indisputably comes a fear of failure. The girls' concerns about failure and showing weakness were clear in the first football workshop. Laura (second researcher) reflects on this directly in her training diary:

> As soon as I began explaining the next part of the session, the shooting practice, some of the girls immediately said that they weren't going to be very good at it. In order to enhance their confidence they all had an opportunity to practice their shooting technique without any pressure of a goalkeeper and I tried to create a supportive atmosphere.

Laura recognised that the girls were used to competing with each other, and the boys, and having to demonstrate competency and skill mastery. As such the creation of a supportive and friendly atmosphere was carefully orchestrated to support the girls as they embarked on a new sport

and mitigate their fears of "getting it wrong." This performance anxiety came from their peers but also from teachers and parents. Libby commented that for every young girl that doesn't "feel any outside pressure at all" there are others that "have huge pressure from their parents to be good at everything, like school work, music *and sport*."

The girls involved in this research expressed that they felt "free" to "choose" the activities that they wanted to pursue, including sports such as football and they utilised a "girl power" vocabulary that rejects a notion of constraint. However, the celebratory discourse that underpinned many of the girls' responses prefigures the young girl as a metaphor for social change (Harris, 2004a; Ringrose, 2007) and fails to interrogate the intricacies and localised complexities through which the feminine is "taken up" (Ringrose, 2007). The reduction of educational opportunities to market values (exchange value and investment) inevitably centralises the individual's position within this nexus, that is they have to invest in their future for the long term and the knowledge accrued will add value—bolstering their choice/life biography (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005) and clearly depicting them as an entrepreneur of the "self." In this sense then, education—and school sports such as football—was an essential way that the girls were able to assert their "normalised" life trajectory. This is, of course, a partial picture that fails to contend with the wider assemblage of social forces that might impact a young person's ability to access education and also fails to recognise that this form of individualised feminism places young people in a precarious position in terms of taking advantage of the opportunities available to them (Ringrose, 2007). Although these girls did not feel the pressure or tensions of their own privilege, they did recognise that others, their peers, might:

> Libby: Like, um, they don't want to fail, or try a new sport like football.

Libby's comment is suggestive of the way that a young woman's decision about whether to participate in certain sports and physical cultures will be shaped by the conditions of possibility that are available. Successful feminine subjectivities are not guaranteed when encountering new sports and activities and this compounds the pressure that is on young women to succeed. Harris (2004a), for instance, highlights the labelling and stigmatisation of those girls that fail to "meet the idealized tenets of feminine

success" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 26). As such we see that sport and physical culture, within schools, have become spaces of regulation and there are moves within these spaces to normalise youth as rational, choice-making citizens (to-be) who are responsible for their future life chances through the choices they make.

Discourses of responsibilisation were palpable throughout the focus group through the utilisation of stories about "Other girls" experiences. The girls reworked educational opportunity from a problem needing state intervention and provision towards that of the work ethic (Carabine, 2007), productivity and the choices of the individual to engage with risky activities that threatened the educational outcomes and their "Top Girl" status. This is not without consequence, though. Research conducted by the Department for Education in the UK and reported by the BBC in 2016 highlights that the shift from a period of sustained economic growth in 2005 to one of recession, austerity and a competitive job market have meant that young people have become more focused on their work and youth is no longer characterised as a time of indulgence in risk taking behaviours such as drinking alcohol and taking drugs but instead by "anxiety and a sense of being under pressure" (BBC, 2016) that impacts upon wellbeing. With this comes an increase in young people experiencing mental health problems and problematic stress and anxiety levels. These pressures and anxieties manifest themselves in a multitude of ways, but by way of illustration, over 1.6 million people in the UK are directly affected by eating disorders and, according to the charity Anorexia and Bulimia Care, anorexia is most common in girls aged 16–17 but has been seen in girls as young as six. A recent survey for the NHS has also found that sexual violence, childhood trauma and pressures from social media are related to dramatic increases in the number of young women self-harming or with chronic mental health illness (Guardian, 2016).

Conclusion

Within this chapter we have explored the complex ways in which young women experience sport and the localised ways in which their experiences and footballing femininities have changed as a result of a series of

football workshops. Harris (2004a, p. 105) posits that "maximizing young women's academic opportunity" is of high importance for elite fee paying institutions in order to aid their pursuit of a career and, subsequently, sport functions as a site to build character and work on the body. Schools therefore, play a crucial role in constructing successful young women, something the Dean Court School girls seemed cognizant of. Indicative of John Evan et al.'s (2008) research, our findings demonstrate the ways that schools have become key sites for the development of citizens—and bodies—that *fit* fluid, complex capitalist societies. Within elite school settings—and school settings more broadly—the body serves as an embodiment of character and bodies are encouraged to move and be active in ways that are contextually contingent.

As Theberge (2003) asserts, adolescence is a difficult period for girls to negotiate the formation and cultivation of their identity, thus we found that the girls' participation in football was complicated by its traditional status as a masculine sport and the girls' desire to conform to the ideal of a successful "can-do" young woman (Harris, 2004b). Their commitment to strive for this ideal was highlighted when they voiced their desire to participate in football within school, but with this participation came a fear of failure and concern about the risks that poor sporting performance entailed for their can-do subjectivities. As this chapter has outlined, this can have worrying effects and affects for young women who are situated at the crux of feminine and indeed global—economic and educational—success. However, it would be remiss not to also consider the binary Other that is created as a powerful effect of the "can-do" girl myth.

The experiences of the Dean Court School girls shed light not just on the complexity of navigating feminine sporting subjectivities in terms of the mental health and wellbeing of young women, but they also remind us about the way in which these footballing femininities offer a narrow reading of Westernised femininity, one that is predicated upon a White, educationally privileged, able-bodied subjectivity. A semblance of gender equality that is predicated upon these female subjectivities is illusionary and dangerous because it is based on increased individualisation whereby "power has been developed on to individuals to regulate themselves through the right choices" (Harris, 2004a, p. 2). The postfeminist sentiment, and the imaginary of the "Future Girls" and "Top Girls" that the

Dean Court School girls aspired to, is devoid of any consideration of the intersections of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religious inequalities that may operate to prevent all females achieving the freedoms and choices about which sports to play. As such we conclude this chapter by problematising the notion of "Top Girl" and "Future Girl" subjectivities on the basis that they are always situated in binary opposition to those who "can't do," those whose bodies "don't fit" and "aren't fit."

Notes

1. Here we are referring to Association Football, also known as soccer.
2. Annual fees for boarding at the time of writing were £29985.00.

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