



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

School of Education

Te Kura Toi Tangata

Waikato Journal of Education

Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

Volume 10 : 2004

10th Anniversary Issue: Commentary by Professor Clive McGee
Inaugural Addresses by Professors Bevan Grant & Doug Booth
Special Section on Bodies in Motion

WAIKATO JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

TE HAUTAKA MĀTAURANGA O WAIKATO

VOLUME 10, 2004

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KNOWING “WHAT MY BODY CAN DO”: PHYSICAL MOMENTS IN THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF PHYSICALITY

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the contradictions of femininity and physicality by focusing on body narratives and the lived effects of physical experiences. In particular it focuses on the classic problem of inhibited movement and lack of force or skill in the dominant female physicality of emphasized femininity. It concentrates on understanding certain specific experiences of femininity—such as feeling “utterly useless”—as embedded in the social production of physicality. Women interviewed for a study on physicality and empowerment give some insight into how physicality changes when they describe moments of physical consciousness in their lives. Once they feel and come to know their own physicality, they can also uncover the conditions which produced it. Examples of ‘physical moments’ are interpreted briefly with a discussion of their significance in the research process itself. As defining points in lived experience, physical moments help educators, theorists and researchers to understand the ways in which physicality is socially and subjectively produced.*

INTRODUCTION

I have always been curious about the extremely strong, skilled and dedicated women who emerge as accomplished climbers in high alpine expeditions or as the top competitors in a wilderness adventure pursuit, but say that they were “useless” at sport and physical education in school. New Zealand mountaineer Lydia Bradey, for example, was the first woman to summit Mount Everest solo and without oxygen (Bradey, 1989). She now guides expeditions to remote mountainous regions such as Mongolia and lives in the Southern Alps. A full-page newspaper feature about her begins with her own claim that she was “utterly useless” at school sport (Thomas, 2002). It is the significance of this perception to women themselves that interests me and also the apparent fascination of it for others. With this statement the author chooses to introduce his subject, who has continued climbing, teaching, guiding and selling outdoor equipment in the sixteen years since her dramatic, even disputed, Everest climb. His article starts with her admission that she was awkward and uncoordinated when she was a girl. The fascination seems to be with the question of how she managed to become one of the leading women climbers in the world.

My fascination with this claim is with the way it is treated as confession and as an indication of a rougher, embodied raw material underlying the calm, polished exterior that casually holds her ice axe. It projects the expert woman climber as that much more fragile because she was a gawky kid, possibly not ‘popular’ or at least not in the sporting crowd of ‘natural’ athletes. The associations with non-athletic, ill-fitting school children are all drawn into the descriptive frame of reference. Associations of inhibition with inability tell us more about her as a gendered subject than as a physical subject. The implication is either that she has overcome a sort of disability in order not to “climb like a girl!”

or that she still lives a “feminine bodily existence” (Young, 1990), which she has disguised and augmented with training and practice. Her muscular arms and strong hands show that she is not an ‘ordinary’, non-athletic woman.

This paper examines the contradictions of femininity and physicality such as this one by focusing on body narratives and the lived effects of physical experiences. Its analytical framework encompasses feminist phenomenology (e.g., Alcoff, 1997; Bartky, 1990; Grimshaw, 1999; Young, 1990), based on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) who suggested that all knowledge of our selves and the social world is ‘lived’ as it is derived from our sensing, perceiving and moving bodies. It also encompasses social theory of the body and gender, based on the work of Grosz (1994), Crossley (1996) and Turner (1996), all of whom approach embodiment as a dynamic of phenomenological experience and surface inscription of bodies in society. In this way they account for both interior and exterior modes of bodily knowing, that is, they theorise, to various degrees, constant psychic-social interaction as producing embodied experience. Both of these theoretical starting points are useful to this project in that they begin with bodies, but do not end there or rest on a static conception of embodiment. Rather, they offer much from which to theorise embodiment as an active and interactive social process in which physical identity is something accomplished within everyday practices of social relations (Connell, 1987). Physical identity is socially produced. My examination of the lived experiences constitutive of becoming strong women is therefore necessarily a sociological one with contributions to make to literature in the sociology of education which is interested in gender, physicality and subjectivity (e.g., Davies, 1989; Hasbrook, 1993, 1999; Gilroy, 1989, 1997; Jones, 1993; Lenskyj, 1986; Shilling, 1991; Smith, 1990; Thorne, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1991) and the many other feminist investigations which echo these concerns (e.g., Cahill, 2001; MacKinnon, 1987; McCaughey, 1997; Theberge, 1991, 1997, 1999).

Within the theoretical parameters outlined above, my analysis concentrates on understanding certain specific experiences of gender—and resistance—as embedded in the social production of physical identity, also termed physicality. ‘Physicality’ is defined in two ways in the literature (McDermott, 1996, 2000). First, it is investigated as the intensity of bodily skill, aggression, force and risk required of participants in any physical activity, but mainly in sporting contests (e.g., Allin, 2000; Theberge, 1997; Young & White, 1995; Young, 1997). The display of physicality in this sense is culturally enforced as representing masculinity and embodying the promise of physical force through which heterosexual male dominance in the gender order is maintained (Connell, 1983; Whitson, 1990). It could be summarised as the social productivity of “forceful bodies.”

In a second approach, physicality is defined as the habitual mode of living our bodies, the ways of walking, standing, sitting, moving and gesturing through which we project social identity, embody difference and perceive bodily sensations in response to other bodies (e.g., Brace-Govan, 2002; Hasbrook & Harris, 1999; McCaughey, 1997). More concisely, it is the social productivity of “moving bodies.” Both approaches indicate that physicalities are socially mediated and best understood as practised, not possessed. Hence physicalities are shaped by social forces as much as they in turn shape bodies into genders, ethnicities, class comportment and sexual styles. “Throwing like a girl” (Young, 1990) may be understood as exemplifying both of these definitions; physical actions lacking force embody femininity as much as moving “like a girl”. As social practices, therefore, “physical skill, strength, size, gesture and posture

provide us with gendered identities and communicate our gender to others" (Hasbrook & Harris, 1999, p. 303).

The first feminist use of the term 'physicality' is credited to MacKinnon (1982) in her theory of gender. It was, however, her keynote address the same year at a Women and Sport conference which was ground-breaking and has shaped feminist discussions of physicality since (Kane, 1995; McDermott, 1996; Theberge, 1985; see MacKinnon, 1987). This speech is best read alongside Connell's (1983) first essay in *his* theory of gender, which focuses on the physical experience of masculinity for boys and men and has been far-reaching in informing the pro-feminist sociology literature (e.g., Connell, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002; Messner, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Whitson, 1990, 1994).

In this paper I focus on one aspect of a recent study of women's physicality and empowerment in the outdoors. In the project, 15 respondents participated in a three-part research design involving structured, in-depth interviews, life history narratives (see Connell, 1992; Middleton, 1987) and memory work writing (see Haug, 1987). An emergent research theme was the incidence and nature of life-changing, bodily experiences which many participants described as happening in adolescence, a time when girls are craving independence while still materially regulated by relations within their home, school and church (Pipher, 1994; Scraton, 1987). With increasing focus in society on damaging body image practices and "Body Talk" therapy sessions¹ for young women, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of what happens at the level of girls' bodies which might offer opportunities for resisting dominant expectations of an 'ordinary' or "emphasized femininity" (Connell, 1987) and open up possibilities for moving toward physically empowering independence.

The experiences of trained outdoorswomen tell us that the embodiment of 'ordinary' femininity is not straightforward. Although Lydia Bradey was "super-slow" and not very coordinated, she was physically active and took up tramping enthusiastically. She may have felt and exhibited the markings of a socialized feminine embodiment, but she was able to pursue adventure, risk and travel to high places in her teens. Is her self-characterization about her experience of being a girl or about her experience of her body? If being "utterly useless" was a bodily disposition, it seems contradictory that she could pursue physically demanding activities in the outdoors. She tells the newspaper reporter that she "was 'overjoyed' to discover tramping because all it required was the capacity to get strong" (Thomas, 2002, p. B1).

Was Lydia Bradey, then, 'socialized' into being a girl, but not quite completely? Was she actually a capable youth who was told in so many social 'messages' that she was awkward and unsure that she became those qualities? If awkward, *was* she unsure as well; do tentativeness and inhibition always emerge from feminized bodies as Young (1990) suggests? Did she then run around with boys and get strong by being a 'tomboy'? How *do* women "get strong?"

Studying Physicality

It is in this context that my empirical study investigated the particular experiences of women who use physical strength and competence in their everyday work. It asked 15 women who work as outdoor educators, instructors and leaders about their experiences growing up as girls in New Zealand and their bodily perceptions

¹ Such as the one advertised by Student Health Services, University of Otago, Dunedin New Zealand, 2004.

and practices as skilled, strong women. It focused on what led these women to the point at which they sought work in the outdoors, immersing groups in what is professionally known as experiential learning, preparing students and clients for self-reliant wilderness travel. It especially pursued the issue of how they became strong, despite also, for more than a few, feeling as girls that they were “useless,” could not run, did not like sport and just did not “fit in.”

The research found identifiable times in these women’s lives in which they witnessed, and thus came to know, their own physical ability, while also seeing it as historically shaped, biographical experience. In what I came to call ‘physical moments,’² there was potent recognition by individual women of how their bodies had been socially constrained to produce a certain type of heterogendered physicality and feminine subjectivity. Through physical (re)training, a ‘new’ body emerged which in turn produced a new sense of subjectivity.

Through the qualitative data analysis, discussed in more detail later, it became apparent to me that there was a notable significance to experiences in which girls and women found out *what their bodies could do*.³ The discovery of their bodily capabilities as a source of physical potential which could complicate the effects of gender difference in their lives was an exciting turning point. Study participant Marnie Webb,⁴ for example, disliked school sport intensely and would not participate. She felt that she had “not a very good body.” As an adult she did not “trust” it, despite actively raising four children. “I mean, I didn’t do anything physically—any kind of exercise. So, um, there was quite a lot about [my body] that I didn’t know. You know, I didn’t know I could run.” At age 35, she took an Outward Bound course to get out of the house. Today, she goes to the gym three times a week, enjoys mountain biking, does women’s triathlons and guides yacht charters for women. Her physical independence gives her a sense of “total excitement” and huge possibility: “I can move around the world with my own strength.” As three longer examples in the next section demonstrate, the lived effects of physical experiences are often incorporated into dominant social relations until the instant in which the conditions which produced them are exposed.

Biographical Body Talk⁵

“I Grew Up Thinking I Was Pretty Useless”

Elaine Ross uses this phrase to describe her childhood. When she got to high school in the early 1980s, she was “pretty unhappy.” She recalls now, “I felt that I just didn’t fit into what the feminine stereotype was. And I was sort of uncoordinated and I could never dress properly....I felt there was something wrong with me, because I didn’t fit into it.” A feeling of not fitting in is often the source of misery and discomfort for girls and may become the point of dissonance in their consciousness of gender (Brumberg, 1997; Pipher, 1994; Rogers, 1993).

² See also MacKinnon (1989, p. 102) for use of the term ‘moment’ to describe consciousness.

³ This phrase is suggestive of the landmark sociological discussion on “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1991). I considered its salience more closely after hearing it from more than one respondent and reading it in other accounts of physical empowerment (e.g., McCaughey, 1997). I came to interpret it as “doing physicality.”

⁴ Participants are referred to by pseudonyms. Verbatim data chunks attributed to participants here are coded for retrieval in the original study (Bell, 2002).

⁵ I used the term ‘body talk’ to organise thematic categories for data analysis after hearing it from one of my respondents; it is also used by Young, White and McTeer (1994).

However, it is not always a catalyst for finding an alternative physicality, as it was for the women in these three examples. It is more often the psychic inscription of femininity itself as difference: being a girl *means* feeling "useless" (Young, 1990).

Elaine's family enjoyed camping trips to isolated spots when she was growing up, so she was not unfamiliar with the outdoors when she went on school camps. Yet, she felt shy and awkward. She makes a connection between physical and social awkwardness; the latter was a bodily experience for Elaine. "If I wasn't as shy, I think I would have got on with the boys quite well. And if I had been better at motor skills and motor sports, you know, I might have played with them more. Because I wasn't very good at that." She felt that she did not fit in with the girls or the boys. A key to Elaine's body talk is the link she makes between her social awkwardness with boys and a lack of ability, pointing to the way in which physical coordination and lack of coordination have particular social effects. They each construct physical difference through bodily movement and thus both ingrain and display a "physical sense of genderedness" (Connell, 1987, p. 84).

"I couldn't have coped without the Girl Guides," she says now. Everything changed for Elaine when she joined the Girl Guides at age 13. The following year she became a Ranger Guide and started learning the specific skills for camping, tramping and sailing. There she "grew to love the outdoors." She experienced social acceptance in the all-female environment at the same time. She recalls, "that's where I started to think, 'Hey, I'm really enjoying myself. People are laughing at my jokes here. They don't mind that I don't quite dress right.' And I think that kept me going. So the outdoors have [sic] always been that source of solace for me. And made me feel really good about myself." Elaine received leadership training through Guides and did some skills instructing to other Guides. Of her two sisters now, she says, "I think I am probably the most epic one."

Elaine's 'physical moment' ended years of feeling "frustrated with being female" at the level of her already comfortable physicality through the acquisition of motor skills with other girls. For a short but crucial time, Girl Guides gave Elaine the "protected space" (Pipher, 1994, p. 266; see also Miranda, 1985) which helped her to see herself become a more skilful woman.

A New Physique: Exercise and Eating

Charlie Cooper's body talk is also characterized by comments about how useless she was. She habitually thought of herself that way: "I used to say, 'Oh God! I'm useless!'" Unlike Elaine Ross, however, who had found that she could be true to herself in Girl Guides despite her awkwardness, Charlie's 'physical moment' revolves around a change in her body. For her, increased exercise, weight loss and healthier eating produced a new body shape which converged with a discovery of what her body could do and how that could propel her into an autonomous career. A new inscription at the surface of her body worked its way inward to shift her sense of being useless.

Charlie calls herself "the tomboy in between the sexes" in her family. Although close to her older sisters, she spent less time with them once they found boyfriends. Charlie herself "never had any boyfriends," she says, dismissing as "boring" one interested boy. "I just wanted to get on with life and pass my School C and write music and play guitar and go play games with my brothers and make bicycles because we were going to save the fuel crisis!" Her idealism and exuberance are typical of girls before puberty, according to an American therapist:

"Most preadolescent girls are marvellous company because they are interested in everything—sports, nature, people, music and books....Girls of this age bake pies, solve mysteries and go on quests" (Pipher, 1994, p. 18).

Though Charlie tinkered with her brothers and did athletics with all four siblings on Saturday mornings, she was not always allowed to do what the boys did. She was not allowed to sleep in a tent in the back yard with them, for example. When her father built an addition onto the house she did sleep under the stars on its balcony, where she was safer.

Charlie's mother, though, encouraged her to become a YWCA Camp Leader for the summer before she started seventh form. Charlie wanted to be a park ranger, inspired by the first woman ranger who had worked in Tongariro National Park. In the May holidays, she visited the Outdoor Pursuits Centre on the edge of the park. "I bought my own pack, bought my own boots, bussed down there, never been away from home that far by myself. And, um- did my first- seeing snow, did my first kayaking, did my first BIG tramping...I was stuffed!!" She was invited to come back to join a more adventurous group. She needed to get fit.

Charlie was 17 and it was a project which changed her life. She was waiting to hear from the Centre, she recalls. "In the meantime, Sarah and I went cycling around Auckland, by ourselves, for our August holidays. I went from ten and a half stone to nine stone, I did yoga, started eating- not white bread, got out of white bread! So my body changed. Yeah? My body went from a useless, overweight, fat blob to probably the same physique I have now. That had a major effect on me, [my instructor] and that course, the May one. Then I went back again and did the December one. But by then I was a changed woman."

Learning to Use Her Body With Force

The defining moment in the biography of her body also came in adolescence for Siobhan O'Brien. When she was 15, she was trying to avoid participating in a physical education softball lesson and took a spot in the outfield. "I was fat, you see," she explains. "I thought of myself as obese. I was always told I was fat by the boys in my family, so I thought of myself as fat and therefore useless at physical things, so I never tried." She describes the physical education teacher as "a very large woman, a very big, muscular woman...She was a great big, energetic, wonderful person, always saying good things about us." When the ball was hit into the outfield and Siobhan just looked at it, the teacher called out to her, "For God's sake, throw it girl!!"

Her exhortation interrupted Siobhan's passive state. Siobhan threw the ball back as hard as she could, the teacher responded, "Hooray! Well done!" and Siobhan understood that perhaps here she could be allowed to do physical things successfully. It was a particular moment in which she learned that she could use her abject girl's body with force. The effect of that physical act was to begin a reinscription of her body and the passive state into which she felt she had been forced by the family bullying. She says, "I wasn't really pathetic; I was angry." Anger exploded through her body that day. She was indignant that her teacher did not see that she was incapable of throwing with power because she was a girl—and fat. "I got so wild that...I chucked the bloody thing as hard as I could wanting it to land between her eyes."

This visceral release of physical power is a key to Siobhan's body talk. It was the catalyst for a completely new attitude to how she spent her time: "so in the sixth form I played soccer, I played hockey and trampoline, I played squash, I

played badminton, I swam, I ran, I did Ranger Guides, I was a house captain at school." She was soon "traipsing around the mountains" with the Catholic Tramping Club. She exercised at home, walked everywhere, ran to swim training in the morning and jogged in her lunch hour. "I put myself on a pretty strict diet. I got to the stage where I knew exactly how much I had to eat each day, so that I could do all the exercise I was doing and I was- I had it fine-tuned that I knew when my body needed more energy. And I would eat something small."

Siobhan refocused her life. "When that thing happened at school, it started a whole thing, I started rebelling." She began with small acts of resistance to her gendered subordination within her male dominated family, which had included being prohibited from wearing jeans. She swore like her brothers and "was pretty stroppy from time to time." She stopped going to church. With a reason to extricate herself from the housework routines, she achieved an important autonomy which she had not before been able to manage. "Once I started doing all those things, like walking across town to training, I just got up and did it...I didn't tell [anyone] any more. It just happened. And I just took over my own life and drew a lot of strength from that."

Siobhan remembers the instant that changed how she knew herself, because she did not recognise her body. It consolidated the time in which a reinscription of her passivity had repositioned her in the physical relations of her family and schooling. It was an image of herself in the mirror that in turn changed her inner sense of who she was becoming: "I was so fit when I was 16- I got a fright one day. I was getting dressed in my bedroom and looked- I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I didn't realize it was me at first, because there was all this- My torso was all muscle. You could just see these rippling muscles down my torso."

The Significance of a 'Physical Moment'

When my study participant Siobhan O'Brien called this turning point in her life a "defining moment," she provided my interpretive inquiry with a research tool. Other researchers have noted the utility of just such a methodological tool:

While much of social science...glosses over central moments in lives that revolve around indecision, confusions, contradictions, ironies, critical incidents, fateful moments, and turning points, the life history approach takes these seriously to understand how they are played out in everyday life as past experiences interact with and shape the future. (Sparkes, 1997, p. 105)

Indeed, constant comparison data analysis (Patton, 1990) allowed me many more insights into various life choices of each of the participants than I could ever hope to discuss. In order to sort the data, I started by constructing chronologies for the 15 life histories and looking for "defining moments." I noted physical experiences recounted by the women, from bulimia, sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancies to injuries, karate competitions and epic wilderness expeditions. I found I was writing "BODY" in large letters across these timelines at points at which the participants had experiences that redefined their relationship with their bodies irrevocably. I then focused solely on their body narratives (Sparkes, 1999) at these points. As I listened for a hidden, but deeply felt meaning or "gestalt" (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997) underlying these narratives, I went to the women's interview

transcripts and memory writing for more context. A 'physical moment' emerged as the point in which a woman's physicality materialized in her own consciousness. Whether it was as muscles, motor skills or a new physique, the women could never 'go back' following these moments. I became interested in the social effects of this kinaesthetic consciousness.

It is clear that there is a dual aspect to the significance of this method. Crucial to the application of such a method is grounding the interpretation of life-changing 'moments' in a theoretical analysis. 'Physical moments' also provide an analytical tool. The term had started as a way of unpacking life experience, but became a significant conceptual framework for interpreting and theorising the data. What I had deemed a 'physical moment' for methodological convenience is clearly a turning point precisely because it makes visible a woman's physicality as her mode of becoming a subject. I applied the concept primarily as I realised that the participants had changed their perceptions of themselves once they *knew* how their physical capabilities changed their possibilities for future action. They had become conscious of the conditions which had produced their particular bodily disposition in the very process of resisting and changing those conditions (MacKinnon, 1989). Thus 'physical moments' are essential to a feminist practice of consciousness-raising as a form of physical empowerment (e.g., Cahill, 2001; Hall, 1996; McCaughey, 1997; Wolf, 1993).

The Social Production of Physicality

The pedagogical literature has been slow to respond to the need to understand body-changing 'physical moments' in the context of learning in the outdoors. One of the greatest obstacles is the denial of physicality as an attribute of femininity, since it is implicated already in the oppositional production of masculinity (Hasbrook & Harris, 1999; McDermott, 1996). The 'women in the outdoors' literature is structured by a problematic dichotomy of 'the psychological' as safe/feminine and 'the physical' as unsafe/masculine (e.g., Hart & Silka, 1994; Mitten, 1992; Powch, 1994). It therefore sustains the heterogendered normativity of physical ability (Nielsen et al., 2000) and, indeed, preempts theorising the inscription of femininity in physical strength. Pedagogical experiences of "personal growth," that is, psychological change through difficult challenges, rest on the new sense of self *produced by* visceral bodily experience. The new self-knowledge acquired is not mastery of one's body, but rather of knowing and trusting one's ability to move through, to experience and to change in the 'physical' demands of difficult situations.

Research participants in my study emphasize that a sense of self-confidence comes from complete reliance on themselves in hard, physical situations. Ianissi Gray, for example, takes alpine tramping trips alone of four weeks on average. She says that she goes alone "to see what's there...stop when I want to stop...achieve my objectives with the gear in my pack, wherever I am....As long as no one comes out [to search] for me." Similarly, Siobhan O'Brien says,

it's doing something that I decided deliberately to do, knowing that I had to take complete care of myself while I'm doing it and- I mean, if I was chopped out [rescued] from an area, I'd feel totally demoralized!...[it] helps me to gain a sense of confidence in myself.

"There's a great attraction to being self-sufficient," agrees Marnie Webb. Knowing that one is "strong enough to do it," as Siobhan says, comes with a new sense that one is reliant upon one's own body and can be autonomous within that body in a way not before known. Another outdoor leader describes her experience:

A key moment...in restructuring my relationship to food was when [sic] I faced a decision with clear consequences for my physical survival. I needed to eat in order to complete the wilderness journey. As a result of this I became more attuned to my bodily survival needs....I recognized that I could experience a different sense of self, which lost associations with body image preoccupation and created a place of freedom from anorexia nervosa. (Richards, 1999, p. 23)

In the outdoors, consciousness of self is achieved only with bodily risk. Rescues are resisted until life is threatened and the wilderness traveller takes pleasure in possessing the necessary strength and rescue skills in reserve. A 'life and death' situation might be imminent in a single river crossing or the decision to eat; the action it elicits might happen before there is subjective awareness of it. The lived effects of even a sole act of physical self-reliance reinscribe social subjectivity.

It is not just a sense of capability that emerges, but a sense of knowing how to control a situation, how to exercise knowledge and power in action (Alcoff, 1997). *Knowing how* to do something powerful is skilled and experiential knowledge which comes with training (Alcoff, 1997). It is not surprising that this happens in martial arts: "I'd always been an athlete," says one woman, "so thinking of myself as physically capable was nothing new to me. But *feeling* powerful was something else" (Solomon, 1994, p. 40; emphasis in original). Another woman says, "I had just learned to kill someone with my bare hands...nothing felt quite like knowing that my body is capable of lethal force. I felt like I had been let in on a well-kept secret" (McCaughey, 1997, p. 86).

In my research study, participant Jo Patterson echoes these thoughts: "I think I already had that physical capability there. It was actually the skills that- [gave me] the use of that physical capability in specific ways." Participant Charlie Cooper puts it succinctly:

It's made me very confident in what my body can do, whereas some women don't know that. I think that's been a real- quite special part of being an outdoor woman is [that] you know your body can run you that distance....You know you can do those things.

In contrast to women who do not know what their bodies can do, trained outdoor leaders and educators must first of all know what their bodies can do. It is not an experience that is common to women, even in menstruation or childbirth, nor one that is easily known if it is not lived. It is more common that untrained women do not know how to move or what to do with their bodies in physically demanding situations (McCaughey, 1997). Femininity depends for its very cultural definition on this *not knowing*, on the inhibition of the subjective effects of living the body as an object (MacKinnon, 1987; Young, 1990). Ultimately, bodies script social subjectivity in movements, gestures and skills and so not to know one's own bodily capacities is socially inhibiting as well as physically awkward.

CONCLUSION

Lived, physical 'moments' are times of social and subjective change that reveal the conditions which produced them. This paper has explored their dual purpose in the research process. While they offer researchers a means for sorting data and highlighting 'life-changing' experiences, they also provide a theoretical basis for analysing biographical body narratives. My study of strong outdoors women found that many had significant physical moments of changed consciousness when they were adolescents. They could suddenly see their inhibited coordination and competence, even as they were reshaping their physiques and rescripting self-deprecating body talk. Importantly, physical moments begin with physical experiences of such visceral grip that they change 'everything.' Within the intensity of physical training in strength, force and skill, these women learned, furthermore, that they could reinscribe the abject physicality of emphasized femininity once they knew what their bodies could do. Thus, physical moments are defining points in lived experience which help us as educators, theorists and researchers to understand the contradictory ways in which physicality is socially and subjectively produced.

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