



Teenagers and Embodied Excellence

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Background study

- *Schooled Bodies? Negotiating Adolescent Validation Through Press, Peers and Parents*
- 5 schools in the greater Dublin area
- Students in first year and transition year
- 242 open-ended questionnaires
- 30 students interviewed twice
- 15 boys and 15 girls

Embodied Excellence and the Media

- **Validation of the body by popular culture**
- *Magazines, looking at models and film stars and people like that. I'd have loads of magazines and I'm always looking at them. (Chloe, 13)*
- *In all the shopping centres and in the ads everywhere it's always good-looking people you see. (Rob, 16)*
- **Active agents rather than cultural dopes**
- *Naturally you're going to see sexy, good-looking people on TV and in shop windows or else they wouldn't make any money. Nobody would want to buy the product if the models were big fat people. (Mark, 12)*
- *Celebrities get loads of money out of saying they have a new diet or whatever. (Anna, 16)*

Policing the body

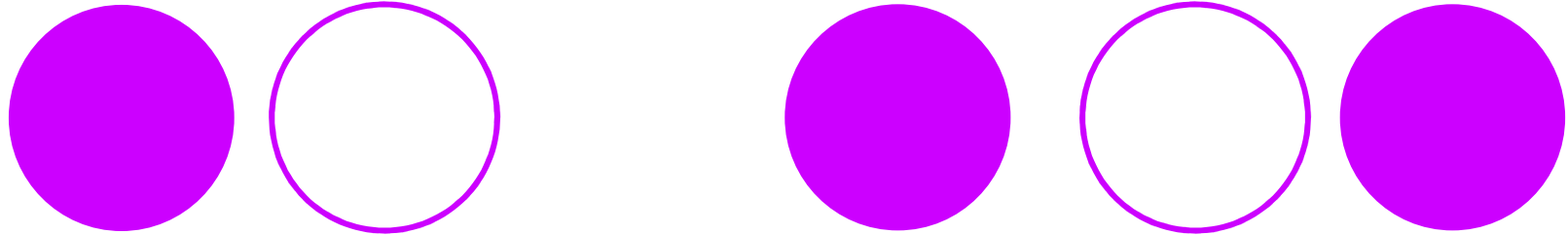
- **Girls policing girls' bodies – incessant conversation**
- *In class it'd be 'oh she's after loosing loads of weight' or 'she's after putting loads of weight on'...Everyday there's like a comment about someone. (Lynn, 16)*
- **Boys policing boys' bodies**
- *I'd say it's because they think it's macho not to say anything. They don't want to be girly... I wouldn't personally talk about stuff like that with my friends. We wouldn't mention it to anybody. (Ger, 13)*
- *When I thought I was fat I kept it to myself. Didn't really see it as any of their (friends) business. Usually I just keep stuff like that to myself. I'd say most fellas are like that but yet they care. Guys don't really talk to each other about stuff like that. (Barry, 16)*
- *So do how do boys police boys' bodies?*
- *They're always measuring strengths. (Daniel, 13).*
- *Physical messing just happens with all the boys. (Josh, 13)*

Boys neutralising academia through sport

- Gill, Henwood and McLean:

‘Men were keen to distance themselves from being seen as too serious, too committed, too earnest – things that were likely to attract a comment about obsession. Being cool seemed to involve a stance of distance or disinterest’ (2005: 54)

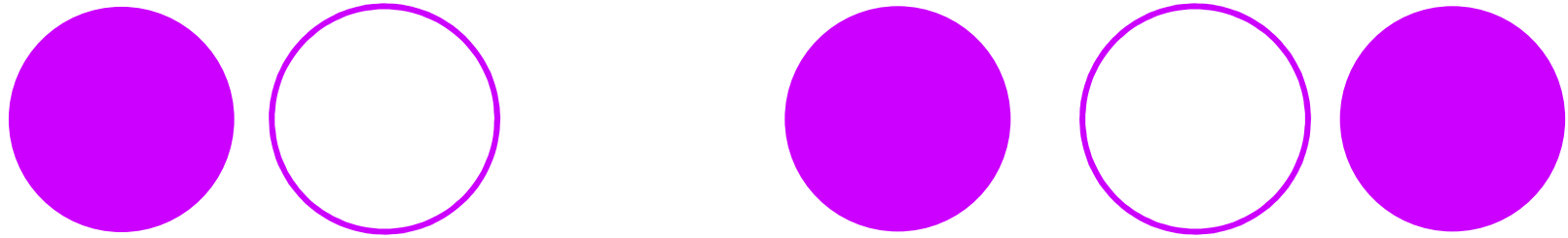
- *I just know an awful lot of people who don't like me...I know they don't particularly like me for different reasons. Maybe they don't like my attitude to schoolwork because I consider it to be serious. I do really try whereas some people don't really care about school and they should or maybe they do care but they don't want to let on. I'm not afraid to let on that I care about school because it is important, but some fellas are afraid to let on because it makes you 'uncool' to care about school. (Brian, 16)*



- *If all they want to do is learn and study and do their homework then it's real hard to do anything with them. Whereas if they're just naturally smart and they like coming out socialising and doing sport then it's alright. (Kevin, 13)*
- *Some people who are very smart might not get involved in after school activities but just focus on school. Everyone knows they shouldn't take it that seriously. It's good not to let homework and schoolwork take over your day but to do other stuff as well. You should get involved in activities after school, like all your friends and then you'll become more popular, but if you don't do any sports after school and you're clever, then you probably won't be popular. (Josh, 13)*
- *Yeah I get on well academically but not in sport. It's either academic or sports, well you could be good at both but I'm not great at sport. (Gillian, 16)*

Prestigious school activities

- 'For much of the time the boys defined their masculinity through action, and the most esteemed and prevalent resource that the boys drew on across all three schools to gain status was physicality/athleticism, which was inextricably linked to the body in the form of strength, power, skill, fitness and speed... Sporting success was a key signifier of successful masculinity, and high performance in sport and games was generally the single most effective way of gaining popularity and status in the male peer group' (Swain, 2003: 302)
- **Very specific activities indicated status**
 - *If you're on the soccer team here it's pretty big because if you're on the chess team who cares. Soccer is cool. (Mark, 12)*
 - *Everyone wants to play soccer, then rugby, then Gaelic and so on. The chess people would probably be known to be like nerds. (Darren, 12)*

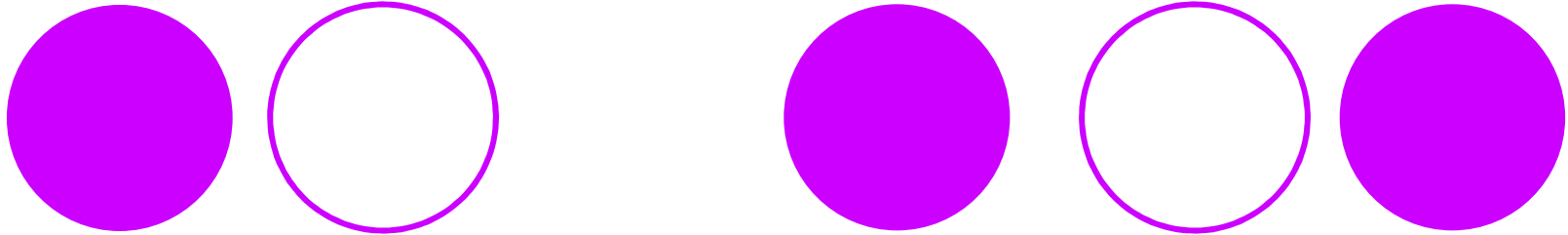


- **The status of male sporting heroes confirms the prestige attached to competition and the competition for prestige.**
- This makes sports such as football “extraordinarily popular, with high rates of participation by adolescent boys” (Connell, 2005: 15)
 - *If you're on the school sports teams you're going to get respect. (Cian, 16)*
 - *Everyone knows you if you're on the main rugby team everyone respects you. In the older age groups you get away with a lot more things. Everyone would want to hang around with you....The rugby teams are just regarded as better. They get away with a lot of things from teachers. Senior and Junior Cup teams would be regarded highly and in our year if you're on the As or the Bs. (Josh, 13)*



The physical competition for acceptance

- **Pushing the body to secure team position**
- These boys were schooled on the expendable nature of the individual and their team place. This brings to mind the fluidity of modern relationships and contracts (Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1994; Turner, B., 1999).
 - *Rugby is hugely competitive because there's always someone who wants to take your place. For the lads on the seniors and juniors there's always a lad younger than them who wants to take their place on the team so they need to work at it and keep it up. (Enda, 16)*



- **Individualised training programmes**

- *I train, I play football, I go running in the park...I work on it and work on it. I play hurling as well on Thursdays in school. I try to play lots of other sports and get my fitness up and just try and play better than the person I'm marking. (Ger, 13)*

- **Those who are not athletic often rejected from activities**

- *When I was in sixth class I got the ball and I was about to pass it to another guy. He ran into me, he rugby tackled me and he was on my team and he punched me in the stomach and then just got up, grabbed the ball and walked off. The other time we were playing indoor hurling here and one of the other guys charged at me and bashed me off the wall. I think they just don't like me being in a sporting atmosphere in the first place, they don't think I'm good enough. I'm small and not athletic. (Cathal, 16)*

The normalisation of stigmatisation

- **Prevalence of overt name-calling**
- Stigmatised for being from particular area, growing their hair too long, cutting it too short etc
- Overwhelming focus on the stigmatisation of the body due to a perceived physical flaw
- Stigmatised if perceived as being 'too thin' or 'too fat'
- **Easier to conceal the thin body**
 - *You can hide that you're too skinny but not really when you're overweight. (Amy, 13)*
- The thin body was aligned more with 'normal', 'natural' despite growing commentary suggesting an obesity epidemic
 - *Mostly the people in school would be thin so they'd be the bigger group and might slag all the fat people (Barry, 16)*

The overweight body and the natural body

- **Perceived deviation from nature**

- *I'd say both fat people and small and skinny people would get slagged because people would slag them because of their shape. But I'd say the fat would get more probably 'cause it's more natural to be thin at our age. (Josh, 13)*

- *Nobody is naturally fat but some people are naturally thin and they just can't put on weight. (Tara, 15)*

- According to Carol Thomas, reactions to bodies that have something wrong with them can range from “disgust and abhorrence to heartfelt pity” (2003: 64)

- **Blame placed with overweight individual – self-inflicted or weakness**



Stigmatising mind and body

- **Socially symbolic meaning of 'fat' in Western cultures**
- Gordon, 1990; Featherstone, 1991; Frank, 1991; Turner, B, 1992, 1996; Baudrillard, 1998; Grogan, 1999; Redmond, 2003; Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005; Monaghan, 2005 and many others agree at some level that within an aesthetically driven Western World, the fat body is perceived to be “indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform” (Bordo, 1993: 195)
- **People often make secondary judgements on the basis of a perceived physical flaw (Goffman: 1963)**
 - *A boy in my class was quite big and he used to get slagged by the people in the older class... If they were playing football and your man fell, they'd start calling him fat and stuff and they'd say 'oh look at you, you're so stupid'. (Ger, 13)*
- **Fear of fat**

Slagging and abuse

- “Fat is not a four-letter word, but it is often intended, and received, as a term of abuse. This is compounded by what I call *bodyism* – the cultural belief that the whole body, perhaps more so than the face (Synnott, 1989), reflects individual character. The ‘f’ word is therefore less than ideal.” (Monaghan, 2005: 83)
- **Socialised to label**
 - *Fat people are treated very differently. Just the general image in itself. They say never judge a book by its cover but that’s not what teenagers do, teenagers do judge books by their covers. I don’t want to fall into that category but I do. It’s the way I’ve been brought up and I’ve been taught to think about how you should classify a person or give them labels and that’s what I find myself doing. (Brian, 16)*
- **Verbal and physical abuse**
 - *This guy who was in my class last year, they’d say ‘giggly arse’ and ‘giggly bum’ to him and then they’d kick him. They used to call him ‘watermelon with legs’ and ‘fatty’ and all this. It’s normal for things like that. (Evan, 13)*



The emotional impact of labels

- **Responding to the label**

- *With my friend no matter where she goes there's always someone calling her 'fat bitch' and 'big belly'... The boys would just say it to her you know if they were playing football and they would say 'oh go on, you can't run for the football, you're too fat'. I do pity her. I know she just sits on the stairs at night. (Eve, 13)*

- **Taking on the label**

- *I have often been upset because sometimes they call me things and say stuff about my weight, but most of the girls they don't really get jeered at because most of them are pretty... They continuously have a go at me though, like every Friday. (Molly, 13)*

- The 'disappearance' of the body is much less likely for stigmatised individuals (Leder, 1990)



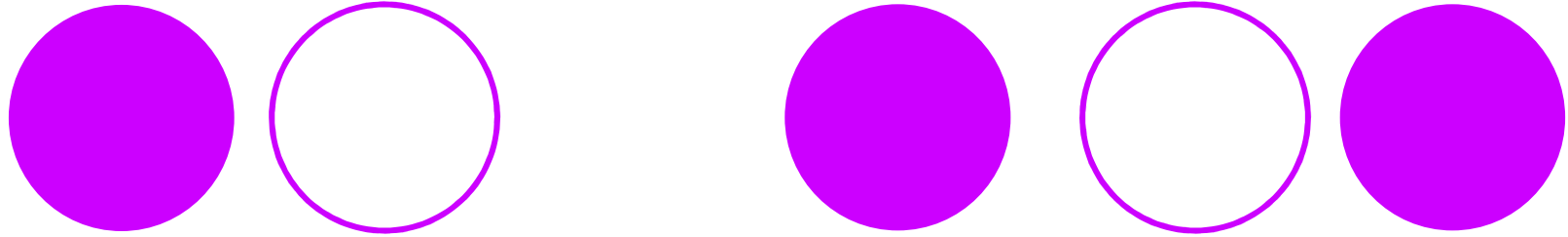
Strategies to cope with labelling

- **Self-isolation**

- *There is a big fella and they slag him all the time.... He doesn't really come down anymore. He used to always be down. (Eve, 13)*

- **Social segregation**

- *There's a group of them that are friends and they're all big... The three of them are very, very big. If you had to pick out big people you'd pick the three of them. Maybe it is just coincidental that the three of them are friends or maybe they are on the same wave length. It could be a possibility that they feel rejected by other groups. (Andy, 16)*
- *Fat people are put into a different group. People who are fat or chubby tend to stick to that group and thin people stick with thin people. That's what my cousin does because she's fat. She tends to stick with people who are the same size as her instead of going with skinny people because she thinks they are talking about her behind her back. (Chloe, 13)*



● **Self-stigmatisation**

- *There's two kinds of fat people. Some think no one's going to want to know them 'cause they're fat and then others just try and then make friends. There's one lad who's very overweight but he says he doesn't care and he's one of the most popular people in our year. There's very few that still have the confidence that he has when you're overweight. He's very funny. (Evan, 13)*
- *If you're a bit fat who cares if you're a good laugh. Like if you can laugh about it too. (Mark, 12)*
- *Like one of my friend's names is 'fat boy' and he thinks it hilarious. He's not that fat but he thinks it's hilarious and he constantly makes comments about how fat he is... He'll refer to himself as festively plump. (Cathal, 16)*
- *There's no use slagging someone if they just laugh it off and agree (Ger, 13)*

Findings of study

- www.trentham-books.co.uk

