Gendered bodies under scrutiny: Women’s embodied experiences of aquatic physical activity in the United Kingdom

Rachel Williams, MSc by Research student
Dr Adam Evans
Dr Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
SCHOOL OF SPORT AND EXERCISE SCIENCE
Introduction

• Participation in swimming has been shown to be consistently decreasing in England since 2002 (Evans & Sleap, 2013).

• Existing sociological research which surrounds the Aquatic Environment identifies the significance that lifelong embodied experiences have on participation in aquatic activity (Evans and Sleap 2012, 2013).

• Inequality still exists in terms of participation rates and ease of access between some social groups (Sport England, 2013).

• Preliminary research suggests that gendered roles within aquatic leisure can be strongly influenced by the presence of other bodies, including other parents and children (Evans and Allen-Collinson 2014).

• Embodied elements of these experiences, however, have yet to be studied in depth.
Presentation Aims

Highlight how women negotiate complex discourses surrounding motherhood in leisure.

Investigate Postnatal woman's perceptions of Aquatic Leisure Activity from a Foucauldian perspective.

Discuss the study implications with regards to health, wellbeing, safety and the reproduction of gender within leisure.
Expectations for male and female roles within British society have altered over the past sixty years.

The gendering of family roles remains a contentious issue!

Functionalist perspective on gendered family roles (Structural Theory)

- Socialisation into gendered identities carries on into adulthood as individuals are created through the discourses which produce a person’s reality (Harper & Rail, 2012, p. 71).

- Sociological research surrounding women’s leisure has developed considerably over the past thirty years (Henderson and Gibson, 2013).

Michel Foucault emphasis on heterogeneity of roles (Post-Structural Theory)
Michel Foucault

(Michel Foucault; a leading theorist applied within sport sociology)

- Subjectivity, meaning and language form the foci of poststructuralist analysis (Weedon, 1987).

- Foucauldian perspectives offer feminist scholars concepts and theories that can be used to resist discourses that marginalise women’s experiences, bodies, knowledge and existence (Weedon, 1987).

Four Analytic Tools
(illustrate how individuals are controlled and regulated, Foucault (1978))

- the art of distribution
- organisation of geneses
- control of activity
- Composition of forces
Methodology

- Ethics
- Case Study
- Procedure:
  - Twenty semi-structured interviews were completed with postnatal women aged 18-45, who had given birth within the previous four years.
  - Non-participant observations were completed over a four week period at recreational swimming sessions and aqua baby classes.

08163346@students.lincoln.ac.uk
Adevans@lincoln.ac.uk
jallencollinson@lincoln.ac.uk
Data Collection Timeline

- Interview Schedule (1) & Pilot Study (1)
  - November 2013
- Revised Interview Schedule (2) & Pilot Study (2)
  - December 2013
- 20 Interviews (Postnatal Women)
  - January 2014
- 6 Weeks of Observations
Methodology

- **Data Analysis (Gratton and Jones 2010)**
  - Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed.
  - Transcripts were read and re-read in order to identify consistent themes and anomalous examples.
  - Codes were then grouped into higher order themes in order to avoid a large number of idiosyncratic examples.
Emergent Results/Discussion

• Gender presentation of the self seemed to be age related and contoured by media discourses of gender

• Mothers’ embodied experiences focused on managing their babies’ bodies with regards to hygiene, pool temperature & safety

• Immersion of babies in water was problematic for mothers – threat to the bounded body
Conclusion

- Health & Risk – perceptions of risk when swimming are not always commensurate with actual risk

- Wellbeing – linked to women’s socially produced role as ‘carers’

- This study helps demonstrate the need to challenge gender stereotypes in leisure in order to promote equal access to leisure activities for men and women
References


Any Questions?