"...If I Had a Choice, I Would...." A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective on Girls in Physical Education


Abstract (Summary)

A significant number of studies evidence girls' lack of participation in physical education. This study used feminist poststructuralism to examine the ways in which high school girls participated in or resisted physical education. Using qualitative research methods, researchers collected field notes, informal interviews, and formal interviews with the teacher and 15 female students. In contrast to previous studies, girls in this study enjoyed and valued physical activity. As active agents, they chose to participate in or resist specific physical activities through their negotiations of gender relations. Physical education classes emerged as a contested terrain in which girls supported the notion of equal opportunity in physical activity but perceived limits on their choices in physical education as compared to male peers. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

Full Text

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Key words: agency, gender, poststructuralism

The intent of Title IX, enacted in 1972, was to provide equal access for girls in all educational arenas, including equal opportunities in physical education classes. Since the implementation of Title IX, physical education teachers have struggled with the issue of providing quality instruction in coeducational classes. Researchers who have examined girls' participation in physical education have argued that girls' success is limited because of continued sexist practices. A significant number of studies in physical education provides evidence of girls' alienation and lack of participation in physical education classrooms (Bain, 1995; Ennis, 1999; Griffin, 1984, 1985, 1993; Hastie, 1998; Nilges, 1998; Satina, Solmon, Cothran, Loftus, & Stockin-Davidson 1998). Lack of participation in physical education, or less than optimal experiences in classes, can limit girls' learning and their physical activity levels across the lifespan.

Several researchers argued that girls' alienation in physical education settings results from socially institutionalized gender roles that maintain and reproduce boys' dominance and girls' subordination in physical activities. According to Nilges (1998) "...gender relations of dominance and subordination actively disempower female physicality" (p. 174). Girls' lack of participation in and alienation from physical education is seen as a consequence of oppression. Ennis (1999) and Satina et al., (1998) asserted that girls' oppression is due to boys' aggression, competitiveness, attitudes of superiority, and domination in physical activities. There is also evidence that male domination of physical education classes can result in girls' feelings of inferiority and characterization of their experiences as meaningless, powerless, and marginalized (Satina et al., 1998).

Attitudes of physical superiority and domination are promoted within male hegemonic forms of sport and are developed through forceful occupation of space, skilful control over objects, or physical power (Connell, 1983; Kirk, Holroyd, & Gorely, 2003). The notion of hegemony (originating from Gramsci's analysis of Italian social class power relations) refers to social and political power relations functioning to produce dominant accepted
cultural forms of being in society. By extending this notion, Williams (1977) theorized that hegemony goes beyond a cultural system of meanings and values (ideology) dictated by the upper class. It is the wholeness of practices and expectations that constitute people's everyday reality. From this view, it is a complex social process of both domination and subordination. In physical education and sports, male hegemony is a gendered ascendency achieved by the social performance of masculinities (Connell, 2002).

Hegemonic male spaces and the performance of masculinities remain dominant in sport contexts and the physical education curriculum (Chepyator-Thompson & Ennis, 1997; Kirk, 2002). For example, Theberge (1994) argued that sport settings create and reproduce gendered cultural forms by maintaining social practices within these settings as a "Male Preserve." Sport as a site of masculine appropriation and acculturation has contributed to the exclusion of women from physical activity and sport and the trivialization of women's bodies. In her feminist analysis of sports as a male preserve, Theberge explained how agents from the medical and physical education fields have been influential and effective in constructing the stereotypical view of the girl's body as powerless and disabled/frail and to suggest "appropriate" feminine physical activity.

Other researchers have argued that, apart from boys' dominance in physical activities, girls are less engaged because they simply do not value movement or physical activity. For example, according to McKenzie and Sallis (1998), boys are 15 to 25% more physically active and 25% more physically fit than girls. Indeed, according to Mason (1995a, 1995b) and McKenzie and Sallis (1996), while both boys and girls become less active with age, girls lack of engagement may be carried over into adult life and be the cause of health problems. McKenzie, Marshall, Sallis, and Conway (2000) reported that many adolescent girls preferred to socialize rather than exercise in classes because they did not like to sweat, and the authors recommended that teaching strategies in physical education classes be tailored to meet the physical skills and emotional needs of girls.

Viewing girls' disengagement as an emotional need perpetuates a gender-blind perspective, a view of girls as "naturally" unable or less able than boys to participate in physical activities. From a critical perspective, Flintoff and Scraton (2001) suggested that viewing girls as a "problem" for not engaging actively in physical education classes is a trend evident in the literature. As Kirk (2002) pointed out, some researchers "...might concede that more could be done to motivate disaffected and inactive girls, but would still contend that the problem, if one still exists, is down to individual choice and enthusiasm rather than structural barriers" (p. 24). Although McKenzie and Sallis's (1996) empirical evidence is useful for understanding students' engagement in physical education classes, an analysis of girls' participation in physical activities that accounts for the social and historical construction of girls and women in physical education and sport offers an alternative explanation for girls' engagement "problem" and suggests different strategies for improving teaching and learning. The "problem" does not reside with girls but with the historically constructed and maintained "gender order" (Kirk, 2002). Internationally and nationally, physical education researchers and sport historians have addressed the issue of girls' disengagement as a problem from an historical and social perspective. For example, in his historical analysis of physical education in British schooling, Kirk (2002) demonstrated how physical education curriculum and pedagogy have been gendered practices for over 100 years. Although progress has been made in terms of gender issues and curriculum initiatives have been proposed to promote gender equity in physical education (O'Sullivan, Bush, & Gehring, 2002), deeply rooted masculinized forms of physical education are difficult to excavate, disrupt, and transform, and masculinized forms of physical activity influence girls' engagement in physical education (Kirk, 2002).

In the U.S., sport historians and physical education researchers have suggested that with women's initial engagement in physical activity and entrance into the sports arena in the 20th century, doctors, sexologists, and educators depicted women as "passive" and "naturally inferior" compared to men (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998; Vertinsky, 1994). These fixed notions of womanhood and manhood are rooted in the Victorian period. As Hargreaves (1994) explained, "...the Victorians maximized cultural differences between sexes and used biological explanation to justify them" (p. 43). Indeed, in this period biological theories provided dominant justifications to explain women's and men's differences as natural and innate and, therefore, fixed in the creation of "womanhood" and "manhood" (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998; Vertinsky, 1994). During the early 20th century, medical, psychological, and Darwinian theories reinforced assumptions about gender that aimed to maintain gender division and control of women's bodies as part of a natural social order (Vertinsky, 1994). Those patriarchal discourses limited and channeled women's participation in particular physical activities to maintain socially constructed gender roles.
To further explore these gender roles in today's society, the purpose of this study was to use a poststructuralist framework to investigate how girls negotiate gender relations in high school physical education classes and how those negotiations affect their engagement in physical activities. In this paper, we first explain feminism poststructuralism, second we provide recent research in physical education from this theoretical perspective, and finally we discuss findings of this study and implications for physical education pedagogy.

Discourse and Feminist Poststructuralism

Studies of discourse investigate how institutions and apparati function as systems of control over individuals' bodies and how cultural and political discourses take material forms as embodied experience in people's lives (Foucault, 1980; Sawicki, 1991). Individuals embody gender and perform sexualized forms of masculinities and femininities. In her theory of performativity, Butler (1990) caused "gender trouble" by arguing that the individual's embodiment of femininity and masculinity is nevertheless a gendered performance trapped within a heterosexual matrix. Contrary to liberal feminists, who have maintained an essentialist view of gender based on biological sexual differences (Stanley, 2002), recent feminist theorists claimed that a more complex elaboration of gender called for a denaturalization of sex itself (Butler, 2002; Delphy, 2002; Pringle, 1992). For example, Butler (2002) subverted radical feminists' ideas of the 1960s and 1970s by proposing compelling feminist theorization of the two sexes not as natural and complementary categories in heterosexual terms but as socially constructed categories built on the production of gender. Bodies are disciplined and become sexualized by the "mark" of their gender. Individuals embody femininity and masculinity through the cultural performance of gender. Dominant discourses of gender, which center on patriarchal assumptions of men's and women's differences as natural, are embodied in women's lives and often constrain their experiences (Bordo, 1989). Weedon (1997) explained that discourses were more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constituted the "nature" of the body, unconscious and conscious mind, and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases (p. 105).

Discourses take concrete form through institutionalized organizations and practices, such as schools, churches, law courts, families, or communities, and they are created and reproduced through social practices in people's everyday lives. Ideas and practices within discourses are multiplicitous, contradictory, and inconsistent (Foucault, 1980).

Feminist poststructuralism offers a tool to destabilize or subvert dominant gender discourses by presenting women not as passive victims of oppression, or as "problems," but as active participants who make choices and participate in structuring their identities (Weedon, 1997). In radical and liberal feminist theories, gender is essentialized: girls and women have been depicted as passive, caring, subordinated, and oppressed by patriarchy (Munro, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; Weedon, 1997). From these perspectives, because power is theorized as a unitary notion of oppression, female subjectivity is biologically and historically fixed and singular; women are seen as passive in dominant discourses and, therefore, oppressed by them (Bordo, 1989; Weedon, 1997). According to Munro (1998) essentializing discourses of gender obscure women's agency in negotiating power relations.

By dismissing the unitary and universal notion of oppression and essentialist concept of gender, feminist poststructuralist theory instead recognizes women as agents in negotiating power relations and interests that are "structural," or present historically and culturally in the institutions and organization of a society. To be effective, discourses "...require the activation through the agency of the individuals whom they constitute and govern in particular ways as embodied subjects" (Weedon, 1997, p. 108). Agency is, therefore, produced by people's negotiations of power relations embedded and produced by discourses. Central to feminism and poststructuralism is understanding how individuals negotiate gendered discourses contingent on specific historical contexts by resisting or participating in those cultural practices. From this view, women are not passive or oppressed but active agents in negotiating gender and racial power relations based on their individual lived experiences and contingent on the specific period.

Feminism and poststructuralism in particular offer tools to demystify and deconstruct fixed ideas about "man" and "woman" and "masculinity" and "femininity" that underpin discourses/cultural practices surrounding physical activity (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1997). As Weedon (1997) explained, "...at the center of the struggle is
the common-sense assumption that there is a natural way for girls, boys, women and men to be. This gives rise to a battle to fix particular versions of femininity and masculinity as natural” (p. 94). While liberal and radical feminism do not recognize the notion of agency, in feminist poststructuralism it is central. Exploring agency is essential to understanding women and girls as active in negotiating structural power relations in society and in the classroom (Munro, 1998). According to Munro (1998) agency refers to the individuals' multiple and conflictual negotiations of power relations in a specific context. As Davies and Harré (1990) pointed out, a strength of feminist poststructuralism is its recognition and exploration of the notion of agency and choice, which recognizes the fluid and contradictory ways individuals position themselves and are positioned by others within discursive practices. By examining the individual's capability to exercise choice and position the self within discursive practices in conflictual ways, feminist poststructuralism offers possibilities "...for gaining an understanding of what it means to be a gendered person” (Davies & Harré, p. 47)

Feminist poststructuralists and educator activists (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999; hooks, 2000; Munro, 1998; Sawicki, 1991; Weedon, 1997; Wright, 1995) provided an alternative framework for understanding discrimination against women, identifying them as active participants historically situated in context. By disrupting essentialist notions of gendered identity and recognizing agency, women are fragmented and nonunitary (Munro, 1998). Crocco et al. (1999) characterized subjectivity as "...a fluid, often conflicted, and continually renegotiated sense of personal identity and agency” (p. 1). For example, Munro (1998) explored the complex and contradictory ways three female teachers, as active agents, narrated their life histories by constructing, disrupting, and negotiating meanings of essentialized womanhood throughout their teaching careers. Poststructuralist feminists recognize personal identity or subjectivity as a product of historically and culturally specific power relations that are socially constructed by institutions and individuals (Weedon, 1997). Munro (1998) conceptualized negotiations of gender as the degree to which women resisted or participated in dominant discourses by making sense of their decisions and actions. By exploring women's negotiations of gendered discourses, we (educators and researchers) can provide tools of analysis that disrupt fixed discourses of womanhood (Crocco etal., 1999; Munro, 1998).

By accounting for individual agency and patriarchy as it relates to gender, race, and social class, poststructuralist feminist discourses question dominant Western assumptions, including radical and liberal feminisms that produce and reproduce women's oppression in society. A poststructuralist framework identifies forms of power outside of hegemonic discourses and, therefore, different sites of resistance to gender and racial oppression. As hooks argued (2000), racial issues are fundamental to feminism because of their interconnection with sexist practices. Looking at women's subjectivity as unfixed and historically and socially constructed is central to the political struggle for social justice and equity, with regard to race and gender issues (Weedon, 1997).

Girls in Physical Education and Poststructuralism

Because feminism/poststructuralism is helpful in acknowledging the multiple and contradictory actions and decisions individuals make in positioning and repositioning themselves within various discourses (Wright, 1995), this theoretical framework “offers useful and important tools in the struggle for change” (Weedon, 1997, p. 180). To date, researchers examining girls' experiences in physical education from a feminist perspective have relied primarily on a radical or liberal framework, characterizing girls as oppressed and passive agents. Researchers have begun to use a feminist and poststructuralist framework to interpret girls' perspectives of their physical education experiences, which allows them to view girls as active agents in the educational environment and, therefore, has the potential to provide powerful insights into female subjectivity and girls' reluctance to participate in physical education.

For example, Wright (1995) provided evidence of power relations embedded in physical education classrooms and gave meaningful insights into the construction of girls' language choices. She used a feminist poststructuralist framework to investigate how girls negotiate gender/power relationships in high school physical education classes and how those negotiations affected their engagement in physical activities. Wright's analysis of language explained how dominant discourses around sports and physical education contributed to maintaining and reproducing gender power relations in physical education classes. The study viewed language as a semiotic system and, therefore, saw it as linked to cultural meanings in continuous creation and transformation. As Wright (1995) explained, language is "integral to the formation of subjectivity or consciousness..." (p. 6), and meanings are negotiated within dominant discourses. Students and teachers are
seen as participating in or resisting sports or physical education practices. By examining language construction of gender relations in physical education classes, Wright (1995) highlighted how girls are both encouraged and constrained by dominant patriarchal discourses.

Other recent studies have examined women and girls’ perceptions of their involvement in their physical education classrooms and outside the gym, with consideration for gendered discourses around participation in physical education (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2001). According to Flintoff and Scraton, women and girls are active in physical education classes and are increasingly involved in sports traditionally defined as "masculine," such as soccer. Importantly this study raised a question about the difference between girls' involvement outside school and rejection of physical education in school. This inquiry explored the role of the contemporary physical education curricula in assisting girls' agency in relation to participating in physical activities.

Traditional gender discourses are reinforced through physical education practices, contributing to the production and reproduction of femininity and masculinity around sports. In addition, the discourses embedded in the physical education classroom may reinforce and reproduce the idea of "girls as the problem" in regard to their involvement in physical activities (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). As Flintoff and Scraton asserted "...gender power in these accounts is conceived of as contested and fluid, not possessed by one group to be used in relations of domination over another... gendered discourses are not stable and are constantly being challenged, resisted or remade" (p. 8). Flintoff and Scraton concluded that young girls were choosing to be physically active and committed to certain physical activities, even if resistant to others. Girls selected the activities in which they wanted to participate or drop and negotiated their experiences and identities in relation to their physical activity involvement.

By acknowledging unstable, fluid, and multiple identities, the traditional nouns of female/feminine and male/masculine are disrupted and the "Gender Order" in physical education is subverted and recreated (Brown & Rich, 2002). In physical education and sport, contemporary theorists argue that to dismiss gender dualism and, therefore, the promotion of the sexual difference in sport (which functions to "naturalize" differences between men and women when engaged in physical activity), the analysis of gender needs to be extended to the "technologies of femininity or/and masculinity" (Hall, 1996) or to the construction of femininities or/and masculinities (Connell, 1995).

The Williams and Bedward (2001) study on the generational gap between teacher and students' perceptions of the National Curriculum in England and Wales also demonstrated the significant role of girls in reproducing or challenging traditional gender discourses in physical activity. This generational gap highlighted the power of teachers' stereotypes in reproducing gender power relations in physical education classrooms. In contrast, girls reported perceived unfairness when denied the opportunity to participate in specific physical activities because of the construction and enactment of the physical education curriculum. In this case, this curriculum emphasized specific activities as "appropriate female" or "appropriate male" physical activities. For example, some of the girls demonstrated interest for "male activities," such as football and soccer but expressed disappointment at being denied opportunities to participate in those physical activities.

These studies demonstrate the usefulness of a feminist poststructuralist framework in increasing our understanding of girls’ experiences in high school physical education, but much remains to be discovered from the perspective of viewing girls as active agents. By acknowledging the feminist/poststructuralist notion of agency, girls' conflictual and multiplicitous negotiations of dominant gendered discourses, we can disrupt the still pervasive view of girls as passive and disempowered in physical education classes.

Method

Setting and Participants

This study used a qualitative research design to understand participants' perspectives on participating in physical education classes by exploring social events in the physical education classroom as situations naturally occurring (Patton, 1990). The setting for the study was a public high school with a diverse student population located in the southeastern U.S. One physical education teacher and students in three of her coeducational classes of 9th- and 10th-grade students participated in the study. Permission to conduct the
study was obtained from the university review board and the participating school district. Signed parental
consent and child assent was obtained for each student who was interviewed, and the teacher granted
informed consent.

Data Collection

Data sources included field notes from an 8-week observation period, informal conversational interviews with
the teacher during the observation period, and formal interviews with the teacher and 15 female students. The
"informal conversational interviews" refer to data gathered informally with a conversational approach during the
observation period (Patton, 1990). The conversational approach is useful when the researcher can observe the
setting for some period of time; in this study, the researcher recorded these data by taking notes at the end of
each informal conversation (Patton, 1990). The researcher entered the study setting as a nonparticipant
observer and conducted informal conversations as part of "observing and listening" to collect information from
the setting context. As a nonparticipant observer, the researcher assumed an outsider, neutral position in the
context of the study by "leaving out audio or videotape machines to record data" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993,
p. 205). Therefore, the informal conversations were not taped. Because the researcher's focus was the
participants' behavior, the nonparticipant researcher did not interrupt the natural events of the context but
sought clarification of the participants' behavior. The researcher did not infer the participants' meanings of
these informal conversations, but the field notes collected during the observational period were triangulated
with other collected data to enhance validation and verification (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

During the observation period, the primary researcher visited each class 10 times, observing the three physical
education classes and informally discussing students' participation with the teacher. For each visit, the
researcher observed three classes, and each class was a 90-min period. After the observations, the teacher
and selected students were formally interviewed using a "standardized open-ended interview protocol" (Patton,
1990, p. 280). Questions were carefully arranged with the teacher and students before the formal interviews,
but flexibility was used during the interview process to ask respondents about the research focus to obtain
more comprehensive data (Patton, 1990).

Students were selected for interviews to represent specific characteristics of each class observed (i.e., ethnic
origin, physical ability, and participation level observed during the field notes). Fifteen female students (7
African Americans, 3 Asian Americans, and 5 European Americans) were selected for interviews and agreed to
participate. There were a total of 23 girls in the classes (7 in one class and 8 in the two others), and 5 girls from
each class were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted outside the teaching areas in a quiet room to ensure participants' comfort. Students
were interviewed individually. Questions in the student interviews focused on the decisions students had made
relevant to participation in class activities and their enjoyment in physical education. They were asked
questions about activities in which they engaged, factors that encouraged or discouraged their participation,
and how their participation compared to the boys in their classes. The questions in the teacher interview
centered on her perspective of girls' participation patterns in her class. Student interviews ranged from 25 to 50
min, and the interview with the teacher lasted for about 90 min. All the formal interviews and field notes from
the observations were transcribed for analysis. A member check of the teacher's interview transcription was
conducted with the teacher.

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis and content analysis were conducted to identify categories and themes emerging from
field notes and all interviews (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Patton, 1990). A cross-case analysis was conducted
to check the validity of the different data sources collected (field notes, formal interviews with the teacher and
students, and informal interview with the teacher and students). Data were reduced and organized into
categories using NUD*IST qualitative research software. The analysis and categorization process was
conducted by using inductive questions drawing from the theoretical framework (Patton, 1990; i.e., How were
the girls in this study active agents in their participation in physical education? How did the girls [teacher]
position themselves within gendered discursive practices? How and when did the girls participate in or resist
their participation in physical education?). In addition to conducting a cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990) and a
member check with the teacher (Rossman & Rallis, 1998), multiple analysts checked the primary researcher's
data coding procedure and the successive categorizations with NUD*IST software to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Patton, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Specifically, the multiple analyst procedure was conducted by providing two external researchers, multiple analysts, a copy of all the transcribed interviews to check on the primary researcher's data collection and first level of analysis. During the first meeting of the multiple analysts, the two external researchers conversed with the primary researcher about the primary researcher's first analysis and their perspectives on the data to gather multiple perspectives on all data collected (Patton, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The multiple analysts were two established researchers in physical education pedagogy, a European American woman and an African American man.

Results

The results of this study suggest that girls' negotiations of complex gender relations in their physical education classes both constrained and facilitated their participation in physical education. Two major themes emerged: (a) girls enjoyed and valued physical activity, were willing to be physically active, and perceived physical education as enjoyable; however, girls made decisions to engage in certain physical activities and disengage from others through their negotiations of gender relations; their participation in physical education classes emerged as contested terrain in which they were active agents in shaping patterns of engagement; and (b) girls viewed their choice to participate in physical activity as constrained by institutionalized gender discourses; their perceptions of their opportunities to participate in physical education differed strikingly from their teacher's perception of their choices and opportunities.

Girls' Views of Their Participation in Physical Education: A Contested Terrain

Similar to other recent findings in physical education (Deem & Gilroy, 1988; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Williams & Bedward, 2001), the results of this research support the view that girls actively participate in physical activities and specific sports in physical education. Girls in this study perceived their participation in physical activity positively by explaining that they enjoyed and wanted to participate in sports and exercise-related physical activities. None referred to their general experiences in physical activity by portraying themselves as inactive or passive. This contrasts with research findings that portray girls as inactive or passive in regard to physical education and, therefore, "a problem" inside and outside of the gym (McKenzie et al. 2000; McKenzie & Sallis, 1996). For example, Desire, one of the students interviewed, said:

I like exercising. I do that a lot and most of the time we start off class with exercises, a certain amount, and I like that because I do that at home all the time. And after school we have cheerleading practice and we exercise all the time, and I think it is a good way of staying in shape. I take it seriously when I exercise....

Maintaining fitness or improving it was meaningful to Ellen also. Like Desire, she recognized the health value placed on physical activity, but viewed her engagement more holistically. When asked if she liked physical activity, she explained, "Yeah, because I want to be in shape...I do a lot of sports and really enjoy physical activity and it helps me, like, emotionally and physically to improve myself." When asked about her preferences for specific activities, she replied, "Swimming and rolling [roller-blading] because they totally refresh my body."

Most of the girls (12 of 15) interviewed explained that they valued physical activities and described their experiences as positive and important for maintaining or achieving fitness. A common denominator in their responses was describing physical activity as a means of making them feel better. They attached specific social, physical, and emotional value to movement activities and sought opportunities to meet the expectations they had for how physical activity could benefit them. In general, they were inclined to speak positively of their involvement in physical activity outside school. Although girls constructed diverse meanings around their participation in physical activities, they viewed themselves as valuing exercise and being actively involved in physical activities. Similar findings support women's positive and active engagement in physical activities (Deem & Gilroy, 1998; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001).
Although the girls viewed themselves as active and involved in physical activities and sports, they were aware of gender stereotypes pervasive in the physical education classroom and in sports outside the gym. They strove for gender equity in their participation and dismissed the notion that gender should limit participation in certain sports. In their initial view, physical activities did not have a "signifier," or a "sexual mark," derived from feminine-or masculine-appropriate behavior or participation in specific-gendered stereotypical physical activities. Despite the girls' and the teacher's efforts to reject gender stereotypes in sports, girls' negotiations of gender relations were multiplicitous, particularly in the sense that their physical activity did not always match their beliefs in gender equity. Although the girls indicated they valued and enjoyed being active and believed they would participate in any physical activity, the practices observed in classes did not reflect this view. Their participation emerged as contested terrain that both the girls and the teacher participated in shaping. Girls negotiated gender relations in the physical education classroom by participating in and resisting socially constructed gender discourses embedded in sports and physical education.

Physical Activity Does Not Have a Gender. All the girls and their teacher theoretically rejected gender stereotypes and supported the idea of gender equity. They believed girls' participation in physical education should not be restricted by gender. For example, when asked, "Are there specific activities that you think of as only girls' or boys' activities?" each girl insisted there was no correlation between activity and gender, so that participation in any sport was a decision for individuals to make. Christen's response was typical, "Me personally, I think anybody should be allowed to do what they want." What is particularly emphatic about this response is the way she resisted gender categories in her answer. Although the question centered on gender differences in relation to sports or physical activities, Christen resisted the gender dichotomy by using "anybody" and refusing to acknowledge the split inherent to the question, her answer itself striving for equity.

Even as they recognized the gender-segregated practice of sports, the girls interviewed insisted on equity. Similar to Christen's effort to disavow gender stereotypes, Lakisha responded to this question with a determined "No," and when the interviewer probed further, she was willing to oppose common opinion:

Interviewer: Could you tell me why [you think sports are not gender specific]? Or, for example, why do people think sports like football are more for boys?

Lakisha: Because football is like a contact sport, so it's more for guys or something; it's more dangerous for girls.

Interviewer: But, do you believe that or you don't believe that?

Lakisha: No, anybody can play.

We used a stereotypically male sport to elucidate Lakisha's point of view, and her response showed her awareness of the gender stereotype. Lakisha firmly insisted that boys or girls should be able to play football, and while she acknowledged the socially constructed common sense argument that "girls are weaker" and, therefore, should not be channeled into contact sports, Lakisha resisted this gender construct. Like Lakisha, Michelle acknowledged and resisted gender stereotypes:

I think if they [girls] have the yearning to try for something then there shouldn't be any divisions holding back-it's not fair to them. There shouldn't be anyone saying no you shouldn't do that because you are a girl.

Although Michelle agreed with the other girls about freedom of choice in physical activity, her own participation evidenced the multiplicitous ways gender was actually negotiated in the classroom and reflected the way common sense notions about gender and physical activity sometimes prevailed. Gender-appropriate behavior or participation in feminine and masculine physical activities was dismissed, and by emphasizing that "anyone or anybody should be able to participate in what they want to," the girls disavowed essentialist sex categories. Michelle never participated in physical education and only talked to her best friend. She always sat apart from the other students on a bench with her notebook, where she wrote poems and drew sketches. She never looked "feminine," carefully dressed, or groomed. Michelle said her decision not to participate in physical education was related to her prior experiences in school and athletics, and she felt she didn't "fit in" with girls and boys she described as "popular."
It was just like you hear on the TV shows. There were the popular people and the unpopular people, and the popular people were good in sports. They were good in school and they were just... [they] were always attacking the [unpopular people] in every way. And of course, I was friends with the unpopular people... like there was this one girl—she was not good at sports either, so she and I were... never around in PE.

She added:

...the main reason is...just because I don't feel comfortable in these group things and everybody is just seeing how you do and they are evaluating you and comparing you with anyone else and I just don't feel comfortable with that.

Although "popularity" might implicitly refer to gender stereotypes, girls and boys who perform heterosexualized forms of masculinity and femininity and, therefore, meet social expectations and standards are, thus, "popular." In this case, Michelle's generalizations about "popular" and "unpopular" were rooted in notions of skillfulness in physical education. To illustrate her point, Michelle even alluded to "TV shows" in her effort to create an image of what popular or successful teens are like. While Michelle's reasons for not participating in physical education were complex and not limited to her perceptions about gender roles or performance in the gym, part of her disengagement came from her resistance to behaviors or performances she identified as popular, in terms of skillfulness. She seemed unaware, however, that in sport, as a male preserve, skillfulness and conceptions of success are bound to be gendered. Interestingly, Michelle never referred to "popular" or "unpopular" groups in terms of gender, or boys' and girls' participation in the "appropriate" physical activity, but in terms of performing skills in physical education classes; throughout the interview she identified herself as skillless. While the common notion of "popularity" is often constructed in society as performing feminine or masculine behavior, it remains questionable to what extent Michelle positioned herself as an advocate of gender equity by rejecting the idea that girls' and boys' participation in physical activity depended on gendered/sexualized behavior and by strategically explaining her lack of participation in terms of performing physical education skills. Michelle was involved in karate outside school, and she later described her engagement in this physical activity as important for "the development of the individual rather than for performance."

Despite her lack of participation in physical education, Michelle's point of view on gender fairness was clearly articulated, and it underscored the interviewees' attitude on the whole that neither girls nor boys should be restrained from participating in physical activities because of gender. While the girls agreed that notions of "feminine" or "masculine" physical activities are stereotypes constructed and embedded in common sense beliefs, they all described girls' and boys' participation as they thought it should be, not as it was. Many of the girls were aware of gender stereotypes, and some resisted them by positioning themselves as advocates of gender equity and social justice.

The girls' teacher echoed their belief in gender equity in physical education and physical activities, asserting:

I think that it [participation in physical activity with regard to gender] wouldn't matter, males or females. I don't think it would really matter because as I said, all kids are competitive, males or females and...they want to have fun and I think that is what you should try to do in PE too...it should be something where they are learning but they are also having fun and being active... I think that pretty much girls and boys have the same opportunities, for what I can see they have had equal opportunities. I think they have just as much participation with the girls as the boys.

According to the teacher, participation in physical activities or physical education should not depend on biological sex; rather, competitiveness and enjoyment of physical activities are natural characteristics not only of boys but also of girls. In dismissing the gender construction of "appropriate" participation in physical activity and competitiveness as only male, she also disrupted the dichotomous categories male/female (Brown & Rich, 2002). The teacher's beliefs in gender equity and equity of opportunity matched the girls', but she went a step further by suggesting that physical education classes at this particular school provided equal opportunities she supported for engagement. In this theme, students' and teacher's awareness of gender stereotypes and their belief in gender equity clearly emerged. Findings in this first section elucidate how discourses of gender equity (politically and culturally produced through liberal feminism of the 1960s and 1970s) were generally supported by the girls and the teacher. However, the girls' and teacher's support of gender equity differed from the embodiment of their perspectives: girls' negotiations of these discourses were fluid and inconsistent.
Girls' Negotiations of Their Participation in Gender Discourses. Girls aimed for gender equity in participating in physical education and various physical activities in their daily lives. Although they strongly advocated for equity between boys and girls, their sense of daily involvement in physical education was inconsistent and contested. Girls' disavowals of gender stereotypes and views of themselves as potential participants in every physical activity collided with the reality of their experiences in the physical education classroom. When girls were asked to comment on differences in boys' and girls' participation in physical education, they responded by participating in and resisting gender discourses, as they performed social gender roles in different ways. In contrast to their initial comments about their experiences in physical activity in general, their responses were conflictual and they positioned themselves within discursive practices inconsistently (Davies & Harré, 1990) when questioned about gender differences in boys' and girls' participation in physical activity. Because practices and ideas within discourses are contradictory and multiplicitous, girls' negotiations of gender relations were inconsistent (Butler, 1990).

When specifically asked about their perceptions of differences between boys' and girls' engagement in physical education, several girls articulated conventional ideas about gender and physical activity. For example, Meagan commented:

I think girls are less engaged, because I think, I'm not too sure, but I think boys get more into it than the girls...I think girls are just more lazy to do it. I think guys are...they're more active than we are.

Meagan perceived herself and other girls as less engaged, generally lazy, and more passive than boys. The difference she saw was consistent with the common sense constructions of girlhood and boyhood, in which girls are more passive and emotional than boys (Bordo, 1995). By positioning herself within the gender stereotype, a girl lets the stereotype function as gender regulation. In this sense, women can maintain and reproduce discourses around "womanhood" and perform, and in a sense control, their social roles (Buder, 1990; Munro, 1998). Similarly, Lauren reasoned:

Well, I mean girls, I don't like the idea very much. It's just...I don't know it's just that guys seem a lot more...more aggressive. Because I think girls have to protect [themselves] a little bit more, their bodies...for one reason.

These girls' characterizations of boys' natural physical power and girls' natural passivity or weakness participate in well established narratives/discourses of Anglo American physical education and sports. Similar attitudes toward "womanhood" and "manhood," particularly toward aggression as a natural characteristic of manliness, have pervaded sports since the turn of the 20th century, when, in fact, structured physical activity and spaces to perform such activities were first organized to address these specific gendered "predispositions." Physical activity was believed to be a means for boys to release excess energy and to learn to control their primitive, aggressive instincts. First promoted as a value of "muscular Christianity" in 19th-century Britain, sport taught boys how "to become men." Sport functioned as an educational process for white middle and upper class boys in the British public schools and was shortly adopted by American public schools and in American recreation (Crossett, 1990; Mangan & Walvin, 1987). Social Darwinism was especially influential in shaping these attitudes and the development of physical education as well as modern sports (Bederman, 1995; Cahn, 1994; Vertinsky, 1994). By contrast, advocates for girls' physical activity imagined women as "maternal guardian[s] of virtue and domesticity," who should be protected by "perfect" Anglo Saxon men (Bederman, 1995). Therefore, in sports and physical activity aggressive play was not a "natural" feature of womanhood but of manhood; women instead had to protect and fortify their bodies for the generation of the "perfect" (Anglo Saxon) race.

Girls who perceived natural differences between girls and boys also tended to suggest that their roles complimented the boys'. Melissa, for example, explained how the "natural" differences between girls and boys produced interactions that engaged her in class:

I think they are a little more involved than the girls are because I think they are naturally competitive. They are. I mean, they are better at stuff than most of the girls are...I think they are naturally more skilled and stuff, but they just can be more dedicated to it.

When asked why she thought that, Melissa continued:
More general—they are looking at different things, they are pretty much better I think. The girls, like, we lack motivation more, and they kind of want to show they are the best...here [in this physical education class] it's fun, because it's fun to watch the guys. They are so funny; they get so competitive, and it is so much fun to watch them, and the interaction is so much fun!

Melissa explained boys’ higher engagement in physical education by depicting herself and other girls as biologically less skilled, strong, and competitive. While Melissa's beliefs may have led to her self-exclusion from particular activities, her belief is embedded in and contributes to the creation and reproduction of gender discourses. Her participation in physical education class coexisted with her purposeful negotiation of gender roles, and, thus, from her point of view the girls’ lower engagement in physical education was rooted in boys' gender performances as "skillful," "competitive," and "motivated." Women are often trapped within a “double-bind”: by performing "womanhood" they participate in "feminine" practices that support their "inferiority of skills," but by rejecting gendered discourses and participating in men's physical activities, they become "masculinized" (Vines & Bieke, 1987).

Although several girls expressed a belief in boys' "natural" physical superiority, they still positioned themselves as arbiters of their own participation and reasoned that such differences could benefit them. Ellen commented, "Doing [activities] with guys is a lot of fun, because even though they are a lot better than us it helps to teach us how to interact with them, and maybe we can improve ourselves. I really enjoy it." She accepted the idea that boys were physically superior and envisioned them as tutors. As Ellen and Melissa explained, girls were able to "improve themselves" when interacting with the boys; they viewed the coed interaction as positive, productive, and fun. Another student, Denise, agreed:

The ways we act when we mix up girls and with guys is different. It's kind of like the guys take charge and they kind of, like, with tennis and badminton they kind of get in our space and stuff, but we just kind of let them do it, because, I guess, they are better.

In their participation in gender discourses, Ellen and Denise accepted boys' physical superiority and placed boys in tutoring roles. But even when the girls saw themselves as less skilled and/or innately less competitive, they did not see themselves as submissive to boys but as deciding to "let them do it." Indeed, Denise described how girls, as the decision makers in the interaction, let the boys teach them. The girls imagined this role as complementary to boys' and, at the same time, voluntary by re-positioning themselves in gender discursive practices, notwithstanding their support of gender equity as evidenced in the first part of this theme.

Although the teacher perceived herself as advocating and practicing gender equity in her physical education classes, she relocated herself in gender discursive practices when she explained girls' lack of participation in her class as a function of femininity and masculinity, echoing the girls' estimation of class activity. For example, she said:

A big problem is that girls, you know, they are worried about their appearance, and you know how the girls are at that age. They don't want to look silly in front of the boys, they don't want to be sweaty or mess their hair. That is the biggest problem you know. Guys don't care, they grow up, you know, it's okay for a guy to be dirty or sweaty, but not a girl [emphasis added]. You know, they [the girls] want to look cute, they don't want to sweat, you know, they are embarrassed in front of the guys....they tell you the first thing they do when they walk in dressing room is...this is their favorite question, I heard this question one hundred million times: do we have to dress out? [imitating the voice of a teenage girl] You know, they asked you that every day.

During the observational period, when some girls did not dress or want to participate, the teacher twice explained that the boys were never a "problem" in terms of participating in physical education—they always wanted to participate. According to the teacher, because some girls worried about their hair or their appearance (stereotypical construction of femininity), they lacked the motivation to participate in physical education. After her first dismissal of the “gender order,” the teacher repositions herself by making sense of girls’ and boys’ engagement within fixed notions of femininity and masculinity. Just like several of the girls, she accepted common sense notions of girlhood but, unlike the girls, perceived their girlhood as a “problem” (i.e., being a girl was fundamentally at odds with sports participation). The teacher explained girls' disengagement as caused by girls' biology "at that age." Even as she identified stereotypical gender attitudes ("it's okay for a guy to be
sweaty"), she understood girls' disengagement in physical education as symptomatic, specific, and natural for adolescent girls.

Participating in this discourse allowed girls to maintain their perception of themselves as "girls," an image of womanhood, even if it acquiesced to cultural constructions of femininity. In this case, for example Ellen and Denise negotiated gender/sex discursive relations of the "natural" complementary roles by accepting being classed as the boys' "inferiors" in terms of skills, competition, and motivation. As Hargreaves (1994), writing about images of femininity at the turn of the century, asserted, women, especially middle class women, believed the pervasive sexist ideology that characterized them as passive, inferior to men. Indeed, as she wrote, "...many women believed in their own inferiority and hence supplied further 'proof of the rational validity of the belief. There were insufficient women who were visibly healthy and energetic, or who participated in sports, to provide a substantial different image" (p. 47). Because individuals engage in multiplicitous discursive practices, exploring the sites of these contradictions provide insights into the complexity and fluidity of gendered identity (Davies & Harré, 1990; Munro, 1998).

As pervasive as conventional ideas about femininity and masculinity were, girls negotiated gender relations in the physical education classroom in various ways. Girls who rejected what they described as "traditional" images of girlhood or femininity also saw themselves as making active decisions to participate or not participate in particular activities or stereotypes. Angela explained:

Some girls even believe that stereotype [that girls aren't athletic], and maybe there are some people like that in our class and in our school system that may think, "I shouldn't be doing this because I'm a girl." I don't sweat all that stuff...that, "I have to make myself look [this way] because of the boys" and stuff. I don't think like that and I'm more masculine than all my sisters are. I'm not as much a girl as some other people, and I think maybe it's because I have an older brother. The best feeling is since you are a girl and you do a boy's sport or whatever and then you do better than some of the boys-it's a good feeling. Like when I was in elementary school they were "Oohh, you are a girl-you can't run faster!" Whatever! And after I ending up beating the guys, that feels very good because after you are like, "What can you say now? A girl just beat you!"

Angela negotiated gender relations by resisting the accepted common sense notions of girls' and boys' participation in physical education and sports. Being aware of those stereotypes and gender practices allowed her to dismiss them and accept herself as different from the socially constructed stereotype. She repositions herself as "more masculine," by rejecting a notion of femininity in which the girl is inferior and complementary to the boy. In addition, Angela rejected this fixed notion by providing a personal example to subvert gender roles in physical activity. Equally resisting and negotiating dominant discourses, Christen asserted:

The other girls always act sort of ditsy. I'm sorry, but around in PE [sigh]. Some of them would try, but they don't seem to take it seriously. It's not just taking it seriously; I guess it's just they have their own standards. To me it seems they have their own standards, and they don't want to look bad in front of "da-da-da-dah" or maybe they think they shouldn't act in a certain way like that. I don't feel like that-I act the way I want to act, so I don't really care. I don't think they [other girls] think about themselves as passive, actively or as weak...they probably-they think they are probably fitting into what they think is a "normal" girl. They are trying to be typical; they are trying to be what the guys want and in that they become passive and weak; but they probably don't actively think, "I'm passive or weak." They think, "I'm being feminine," which is another word for passive and weak, basically.

Like Angela, Christen and other girls in the interviews negotiated their position as girls in the physical education class by deconstructing fixed notions of girlhood. They explained that women's participation in stereotypes relied on maintaining and positioning themselves as "feminine." Christen envisioned girls as victims but also active agents working within dominant gender discourses. Girls' participation in or resistance to physical education reflects the complexity of gender relations in the classroom endeavor, and the girls and their teacher positioned and repositioned themselves in fluid, multiplicitous, and contradictory discourses. Girls and teachers negotiated and made sense of girls' and boys' participation in physical education in multiple and contested ways. Because girls practiced femininity in multiplicitous ways, their participation in physical activity should not be viewed as unitary or homogenous.

When Is a Choice a Choice?
When girls enjoyed the kinds of activities offered in physical education class and felt they had a choice to participate, they engaged. They resisted physical education when they perceived the physical activity as gendered, unwelcoming to their participation, and, thus, not a choice. In this second section, girls' negotiations of their choices filtered through gender, and race relations constrained or channeled girls' participation in physical education and sports. Although in this study dominant social discourses, embodied by students', parents', and teacher's decisions limited the girls' choices, they were active decision makers in participating or resisting certain physical activities and in negotiating these gendered discursive practices.

Basketball: A "Stacked Deck." The gendered barriers girls encountered in physical education classes and outside the gym contributed to their lack of participation. Girls were active agents in their disengagement from or participation in activities; for example, in this study they resisted their involvement in basketball because of perceived barriers. Specifically, girls resisted involvement when they viewed basketball as gendered and unwelcoming to girls, especially when basketball was constructed as a male sport. Girls' lack of participation in basketball reflected their negotiation of gender relations embedded in the physical education classroom.

The teacher explained the construction and context of basketball in physical education. In this school, African American boys traditionally played basketball, which was constructed as a gendered physical activity. According to the teacher:

Most of African American boys want to play basketball, and there are some very good players that don't even play on the basketball team. Most of the time if they had a free day or whatever, they always wanted to spend their free time to play basketball. The reason the girls did not participate as much as the guys is because there wasn't anything like basketball for them to play.

The teacher explained boys' involvement and girls' disengagement in basketball this way:

It's what they [guys] wanted to do and sometimes I would let them play to reward them, not all the time. You know that is what they like to do. You know I would rather see them run up and down and play basketball than sitting on the side getting in trouble. You know that is why I would let them play.

When asked to explain girls' lack of participation, she said:

They [the girls] don't want to play with the boys, and they [the boys] probably don't want to play with them because they [boys] are pretty serious about it...they [the girls] know that if we are going to let the boys play basketball, they probably don't have to play if they don't want to.

In her comments, the teacher anticipated that the boys would either play basketball or misbehave and decided to use basketball as an incentive for the boys, because she knew they preferred it to other activities. In this way, she manipulated the circumstances to involve boys in activity and promote good classroom management. At the same time, this "incentive" defined basketball as an outlet for boys' energy and separated girls from a "male space" of aggressive play. In this instance, the teacher and students perpetuated a gender dynamic already established in physical education classes at the school. In several informal conversations, students and the teacher explained the practice of boys' playing basketball as a break or reward had been "tradition" in this school for as long as they could remember. Both the teacher's strategies and the students' choices were embedded in the context of the school, where basketball had been constructed as a male terrain.

Moreover, when this practice was observed in the first-period class, the only students engaged were African Americans boys; none of the girls or the only European American boy ever participated. In informal interviews, the teacher suggested that basketball games were an African American boys' space and confirmed her suggestion during the formal interview, explaining:

Most of the ones who wanted to play were African Americans, but the White boys want to play too, but they don't want to play with the African Americans, because basketball has become their sport, and they [African Americans] have higher skill levels. But, you know, they also play different than Whites; they have a different way of playing.
Again, this space was contested terrain in which African American students may have identified themselves with this physical activity (Harrison, 1995). Girls commented that the (African American) boys played basketball outside of school as well as in the gym.

Several girls and the teacher viewed gender separation on the basketball court as a mutual decision based on girls' lack of desire to play, but 12 of 15 girls provided a different explanation for their lack of participation. For example, Lauren said, "I'll play basketball at home by myself. I'll play basketball at home with my brothers, or my friends, but at school I don't." When asked why she did not play basketball at school, she replied:

When we are playing basketball or something in the gym, the girls would sit on the benches and the guys would play. I'm not really interested in it. I don't like it. I don't enjoy the game. They don't ask us to play so we don't. We don't want to play with them." [emphasis added]

Lauren's view of her participation in basketball was similar to the teacher's, but it was also representative of other instances when girls' took responsibility for their lack of participation, even when their participation was contested by other forces such as the boys and the traditions of the school. Lauren did play and like basketball, but not at school. Her noninterest did not originate outside of school, as the teacher's comments suggested, but is a function of her decision making in the school context. Additionally, 7 girls explained that they liked basketball and they played at home, outside of school, or with family members, but not at school. Lauren's view of basketball contradicted the teacher's, because her lack of participation was related to the context of her physical education class. Although she played basketball at home and enjoyed it with friends and her brother, she did not feel welcome on the court in the physical education class. The teacher perpetuated the stacked deck of basketball, which discriminated against girls' participation. Similar to Ennis's (1999) finding, basketball itself was not the cause of her lack of interest; lack of support or encouragement and the social context of the game, including her interactions with the boys in the class, repelled her participation.

Throughout formal and informal interviews, the teacher maintained that girls did not want to participate in basketball, and she provided an alternative to boys' basketball because she wanted the girls to be active. The alternative was to walk or run outside on the track, because, the teacher thought, girls would like walking or running. Some of the girls did go outside to walk or run when asked, but many felt as though they were being sent away. However, none of the girls who walked or ran on the track complained about this practice during the formal interviews.

Girls sat on the bleachers and did not play basketball based on gender barriers embedded in this specific context. Several girls described basketball as unwelcoming because of the tradition in the school context surrounding basketball and because of boys' attitudes toward the game. For example:

Melissa: ...as far as like basketball, that's mostly, well, at our school that's mostly just boys...I don't know, I personally don't like basketball; I personally don't like to play with all boys, because most of the time it's only boys that play basketball, and so I don't go out mainly for that reason and then because I don't like it, but if we are required to do it, I will do it.

Interviewer. Can you explain why you don't like it?

Melissa: Because they play rough, they really do, and some of the girls are afraid to get hurt and fall, and I don't want to go out and have to go through all of that.

In this school, girls viewed basketball as a male space in which boys performed aggressive and rough play; it is not surprising that girls, therefore, resisted participating in it. Girls did not perceive themselves as passive or with specific feminine emotional needs, they simply resisted a physical education context hostile to them.

Tennis and Badminton: A "More Level Playing Field." None of the girls interviewed described tennis and badminton as a boys' sport in physical education. Girls engaged in and enjoyed badminton and tennis, in contrast to their nonparticipation in basketball. None, except Michelle, ever sat on the bleachers during tennis or badminton. In those units, girls felt more comfortable with their skill levels, supported or encouraged by the teacher and classmates, and enjoyed being in a coeducational environment. The contexts of these units were
positive and welcoming. The teacher’s support and similar skill levels among players across gender facilitated girls’ negotiations of gender relations and the physical education curriculum. The teacher had adopted badminton and tennis as extracurricular units specifically to promote girls’ engagement in physical education. The lessons of these two units were structured and taught with a traditional skill approach to teaching and learning in physical education: the teacher introduced and demonstrated the skills at the beginning of each lesson and then organized drills and games. The girls responded positively to this opportunity. For example, Lashawn said, "It was fun. I mean, that was my second time playing tennis, and it was fun going out and playing. It probably was the funnest [sic] thing we played this year." She also commented:

When we are playing tennis it's fun, because it's just with your friends and it's just fun...it's kind of a social thing, because I'm not very good... I just think I can enjoy anything if it's fun, but if it's really hard or really difficult, people would get tired of it and they won't do it...it [physical activity] should be something that everybody enjoys.

Tennis and badminton also provided boys and girls the opportunity to interact socially. Several girls maintained they particularly liked these units, because they were not separated from boys and because tennis and badminton were not "for boys" only. Lakisha did not see herself as particularly skillful, but she described tennis and badminton as contexts in which everybody would be able to participate and enjoy.

Other girls echoed her opinion, adding that boys and girls were more at the same skill level in these sports. For example, Angela enjoyed tennis as compared to basketball, which she saw as discriminatory against girls because of die disparity in skill level among students. She explained:

I guess I'm glad we played badminton only because everyone did it and everybody enjoyed it...it's a different sport and it's not just like with basketball they [the boys] probably play everyday at home anyway, so I think it allows everybody to participate.

Again Angela perceived tennis and badminton as different from basketball, because they were alternatives in which both boys and girls could engage equally. Instead, because of boys' similar skill levels and limited prior experiences in badminton and tennis, everybody (girls and boys) equally engaged in the units and enjoyed their participation.

Skill levels were a real concern for the girls. Often they perceived themselves as not skilled because they never had opportunities to learn and practice, especially compared to the boys. During the badminton unit, when students played in a tournament, the gym seemed like a holiday; students' were actively engaged, smiling, and willing to interact with each other. The silence that often characterized the gym disappeared. Lauren also commented:

Badminton, I think it was more fun because it was easier, everybody can play well, and so when everybody can play well then your game is better, and you play better, I guess. That was more fun. Everybody had the same skill level.

Because skill was such a concern for the girls, they frequently viewed badminton as even more engaging than tennis where they felt more comfortable with their skills. As Christen pointed out:

Badminton is easier to be good at, because the birds are not as hard to hit and you can play easily, and everybody is pretty good at badminton and in tennis... [sigh]. Another thing about badminton-I was just thinking about this a minute ago-is that badminton is more traditionally feminine, so girls felt more encouraged to participate...traditionally badminton has always been seen as a girl's sport, because you know people expect girls to do that.

Christen suggested that in addition to equal skill levels across genders, girls' involvement was higher because badminton was a "feminine" sport. Christen's perception of a "sport as it is" again contrasted with "sport as it should be." open to everyone. Although this traditional notion in American culture that badminton is "for girls" might have functioned as a facilitator for Christen and some of the other students, overall badminton was not constructed by the girls, the teacher, or the school context as gender specific; it was perceived as gender
accessible to girls. Girls enjoyed badminton differently from walking and running; these last two activities were perceived as discriminatory activities for girls only because they allowed boys to use the gym and play basketball.

Boys Have More Real Choices. Girls' perceptions of their choices to participate in basketball, walking, running, tennis, and badminton constrained or promoted their participation in physical education. A discrepancy between girls' views of their opportunities to engage in physical education and their daily lives and the teacher's perception of their choices emerged in this third theme. Findings in this study, similar to Williams and Bedward (2001), highlight a "generation gap" between teachers' and girls' views of physical education participation. Girls in this study identified their choices in physical activities as gender stereotyped and, therefore, constraining of their participation inside and outside the gym. Recognizing their choices as constrained by their gender contradicted their initial dismissal of "feminine" or "masculine" physical activities, their belief that "anybody can play," and the idea there was gender equity in their classes.

During informal and formal interviews, the teacher often iterated her belief that girls and boys had the same opportunities to participate in physical education. She asserted:

You know, but if they know that it's [participation is] expected of them-you know, I always tell them you have a choice, do you want to participate? Then participate. If you don't want to participate then you lose your points.... You know, it's not that you give them a choice, you give the girls and guys a choice. The girls are not going to dress out, and the guys are going to play basketball. But given a choice, I think, anywhere, given a choice the girls won't dress out, and the boys will, because they want to play basketball if they are given a choice.

In this case, the teacher was concerned with girls' needs and included badminton and tennis to promote girls' participation in physical education. Given girls' perceived needs, the teacher provided an equal choice to girls and boys and disavowed the gender aspect of basketball at the school. To explain girls' disengagement in activities, particularly basketball, she relied on the stereotypical view of girls as not wanting to get hot or sweaty. When asked why there were activities in which girls participated, even got sweaty (such as badminton), the teacher explained that tennis and badminton were "new" sports, and girls and boys had similar skill levels. The teacher's strategy for ensuring participation equity increased the overall level of girls' participation in physical education. But to the extent the assumptions about girls' and boys' choices were based on common sense notions of "natural" differences between boys and girls, girls were ultimately viewed as "problems" whose lack of participation was part of their adolescent development. Like liberal feminist investigations of girls' disengagement, analyses that view girls' differences from boys as natural do not account for social, cultural, and historical specificity of gender and race relations.

While the teacher firmly asserted girls and boys had the same choices to participate, girls contested their choices. Girls viewed badminton and tennis as opportunities to engage in activities they enjoyed and in which they were comfortable with their skills. Despite their involvement in those two units, they suggested their choices in physical education were limited. Desire felt she did not have the opportunity to participate in her favorite physical activity, as she explained:

I like to play outside and play sports and stuff like that. I would rather play football right now than anything.... I don't play the sport on a team, I just play with my brother... but if I had a choice I would... they could have football for everybody.

Similar to Desire's perspective on her choices in physical education, Angela agreed:

There was never going to be a football team [for girls], but they could play tag football... because a lot of people say girls can't play football, but I like football. I mean, me and my friends around the corner we play football against these two boys, and we win. We don't tackle, we just play.

Many of the other girls (11 of 15) in this study argued they should have the choice to participate in sports only boys usually play. Girls also strongly felt their choices were limited by the kind of sports not available to them as well as the way their choices compared to the boys'. As Denise recalled:
Because I heard of a girl who wanted to play football, but she would kind of be discouraged from it, and then I'm sure if the guy wanted to be a cheerleader I mean it's easier for the guy to be a cheerleader than for a girl to be a football player.

Denise did not criticize the stereotypical view of cheerleading as a girls' sport, but argued that boys had more chance to participate in "gender specific" sports or break stereotypes if they wanted to—the chance a girl would not have if she wanted to play football.

Girls felt constrained by not having a choice to be involved in physical activities they enjoyed. Football was one such sport for many girls in this research. This is consistent with Flintoff and Scraton (2001), who reported that girls in their study felt limited by the lack of opportunities to play soccer. In the school where this research was conducted, basketball was popular among the African American boys and traditionally preserved within this community; soccer in England has a similar status among working class boys. Flintoff and Scraton concluded that key areas of criticism and discontent for girls centered on the activity choices and experiences offered in the physical education program.

Gender stereotypical ideas and practices in sports and physical activities constrained and promoted girls' participation in physical education and at home. Differently from badminton and tennis, but similar to basketball, girls wished they had the choice to play football. Because boys had more choices, girls felt discriminated against and that choices in physical education as well as outside the gym constrained their participation in physical activities. Christen argued:

Everything goes to the football team and basketball teams, and we don't get anything at all. And people discriminate, like, "She wants to play football? What is she talking about?" I mean, and the reason more girls won't go out for that stuff is because they don't feel they would be accepted.

Beliefs and practices in the social context limited girls' choices: sports such as basketball were constructed as a boys' space, a "Male Preserve," a lack of economic resources for girls compared to boys, lack of opportunities to engage in their favorite physical activities inside and outside the gym, and the perpetuation of traditional, stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity. For example, although many of the girls described their parents and family members as supportive of their involvement in physical activities in general, this was not true for all sports. Cathy said, "I always wanted to do something, and boys were [saying to me], you can get hurt or stuff like that." When asked what she meant, Cathy explained, "I wanted to do boxing, and my mom said no, she didn't want me to.... I always wanted to do that, but she [mom] did not want me to." Cathy's choice to box was constrained by her mother's decision not to let her participate in this sport. She explained that, despite her past involvement with gymnastics, she decided not to be involved in other sports, because her only interest was boxing and this activity was not available to her.

Finally, Cathy's thoughts summarized the girls' perspectives on their choices to participate in physical activities, sports, and physical education. She argued for more choices to be active and engage in physical activity, "I think sports should be more androgynous, because it's too gender-specific right now. In general, [in] all of the sports. They should be more androgynous, and there shouldn't be 'girls' sports' or 'boys' sports'."

Although girls in this study viewed themselves as responsible for their own decisions about participating, their perspective differed from their teacher in that they felt their opportunities to participate and make choices were limited when compared to boys' choices. Girls recognized these constraints as pervasive in society as well as in the school context.

Discussion

Using a poststructuralist framework, this study provides insight into understanding how girls actively negotiate gender relations embedded in physical education classes and society. Despite the increased opportunities in athletics available to girls since the implementation of Title IX, girls in this study still perceived gender barriers to their participation in physical education, but they indicated they would be willing to actively participate in activities in an equitable setting. Rather than being viewed as passive participants who are oppressed and
marginalized, the poststructuralist view enables us to view girls as active agents who make decisions and choices concerning their engagement in activity.

The complexity of gender barriers the girls perceived in the physical education class was evident in this study. Gender stereotypes are a form of control over girls' participation in physical education and their daily lives. The results indicate that if teacher educators and physical educators are to improve girls' status in physical education classes, awareness of gender stereotypes and girls' perceptions of gender barriers to their participation is important. Rather than forcing girls to participate in activities they perceive as unfairly biased for boys, efforts to engage girls in activity should be designed to support their attempts to confront those barriers and negotiate gender relations in an instructional setting.

Girls' awareness of gender stereotypes can limit or encourage their participation in physical education class and in physical activity across the lifespan. Within a poststructuralist framework, girls' lack of participation reflects multiple sites of resistance to dominant discourses and presents the physical education class as a complex environment in which power relations are not repressive or centralized but multiplicitous and contested. The results of this study decenter and subvert the notion that girl's subjectivity is fixed and singular and provide an alternative view to dominant patriarchal discourses that depict girls as passive, subordinated, and with emotional needs. These findings support the notion of constructing educational environments that account for girls as active agents in physical education participation and, therefore, can provide more activity choices within physical education curricula. As agents, girls negotiate gendered structural barriers they face in society and in the microcosm of physical education. To help girls negotiate this contested terrain and, consequently, enhance their involvement in physical activities, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers need to explore ways to disrupt gender discourses and understand how to create welcoming and encouraging physical education contexts. It is crucial to construct learning environments that are a "more level playing field," coeducational contexts in which girls are supported in their participation and feel comfortable with their skill levels.

Gender-dominant discourses and related social practices and stereotypes must be disclosed to help girls renegotiate their participation. Awareness of gender stereotypes and the effect that they can have on girls' decisions to engage in activity have the potential to alter girls' views. High school girls in this study were not unwilling to participate in physical activity, and they were not passive in their exclusion from activities. Consistent with recent investigations (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001), the issue of curricular choice emerged in this study as a powerful factor in the decisions girls made concerning their engagement. Activities that provide opportunities for all students to learn, rather than those favoring male participation, emerged as a compelling way to increase girls' participation.

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