



Article

# Learning about bodies and the lived consequences

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## Abstract

From the perspective of a final year physical education and sport and exercise science undergraduate student, this article explores the relationship between learned and lived experiences related to the body. The research uses an autoethnographic approach that focuses on the educational and social issues that the first author faced as his physical identity changed. The author reflects on the ways in which his once acceptable body experienced declining capital as his body became too 'fat' within the spaces that he was connected to. In an attempt to resist institutionalised understandings that imply that larger bodies are a result of neglect and poor lifestyle choices, this research demonstrates the impact of cultural understandings on the everyday life of a university student seeking an 'acceptable body'.

## Keywords

autoethnography, bodies, capital, habitus, masculinity, physical education

This article adopts an autoethnographic framework in order to apply sociological theory to experiences that the first author faced while in his final year of a physical education and sport science degree at university. Using autoethnography allowed him to reflect and give an honest account of his experiences in order to contribute to the growing body of literature that addresses the marginalisation and rejection of certain bodies within physical education, sport and exercise spaces. From seeing a shift in his body composition that also led to an increase of 20 kg of body weight, he documented the moment of realisation that he was 'classified' as obese by guidelines issued through government institutions. Having previously devoted years helping people lose body weight, he struggled to come to terms with how he had let his body change. From this, and despite the effort he was putting into his studies, he felt lazy, deviant and unworthy to be able to continue in an in

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industry that only credits those with the leanest physique. At the time of writing the reflections, he was a 26-year-old white, heterosexual male who worked both as a personal trainer and as a sports coach for children at primary schools around the South East of the United Kingdom.

This article aims to help raise the awareness of different bodies within physical education, sport and exercise spaces. It endeavours to encourage individuals to enjoy these spaces and not feel that they are intruding on areas that belong to the 'normal sporting body' (Chase, 2008). In contrast to other literature that looks at the 'fat *sporting* body' (e.g. Chase, 2008; McMahan and Penney, 2013; McMahan et al., 2012) this article is linked to health-based university degree programmes and gym spaces in general.

### **'Fat bodies': where do they stand?**

A recent survey in the United Kingdom suggests that 27% of adults are classified as obese (NHS Digital, 2018: 17). Government and health organisations convincingly lead obese people to believe that they are living with a chronic disease caused by overeating and a sedentary lifestyle (Monaghan, 2008a). Evans et al. (2008: 17) use the term 'body pedagogies' to describe 'conscious activity taken by one person, organisation, or a State, designed to enhance an individual's understanding of their own and/or others' corporeality'. They argue that body pedagogies provide guiding resources which are a reflection of particular social and cultural understandings influenced by corporeal norms and health concerns of a particular time, such as the current 'obesity epidemic' (Cliff and Wright, 2010; Gard and Wright, 2001). Discourses associated with obesity normalise the idea that fat people are a cost to taxpayers and bad citizens (Petersen and Lupton, 1996 cited in Cliff and Wright, 2010). Fat is deemed a clearly visible symbol of self-neglect and lack of willpower (Cliff and Wright, 2010) giving off messages of laziness, lack of hygiene and unkempt presentation (van Amsterdam et al., 2012). We learn to understand fat bodies as the undesirable 'other' (Cliff and Wright, 2010) in comparison to 'normal' and acceptable bodies. Government policies which reinforce this discourse have included the weighing of schoolchildren and their subsequent categorisation by Body Mass Index (BMI) (LeBesco, 2011), and published guidelines on frequency and duration of physical activity (Ayo, 2012). In addition, the free market allows corporations to market goods which promote a healthy lifestyle such as low-calorie food, fitness clothing, health magazines, and exercise DVDs (Ayo, 2012). Brands offer their wares and then ethical, neo-liberal citizens make the decision to consume them (Ayo, 2012).

Body pedagogies are evident in educational establishments where school health and physical education programmes are based around tackling 'the epidemic' (Cliff and Wright, 2010). When considering the use of the word 'epidemic' in relation to fatness, LeBesco (2011) suggests that those who are of a 'normal' body shape feel a need to safeguard themselves by separating themselves from fat bodies and monitoring the abnormal 'other'. The way language is used to suggest that fatness is a problem that is unacceptable and out of control promotes the idea that to possess a fat body is a moral deviance (Monaghan, 2008b; Murray, 2007). As a result of this, 'obese individuals are highly stigmatized and face multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination because of their weight' (Puhl and Heuer, 2009: 941). Burrows et al. (2019: 201) suggest that PE (physical

education) may not reduce obesity or successfully influence students' actions, but 'may leave a damaging legacy, which cannot be ignored (e.g. weight-based oppression, victim blaming, discrimination, body hating, stigmatization, weight bias and so on)'. Gard and Wright (2001) explain how there tends to be a lack of critical consideration in PE in relation to the obesity epidemic which impacts upon physical activities, practices and research within PE. According to van Amsterdam et al. (2012), teachers displayed an understanding that a lack of body fat was closely linked with good health and the potential for good performance. Teachers presented bodies as malleable entities which should be shaped to comply with social norms of the 'good body', likening the body to a project.

In addition to educational establishments, body pedagogy is also reiterated within media and entertainment across a number of platforms (Markula and Pringle, 2006). The most obvious of these being the innumerable television shows that are dedicated to the management and regulation of the fat body that is out of control (for example, *The Biggest Loser USA*). Such programmes reinforce discourses related to which bodies are considered an acceptable shape, size and weight. Fat bodies, on the other hand, are gazed at as 'freak like' and 'monstrous' (Richardson and Locks, 2014). Dominant discourses shape how we perceive a person's body and broader social discourses related to fatness and fitness are often reflected in schools. Within schools, children's understanding of bodies and valuable physical activity practices are influenced by the intersecting and interrelated body pedagogies endorsed outside of the school environment (Powell and Fitzpatrick, 2015). Bourdieu (1991: 76) describes how discourses continue to exist in a particular way as long as they are accepted by society, 'i.e. heard, believed, and therefore effective within a given state of relations of production and circulation'. The discourse on how we should present our bodies has therefore led to society thinking that the fat body is 'out of control, out of place, and out of shape' (Sykes and McPhail, 2008: 67) and therefore, holds less value (or capital) than non-fat bodies. Findings in Varea and Underwood's (2016) study further emphasise this, as they found that pre-service PE teachers made judgements about fat bodies being abnormal, deviant and disgusting, and demonstrated pity towards those they deemed as fat.

However, our perception of the body and the judgements we make are subject to time, place and the society in which we live (Shilling, 1993). For example, historically, within Western society, a larger body was commonly recognised as a symbol of wealth and success whereas slimmer bodies were often associated with the poor (Richardson and Locks, 2014; Synnott, 1993). If we recognise the very real impact of temporal and social influence on our own understandings and consider the body in a more neutral way, we can recognise that body shape does not always have a direct link to health (Le Besco, 2011). Suggestions about causation between fatness and illness need to be more critically assessed and questioned (Clough, 2004; Flegal et al., 2005).

## **Bourdieu's relational concepts of field, habitus and capital**

### *Field*

Social issues of body can be analysed by applying Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of field, habitus and capital. Bourdieu (1984) defines fields as socially occupied spaces where informal rules, values and power relations exist. Gyms and educational contexts can be

viewed as fields. An agent's (or person's) position within a given field is influenced by the rules (or doxa) that help to structure a field. The doxa tend to align with the collective values and social norms in the field. As such, these doxa more or less structure acceptable ways to act within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1977). However, occasionally, agents may wish to transform the doxa in order to benefit their own position within the field, while those trying to preserve the status quo will struggle to maintain the existing doxa (Bourdieu, 1977). Those in the field will evaluate an individual's habitus to judge how well they fit.

### *Habitus*

Habitus is described as 'socially acquired, embodied systems of schemes of disposition, perceptions and evaluation that orient and give meaning to practices' (Bourdieu, 1984: 17). Bourdieu (1984) explains how habitus does not result from either autonomous choice or structural influence. Instead, it is the result of both of these factors over time, whereby dispositions become influenced by previous experiences and structures, but also influence existing experiences and structures and, critically, shape our opinions and views of these. Individuals enter into fields with a habitus which is shaped by personal experiences as well as social class, gender, race, ethnicity, educational background and other characteristics. Habitus determines a person's status and behaviour in a field and can be viewed as "unreflective practical habits", which shape the way we act and think in different social contexts or "fields" (Browitt, 2004: 1). Additionally, capital is often acquired as a result of an individual's habitus aligning with the doxa of a field.

### *Capital*

Bourdieu (1986) describes how capital can be affiliated with power within the field it is presented in and usually presents itself in three core forms. The first is economic capital, which is related to an instant conversion to money. The second is social capital, which is related to social networks and connections and which 'provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital' (Bourdieu, 1986: 248–9). The amount of social capital that an individual agent will possess is dependent on the number of connections one can activate and the amount of capital each of those connections has. Finally, cultural capital can take a variety of forms, including an embodied state, an objectified state and an institutionalised state, which includes the capital gained from educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital is notable in its embodied state because, as Bourdieu (1986: 244) explains: 'the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan [. . .] cannot be done second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out)'. In order to possess this type of embodied cultural capital, the bearer of the capital must invest personal time and sacrifice. Cultural capital can also present itself in an objectified state, which is linked to material objects. The important element of objectified cultural capital is that it is not solely the ownership of a material object, but the ability to 'consume' it, the means to 'appropriate' it (Bourdieu, 1986). It is the knowledge and understanding which goes beyond simple ownership that turns this capital into symbolic capital. Additionally, one form of capital can be transferred into other forms of capital.

As suggested by Shilling (1993), a person's socio-economic status has an imprint on their body. For example, the body of somebody who can afford to eat the required food, and afford access to the required training guidance and facilities, may be more aesthetically pleasing than the bodies of those without the same opportunities. This is an example of economic capital being transferred into physical capital. The concepts of field and capital are used to explain how hierarchical structures are formed within and among groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Connell, 1987).

The field of the gym can be used as a good example of how people's bodies are evaluated and earn capital. In masculine-dominated gym spaces in particular, those who possess the largest muscles and have the leanest bodies tend to possess the most physical capital due to their compliance with dominant discourse, therefore, they are most respected by others in the environment (Andrews et al., 2005). Alternatively, within the same space, those who possess fat bodies would be at the bottom of the hierarchy, particularly because being fat has been conflated with excess femininity (Sykes and McPhail, 2008). It is worth noting that this is a social field whereby particular understandings of masculinities dominate. Pringle (2001, 2003) discusses how practices which emphasise masculinity, such as rugby, allow participants to assert the power of their 'manly' bodies over 'other' males and all females. Pringle (2001) explains how he used and presented his body in certain ways in order to reproduce dominant discourses of masculinity in this field. For example, he explains: 'at times, I would act "manly" by taking dares, swearing and being physically rough' (Pringle, 2001: 434). Pringle (2003) demonstrates that normalised actions and presentations of the body exist in the field of rugby which reproduce dominant masculinities. This work demonstrates how particular social fields adopt specific understandings and enactments of masculinities.

## Methods

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach where the researcher reflects on their own experiences for the purpose of analysis (Sparkes, 1995), retrospectively giving meaning to events (Polkinghorne, 1995). Autoethnography explores the author's personal story and connects this to wider political, social and cultural meanings (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000) with the aim of extending sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2000). Allen-Collinson (2013: 194) explains that 'the researcher's own experiences *qua* member of the social group and within social contexts are subject to analysis, in order to produce richly textured, often powerfully evocative accounts or even performances of lived experiences'. It can be seen as both a process and a product (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis and Bochner (2000: 737) describe the process of autoethnography,

I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story.

The body is of the utmost importance when recollecting events and also when trying to explain and understand actions performed during a moment. Bourdieu (1990) recognises the importance of placing the body in a posture to remind us of emotions, thoughts and

feelings. Maybe partly because ‘most of the words that refer to bodily postures evoke virtues and states of mind’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 70), for example, someone walking in a determined manner as opposed to someone walking hesitantly. Bourdieu (1990) discusses the importance of embodied sociology. He recognises how the body learns physical conduct and movements and then enacts these movements as ‘body automatisms’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 69). Informed by common sense and habit, agents do not consciously consider these actions. For example, he discusses embodied manners such as sitting up straight and how, over time, this culturally significant state ceases being a conscious thought process. The body is of the utmost importance when considering habitus, it is an essential component which is closely connected to time and language. The actions of the body can be viewed as an *enactment* of the past rather than a simple recollection of it (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu (1990: 73) goes further by explaining that ‘what is “learned by the body” is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is’. As stated by Denzin (2012: 298), ‘an embodied project that matters must locate the body within a radically contextual politics. It must focus on the active, agentic flesh-and-blood human body.’

Cook (2014) describes how autoethnography can be seen as narcissistic and self-centred, but also explains how this can be alleviated through the use of analysis and critique in order to maintain academic integrity. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain how the author should move backwards and forwards through the exploration of moments related to personal experiences and honest vulnerability, to a more detached analysis of events and experiences utilising theories and previous research. This method highlights the author as being a social being within a larger society. It is a reflection of past experiences, but also a valuable representation of the culture within which they are situated. From this, autoethnography allows others to make connections with stories and reflect on how they may relate to their own life within the culture. The method is also useful for readers coming to understand that the experience of social being as listening to stories promotes learning and self-discovery (Coles, 1989).

Autoethnography has previously been justified by others within the field of PE and sport. Cameron (2012) suggests that this style of writing promotes different ways of researching PE and explains how it is a useful method to encourage other teachers and students to reflect upon the influence of their previous experiences on pedagogical choices and practices. She asserts that learning opportunities arise from writing stories of our experiences. Legge (2014) and Landi (2018) both utilise autoethnography to reveal experiences in the field of PE. Legge (2014) reflects as a teacher educator negotiating her cultural heritage as a European New Zealander within the Māori culture in which she taught, and Landi (2018) discusses his experiences as a queer male PE teacher, drawing out recommendations related to inclusivity in physical education and suggesting that systemic change could be encouraged as a result of findings from autoethnographic approaches. Thus autoethnographies align to Drummond’s (2010) call for a shift from normalised methods being used to analyse masculinities and the body and the stories about these ideas at a time when he describes his life as being consumed by sport.

Due to the openness that autoethnography encourages, the first author of this article used this method as a means of confronting dilemmas regarding self-presentation (Allen-Collinson, 2013). As a third-year student at university, he felt that he had witnessed an

involuntary shift in his own identity that he felt powerless over. This autoethnography gives an embodied insight into the inner struggles that he experienced while coming to grips with his new body presentation, perceived loss of identity, and adoption of a new identity that he rejected. Prior to the first author completing the reflective accounts, the first and second author engaged in discussions related to the methodological approach of autoethnography. Discussion was then ongoing as the level of detail portrayed in the stories was reviewed and the second author asked questions to encourage and invoke deep thought from the first author. Both parties also engaged in the theoretical analysis and application of Bourdieu's (1984) ideas and academic literature which were used to explain two personal 'moments' as products of wider social influences. Initially, the first author applied key theoretical ideas, and then the second author continued with the analysis, checking with the first author that the subsequent theoretical applications accurately continued to represent and explain the personal vignettes. This provided a useful way to embrace the involvement and detachment process of autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

The first author constructed the stories in a solitary environment at home, in the hope that he could engage in an honest account without the distraction of others when remembering the details and feelings that were experienced at the time. Autoethnography should provoke emotion in the reader (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013), meaning that the author wanted to accurately represent his feelings in order for readers to engage with his perspective. He went through a process of reflection where he thought back to important personal moments. Additionally, he engaged in ongoing reflexivity where he considered the self, contextualising why he felt a certain way, recognising experiences and realising the influence of past experiences and personal history on his presentation of events. Examples of this include the confession from the author that he made excuses to friends for gaining weight as well as feeling the need to change his body shape through gym workouts. The author engages in a reflexive process whereby he presents his perspective through his description of moments and then considers the presentation of knowledge by utilising literature to understand why he felt like this and to explain the way he represents how he felt at particular times. Reflexivity allows the author to 'self-consciously problematize a definitive sense of self and others, pursuing instead a richer understanding of the fragmented, temporally and contextually shifting nature of selves and relationships' (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013: 73). Allbon (2012: 64) further clarifies this process of self-reflection by explaining that the 'inward observations' are then 'turned back outwards as reflexive inquiry shaped by events and processes'. Writing the stories at home alone alleviated some of the first author's discomfort as he felt embarrassed about some of the deeply personal information being disclosed: he was more comfortable in what was perceived to be a safe space away from the gaze of others. Historically, people had identified him as a fitness enthusiast, and he feared that people would think that more recently he had neglected himself. Both the stories presented are reflections from 'moments' where the first author struggled with his body image. These stories have been told in the hope of giving readers an insight into personal identity struggles through self-narrative. Sparkes (1994, cited in Sparkes, 2002: 221) claimed that 'this focus on reader response encourages connection, empathy and solidarity, as well as emancipatory moments in which powerful insights into lived experiences of others are generated'.

In order to maintain the trustworthiness of this research, rigour was examined using Le Roux's (2017) five criteria for excellence in autoethnography: subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility and contribution. The research has been acknowledged as being self-consciously subjective and self-reflexive, it was written openly and honestly in the hope that the autoethnography resonates with others and promotes credibility of the research. Finally, the contribution of this research will hopefully 'extend knowledge, generate ongoing research, liberate, empower, improve practice, or make a contribution to social change' (Le Roux, 2017: 204). Le Roux (2017) also recognises that the excellence criteria are intrinsically linked to ethical considerations. Despite talking about personal experiences, others are acknowledged as part of the author's history and the described moments. The stories were given to some of the people who were referred to in the vignettes, so that they could discuss the accuracy of the representation of described events and the moments could be reconsidered if necessary (Landi, 2018; Legge, 2014). The following vignettes are the result of personal reflection and agreement from others involved in the moments.

### **'Class I – obese'**

It is Friday and I walk into the court room where the physical activity and health module takes place. Straightaway, I feel a jab in the side of my stomach as my friend laughs at me and says 'What's this?' I smile and sit down, embarrassingly making excuses as to why I have put on weight. The lecture begins and I stare at the clock while the lecturer discusses the dangers associated with obesity. She warns us that, despite some criticism, while it may not be the case for athletic people, the BMI calculation gives an accurate indication about one's body. Lupton (2013) recognises how there is an ongoing critical conversation related to the use of the BMI, particularly in relation to unquestionable assumptions in the medical and scientific realms which tend to link ill-health, disease and decreased life expectancy to the categories of 'overweight' and 'obese'. After the lecture, my partner for the case study grabs me and suggests that we go and complete the pre-assessment data; I agree and we go to the lab. We record my height, weight and respiratory function. We both go home and later, he emails me the pre-assessment data. I read down the side of the normative data classifications: 'class 1 – obese'. I sit there with my head in my hands, staring at the blurred desk through my teary eyes. 'That is it!' I think to myself. It is no longer a matter of individual interpretation, science itself has made a clear judgement about my body. I do not want to go to university on Monday, I feel so embarrassed. I wonder what people will think when they know that the case study is based on me. Ideas evidenced with scientific reasoning become taken for granted as normal and common sense (Pronger, 1995). Within a 'risk society', people perceived as experts create moral panic related to obesity. Obesity discourse categorises normal and abnormal bodies, and aligns individuals with being good social actors or bad social actors at risk of needing state health care (Gard and Wright, 2001). Individuals are encouraged to manage personal risk and being 'fat' indicates that person has morally failed (Butler-Wall, 2015). I sit there trying to convince myself that this scientific judgement is not so bad and I think of apologetic strategies to convince my partner that I am not the bad social actor that science suggests I am. I worry that now my label of 'class

1 – obese’ is recorded, I will be mocked and marginalised by my friends, even though they may not intend to hurt me. I am sure that they would not think that their mocking would affect me because of the person I used to be: a strong, toned personal trainer and gym enthusiast. Yet now my body has been labelled as outside of the normal range, it has been classified as deviant by the BMI calculation.

The evening comes and I sit in my desolate room, with the lights off, staring at the screen of my laptop. Only a few more weeks are left of university and then I am finished for good. The television is on in the background and I overhear an advert that talks about being ‘beach ready’. My heart sinks as I think about my current body and how I can physically feel myself growing out of my t-shirts that looked good on me last year. I am dreading this summer; perhaps I can work on my body project once I finish university, but for now, I do not have time. My gym membership has expired and I cannot afford another one. Last month’s gym membership was a waste of money as I hardly went; I was too busy delivering Chinese takeaways to earn enough money for petrol for the week. I think about my friends, who seem to have such an easy life. One has his own company, the other has his own house, and I am having to drive Chinese food around in order to survive. I hate having two jobs, I never have time to do anything that I want to.

I get out of bed and turn on the light. I stare at myself in the mirror, turning from side to side to see how I look from every angle. I sigh and reach up to my shelf and pull down the *Ultimate Body Plan* book: ‘How to transform your body in 12 weeks’ – that sounds good. So, if it is April, I could look more respectable by July when I go to Rome. Now, I need to find the time and money to get back to the gym before it is too late. I realise that every week I delay it, the worse I will look on holiday. Shilling (1993) explains how those with a lower socio-economic status develop an instrumental relation to their body as they have little time away from necessity. Bourdieu (1986) emphasises the link between economic and cultural capital by recognising that embodied capital requires the investment of personal time and that acquiring this form of cultural capital is dependent on free time away from economic necessity.

I sit thinking about my habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and who I am. I start to get feelings of resentment towards my parents for the way I am before feeling guilty for thinking this. I am the one to blame for getting to this size, nobody else is. It is me who has not trained and me who has been gluttonous. I debate with myself whether I am the hard-working person that I believe I am, or whether I am the lazy person that I imagine my friends think I am because I am fat. After all, fat people are automatically assumed to be lazy and undisciplined (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Discourses of healthism persuade us that health is visible through our physical appearance and corporeality (Kirk and Calquhoun, 1989).

The next day comes and it is glorious. It is the middle of April, yet, the sun is shining and the forecast says it is going to reach 25 degrees centigrade. ‘Let’s go to a theme park’, Danielle suggests, ‘you’ve been working so hard recently – just have a day off and enjoy the sun’. I smile and agree to go, it will be a lovely day out and I have been working hard. I put on a new top and get my new shorts out for the first time. I think to myself: this is the dress rehearsal for summer. I can hardly do the button up on my shorts. Suddenly my face changes and I find myself staring into the mirror again without even realising. Moving from side to side, I stare at the bulging layer of fat underneath the white t-shirt which is obviously protruding over the waistband of the shorts. Last

summer I was looking at myself in the mirror with delight, now, nine months later, I feel like a mess. I climb into the car, hiding behind the lenses of my sunglasses: I imagine myself to be less visible to others while I am wearing them. The stark reality of my body shape, highlighted by the materiality of the shorts, left me feeling uncomfortable. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, habitus is embodied. An individual's habitus is shaped by previous experiences which influence dispositions, and these dispositions affect an individual's opinions and views (Bourdieu, 1984). I was aware that my 'new' body would leave me with little embodied capital in many social fields (Bourdieu, 1986) so I looked for a way to 'hide', for example, behind my sunglasses.

We get to the theme park and I climb out of the car and stare at myself in the reflection of Danielle's car. I think: 'Damn, I'm doing it again! Why can't I stop?' I look around to see if anybody is watching me but they are not. This is a bad habit that I have developed, but I cannot help it. I am constantly monitoring myself, quite often without even realising. Last year I admired my body, now I am checking how visible my fat is. As I stand by the car, I consider strategies to hide my physique. I suck in my stomach to make myself look thinner just in case somebody is looking at me.

### **From measuring weight to lifting weight: failing at both**

It is one o'clock in the morning and I cannot sleep. I am having one of my self-reflexive moments where I think about what is going on in my life and how I should improve myself. It has been a while since I have trained as I am so busy. I do not have any money either. Curiosity gets the better of me: That is it! I climb out of bed and walk into the bathroom and over to the scales. After spending some time amending the settings of the scales, I manage to set them to measuring in kilograms. Right then. So I was 86 kg and I am expecting to be around 90 kg with my recent lifestyle. I step on the scales, then off, then on again. 'This cannot be right'. The scales are measuring 106 kg. I step off in disbelief and stand there on the cold bathroom tiles with my eyes closed. Multiple feelings shoot through my mind to the point where it was hard to pinpoint exactly which was the most dominant feeling: disappointment, embarrassment, disgust. Who am I? All of a sudden, I have become a monstrosity. Weighing and measuring practices can be seen to embarrass and discipline fat bodies (Sykes and MacPhail, 2008). So that is what Dean was indicating when he was poking me in the belly. That is why my friends have been telling me that I am 'tank'. It all makes sense: I am fat. Shilling (1993) describes the body as a project that is worked on over time, forming one's identity. As I stood on that cold bathroom floor, I thought about who I was and who I am now. I found it hard to fathom how quickly I had put on 20 kg in weight after taking just six months off of training. It was as though a demon had taken over my body, I had lost my identity. Feeling guilty, I get back into bed thinking of ways to correct my body. I'll ask Grandad to lend me some money in the morning and I can get a gym membership. I grab a book off my shelf that promises to transform the body in 12 weeks. It tells me to 'Incorporate lots of compound moves, especially Squats, Deadlifts, Lunges, Dips, and Pull-ups.' Great! I thought to myself, I can do dips and pull-ups with a 20 kg weight tied around my waist, this will be easy. Finally, I drift off to sleep, excited about signing up to the gym.

The next day arrives and I sign up to the gym. I feel excited and motivated. I warm up on the machine that works the latissimus dorsi muscles while I wait until the pull-up frame is free. Finally, I race over to it, and before I begin my set, I look over my shoulder to get a glimpse of who is watching. The room is full of other men in tank tops with rippling striated muscles. I think to myself: I may not be looking as good as they do, but I can sure show them what I am capable of with these pull-ups. Right this is it, let's go for it. I jump up and grip the bar, my feet dangle two inches above the ground. I pull through my arms and expect to go sailing up towards the bar. I go nowhere. I lose grip and land on my feet again. I stand there in silence, gazing at the reflection in the gym in the mirror, checking whether anybody has witnessed my complete failure. Nobody looks and I feel relieved. Reflecting on what happened, I felt quite embarrassed by my need to catch attention before showing off my capabilities. Having walked into the resistance area with an out of shape body, I felt that I needed to justify my status within the gym space. I recognised I had no physical capital (Bourdieu, 1984) due to being overweight and, therefore, I tried to compensate by showing my body's functional ability instead. I felt that I had to compensate for my overweight body within a masculine-dominated space, since my fat body did not feel very masculine (Sykes and McPhail, 2008). Yet, having assumed that my habitus would align with the doxa of the field, the reality of incompatibility between the doxa of the field and my habitus resulted in me gaining little capital in the field. Previously, I felt comfortable in the gym; starting conversations with people and talking to like-minded others for a prolonged time. I felt that I belonged there. When walking into the gym with an overweight body, it felt different. I felt that nobody in this space acknowledged me in the way I was used to; people did not speak with me in the same way. As Thompson (1991: 15) explains, 'a field is always the site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or alter the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it'. In my case, the field was the gym and where I had lost my physical capital, other forms such as my social capital also saw a decline too.

## Final thoughts

The openness that autoethnography allows has hopefully enabled others to gain a wider understanding of the pressures that certain discourses can create within Westernised culture, and particularly within specific PE, sport and exercise spaces. Reflections have been situated and explained through the application of Bourdieu's theoretical ideas in order to analyse personal experiences. From this reflection, partnered with the use of theoretical analysis, critical conclusions suggest that while discourse may influence how individuals identify themselves, an individual's habitus limits, or enables, opportunities related to body image and capital within a field, rather than it simply being attributed to an unlimited range of lifestyle choices. Alternatively, it should also be considered that sometimes lifestyle choices are made as a result of one's taste, which in turn, is influenced by the formation of one's habitus and social standing (Shilling, 1993).

The autoethnography has allowed personal reflection about taken-for-granted assumptions related to what a 'good' body should look like and be able to do. It allowed critical thought to be applied to practices encountered by the first author who would have unknowingly contributed to the doxa of the fields of the gym and the university degree programme which he was part of. It allowed an unpacking of previous experiences and

critical reflection on the way the first author felt in various situations, considering broader social influences to explain why he might have felt like that. This reflection allowed the first author to become aware of moments where his embodied habitus gained him capital in the field, but also the moments when his habitus did not align with the doxa of the field, which resulted in gaining little capital. It allowed the first author to critically realise ideas that he had not really considered or tried to understand in this level of detail before. Brown (2005) explains how Bourdieu recognised the possibilities of ‘new conditionings’ which allows the notion that the habitus can be changed as a result of heightened awareness and new knowledge. Embodied change can be an intentional personal initiation.

The messages and discourses being reproduced in many PE or sport and exercise science programmes may reassert which bodies are seen as valuable or which gain capital within these fields. At the same time, hidden messages are evident about less desirable bodies, those with an embodied habitus that does not marry with the field’s doxa, which results in such bodies gaining little capital within these educational spaces. As many individuals undertaking these degrees may aspire to become physical educators, it is important to consider how the reproduction of doxa and the hidden curriculum may filter into the school education system, which influences generations of children. Here, often, there is a reproduction of knowledge about particular embodied habitus gaining capital within the field of PE and other fields centred on physicality, or broader social fields with doxa that promote the same views about valuable and desirable bodies. However, there is also the opportunity to resist these values and norms through transparent critical conversations. Yet, as Brown (2005) suggests, change will only come from knowledge creation that challenges existing assumptions and characterises new conditionings of the habitus of PE teachers and others within PE, sport and exercise science fields. New conditionings of the habitus of these social actors will provide the best possibility for a change to the doxa in the field, and therefore, who possesses capital.

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