"You Can *Feel* Them Looking at You": The Experiences of Adolescent Girls at Swimming Pools

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This paper explores the constraints that a sample of Western Australian high school girls experienced when using public swimming pools, and the strategies that they developed to negotiate these constraints. The data were collected from girls, aged 15-16 years, in focus groups and individual interviews. The girls were a subset of an earlier study that had found that 29% of girls would use pools more if boys were not around. For many of these girls, embarrassment affected both the frequency and quality of their participation. To reduce self-consciousness some had developed strategies to make themselves less visible including covering up their bodies, staying in groups, swimming at remote venues and avoiding pools altogether. Strategies for enhancing enjoyment of this public place are suggested.

KEYWORDS: *Adolescent, women, physical activity, constraints, recreation*

Introduction

Although it is well known that girls at around 15 years of age are not as physically active or as fit as boys, the reasons for this remain largely a mystery. A quantitative study in 1995 looked at girls' perceived alienation from certain active recreational spaces as a possible factor affecting their participation (James, 1995). It found that there were certain recreational spaces that girls said they would use more in the absence of boys. The public swimming pool was one of these places. The follow-up qualitative study, reported in this paper, explored the reasons for the attitudes of 15-16 year old girls towards certain recreational spaces, and identified strategies that active girls have used to overcome or "negotiate" constraints to their participation.

This paper focuses on these girls' feelings at swimming pools. Swimming is a healthy, relaxing form of physical activity that girls should feel free to participate in without constraint. It is argued that most girls are very conscious of their presentation in public and that this can affect the quality and quantity of their participation. Measures that can be taken to alleviate some of these constraints are suggested.

Background

General inactivity of girls at around 15 years of age, and associated concerns about unhealthy diets have been the topics of various studies (Department of the Arts, Sport, Environment and the Territories, 1992; Overdorf & Gill, 1994; Paxton, Wertheim, Gibbons, Szmukler, Hillier, & Petrovich, 1991). At this age, young people decide "either to drop out of sport, or stay with it. If they continue, then it is more than likely that they will do so for a significant part of their lives" (Australian Sports Commission 1991, p. 13).

Research shows that girls are less fit than boys of the same age (Australian Sports Commission, 1991) and only half as likely to be involved in sporting organizations (Ministry of Sport and Recreation, 1997). Despite commendable efforts around the world to decrease this gender gap, an American study found that women's fitness participation across all age groups had actually decreased slightly in recent years, with the decline in fitness participation greater among younger than older women (Robinson & Godbey, 1993).

Body image is a big issue during adolescence and many girls are unhappy with their physical appearance. A large study of Western Australian adolescents found that although 62% of boys felt that they were the right weight, 66% of adolescent girls thought they were overweight. Over half of the girls, aged between 12 and 16 years, reported that they were trying to lose weight, yet only 21% had a body mass in excess of their recommended level (Institute for Child Health Research, 1995). Studies by Shaw (1991) and Paxton et al. (1991), found that many young women, motivated by media images to be thin, were turning to radical and unhealthy diet strategies to look slim, rather than turning to physical activity with its associated benefits.

Girls' bodies, especially during puberty, rarely match up to the unrealistic ideals portrayed in the media. Heterosexual romances featured in novels, magazines, movies and on television, perpetuate the notion that men judge women by their appearance. Girls who are self-conscious about their appearance may limit their recreation participation in public places to avoid embarrassment, and it was this concept that motivated the original study in 1995.

Relationship to the 1995 Quantitative Study

The 1995 study sought to measure girls' attitudes to a series of public and private sites for recreation in the community, to ascertain if these contexts or settings affected girls' leisure participation (James, 1995). Leisure means different things to different people: here it is used interchangeably with recreation and refers to experiences that are freely chosen and intrinsically motivated, that may be active or passive in nature. The original study (funded by Healthway, the Health Promotion Fund of Western Australia) surveyed 276 fifteen-year-old girls from 10 socioeconomically diverse Western Australian high schools, regarding how they felt about 20 listed recreational

spaces. It found that the places where girls felt most self-conscious were, in rank order, school basketball courts, public swimming pools, health clubs and beaches. One striking finding from the study was the girls' ranking of recreational places that they would use more if boys were not around. The top four places in order were school basketball courts, public swimming pools, amusement halls and school gyms (James, 1998). The following year Healthway granted further funds for the qualitative study, reported here, to explore the reasons behind these findings, using a subset of girls from the original study.

The meanings associated with public spaces are not the same for males and females and these differences begin well before adolescence. Sebba's (1994, p. 66) review of the studies of young children concluded that boys and girls "read and interpret their similar environments in different ways, conduct their activities in different places, organize themselves in groups of different sizes . . . and are involved with their surroundings in a different manner."

In many cultures, according to Franck and Paxson (1989), women have historically controlled the private domestic spaces, and men the more public places where women may feel vulnerable to harassment or even physical attack. Physical design characteristics may encourage or discourage women's use of a public space. They may also affect whether women will use those spaces alone or only in groups. (Franck & Paxson, 1989).

An Australian study of adolescent girls and space (Girls in Space Consortia, 1997) found that adolescent boys' use and domination of public recreation spaces and facilities restricted girls' activities. Girls experienced a lack of sense of control in public spaces, and fear and risk of victimization constrained their participation. The study concluded that public spaces should be designed in response to girls' aesthetic, social and personal safety needs. Although there have been studies into women's feelings about public spaces in general, (Altman & Churchman, 1994) and adolescent girls' use of private spaces such as the bedroom (Griffiths, 1988), no detailed research had been found on the way adolescent girls feel during social encounters at public swimming pools.

Public swimming pools were chosen as one of the sites for further exploration because responses to the initial survey were puzzling. Although pools were ranked second as a place where girls felt most self-consciousness, the survey showed that they were perceived as being used slightly more by girls than by boys (James, 1998). This may be because, as Snyder and Spreitzer pointed out, swimming is defined as an acceptable female sport (cited in Dyer, 1986). Even though the girls did not see pools as dominated by boys, 29% of the girls surveyed said that they would use them more if boys were not around. Self-consciousness at swimming pools was correlated with low concepts of worth, physical appearance and athletic competence (James, 1995).

What the 1995 precursor to this study did not ascertain was why girls felt so uncomfortable and what they actually did at pools. Western Australia

has a warm climate and about 70% of the 1.8 million people live in the capital city, Perth, within an hour's drive of a beach (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). A study found that there were 193 aquatic centers in the state (Thomas, 1993). Of these, 50% were run by local government authorities, 36% by schools and 14% were commercial. School pools are usually used for compulsory swimming classes and competitions and rarely for fun use, while local government community pools are for freely chosen activities on payment of an entry fee. The term "public swimming pools" refers here to those pools where girls may be exposed to public view, such as school and local government pools, as opposed to the relative privacy of home pools.

Theoretical Considerations

This exploration of young women's participation at public swimming pools draws on literature pertaining to the "presentation of self" and leisure constraints. Self presentation in public places was explored by Goffman in the '50s and '60s in his analysis of human interaction rituals (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967). He suggested that an individual can be perceived as a performer, whose behavior is designed to create a particular impression on an "audience" (Goffman, 1959). If the "self" that is projected by an individual is discredited however, embarrassment can follow. For young people particularly, the complexities of social interactions can be overwhelming. Goffman (1967) advocated that individuals need to develop the capacity to maintain composure in encounters likely to cause embarrassment, because those who lack confidence and poise can come to dread all such encounters, foreshortening them or evading them altogether.

Embarrassment can inhibit participation in any encounters, including those in leisure situations. This study also draws from the leisure constraints literature. The 1995 study (James, 1998) looked at perceived alienation from various spaces as a potential constraint on girls' participation in active leisure pursuits. Researchers no longer speak of insurmountable barriers, but constraints that can be "negotiated" or overcome. According to Jackson (1988, cited in Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993, p. 390), a constraint is any factor that "mitigates between a possible activity and one's opportunity for involvement in that experience." Further, leisure constraints research has moved from how a particular type of constraint affects leisure choices, to how people "encounter, experience and respond to the array of constraints that influence their leisure behavior" (Jackson, 1993, p. 129). Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993, p. 4) suggested that "participation is dependent not on the absence of constraints (although this may be true for some people) but on negotiation through them." A perceived constraint, therefore, does not always lead to reduced participation (Kay & Jackson, 1991).

Conceptual Framework

From the literature it would seem that a girl's decision to participate or not to participate in swimming could depend on two factors. I have called

the first her "situational body image" factor and the second her "desire to swim" factor. The former is an adaptation of her overall body image (formed by the influence of the media, her family, peers, etc.), that is modified by the situation at the pool at that moment. It would depend on the *audience* at the time and whether the *place* itself (its physical characteristics and its rules) affected her exposure to that audience.

The desire to swim factor is influenced by issues such as her perception of the potential for embarrassment or ridicule in front of the audience at the time, and the strength of her desire to be included in a social activity. On some days the activity of swimming may be more attractive due to hot weather or a need for relaxation, companionship or fun. On other days cold weather or more appealing alternatives may diminish the desire to participate. This emergent conceptual framework, derived from both the literature and the girls' responses, is shown in Figure 1.

If the situational body image and the desire to swim were high you would expect a girl to participate to the fullest. If both were low you would expect her to constrain participation altogether. If however the situational body image was low but the desire to swim was high enough to overcome its effects, then you would expect the girl to negotiate the constraint resulting in some form of participation.

The strategies that girls in this study have used to overcome constraints have been organized into a typology modified from one created by Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) to explain how women successfully or unsuccessfully negotiated constraints. The original categories ranged from Achievers, who saw benefits to participation and actively resisted constraints, through
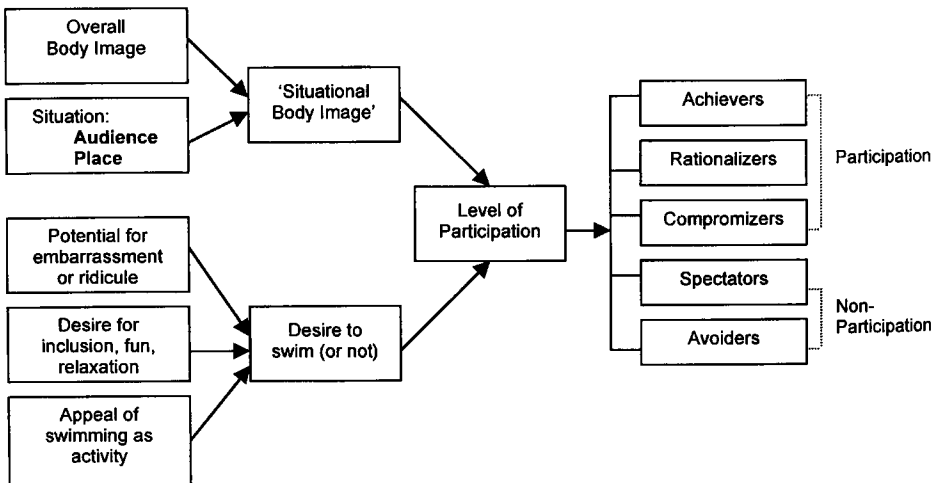

Figure 1. Emergent Conceptual Framework Indicating Issues Affecting Girls' Level of Participation in Swimming.

to Attempters, Compromizers, Dabblers and finally Quitters, who ceased participation or never attempted a physical activity even though they were interested in it. The categories modified for this study are outlined in Figure 1 and are defined in the Findings section.

In summary, this paper explores the feelings of a sample of Western Australian adolescent girls about public swimming pools. It shows the constraints that they have experienced, particularly relating to the situational factors of audience and place, and how they have negotiated them. It includes participants' suggestions regarding improved programming and design aspects of public pools.

Method

The qualitative study reported here, further explored attitudes of girls who had participated in the original study. It focused on three recreational spaces from the original study, school basketball courts, bedrooms and swimming pools. Other aspects of the qualitative study are reported elsewhere (James, 1996, 1998, 1999, in press) but this article focuses on the findings regarding swimming pools; specifically those run by local government authorities and those at state government schools.

Sample Selection

The study consisted of 4 focus groups each of 6-8 of the original girls, followed by semi-structured individual interviews with 16 of these girls. Four of the 10 socioeconomically diverse schools from the 1995 study were randomly selected. These included 3 metropolitan and 1 rural school. The focus groups were then randomly selected from lists provided by the teachers. Like the original participants from the 1995 study, the girls represented a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups. There are potential disadvantages of focus groups such as lack of independence of thought, dominance of a few people, and some participants feeling inhibited (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995). This did not appear to be the case in this instance and the advantages for this study were that the focus groups provided rich data and allowed the researcher to purposefully select appropriate participants for individual interviews. A trained associate assisted at each of the 4 focus groups and fieldnotes were written during and directly after each one. Four girls were selected from each focus group, in consultation with the associate, to create a balanced and diverse sample (Patton, 1990). The group of individual interviewees selected were approximately 16 years of age, made up of a mixture of sporting enthusiasts and non-sportspersons, of mixed body types, assorted ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and diverse aspirations and interests. The temptation in this study was to interview only the girls for whom participation was problematic, that is, the Quitters. It is clear from the constraints literature that much can be

learned by also interviewing the Achievers, the girls who are active despite experiencing constraints. The strategies that they use to successfully negotiate constraints may be applicable to others.

Data Collection Procedures

The author conducted all interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule to explore relevant issues pertaining to constraints and strategies used to negotiate them. Because of the prior exposure to the interviewer in the focus groups, rapport was quickly established in the individual interviews. This, coupled with the fact that the girls had been thinking of the issues since the focus groups, provided thoughtful responses to the questions. For ethical reasons, sensitive issues such as the impact of any physical or sexual abuse on the interviewee were not broached because the researcher was not qualified to deal with any trauma arising from such matters. Although focus groups were conducted at schools, individual interviews were conducted at a venue of the participants' choice, which for most was in their own home. Focus groups and individual interviews each lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were taped and transcribed verbatim.

Strict codes of confidentiality, parental permission, anonymity and right of withdrawal were adhered to. All names used are pseudonyms. The word "girls" has been used to describe the participants, reflecting the way that they referred to themselves and each other during the interviews. The term "adolescent" has been used because the interviews focused on the girls' reactions to situations that they had experienced between the ages of 12 and 16 years. The term "sex" is used in the biological sense to describe male or female whereas "gender" refers to the socially constructed spectrum of feminine or masculine roles.

Data Analysis Procedures

A process of inductive content analysis was used to analyse the data (Patton, 1990). The basic unit of analysis was a quote: a statement made by a participant that expressed a single idea or feeling about an experience or an issue. These could be a word, sentence or paragraph and some sentences could contain more than one quote (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The quotes were clustered into common threads or categories using an inductive process. Each new quote was compared and contrasted with the preceding one and either assigned to an existing category or a new category was created for it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Transcripts were read and tapes were listened to repeatedly throughout the analysis phase and surprises, interesting patterns, inconsistencies and puzzles were recorded (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). To minimize bias, a graduate research assistant independently coded a sample of interviews and these codings were compared with the researcher's until both were satisfied that the coding was consistent (Henderson, 1991). The coded quotes were indexed using the qualitative computer

software, NUD*IST. This package facilitates the creation of an index tree to organize the data for easy access while ensuring that the rich data are readily accessible in their original context. This allows the final research report to include participants' own words (QSR NUD*IST, 1994). Following review by colleagues, the coding was revised, and where necessary categories were split into two or merged. Meta-coding was then applied to reduce the large number of categories into higher levels of explanatory themes to assist in theory building (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These fell into two broad areas: issues that constrained girls' participation, and strategies that girls used to negotiate these constraints, categorized according to the modified Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) typology.

In summary, the data were collected from group and individual interviews and built on the data collected in 1995. Colleagues had input into the coding and analysis. To add another dimension of triangulation to the process (Patton, 1990), a year after the interviews the participants were given the opportunity to read and react to the transcripts and to respond to a presentation of the findings. They appreciated this opportunity and expressed that the findings presented an accurate picture of their feelings at the time. They added further suggestions for improvement to the design of pools, and these have been included in this paper.

Findings

The findings are divided into two parts. The first looks at the ways that the girls reassessed their body images in response to a perceived audience at a particular time, and how this affected the quality of their participation at pools. The second outlines strategies that the girls used to overcome perceived constraints and find their optimum level of participation.

The Audience as a Constraint to Participation

All girls expressed an awareness of their presentation of self at both public and school swimming pools. A very small number of girls felt good about their bodies and did not experience any constraints to their participation. Elspeth, for example, reported that boys occasionally "wolf whistled" at her at a local pool. Sometimes it made her feel self-conscious but she confessed that at other times she liked it saying, "that means that they think I'm all right." Most girls, however, expressed degrees of dissatisfaction with some aspect of the way that they looked in their swimming suits (called "bathers" in Western Australia). As Sandy said, "sometimes I feel really good . . . attractive and . . . really sporty but then sometimes I feel really ugly. Especially when there [are] guys around and you're in something as revealing as bathers . . . like, you can see the actual shape." Leonie commented that "because [other girls] say that they're fat and they're ugly, you look at yourself and think [maybe] I'm like that as well!"

For many, a feeling of being watched contributed to their discomfort. Krysta confessed that at school swimming lessons she felt "strange. . . I felt

like people are staring at me. I hate my bathers for a start. It feels like I'm naked when I'm in my bathers. I hate the fact that you have legs showing and arms showing and your body." Girls related their embarrassment to particular audiences. For some it was the feeling of being watched by other girls, for others it was by boys in general, particular boys, or strangers. Sandy, for example, felt worse when she was with friends of her own sex. She said, "I think 'Oh they've got the nicest body' and I think . . . I've got the worst body you could ever have. So I get a bit self-conscious about that because they look so nice and I feel I look horrible." For her, being with her girl friends could be more embarrassing than when she was with boys. She said, "If I'm by myself and there's guys around I don't worry as much as I would if there's other girls around."

Vanessa found compulsory mixed swimming classes at school particularly unpleasant: "I hated going to the pool. . . . I felt really weird around [boys]. . . . 'What if they think my ears stick out?' or 'What if they think I'm fat?' or stuff like that." For Beth, the presence of particular boys was a factor. She conceded that "if there's a guy you like there [then] you feel a little bit more self-conscious." Sandy said that the more popular the boy, the more that she worried about the way that she looked.

Val reflected a concern of other girls about being watched by people that they did not know. She remarked "if you are down [at the pool] and you see a total stranger, then they just gawk at you and stare at you and you feel really weird." Sandy, however, said that she was more concerned about the reactions from the people she knew and "couldn't care less if [she] was amongst strangers."

As well as the feeling of being watched, some girls sensed that they were being talked about. One group participant observed "you *know* they are talking about you." Another added "they're looking at you and laughing, so you sort of get the drift." Beth declared "your ears just burn. You don't know, but sometimes people will say 'Oh this person was talking about you'. You can *feel* them looking at you. They're probably not, but you always *feel* like they're looking at you." Leonie said she knew that boys compared girls with models from magazines and was sure they made comparisons behind girls' backs.

For most girls, the feeling of being watched and talked about was more than just a feeling. They had overheard derogatory comments from both boys and girls. When asked whether boys really made such comments, Gerry replied "I've been sitting near them and you hear them say it." Another group participant added "I've heard other people being teased, like if they are slightly overweight, the boys go 'Look at all that flab!'." Yet another remarked "yeah the guys are worse when it comes to being mean, you know, they don't really care what they say."

Some girls, however, were convinced that it was other girls who were the biggest enemies on this front. Astrid asserted that some girls would say "Oh you've got a big bum!" or "If I was you I wouldn't wear those bathers!" Beth confided that "girls can get really, really bitchy when they want to." Quite a few girls alluded to the impact of the "popular girls" on their self-

consciousness. The phrase "popular girls" was always used by interviewees with a deprecating tone of voice, implying that such girls were not popular with everyone. Sadie described them as the group of girls who caused her to feel the greatest embarrassment. She said they were "the most elite group in the school. . . . The most popular people, who are running around in bikinis and stuff, you know. But no-one else can do that."

Although the general consensus was that both boys and girls made derogatory comments behind people's backs, there was considerable disagreement as to whether boys' or girls' negative remarks were the more frequent, or the more hurtful. There was a universal belief amongst the girls, however, that boys do not experience the same traumas as girls do, when in or around the pool. Girls seemed to be acutely aware of their presentation in public and appeared to adapt their image of themselves according to the audience at the time.

Strategies Girls Used to Negotiate Constraints

So far, ways that various audiences can negatively impact on girls' situational body image and constrain their participation have been outlined. If, however, girls' desire to swim is sufficiently high they may use a range of strategies to negotiate these constraints. These center on the ability of the girls to make themselves less visible to the audience, either by hiding their bodies under clothes, metaphorically hiding behind others, or not going swimming at all. Some of these strategies are constructive and lead to increased physical activity, whereas, others lead to a decrease in participation and in some cases, avoidance of swimming altogether.

To aid analysis, an adaptation of Henderson and Bialeschki's typology has been used as a framework (1993, p. 394). The boundaries between the categories are not meant to be rigid. Girls are expected to move between them depending on their confidence levels, the audience and the situation at the time. In relation to girls interviewed in this study, the adapted categories are:

Achievers: Girls who are oblivious to constraints and have high participation levels.

Rationalizers: Girls who used to experience constraints, but now rationalize their insecurities: they talk themselves into joining in.

Compromizers: Girls who are self-conscious but have developed coping mechanisms so that they can participate at a reasonable level.

Spectators: Girls who are on the fringes of participation.

Avoiders: Girls who avoid participation wherever possible.

Achievers.   The Achievers were the small group of girls in the study who wondered what all the fuss was about. Regardless of how they might have appeared to others, they had always felt good about their bodies and had never felt constrained from participation in swimming pools. They consisted

of two sub-groups, those who perceived their bodies as attractive, and those, who labeled themselves as "tomboys", for whom the issue of physical attractiveness was of little importance to their sense of self. Rosetta's advice to girls who were holding back from participation was, "If you want to go and do it, go and do it."

Rationalizers.   The "go and do it" attitude of the Achievers was not quite so simple for most of the girls interviewed. Some girls recognized that physical activity was important and could be rewarding, but they had been stung in the past by callous comments, and still felt self-conscious in a lot of active situations. They used self-talk to overcome their embarrassment. For example, Beth said "I've always felt self-conscious in my bathers, but I try not to let it really get to me. . . . I don't let it get to the point where I'm too afraid to go into the water."

Most of the girls categorized as Rationalizers had experienced periods of self-consciousness in the past, but had now "grown out of it." Chloe said this was, "a gradual change. I got more comfortable with people, with all my friends, because I got to know them better. When you feel more comfortable with your friends, you don't really worry about what everyone else thinks."

Vanessa's mother had provided her with useful aphorisms as defense mechanisms. Her advice was that girls "shouldn't be afraid, because no-one's better than you." It seemed to help if they could divert the problem back onto the critic. Beth, who was still embarrassed in certain situations at the pool, had taught herself to say, "Well, if they can't accept me for who I am, it's too bad."

Compromizers.   If Achievers were not bothered by self-consciousness, and Rationalizers worked to convince themselves that they were not bothered, then Compromizers sought out situations where they were least bothered. Most girls fell into this category. They developed a range of rituals to make swimming in public more bearable.

For many girls the process of actually approaching the pool for a swim was often extremely embarrassing. These girls developed a strategy of covering themselves up until the last possible moment. Leonie described how girls "wrap their towels around them and when they are about to jump in the pool they rip the towels off pretty quick[ly] and then jump in before anyone can have a chance to look at their body."

Some schools allowed girls to wear T-shirts in the water, whereas others forbade it. Some girls appreciated the option; others found it too difficult to swim properly in shirts. Deborah had mixed feelings, commenting that on a recent visit to a pool: "I was going to go in my shirt but I thought 'No', I don't really like swimming in T-shirts. [So] . . . I just chucked my shirt on the ground and jumped in the pool." For Kylie, the T-shirt option at her school was a welcome one. She explained: "I usually wear a T-shirt over my bathers so it doesn't really bother me. But if I forget my T-shirt then I do [feel self-conscious]."

At Rosetta's school, T-shirts were not allowed in the pool. Initially this had been difficult for some girls, but in the end she felt the rule had been justified. She reported:

Mostly girls were worried what people were going to say and if the guys were going to make fun of them or not. And at first all the girls just said, "Oh, I've got my period" and that sort of stuff. But then, after a while everyone just got involved and no-one said anything and everyone just got used to it and it was just like normal. No-one made fun of no-one, so that was really good.

Not all girls were content to cover up their top halves with a T-shirt. One group participant always kept a towel around her lower half, claiming "you get patronized heaps if you've got a big butt or anything at this school."

For some girls, melting into the crowd, preferably surrounding themselves with girl friends minimized exposure to the "enemy". For Tania, friends provided reassurance. She contributed "if your friends do tease [you], you can tease them back and know that they are joking. But if somebody else [teases you], you just feel really bad. If you don't really know them, you can't really say anything." Beth also found friends to be useful camouflage, especially when boys that she particularly liked were around. She confided, "I just try to act normal and try to ignore them. . . . You just try to sort of hide behind [pause] talk to your friends and try not to look too much out of place."

Another coping mechanism some girls used was to avoid any activity in a pool that might draw attention to themselves. This was often at the expense of having fun. One of the group participants avoided public pools and only used her home pool "because I can muck around and . . . I don't feel like I'm the laughing stock all the time." Maria also confided, "I don't mess around in a public pool, I feel like an idiot." In public she would only do laps, but she said she wished that she could mess around.

Vanessa had immigrated to Australia from Europe, five years earlier, and had relatively poor swimming skills. Unlike most of the girls, she said that she felt more self-conscious in the water than on the edge "because I was never really a good swimmer and when we had to race and stuff, I thought 'What if I drown?'." From her tone, the fear of a potentially undignified rescue, in front of her class was greater than the fear of drowning. She recalled:

When you're in Year 8 and 9 [aged 13 or 14], you're trying to impress the guys. You think "Oh no, they're going to tell their friends and their friends are going to tell their friends and then the guy you like is not going to like you". . . . So I was self-conscious; I didn't want to make a fool of myself in front of them.

Anonymity was a strategy used by some to overcome this problem. It was not sufficient just to cover up and keep a low profile when at the pool; several girls used the strategy of going to beaches or pools where they were not known, to enjoy an "unselfconscious" swim. Chloe suggested the problem with the local pool was that "it's around the area where I live. . . . If you see someone [who knows you] you think they . . . might go and tell someone at school if you did something stupid." Jan also chose a swimming pool in another suburb "so no-one would know that it was me . . . being an idiot there and [no-one would] recognize me."

Spectators. The lure of the cool water on a hot day and the relaxation that a pool could offer usually pushed girls into the Compromizer category rather than the spectator role. Only a very small group of girls sat on the edge of pools fully clothed and watched. These were more likely to be those from non English speaking backgrounds.

Avoiders. Avoiders were the girls who would rather accept a punishment than join a mixed swimming class at school. For Krysta even "with a T-shirt it is no better: I just feel really bulky and unattractive. I just don't like going [swimming at the pool]."

At some of the schools where T-shirts were not allowed, avoidance was the girls' chosen option, but this could be punished by the teacher with the old-fashioned sanction of "writing lines" (writing out a hundred times an aphorism on the benefits of swimming). Leonie commented:

> some girls are overweight and they feel that since they can't hide their bodies [there] is no point in going in the pool and getting teased. . . . They don't go in at all. [If they don't swim] they have to bring a note or else they must "write lines". I believe that 3 out of 10 girls would rather [write lines, than swim].

With regard to compulsory school swimming classes, Julie said girls just did not want to get in their bathers and be seen in the pool with the boys. She said, "I think if they said you can do swimming or something else, all of the girls would have gone for something else. A lot of girls aren't happy with their figures." Sasha confirmed this saying that "quite a few girls would come with notes or excuses, 'Oh I've forgotten my bathers' or something." One girl pointed out dryly that "boys never seem to forget their bathers."

Discussion and Implications

Constraints

It is obvious from the Findings that one of the biggest constraints was potential embarrassment or presentation of self. Although a few girls reported feeling good about their appearance when swimming at public pools, most girls interviewed reported feeling fat or ugly at least some of the time. In swimming attire, more of the body is revealed than in street clothes and little is left to the imagination. Perceived weaknesses cannot be artfully covered with clothes or cosmetics and few hairstyles meet fashion requirements when wet. Given the findings of the Institute for Child Health Research (1995) that girls tend to overestimate their body weight, it is not surprising that most of the girls had a poor situational body image at the pool where their bodies were so exposed.

There was a commonly held view amongst the girls that boys do not endure the anguish that girls go through regarding their self presentation at pools. This is possibly because, as was found in a longitudinal Finnish study of body satisfaction of adolescents, at each age level, boys are more satisfied with their bodies than are girls (Rauste-von Wright, 1989).

All girls were conscious of the critical gaze of others when they were at the pool. In Goffman's (1959) terms they were acutely aware of their audi-

ence and how they believed that their audience perceived them affected their usage of the pool. There seemed to be mixed views about which audience the girls were most conscious of at the pool. It ranged from boys that were known and liked, to boys who were unknown, to girl friends, to the popular girls. Yet it could be argued that *all* of these audiences are in a sense refracted through male eyes.

The 1995 survey had found that almost a third of the girls would use pools more in the absence of boys (James, 1995). These were presumably the girls who feared critical appraisal by boys. The remaining two-thirds could have been made up of Achievers, who participated regardless of the audience, and some of the Avoiders who may just not like swimming. Another group, for whom the elimination of boys from the pool may not have helped, may have been those who felt embarrassed around other girls as well. Given the predominant heterosexual media images in adolescent girls' magazines that superficial physical attractiveness to boys is all important, these girls may have believed that other girls judged their worth on their ability to appeal to boys.

Regardless of who the perceived audience were, some of the views were based on actual evidence that members of these audience groups discussed the relative merits of the girls at the pool, whereas others' views were based on strong, but unsubstantiated feelings. Whether the audience response was real or imagined, the girls usually interpreted the response as disapproving, even when there was no evidence to suggest this. This interpretation led the girls to modify their participation levels or behavior in order to minimize potential embarrassment.

Rather than the fear of looking overweight or ugly, some girls were concerned that their behavior itself may attract the derision of others. Some girls in the study took pains to limit their desire for playfulness, pursuing instead what they perceived might be more acceptable or "appropriate" activities such as swimming laps.

Another commonly held belief was that embarrassment decreased over time, although the possible reasons for this are unclear. The Finnish study found that body satisfaction improved over time but did not suggest a reason either (Rauste-von Wright, 1989). Goffman's view was that every young person must pass through a "trial by taunting . . . until he *(sic)* develops a capacity to maintain composure" (1967, p. 104). Presumably, this developing composure would correspond with an improved situational body image and relate to increased participation.

Strategies Girls Used to Negotiate Constraints

The typology modified from Henderson and Bialeschki (1993) shows the spectrum of participation types, classified from Avoiders to Achievers. Strategies that girls have used to move themselves up the spectrum were outlined. Achievers had few inhibitions that affected their participation in swimming. This might imply that they were all slim and attractive, but their actual body weight did not appear to have a bearing, and interviewees of all

shapes and sizes were identified at both ends of the spectrum. Those who identified themselves as "tomboys" may have seen a visit to the pool as an opportunity to challenge gendered stereotypes and resist male domination. This notion of leisure as resistance is strongly advocated by Wearing (1998, p. 41).

Rationalizers experienced some discomfort at pools but used psychological strategies such as self-talk to overcome their inhibitions. They strove to present an outward appearance of composure even when they did not feel totally at ease. Compromizers, the largest group, can be summed up as those who experienced discomfort but had developed tangible strategies that minimized their exposure to the critical gaze of others. These included covering up and jumping into the water quickly, or wearing T-shirts in the water. A Canadian study that explored the impact of body image concerns on women's motivation and enjoyment of aerobics classes found that clothing was a concern for many of the women (Frederick & Shaw, 1994).

It seems that the choice of whether T-shirts or other clothing should be worn in the water should be left to the individual and not those in charge. In New Zealand recently, police were called to a disturbance at a public pool when angry parents demanded that their girls be allowed to wear shorts over their swim suits. Several girls had been told by the management not to wear shorts in the water, despite the fact that boys at the same pool were allowed to do so. ("Pool Ban Sexist," 1999). It may never be known how many self-conscious girls have avoided this facility in the past because of its management policy.

Other strategies of Compromizers included surrounding themselves with friends, avoiding actions that attract attention, and seeking anonymity. Anonymity could entail travelling to a distant aquatic facility where they would not be recognized. Beaches were popular because they were seen as less focussed than a pool. Ironically, a lack of suitable facilities nearby is often cited as a constraint to leisure (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger, 1996), yet for these girls, travelling afar was a form of liberation.

A pool could be regarded as a place for unselfconscious girls to sunbathe and proudly display their bodies. This was true for only a very small number of popular girls. For most of the interviewees, it was actually seen as less threatening to be in the water than to be exposed on the periphery. Those classified as Spectators did not want to be personally exposed without the protection that clothes can provide; but they did want to participate as a part of the audience. Many Avoiders experienced such severe embarrassment when in swimming attire that they evaded it altogether, regardless of any punishment that this may incur. With some of the suggestions in the next section, perhaps even some of the Avoiders could be persuaded to alter their perceptions.

As each girl's participation is affected by her situational body image and desire to swim at a particular time, the typology must be seen as flexible. The ideal would be for a girl's situational body image to improve so she could progress towards higher levels of participation, and some of the girls

interviewed felt they had already experienced this. The findings concur with Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993), in that the constraints are not permanent barriers. As girls get older, it appears that some develop better strategies for dealing with and overcoming constraints. The challenge then is twofold: to minimize the situational constraints where practicable and give more girls the skills to negotiate through the remaining constraints as painlessly as possible.

Implications and Recommendations

This was only a small study and its findings cannot be generalized to all girls in all cultures. As with any qualitative study it will have been susceptible to the biases of the researcher, although steps were taken to minimize these. It has, however, attempted to shed light on the feelings of a number of girls from diverse backgrounds at public swimming pools, in one western country. The voices of the girls have been used to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. Further research is required to test the emergent conceptual framework.

Action research would be useful, particularly if aimed at encouraging the transition from Spectators to Compromizers, and Compromizers to Rationalizers. Further research is also required to see which of the feelings about self presentation hold regardless of issues such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and background. A similar study of boys' views would be of interest, as would cross-cultural and observational studies in this area. The impact of physical or sexual abuse on feelings at pools could also be explored.

Although generalizations cannot be made, there is plenty for recreation programmers, facility providers and physical educators to think about, in terms of policy, design and programming. They can potentially influence both the elements of audience and of place. Many of these recreation professionals chose their careers because they were Achievers during their adolescence and they may find it hard to see the world from the point of view of adolescent girls who may not feel so at ease with their bodies.

Better pool design could enhance the quality and quantity of participation for many girls. For example, designers of pools could ensure that women's change rooms are as close as possible to the water. In many aquatic facilities, self-conscious girls accessing the pool have to "run the gauntlet" past kiosks, spectator areas and fitness center windows. The internal layout of change rooms could also be better designed to offer more privacy. As Franck and Paxson, (1989, p. 142) asserted "a public environment that demonstrates respect for women through its symbolic messages will help to increase women's right to use public spaces and their comfort in doing so."

Policy at pools can affect participation, such as in the New Zealand example. Operators of public and school pools should seek input from adolescent girls and boys, from both ends of the participation spectrum, in setting policies and devising programs that decrease embarrassment for girls.

For the girls who would prefer to swim in the absence of boys, single sex sessions, staffed by women, at low usage times could enhance overall usage, and may attract ethnic groups not currently represented. For those who do not want segregation, strategies such as self-talk could be taught to expedite the process of developing composure. As it appears that embarrassment decreases with age, programmers could target post-adolescent women who may have dropped out in adolescence, to persuade them to return to swimming as a form of recreation. As lifelong active recreation habits are formed when one is young (Scott & Willits, 1998) it would be a pity if some young women were turned off swimming as adolescents, never to return.

Schools could play a role in raising these issues for discussion, not just in physical education classes but also in other subjects such as media studies and health education. Both girls and boys should be alerted to the implications of the unhealthy stereotypes of women that the media presents. The role that the media has to play in the way that girls are perceived by both girls and boys, particularly in the leisure context, still needs further research (Henderson et al., 1996). School drama classes could also explore different media representations and could help girls to become more at ease with their presentation in public, improving their overall body image.

To change the way that society and the media portray women is a mammoth task, but small changes at the situational level can be achieved. The voices of adolescent girls need to be heard in the future programming and design of public swimming pools. There is no reason why girls like Beth should have to "try not to look too much out of place", in a place in which they have every right to be. By resisting the pressures to constrain their participation at public swimming pools, girls can not only enjoy a healthful form of relaxation, but they may also be empowered to resist other forms of gender stereotyping in society at large.

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