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Learning to Leisure: Femininity & Practices of the Body

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Abstract

Within this paper I conceptualise practices of the body that are *learnt* and deployed as part of feminised body work within the cultural context of girls' leisure. These are practices of the body that are engaged by young women in ways that allow them to (re)construct their subjectivities as well as 'negotiate a physical sense of themselves' (Garrett, 2004, p. 223). Therefore this paper begins by mapping the theoretical foundations upon which the analysis of femininity is couched. Predicated upon debates that distinguish between the girl as a passive, duped recipient of culture's pedagogical signs and the girl as an active, autonomous 'freely choosing,' 'freely consuming' citizen, I draw out the ways in which young girls' body practices can shed light on the complex relationship between 'choice,' agency, consumption and subjectivity. Drawing on data collected from workshops and focus groups, I locate consumption, body management and beautification as constituents and simultaneously constitutors of leisure time. I thus offer insight into the ways in which a group of twenty thirteen year old girls who attended a private (fee paying) school in the West of England account for, maintain, develop, and in places resist, localised appearance cultures. Structured around certain leisure activities—reading magazines, shopping for clothes, eating, engaging in physical activity, applying beauty products, makeup and hair styling—this paper concludes by highlighting the ways in which wider cultural discourses are having embodied effects and are being consumed, *not without consequence*, as commonplace everyday preoccupations.

Keywords: aesthetic recreation, practices of the body, femininity

Introduction

Body image dissatisfaction was reported by the majority of respondents to the consultation to affect individuals regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability status, body size and shape (All Party Parliamentary Group [APPG] Report on Body Image, 2012, p. 11)

While there are many interesting and important points that emerge from the APPG Report (2012), one of the most telling is the notion of an omnipresent culture of appearance that impacts everyday lives, traverses experiences, temporal and spatial boundaries and encroaches into an individual's utilisation of their *leisure time*. Trips to health spas and salons for manicures, pedicures, fake tanning, makeovers; shopping; gym membership; indulging the self-help genre of magazines and television programming are everyday manifestations of an individual's will towards consumption, body management and beautification. Located within a socio-cultural nexus of gender and day-to-day leisure it is possible to examine that the purposeful use of free-time, the animated discussion that surrounds this and the media (re)presentations that trade in cultures of appearance (Carey, Donaghue & Boderick, 2010), have become invested with distinctive (feminised) body politics.

This paper explores the leisure practices and experiences of a group of twenty thirteen year old girls who attended a private (fee paying) school in the West of England. Through workshops and focus groups I examine the ways in which girls articulate themselves within discourses of individualism as well as the regulation of the 'normal' body that permeates the present. In focusing on girls' lived experiences with their bodies within the cultural context of girls' leisure the paper builds upon Carey et al. (2010) and offers insights into the ways in which young girls account for, maintain, develop, and in places resist, localised appearance cultures. I situate the aforementioned consumption, body management and beautification, as constituents and simultaneously

constitutors of leisure and I aim to contribute to knowledge that advances and reinvigorates the field by *holding together* the structural and the agentic in often multifaceted and competing ways. Through exploration and theorisation of leisure practices and the *'chat'* that accompanies these pursuits and pastimes, I offer readings of the ways in which young women (re)construct their subjectivities and 'adopt practices that represent both conformity and resistance to dominant power and discursive relations' (Pavilidis, 2012, p. 169) as well as how girls 'negotiate a physical sense of themselves' (Garrett, 2004, p. 223) through their leisure activities. These are readings that engage, in a dialogic and critical sense, with power relations operating in a specific cultural context; ushering forth a form of pseudo liberatory space that is at once private and public. With Rojek, this grounds leisure within society (Blackshaw, 2012) and it requires 'interdisciplinary analyses of gender and leisure relations at work in everyday life' (Aitchison, 2003, p. 159).

Theorising the Practices of the Body: A Feminine Beauty Project

Through the theorisation of everyday lives, I look to shed light on the cultural climate as organised around/with/through complex and ambiguous discourses concerning young femininity. This approach necessitates that the lived experiences of young girls are situated 'within the context of the network of political, economic and social linkages that produce and give meaning' to them and involves a movement between wider culture and the individual or local (Silk, 2007, p. 254). As Carey et al. (2010, p. 302) point out; this type of analysis extends existing quantitative studies that explore appearance and body cultures through behaviour and attitudinal measures, by interrogating girls' 'reflexive experiences as participants within these cultures.'

Radical contextualisation (Grossberg, 2012) of this nature places leisure within the materiality of everyday life. Reworking Duits and van Zoonen (2011, p. 494), this

approach articulates young femininity ‘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.’ Within the balance of this paper I unpack this contention in terms of the ways in which girls consume and self-govern through the use of diverse forms of body work. Understanding specific, localised aestheticised recreation requires analyses of heterosexy discourses, knowledge and practices to reveal the operation of power at the level of the micropolitical. Simultaneously it points to the ways in which these feminising body practices are often ground in neoliberal discourses of individualisation, self-surveillance and are shaped by, and are shaping, late capitalist consumer markets and the gendered production of neoliberal consumer-citizens deployed throughout the empire (Heywood, 2007). At this juncture I want to allocate the space to theoretically ground the analysis that follows in the hope that this will allow for a more nuanced reading of the girls’ embodied leisure experiences. I expand the counter layering of ‘freedom’ and independence (e.g. we participate in a seemingly autonomous manner but to what extent is this dictated to by the state?) through delving into the intimate management and sculpting of the ‘self’ in which the girls partook.

As relations between the state and its citizens have shifted away from state building towards a form of individualisation, so Gonick (2004) locates the changing, complicated and complex possibilities of a distinctively feminine subjectivity. The participants in Gonick’s (2004) study formulated and (re)articulated their gendered subjectivities via a ‘knowledge’ of femininity that was underpinned by the discursive formations and social constructions of ‘girlhood’ in late capitalist Western societies. Many scholars explicate and offer important ways to theorise contemporary girlhood, power and politics, referring to a ‘blending of a kind of individualized feminism with neoliberalism’ (Harris,

2004a, p. 185) in which the girl is heavily invested. In fact Anita Harris' (2004a, b) work is suggestive of the integral role(s) and position(s) that young women have taken up in relation to the social and economic prosperity and the future of our society (Azzarito 2010). These changes have enabled the current generation of young women to see themselves, and to be seen, as enjoying new 'freedoms and opportunities' (Harris, 2004a, p. 8). What is troubling though is that the hallmark of a have-it-all femininity that is equally available to all is a fictional storyline: it is representative of the few, not the many. What is more the problematic nature of free 'choice' is the way it is increasingly becoming associated with consumptive practices. The marketisation of youth is intimately tied to the way we make sense of this expression of 'choice' and autonomy.

Girls and young women are harnessed as an important consumer group but 'the image of successful, individualized girlhood itself is one of the most profitable products being sold to them and others' (Harris, 2004a, p. 20). Afforded with a 'freedom' to consume becomes conflated with and supports the neoliberal, depoliticised remit of the state premised upon consumption equalling certain forms of 'good' and 'bad' subjectivity. Through the purchasing of material possessions and learning about the appropriate utilisation of these in the management and maintenance of the body, the active, 'worthwhile,' productive consumer citizen, those hardworking individuals who make the correct (consumptive) 'choices' are praised and held up as model subjects. As a result the practices of consumption become representative of the person and part of the crafting and perpetuation of a selected 'self.'

It is hoped that by mapping the foundations upon which debates distinguishing between the girl as a passive, duped recipient of culture's pedagogical signs and the girl as an active, autonomous 'freely choosing,' 'freely consuming' citizen are based I can draw out the ways in which the young girls' body practices can be seen as the

‘metonymic location for many’ economic, political, social and cultural struggles (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006, p. 114). With Arthurs (2003), I feel that these oscillations need not be discussed as dichotomous, alternative positions, rather the job for academic feminism is to live, work and function—as the girls we engage do—within the complex relationship between ‘choice,’ agency, consumption and subjectivity. Evans, Riley & Shankar (2010) call for empirical work that combines cultural analysis with first person accounts; this is research that locates the subjective and the cultural as being inextricably linked. I find particular solace in their directive, that by engaging in this way feminist scholars ‘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 and postfeminist rhetoric’ (p. 127).

Neoliberalism, for Read (2009, p. 29), ‘operates on interests and desires and aspirations rather than through rights and obligations.’ Thus within our historical present critical approaches to leisure need to be responsive to the rhetoric of the ‘free-to-choose’ individual and ‘freely-chosen’ activities. This is a moment within which leisure practices are bound by what Rich (2005, p. 489) refers to as the ‘ambiguities of being ‘female’ under neo-liberalism;’ these are often embodied ambiguities that are concerned with the (re)construction of young heterosexy femininity along public, private, privileged and marginalised lines. Positioning and conceptualising leisure—as feminine beauty practices—I strive to comprehend the (re)production of a female consumer-citizen who is precariously placed as the neoliberal subject par excellence (Gonick, 2004). Specifically I discuss the multitude of preparations and body practices that are grappled with, mastered, and deployed as part of daily, hour to hour, minute to minute *necessary leisure time of females* (Wesely, 2003). These are middle-upper class, white females whose everyday lives shed light on the contemporary celebration of a ‘normalised,’ read

privileged, feminine subjectivity that is (re)articulated through the intricate movements between structural struggles/forces and 'choice,' critique and consumption (Duits & van Zoonen, 2011; Leve, Rubin & Pusic, 2011).

Methodological Contingencies

This paper forms part of a broader empirical PhD project focused on the sculpting of young female subjectivities; this qualitative study responded to questions related to girls' experiences of physical culture and the way the body is both mediated and lived every day. The voices that are centralised in the discussion are those of the girls who attended Franklin School (a pseudonym) which is a private (fee-paying) school in the West of England. This educational context was chosen specifically because of the social class demographics that were, as a result of the nature of the school, relatively homogenous. Research of this nature, as it concerns girls in a position of 'privilege,' inevitably differs from the 'expected' qualitative investigations that have tended to focus on the marginalised, oppressed and/or subversive (Kellner, 1997). However, such an exploration of the relocation of power is seen as a vital contribution and so I engaged with this group of young girls in the hope that I would be able to intervene upon and into these patterns of 'privilege.' Rather than justify their leisure practices or restate a lived reality, I unearthed the power relations upon which these practices—often of the body—are based. Through weekly workshops over the course of a school term and within three focus groups I looked to problematise the (re)constitution of the 'normalised' body and explore social, technological physical cultural practices relating to young femininity. I did this in an analytic and interpretive sense but also through the inclusion of critical corporeal closures (see author forthcoming) in which I asked the girls themselves to imagine alternative realities; more equitable (re)presentations. Moreover the focus groups provided an opportunity for me to engage the girls further

on some of the topics that arose in the workshops—for example relating to heterosexiness, social class and race—in smaller groups (between 5 and 8 girls). This research was conducted in accordance with both the University of ... and British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines, appropriately therefore the names of the girls and the school are pseudonyms.

Through my analysis and (re)presentation of the data I collected I will tease out the leisure pursuits that manage and maintain the appearance of the body, act as a ‘means of selling the self’ (Wearing & Wearing, 2000, p. 48) and uphold a middle-upper class female’s choice biography (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). At the crux of this paper then are the girls’ lived experiences: that which they told me, wrote about, drew and I observed during the workshops and focus groups. The workshops were highly intertextual, multi-modal, animated and dynamic; within them the girls and I read magazines, watched You-Tube videos, drew pictures, wrote narratives, made posters and danced along to the Nintendo Wii game “We Cheer.” Moving between media and body texts (Fusco, 2006) entails recognition of the multifaceted layers of (female) representation and the ways that these images and understandings are interpreted by those that are positioned centrally. Hence the deployment in this paper of a doubly articulated methodology (Livingstone, 2007) that fuses media analysis of magazines with person research as I read into, move between, work with and analyse these different layers of representation and interrogative workshop ‘tasks.’

In what follows I draw on these body texts in order to examine the ways in which girls are increasingly made known through what Gill (2007) refers to as their bodily property and their performance of femininity over and above anything else. Johnson, Chambers,

Raghuram and Ticknell¹ (2004) explore how an analysis of this kind can be thought of as a form of contingent dialogues that scrutinise the texts that are at the heart of a contextual inquiry. They ask, for example, for research strategies and analysis that make known and reveal the relations of power found in the most ‘innocent’ of places (throughout the media). This is a process of reading of and for dominance (Johnson et al., 2004). Further, this is a form of analysis that involves a journey through the ruptures and tensions that concern ‘agency’ and its cultural conditions. The central suggestion proffered here then, is that in order to ‘account for and express the experience of living within particular sets of circumstances’ (Gray, 1997, p. 91) there is a requirement to do justice to the richness of the research.

Considering the theoretical and methodological insights offered, this paper is—unsurprisingly—framed by my making sense of the young female body through articulating it as one ‘element of the cultural terrain within a wider cultural politics’ (Silk, Bush & Andrews, 2010, p. 115); it is situated within the multifaceted and ‘messy’ borderlands where notions of agency, ‘freedom,’ ‘choice’ and first person experiences adjunct and are (re)conceptualised through the cultural conditions that simultaneously promote possibility and (re)establish the discursive processes through which the female body is made known. In this sense it is an exploration of *wider culture* through the *particular* lived (physical) experiences of a group of school girls. This has implications for the text written on the page and the lines of argument developed. So whilst I am mindful that the everyday lives excavated are localised and radically contextual, my intention here is to extrapolate out from the particular in a way that interrogates the

¹ Following Johnson et al (2004, p. 227), analysis should comprise four readings: “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.”

wider socio-cultural context and governance of girlhood that was theorised previously. Common forms of learning about femininity and resulting body work are thus scrutinised to suggest their ubiquitousness and pertinence within the current conjuncture.

The intricate and enigmatic sculpting of subjectivities, that are enabled and disabled by a learnt mastery and knowledge of practices of the body are vital for analysis of the constitutive features of a young girl's leisure time. These will be discussed thematically in terms of how the feminine body is established within popular media and how girls then consume and respond to it by engaging in multiple body practices related to diet, exercise, clothing and beautification. Theorisation will be interlaced alongside the voices of the participants in the study. This layering is important as it is indicative of the ways in which girls are invited to consume and invest in their femininity at a young age, the ways they learn about femininity and their experiences and (re)establishment of their distinctively feminine bodies within their leisure time.

Learning about Femininity: Popular culture

Whether experienced and consumed as leisure, for novelty or for entertainment, the divergent images, sounds and movements that inhabit popular cultural forms need to be situated within wider iterations of power, as they articulate a deeper cultural politics (Miller, 2006). Grounded within consumer culture's pervasive preoccupation with the body; the fastidious concern with the youthful, flawless female body as it is depicted throughout 'glossy teen magazines' (Oliver, 2001, p. 144) provides the starting point for the discussion. This exhorts a need to take seriously the inter-relationality between the production, distribution and consumption of magazines; how they are imbued with

mediated knowledge concerning how the body should be, look, act and move and are engaged and experienced by those positioned centrally.

The image of the thin, attractive, glamorous young woman is rife across the tweenage mediascape and can certainly be seen to promote a belief that thinness and heterosexual attractiveness are a cultural 'norm' (Tiggemann, Gardiner & Slater, 2000). However, and strikingly, the corporate constructing and manipulation of the image does not always go unrecognised:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Aqua | People don't wanna [sic] read about ugly people . . . the magazines won't sell |
| Lottie | They wanna [sic] look like the people in the magazines that they are told is perfect |
| Amber | The magazines want to sell, so they can't really talk about like really fat, ugly people. They can but I mean like, people prefer to read about skinny people |

Extracts like this one from a workshop, highlight that the crafted, commercialised, slender, surgically enhanced feminised corproeconomicus is not passively consumed. In fact girls engage readily in forms of media talk that Duits (2008) outlines in her ethnography of multi-girl culture. This positions them very clearly as active agents, although, the wider socio-cultural forces that are brought to bear revolve around what I would consider as narrowly read popular rhetoric related to airbrushing, Botox and size zero. Narrow and commercially induced readings of resistance are 'messy.' This is compounded in the way the critical narratives operate at once to comprehensively counter the overly "skinny," commodified celebrity and yet are framed upon an acknowledgement that the frequency and intensity of media images *does* incite personal

Consuming the celebrity—celebrated—flesh may not impose a directional cause and effect relation between the media and body image, yet the predominance of the mediated female form appears to provide a particularly powerful context for the sculpting of subjectivities (Liimakka, 2008). Whilst girls do not experience, interpret and rationalise these cultural inflections coherently, they certainly position themselves as knowledgeable consumers. The key facet however, is that this occurs sometimes in a consistent manner and at others times fleetingly and momentarily. Although girls seem able to explicitly note the ‘normative’ expectations placed upon them, this is often couched in ways that do not wholly disassociate them from the images they encounter. Put differently, girls critically apprehend the images presented to them and yet these subversive narratives do not reflect how they address their own corporeality. This reiterates a necessity for leisure studies scholars, to unpack the public pedagogies that originate from multiple sites regarding ‘appropriate’ femininity as well as how these congeal in complex ways with girls’ embodied experiences.

Body Work: Diet & Exercise

The perfect body?

- | | |
|-------|---|
| Paris | A thin body, no flab and a bit toned and have like nice legs but not chunky |
| Eva | Nice and tanned |
| Paris | Nice, tanned legs and body . . . and like have the right features on your face [giggles]. Like nothing too big or small |

India	All the teachers are like saying in our PSHE ² lessons, 'there's no such thing as a perfect body'
Paris	There is
India	But there's like features of a perfect body

Pilcher (2007) apprehends 'body work' as being continual; hence the body is considered a partial, incomplete corporeal-cultural entity. Having noted how the girls variously deployed magazines and conformed and/or critiqued the content as part of their leisure time, we need to take seriously the suggested link between mediated, digitally induced comprehensions of the body and the subjective experiences of these appearance cultures (Kirk & Tinning, 1994). It is within the ruptures and tensions that emerge when girls' own body narratives border the stories of the body they are told, that leisure and culture can be opened up to expose the (un)restrictive meanings of free-time practices that are at once culturally and personally inscribed (Blackshaw, 2012). The body is the *ultimate fashion accessory* and therefore recreational time, energy and expense is readily invested in its conduct and form. In contemporary society the body, especially the slim heterosexy body, is a significant marker of desirable femininity. A preoccupation with physicality emerged in the personal biographies that the girls wrote during an introductory workshop. This demonstrates clearly the extent to which the corporeal circulates within the everyday:

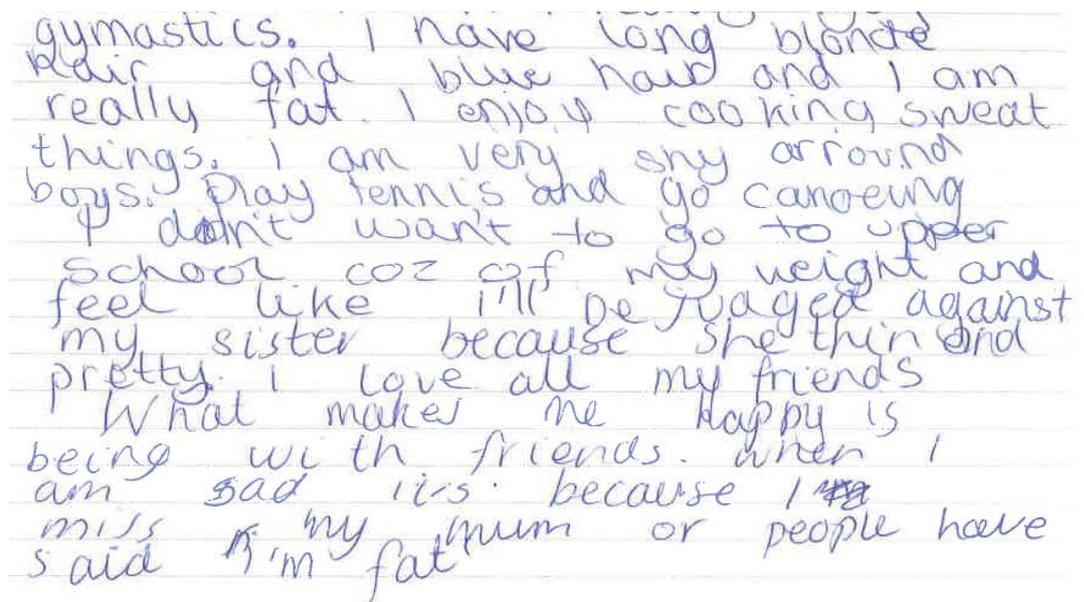
school. I live with my Mum and Dad - & three " brothers. I also have a dog, I have been at Clifton at 1 years old, my favourite subjects are Art and (geography) I love cooking and Art

I like my hair, but I hate my skin. I think I am quite fat!

² PSHE is the acronym for Personal Social Health & Economic education that takes place with schools in the United Kingdom.

Figure 1. Roxy's personal biography.

The body, its size and shape is therefore ever-present throughout contemporary society and in the UK we experience—often through leisure—a barrage of information regarding correct body management. Therefore, any reading of the new girl order must acknowledge the centrality of the body in a patriarchal society that narrowly defines the 'ideal.' With Adams and Bettis (2003, pp. 87-88), it appears that girls 'play an active role in reconstituting ideal femininity as they resist, rethink . . . revision' their gendered selves through their 'chosen' leisure activities. Their respective conversations and written narratives about these are reflective of this:



gymnastics. I have long blonde hair and blue hair and I am really fat. I enjoy cooking sweat things. I am very shy around boys. Play tennis and go canoeing. I don't want to go to upper school coz of my weight and feel like I'll be judged against my sister because she thin and pretty. I love all my friends. What makes me happy is being with friends. When I am sad it's because I miss my mum or people have said I'm fat.

Figure 2. Lucy's personal biography.

Lucy's consistent reference—throughout the workshops and focus group tasks/discussions—to her weight and her perceived fat body (a body that at one point was considered to be the “size of an elephant”) highlights the perpetual nature of feminine body work to correct that which is considered inherently inadequate. This only serves to (re)confirm the ‘normalised’ svelte body that befalls a self-policing, scrutinising gaze. This induces a sense of sadness and surveillance:

Monique I think in the morning everyone's tummy's like flatter
 [everyone agrees] and then you don't want to eat because you
 know it's going to get bigger and then by the end of the day
 it's bigger than it was

Amelia And then it gets flatter again

Charlotte But no you're like it might not go flatter as much and then
 some days you're like skinnier than others

As a form of self-directed leisure, girls eagerly attend to their own bodies and the corporeal presence of others in the pursuit of desirability. Conversant with Foucault (1979); regulation in this sense stems from the monitoring of the 'self' in light of the perceived risk and threat of deviation, rather than originating from external sources. The endorsement of a particularised culture of appearance should then be understood in terms of girls' continual references back to their body and the bodies of 'others' as Aqua delineated:

I don't mind being quite small but I am always like consciously worried that I am going to get fat. Cause [sic] I think because I'm quite petite at the moment I think and that's fine, but I am always worried that I will get fat and short, fat people, I don't know, I'm always scared that's going to happen . . . they look quite funny (Aqua).

Comments such as this are insightful in terms of exposing the potential incongruities experienced daily by girls. Found across popular cultural forms and established upon a notion of the body as a project to be worked upon, girls' lifestyle 'choices' and attention to the 'normalised' body augment their individual embodied biographies. Arising from this, one of the main practices engaged in order to achieve or uphold the body beautiful was controlling food/calorie intake:

Aqua I often can't do much sport at home because I am often on the train to see my dad or something or in the car and so I think that's, that might be sometimes why I don't eat as much because I feel because I can't do anything to burn the food off
...

Lottie Eat celery

Me Celery?

Lottie You burn calories when you eat celery

Consumptive leisure practices were rationalised and legitimised via a healthified rhetoric that positions girls as pseudo experts. This highlights the way leisure spaces offer sites for girls to inhabit positions as knowledgeable subjects who learn to manage their everyday practices in order to preserve a specific subjectivity and avoid, at all costs, a fat body representative of deviance:

Me What's kind of the body that you don't want?

Charlotte Fat and that's about it

...

Stephie If if you like wake up one morning and you like think you feel a bit [interrupted]

...

Charlotte You feel you're fat?

Stephie Yeah yeah, you think you're a bit podgy then like you'll like try a little bit extra for the exercise front ...

Jasmine I just try and eat a bit less

Amber I'd just eat a bit less, not have so much lunch, don't have a pudding at lunch. I mean I walk to school and back everyday

Ameila It makes you feel better doesn't it?

It is apparent that the management of diet and exercise practices take on temporal and spatially specific dynamics when directed towards the maintenance of femininity and the reconciliation of girls' body dissatisfaction. For instance, for Aqua these practices of the body took on a temporal dimension as the travel required seeing family restricted the amount of time available to burn calories. Moreover, Stephie reconciled the body discontent she felt due to feeling "a bit podgy" by trying harder in games and Amber managed the same phenomenon by not eating "so much lunch." In both of these cases Stephie and Amber engaged particular strategies to manage their bodies and conversations such as these brought to the fore the manipulation and modifications that occurred according to the *school space* they occupied. Importantly, this responsabilised body comportment is conducive to society's expectations that 'can-do' and 'Top Girls' (Harris, 2004b; McRobbie, 2007) construct a physical sense of 'self' through surveillance. These young females employ specialised knowledge and as a result undertake specific, specialised even, corrective measures (Duits, 2008; Foucault, 1979).

Body Work: Aesthetic Stylistation

In much the same way that that I analysed the nexus between popular (media) culture and the (re)presentation of the feminine form, so consumer culture commandeers and utilises what McRobbie (1991) terms the spectacularly feminine and trades in this imaginary. Developing the previous discussion of the literal sculpting and manipulation of the corporeal, I now further the idea of physicality as a marker of social status. I want

to attend to those products that touch the body, enfold it, swathe it, work upon and through it and imbue it with significance in a specifically gendered way (Pettinger, 2005). Through prolonged and persistent investment the body performs femininity in a manner that is germane to certain historical and cultural determinants. Consequently Cole (1993, pp. 86-87) indicates that performing normative femininity requires individual labour and consumption of 'knowledges, practices, and strategies.' Paying attention to the context in which these practices are carried out diversifies the(ir) meaning so, for instance, feminine beautification can be concurrently understood as laborious and/or conflated as a group leisure activity. Somewhat like Wearing and Wearing (2000) I now critically engage with the practices of aesthetic stylisation, exploring the conspicuous consumption of clothing, make-up and hairstyling as expressions of commodified leisure that reaffirm an individual's subjectivity and status.

Body Work: Clothing

Through the consumption and application of 'products' the young female engages in aestheticised recreation as a form of leisure in which she deploys the skills, knowledge and resources required to perform a particular version of femininity. The notion that one can 'consume oneself into being' (Walkerline, 2003, p. 247) by purchasing clothing and discussing fashion is one way in which a feminine subjectivity is (re)constituted. As an ephemeral field of representation, fashion can have inherently fraught meanings with regard to the (re)construction of femininity (Evans & Thornton, 1991). The meanings attributed to clothing seem to be underpinned by discourses of 'looking good,' however embodied subjectivities are certainly a work in progress. Fashion is comprehended as a project of continual collective realisation. Apparently unaware of the larger cultural mêlée to which clothing 'choices' speak, fashion for girls presents an opportunity for

the public presentation of the ‘self.’ Clothing and shopping then are important aspects in the performance of a feminine subjectivity; they operate to ‘secure girls’ focus on constructing and reconstructing their bodies as feminine bodies’ (Best, 2004, p. 196). The ironic oscillation between girls as both object and subject of their own ‘self’ throughout commodified leisure gestures once again towards a multifaceted engagement with consumptive leisure activities whereby clothing is negotiated and purposefully utilised:

Amber I take forever to decide what I am going to wear, I go through everything in my wardrobe

Stephie Oh yeah and when you get there you realise that you’re wearing the wrong thing. On home clothes day that is one of the, like, only times that you get to like, [someone interjects: “impress”] that the boys can see you in what you wear. The boys can see what your wardrobe is like
...

Amelia It’s so stressful

Stephie So that’s one of your chances that that the boys can see what your wardrobe is like so you sort of spend ages. Like the day before evening you spend picking what you’re going to wear

Charlotte I spend hours and hours and hours and hours

Within these excitable conversations was an awareness that there are decisions to be made that entail consequences if “you’re wearing the wrong thing.” Facebook, telephone and everyday peer initiated conversations situate clothing practices as central in the desire to be ‘normal’ and to conform to a certain image. Shrouded in contemporary discourses concerning the conduct of women, clothing the body and shopping for clothes—as leisure experiences—allows girls to explore and publicly

present their femininity in ways that feel autonomous yet reify ‘stultifying stereotypes’ that privilege *and* marginalise certain identities (Wearing & Wearing, 2000, p. 46):

But you know the people, like thinking about people in our school, people who wear not different, I don’t want to say *weird* . . . *let’s just say different types of clothes*. I don’t just don’t *they look wrong*, yeah they just don’t look nor [doesn’t finish word] I don’t know they just don’t look normal they just *don’t look like what normal teenage girls would wear* (Paris).

A consumer culture that is targeting increasingly younger women has, perhaps unsurprisingly, become somehow ordinary and mundane, as has the demanding need for the reiterative consumption and commodification of the ‘self.’ Ostensibly, clothing acts as a consumerable marker of an ‘appropriate’ and desirable femininity. This is suggestive of polysemic readings concerning the ‘choices’ that surround aesthetic recreation and a recourse to discourses of ‘normalisation.’ Leisure as *aesthetic labour*, points towards the highly gendered, time consuming and on occasion troublesome performances of girlhood. The body that moves in and out of, buys into or out of and is representative of various consumptive practices, is a body that is extensively and labouriously invested in. Leisure time and work are no longer juxtaposed but rather conflated and the way the young female body shops and is dressed articulates the experience of the body and how this interlaces with the ways the body is ‘supposed’ to be managed and engaged. Female aestheticisation through clothing, whether experienced individually or collectively, could be conceptualised as body work that speaks to the socio-cultural and socio-historical context. With Pettinger (2005, p. 461) therefore, clothes are considered much more than banal, insignificant material objects, instead they confer gendered, classed, raced power lines that are ‘prevalent at particular historical and geographical junctures.’

Body Work: Beautification

- Roxy When I get up I like get dressed but then I umm, I put this like clear mascara on. I don't always, I actually like rarely, like once a week. And then I sometimes put brown eyeliner on, but like that's again like only once a week if I think that I look really really bad . . . And then if I've got a spot, which like I don't normally get spots, but if I did I would probably put foundation on but only on the spot and like blend it in. But I actually, not being like boastful, but I rarely get spots that I actually want to cover up
- Aqua I always get spots, I always put concealer on I always, always
- Lottie I never wear concealer or foundation because it covers it up [the skin] and makes it not breathe
- Aqua I've got stuff that makes it better
- Lottie Aqua that stuff doesn't make it better, I only ever wear eye makeup I never wear anything else
- Aqua I wear lip gloss

Practices of beautification refer to the conflation of beauty, consumption and point once more towards the commodification of gender. These practices of the body are understood as being at once a matter of individual imperative and constraint (Pettinger, 2005). Girls to lesser or greater degrees adopt specific discursive practices in their presentation of the 'self' as a female subject. Having *learnt* the feminised skills of hair styling, makeup and having acquired knowledge about general beautification and the performance of the 'self,' they appear to call upon these apparatuses at will within their everyday lives. Aesthetic stylisation directed towards beautification epitomises the

maintenance and experiences of the body through immersion or distanciation (Featherstone, 1991).

With Bartky (1990) the regime of aesthetic stylisation undertaken by females renders visible the consumptive processes of femininity in terms of the literal imposition of electrical and material accessories to aid in the process of beautification. The constant quest for a culturally prescribed ‘normative’ femininity suggests girls are proficient and ‘savvy’ about the practices that make possible the sculpting of a desirable physical form. As such femininity is regulated via coiffure and cosmetics. This body work requires constant attention to detail especially as girls navigate different experiences and spaces—from the shopping centre to the classroom to the bedroom.

The valorised feminised neoliberal subject is incentivised to become the instigator of her own body narrative. Black and Sharma (2001) discuss this in terms of how beauty therapy, as a moment of leisure and lifestyle politics, has been restructured as a consequence of capital accumulation, market demands and individualism. Therefore the primary relationship that now exists is between the individual and the market. As noted previously the girl is expected, quite literally to *consume herself into being* (Walkerdine, 2003) and copying the attractive hairstyles demonstrated, and purchasing the products advertised, in the magazines can be seen as techniques through which this is achieved. Lucid, lengthy dialogue about clothing, makeup, hair styling and the most effective ways to establish ‘appropriate’ appearances provide reference points to which the girls readily return. The ‘acceptable’ body is often compared against that which (re)appropriates femininity in the extreme; as such the girls positioned themselves as distinct from the (un)fashionable, (working) class(ed) ‘other.’ The ‘inappropriateness’ of the ‘chav’ (in British parlance) and their overly tanned, styled hair, large jewellery, was widespread and thus advances the exploration from a concern with individualism in relation to the

market, towards a reiteration of the *classed, gendered* individual and the market. There was an incontrovertible ease with which this element of performative femininity was disclosed, therefore alluding to the degree to which girls embody subject positions of informed and willing biographers in their own lifestyle/leisure narratives:

Me Ok so if you're going out for something then . . . you're going to see people what would you do?

Amber Is your hair clean?

. . .

Me So do you think it takes quite a long time?

Monique Yeah it takes about like, and hour

Stephie Yeah it does

Jasmine If you add the shower it takes about

Amber Ages I take forever in the shower my dad always shouts 'get out'

Jasmine I spend about forty five minutes in the shower

Stephie I blow dry and straighten my hair every morning my hair goes wild

Joanna Blow drying takes so long

Felicity If I, if I don't like dry my hair it goes all curly

. . .

Stephie And like you try and sneak on a tiny bit of makeup to try and pull it off

Amelia But if you think you look nice you feel more confident

Group Yeah

Felicity And if you don't you just

Charlotte You feel crap

...

Me So it's quite kind of

Charlotte Treacherous

The ideal body associated with contemporary young femininity is (re)contoured in ways that resonate with their localised understandings of the feminine body-subject. This is a mediated and conspicuously crafted corporeality, a *learned* body and a readable one. Evidently, and again following Bartky (1990), girls' daily lives are temporally invested in body work related to aesthetic stylisation that alludes to an organised, energised and on-going commitment to gendered embodiment, the mobilisation of specialised body-knowledge and the mastery of leisure practices. From taking forty five minutes or an hour in the shower, to having to wake up at five thirty in the morning in order to straighten their hair before school, girls manage their supposed 'leisure' time and aesthetic stylisation accordingly. In Rojek's parlance leisure becomes a *school for life(styles)*.

Aesthetic stylisation is often thought to straddle the personal as well as social realm of experience. As a shared process it can be envisaged as a site of enjoyment, agency even (Cahill, 2003), thus countering, or at least speaking back to, the penal and punitive analyses within which women's investment in the 'self' are ordinarily located and I alluded to previously. As girls devote time to the performance of young femininity

through makeup and hair styling, they question their own practices, seek reassurance from friends, impart guidance and develop their utilisation of make up:

Lucy I try and have time to straighten my hair, I think of straightening my hair quite a lot. And I try to wear makeup, but I don't really like look good in it cause [sic] I can't do make up. I know that sounds really weird but I can't do make up

Aqua I would tell you what I think but I don't think I have ever seen you in make up

Further, and despite Charlotte's claim that these are "treacherous" times, girls' collective imagining of an idealised image as part of their leisure time is not universally an immediate source of displeasure. Instead it is often the practicalities and outcome of their aestheticised investment in the 'self' that are contested not the actual activities undertaken:

Lucy But if I wear, if I put make up on myself, I'll look stupid. Like I sometimes ask my sister because she can do it better than me

Kate Aqua once, I wanted to put some mascara on and you put like quite thick mascara on and I just looked so different. I just didn't like it

Lottie Kate doesn't trust me because once I was putting mascara on and she moved towards me at the same time so I poked her in the eye. It wasn't my fault and so now she doesn't trust me

It would be remiss however, not to attend to the voices of protest; for it seems not all females share a devotion to feminine beautification, some challenge routines that ensure

that the skin is moisturised, toned, radiant or that hair is removed and the eyebrows ‘plucked out by the roots with a tweezer’ (Bartky, 1990, p. 69):

Umm, I don’t ever brush my hair, or umm blow dry it, or straighten it, or curl it. I don’t really ever put umm make up on and umm the only way I can keep my hair non-greasy is to put like both shampoo and conditioner . . . I just tie my hair up to get it curly (Robin).

An ‘*I don’t do this every day*’ discourse that can be seen to run throughout some females’ talk, although different from the ‘resistance’ shown through self-pleasure, could be read as rejection of ‘norms’ that subjugate the young female body. However, decisions to not employ certain forms of feminine body work need to be grounded within individuals’ wider narratives. In the case of Robin this was a narrative in which she noted: “I just want to be kind of be noticed not being too pretty not being like dull but I just want to be like noticed.” Balancing individual preferences alongside a desire to belong and fit in ripples throughout the girls’ everyday lives.

Contemporary adolescence is a time in which young girls are striving for an understanding of their own subjectivity, but these leisure behaviours are located within a commercially mediated conjuncture. Guided empirically and theoretically, the most illuminating moments of the lived experiences of the Franklin School girls occurred when they individually and collectively ‘worked through’ and negotiated the expectations placed upon them by a cultural imperative and those *they* imposed in an effort to maintain the successful performance of a gendered subjectivity (McRobbie, 1991). An emphasis on the investment and work on the ‘self’ attests to the accountability of the neoliberal citizen for their ‘choices,’ the result of which can have telling implications for ‘other(ed)’ bodies.

Closure

Under the aegis of neoliberalism, public and private issues have been reconfigured in ways that are not only dictated by the market but have become depoliticised and entirely individualised (Giroux, 2004). In Heywood's (2007) terms the alignment between political realities and the governance of everyday life (re)constructs the notion of the 'self' as a 'do-it-yourself' leisure project. This suggests that our research is sensitive to critical considerations of gender and interrogates leisure practices as sites for the education of the 'self' and *learning* the body. The lived experiences drawn upon in this paper demonstrate that the multiple practices of the body deployed by girls in the quest for the ideal feminine body require them to become competent and knowledgeable within appearance cultures, but this necessitates a commodified and at times exclusionary investment. By drawing on powerful discourses of the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate,' a form of (re)configured feminine subjectivity is vigorously and pleasurably 'taken up.' There is a sense of girls' contradictory body relationship; a double bind if you like, in which a narrowly defined femininity is grappled with, made intelligible and afforded legitimacy through an interplay between gendered and (hetero)sexualised leisure practices and girls' active (re)appropriation, resistance and questioning of this. The findings presented and the theorisation forwarded indicate that girls, while actively questioning some of the practices, nevertheless aspire to the ideal female body shape imagined in accordance with the 'popular' ideal.

An interdisciplinary approach to leisure points towards the need for revitalised contextual engagement that situates wider cultural forces within micro-political, localised realities (c.f. Crouch, 2000; Jamal & Kim, 2005; Morgan & Pritchard, 2005;

Silk, 2007). Indeed Wearing and Wearing's (2000) research is suggestive of the need for leisure studies to engage critically with the current climate of ambiguity, controversy and complexity through exploration of everyday lives, lifestyles, behaviours and practices. Following this I began the paper by unpacking the cultural politics of the present, particularly as this is (re)configured in respect of notions of girlhood. These conceptual shoring's allowed for an extensive consideration of girls' leisure-orientated body practices and the explication of these in relation to the learning or pedagogic potential of popular culture forms such as glossy magazines, and body work related to diet, exercise, clothing, makeup and hairstyling. This paper then, has articulated the ways in which the leisure practices of a group of young girls resonate with the 'dangers and opportunities of [our neoliberal moment] . . . for its self-inventing subjects' (Harris, 2004a, pp. 7-9).

Bodies and leisure activities can, of course, be read as texts, but they are also lived and experienced in an everyday sense. Maybe it is within and amongst these overlaps and corporeal borderlands that the most interesting and impactful analyses are forwarded? The more light we can shed on the 'everydayness' of young girls' lives, the more theorisation that we engage in and the more we bring this to bear in terms of our dissemination, the more sophisticated understanding we will be able to garner of the embodied demands and expectations placed upon young females. This research has focused on those in positions of relative privilege thus differing from those studies that hold those excluded from leisure as the foci. Of course further work is needed into the aestheticised recreation practices of both the valorised *and* marginalised. However, unpacking young girls' leisure activities, as I have done here, allows researchers, practitioners, educationalists and parents alike to interrogate the ways in which wider

cultural discourses are having embodied effects and are being consumed, *not without consequence*, as commonplace everyday preoccupations.

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