Doing childhood, doing gender, but not doing sports: Unorganized girls’ reflections on leisure time from a relational perspective

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Abstract
The aim is to analyze how girls from a multi-ethnic area, not doing sports, reason about their well-being during leisure time, and how they think about physical activities, social relations, and their near future. The results say that they mainly regard leisure time as a moment for rest. They have close relations in primary groups but weaker secondary relations. They reveal stereotypical opinions about gender divisions in sports. Physical activity is unwanted and tiresome, if not part of playing.

Keywords
associations, autonomy, gender, generational order, leisure time, physical activity, social relations, social sustainability, sports, well-being

Introduction
Concerns have been raised that children who do not participate in organized sports are excluded from important opportunities to meet with their peers, to play, to be physically active, and to promote their health (Walseth and Fasting, 2004). Sports research has found participation to be stratified according to class, ethnicity, and gender (Ekholm et al., 2019). In Sweden survey research among school children in two of the major city areas
have found that the participation rate in organized activities has shifted towards higher rates among younger, and lower rates among older children (Blomdahl and Elofsson, 2017). Following high social ambitions among volunteering parents and in policy to recruit as many as possible from all backgrounds to different leisure time activities, those not participating have been defined as “outsiders” (Olson, 1992). The estimated group aged 10–13 years among girls is 9–17% in seven researched municipalities between 2012–2019, not participating in organized regular activities, civil society organizations (sports associations and clubs), or more open and expressive activities organized by municipalities (youth centers, libraries, and public swimming pools). The group of outsiders do more often live in one parent households, have lower socioeconomic status, have more often immigrant backgrounds, lower satisfaction with their leisure time, lower physical activity, and lower self-rated well-being than those in the same year groups who participate in organized activities (Elofsson, et al., 2020).

Research results and the label “outsiders” signals concerns that there might be something in this group’s social background that contributes to their lower participation rate and that might affect their possibilities to have a meaningful leisure time and perhaps even run future health risks due to less physical activity and fewer social relations. In this article we will elaborate on these worries from the perspective of childhood studies that has raised interest in children as competent social actors with an autonomy of their own (James and Prout, 2015; Mühlbacher and Sutterlüty, 2019). The goal in childhood studies to analyze children’s lives from their own standpoint is an attempt to question the long tradition of treating children as either powerless victims of their circumstances or as ill willing by nature (Warming et al., 2019). Listening to girls’ own experiences as active agents, instead of oppressed and passive, can give insights into the shaping of female subjectivity (Azzarito et al., 2006). However, benevolent attempts to support children’s agency, as well as efforts to protect them from bad habits, for example, a physically inactive lifestyle, are different sides of the same coin. Both are justified as being in the best interest of the child. Every decision on behalf of a child is part of a specific moral project to create the best version of a proper childhood (Cook, 2017). The sum of all efforts and all omissions shape the generational order of a specific society at a certain time (Alanen, 2020). As a structural form, childhood together with other structural forms, such as gender and class, constrain and condition the lives of children and their relation to other generations. Every structural form is shaped and reshaped by the sum of actions of all people involved. Children’s agency is of importance, as are parents, schoolteachers, and volunteers. In their interaction, they all are doing childhood, gender, and sports. Organized sports have a privileged position as recipient of public funds that comes with a pressure to involve children from hard-to-reach groups and also to contribute to public health, social inclusion, and even crime prevention (Fahlén and Stenling, 2016). Children not taking part, as well as their parents, are often aware that they represent an anomaly and this is something they must relate to. In this study we want to contribute by analyzing how groups of girls who do not take part in organized sports reason and how they experience their situation. This is a group of girls that seem to be of high policy concerns but, due to their negative definition—they are outsiders, unorganized, at-risk—but seldom get the opportunity to be heard.
The aim of the study is to analyze how girls from a multi-ethnic and socioeconomic diverse area who do not take part in organized sports reason about their well-being during leisure time and how they think about physical activities, social relations, and their near future. The study will contribute to previous research by giving insights into how the girls reasoning, daily activities, and everyday decisions contribute to the prevailing generational order.

Doing childhood and doing gender from a relational perspective

The relational perspective used in this study opens for a combined interest in agency and structure. After all, every child is born into already existing structural forms, developed during historical circumstances. Traditionally gender and childhood are structural forms of different kinds that demand certain activities of individual persons to follow. Carrie Paechter (2017) have analyzed how growing children name themselves as gendered as a way to claim their right to autonomic participation in civil society. Growing up as a girl mean cultivation of “girlyness” (Paechter, 2010), becoming less physically active (Paechter, 2007) and giving up sport activities and outdoor hobbies in the age of about 11–13 years (Ivinson and Renold, 2013). The institutionalized trajectories mean that you leave childhood but stay in the same gender. Following years of political struggle, gender stereotypes start to loosen up, and it is even possible to choose to perform gender affirmative treatment in countries such as Sweden. However, imagine that you want to stay a child the rest of your life. There are no options for that. This of course restricts children’s alternatives as actors. This also means that children always have their future selves to consider, as they will leave their social category and transition into youth and adulthood in just a few years (Uprichard, 2008). Even so, childhood studies often focus on children’s agency but despite good efforts, it has never been very clear what it means to be a social actor when you are a child (Esser et al., 2016). One suggestion has been to focus on children’s autonomy from a relational perspective. Autonomy should not then be equated with independence. Autonomous children are to the contrary dependent on many other persons, and so is every individual (Mühlbacher and Sutterlüty, 2019). The relational conception of autonomy emphasizes individual persons’ development in social connections and relationships with others. Being a part of relationships and social networks makes all persons interdependent; however, interdependence does not contradict autonomy but is rather an inherent part of the self (Braudo-Bahat, 2017). We become persons and develop well-being by interaction and by learning from others, and our individuality comes from socializations in primary and secondary groups. Primary groups, such as family and close friends, are significant others who we are emotionally bound to and who mainly supply support and control. Secondary groups, such as sports clubs, can contribute to information and bridging networks (Thoits, 2011).

In their seminal paper on doing gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) say that gender is not an individual property but an emergent feature of social situations. Gender is an institutionalized way to assess the actions of individuals in almost any situation. In sports, it is almost without exception that boys and girls are separated at a very young age. Gender not only stipulate particular identities, roles and how power relation between women and
men is constructed but also maintain and reproduce gender inequalities. Connell (1995) described the patriarchal power as hegemonic masculinity, with white heterosexual males at the top of the hierarchy, with a guaranteed dominant position. But according to Schippers (2007) the hegemonic masculinity matrix is also maintained by women, who submit themselves to the dominance of men as the powerful actor, while treating women as more fragile and dependent. Women who do not follow the order, pariah femininity, tend to be excluded, or face reprimands. For children doing gender is a way to display social competence as they move from the more sex neutral, but incompetent, baby stadium to being big girls or big boys, from playing to organized sports and performing accordingly as efficient and outward directed (males), or as homebound and focused on appearance (females). Unexpected interaction, for example, among girls playing football, can therefore be interpreted as examples of action with the potential to change existing structural forms (Deutsch, 2007).

Study design, data, and method

This study had an explorative qualitative design using “reflexive photography” and focus group interviews. Photographs were used to enhance the richness of data, facilitating participants to reflect on and talk about their daily activities, experiences and thoughts (Pyle, 2013; Whiting, 2015). Participants were recruited from an elementary school in a suburb in the larger Stockholm area characterized by lower socioeconomic status and inhabited by many ethnic minorities. The study was ethically approved by the regional ethics committee in Stockholm (2018/1316-31/5).

A total of 18 girls, aged 9–12 years, took part in the study. None of them participated in sports, and 15 were not participating in any organized leisure time activity at all. Most of them, 11, were living in rental apartments, 16 were born in Sweden, one in Pakistan, and another in Nicaragua. Seven of the girls had both parents born in Sweden, five had one parent born abroad and four girls had both their parents born abroad (in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan). Each participant took part in one information session and three focus groups of 45–60 min. Each participant received a disposable camera and was asked to take photos in their leisure time of (a) situations associated with well-being and (b) situations when being short of breath.

In the initial focus groups, consisting of 5–7 girls, the girls were asked to select one photo each associated with “well-being” and “short of breath.” The photos were then discussed and reflected upon in relation to the interview guide. In the following smaller groups (3–6 participants), questions raised in the first sessions were further discussed by focusing on three additional areas: gender and leisure time activities, social relations during leisure time, and leisure time in the future.

In order to understand the girls as social actors and their possibility for agency, their experiences and opinions related to structural forms of gender, childhood, and aging led the analysis. The theoretical framework sketched above informed the analysis of the empirical data. Development of themes was guided by general principles of qualitative inductive content analysis (Patton, 2002). Initially the transcribed text was read through to identify areas that related to well-being and to physical activity in general, social
relationships, and gender, together with content referring to a change in leisure time in the near future (3 years). As a next step, “condensed meaning units” were formulated, constituting a reduction of the original meaning units without changing the content of the text. Condensed meaning units with similar content were then sorted into the three predefined categories; childhood, gender, and aging. Meaning units in each category was in a later phase related to each other and either divided into smaller subcategories or pooled into a broader one. Finally, the cores of the interpreted meanings of the categories were linked together into three themes which are used as headlines to structure the following section. To enhance trustworthiness the results, contain many quotations. The main purpose of the focus groups, following the relational perspective, was to stimulate group discussions based on theoretically informed areas; therefore, quotes are results from group discussions and not referring to specific individuals.

Results

Doing childhood: Relaxing and being online means to be in control

In the maturing process there were seldom room for physical activities. The home emerged as an important place for well-being in the leisure time, to relax and to be with family members and primary groups, including pets. In the home and especially in the own bed, the girls felt control and could decide for themselves what to do. Other photographs of things that contributed to well-being showed many guinea pigs, cats and dogs. The residential building, bed and teddy bears were photographed and described as important. Being indoors meant a calm and quiet place where activities and socializing with others could take place, mainly online, preferable while lying in the bed but also reading and writing could be relaxing. To relax was discussed as increasingly important in the transition from low to middle grade school with more homework and the school day being more demanding. The girls expected a more sedative future to come along with increased use of the mobile phone but also viewed greater autonomy like being allowed to go out with friends. The future scenario of being able to go shopping for soft drinks by themselves were stressed in several groups and served as goal picture.

The mobile phone stood out as highly important for the girls and filled various functions, such as playing games (Roblox, Tic Toc, and Musically), keeping track of friends and acquaintances on social media, to make purchases or surf around more generally. The mobile phone was described as a tool to forget everything else, which was comprehended as both positive and negative. It was described as de-stressing but also came with the risk of forgetting about homework or joint activities with the family, such as dinner. The mobile phone, with access to the internet, provided access to the world without request of leaving the bed and with control of how to participate without further demands of interacting. The girls mainly described themselves as consumers on the internet, looking at what other people was doing.

To choose not to take part in organized activities in the leisure time mostly meant to be alone which was both appreciated and scaring. Being alone could be desirable, to be able to fend for yourself, eating and sleeping when wanted, and not least to control screen
activities on your own. Being able to stay at home when other family members were away was described as a measure of maturity and was proof that you were growing older.

-I think there is kind of someone there. In addition, then I get scared. Therefore, I always watch TV and have it on... so I heard some noise from the hall and then I was truly scared and then I looked at the TV and lit all lights and stuff. In addition, then I hear the sound again, and then I got truly scared.

-Therefore, I usually kind of play with one at a time. Because I think it is hard to play with, like this many. If it kind of gets trouble most of the time. In addition, like if they have argued.

Leisure time thus primarily meant socializing with a few people from primary groups such as close friends, the family, and relatives. The girls expressed it as a conscious choice not to take part in bigger groups and instead they had to learn to be alone which in the long run meant to promote the autonomy with the possibility to decide for themselves.

It was prominent that the girls were aware of others’ expectations and health benefits of physical activity but being short of breath were mainly considered as something negative: Being late and having to chase the bus, or run to school, or with being frightened in a dark stairwell when the elevator was broken is examples of things photographed. Being physically active had been fun as long as one was playing. But to play was strictly age divided. One girl said that when she was in grade three (aged 9), she and her friends were breathless when they climbed, ran, and played, but now that they were in grade four (aged 10), they had stopped doing such activities. The girls also recognized structural differences that reinforced their understanding of being too old to play. The schoolyard was one such example. In the lower grades, the schoolyard and the breaks made it possible to play in a different way. Then, the school bell rang after the breaks, but in the higher grades, they had to keep track of time themselves, which made them more uncertain when out playing. An activity that still was considered fun, even when being older, was the commercial indoor playgrounds, which are large halls with, for example, trampolines or parkour practice areas growing up in industrial estates. The unforced way of exercising with possibility to challenge oneself was appreciated along with the activity often taking place with different constellations of children such as siblings, friends, and relatives. The participation of parents and other adults also contributed to a way of socializing that both parts appreciated.

-Therefore, it is good for the body and so it is fun, because you jump of course and then you train up the body and so you think of course... it is fun to be at ‘Jumpyard’ because there you can of course do flips that you cannot cope with... and then it is inside, and now it is snow and everything out so that.

-Yes, just one thing... you can only be there for an hour, but so it is slightly hard when they say that it is now the end of time, because it is like as you just want to continue.

The playgrounds were also associated with parties and seen as a way to make new friends. The risk of harm or loss of their parents was mentioned, but it was mainly
affordability and the limited time that was described as negative. Going to the commercial indoor playgrounds was something the girls wished to do more often but not something they could, or were allowed to do by themselves, as parents or other adults had to accompany them.

**Doing gender: Girls take it easy—or do girlish sports**

Sports was not part of the identity-development as a girl. A general perception in all the groups was that girls preferred to have less active leisure time and were generally more interested in taking it easy than boys. Girls were considered interested in animals together with being more caring and willing to learn about animals. Boys were instead described as being more interested in running, being faster, having more energy and happy to do sport, both organized and unorganized.

- All boys go to football in my class. Therefore, they run the more. They play football all the time, but girls do not.

The girls stressed their own perceptions and observations which together displayed the gender norm that as a girl you should gradually be less physically active and that girls involved in sports were exceptions.

- Sometimes, or at least like this on the movies, that I have seen. Then, it is usually like this that the father was like this..."did it go well at football, did you win?" And the mother just “how is it going at school..." and like that.

- Like every time I see a movie, and there are like some who play hockey. Then, it is always boys. In addition, every time I kind of watch some game. It is almost always boys. Therefore, my uncle’s son, he likes to say this. He goes out and runs because he wants his son to have muscle and... However, his girlfriend and his daughter, so they just sit and sew. In addition, I think it is very much a difference how they do it.

- Boys play football in this kind of team, like Sweden’s team, but there are actually women who play football too.

Physical activity related to sports was also discussed with significant gender differences including presumed differences in physical abilities, that hinder both girls and boys in different sports. That girls and boys have different types of bodies were discussed. Ballet required a certain posture that made some of the girls hesitant that boys would meet the requirements and agreed that ballet was considered more suited to girls, as displayed in the following exchange.

- I think like this, that you must be quite this straight, and nimb, and slim, or whatever to say.

- I think the boys should try ballet.

- Some boys do.
-However, not to be like that, but you have to be kind of like this.

-Yes, truly straight in the body and... you get pain in the whole body after.

The girls expressed a clear division of activities aimed for girls vs boys. Girls were described as riding, going to gymnastics, dancing, figure skating, and skating. If boys participated in these sports, they were described as exceptions. Sports described as suitable for boys were by the girls described as football, kickboxing, basketball and table tennis. If one as a girl participated in a sport considered being for boys, it was clear that one deviated from the gender norms.

-Therefore, I do not agree, because I... I am not like other girls as well, but I move, I have climbed since I was two years old. I run, move, jump, at least in third grade.

Not participating in organized activities, especially sports, meant trouble to get attention from the parents. Football stood out as an example that not only was as an activity primarily for boys but also had direct negative consequences for themselves. Football was also hard to join even if one wanted. Spontaneous football in the public football field was dominated by the boys which meant a risk to be injured.

-However, then I feel like this, that if I want to be with the family now. However, then, they will kind of return home in an hour then. Because they should be at X’s football game.

Interviewer: Okay, so they are with your brother at his football game?

-Yes, that is, and watch football. However, I do not want to watch this kind of football. Then, it is just “oh they get goals... oh, they got goals”. However, even you get a little impressed that they got goals. However, it is not like this maybe the whole world that they got goals.

Not sharing other people’s sporting interests but still having to follow along with sports-related activities was described as a common negative experience which was either not self-chosen or chosen as an attempt to spend time with important others even if not sharing their excitement.

**Growing older: Hopes and doubts for the near future**

With the risk of losing control, and facing dependency, organized activities were put on hold. Prominent in the interviews was that the girls had many thoughts and desires for a partly different leisure time. The girls hoped for more and new friends, learning new skills, and becoming stronger and gaining more energy, which were discussed as possible consequences if joining different organized sports such as gymnastics, riding, figure skating, and football.

-Because I like to move, I love to move, and I might meet other friends.
However, the huge range of possibilities existing in society contributed to hesitation. It was sometimes overwhelming with all opportunities of activities that seemed fun but also raising doubts of what they meant.

-And I cannot decide if I am going to go swimming, if I am going to go to art school, or if I am going to start baking.

-I get tired in the evenings, too. In addition, I cannot keep up. Because if I start football, maybe it is late. I do not know, I have to go home and then sleep right away.

The risk of getting too little time for rest and losing time with the family was considered. The fact that the girls had observed other children’s participation in organized leisure activities, mainly sports, and that they reflected on the impact it had on their leisure time was clear. They saw a risk that sports could take too much time. In the process of trying to sort one’s own needs and wishes the girls were aware of that time passes, and with that their possibilities to join. The fact that other girls had participated in different activities for a long time meant not only that they were substantially more trained but also that it would be difficult to find friends.

-Yes, as if you start in a group that has already started slightly, and knows a lot, that is, I... I do not care what other people think, if they think something bad about me, but like... It is slightly... thus, I find it slightly uncomfortable when people laugh at you and like this, if you cannot.

Uncertainty about demands made the girls hesitant to change their leisure time. Not having the bodily abilities or skills required. The risks of injury or too demanding coaches had to be considered. Working out at home on your own or with the help of a friend, as well as watching other trainers were strategies to be ready in case a place should become vacant or simply because you wanted to get better at the activity before you dared to participate with other children.

-Therefore, I... Mostly, I like... to watch others doing it, so that I get even much better, and like that.

-However, they [the coaches] usually stand in the middle and just check and say that: ‘Yes but now you will do that’....so if you cannot do it as well, and so you jump, even though you dare not do it, even if they say: ‘do it, do it’, well then it becomes too difficult, and then it becomes... Then, it will not be fun anymore. Then, you kind of want to quit even if you want to learn it.

Taking part in organized activities were further discussed as being more dependent on others, preferable parents, for financing, transportation and support. A range of actually have asked but being denied participating to expected it might be problem were raised. Alternately staying with mum and dad at different places stood out as a major obstacle. It
could also be enough to see older siblings being denied participation because of the costs to not express their own wishes.

-It was great fun [going to football]. I only had time to go to training. However, I could not get to the second training. Mom thought it was too dangerous because it was dark and stuff.

-My dad is afraid that I am hurting myself, that is why he is not sure if I can start or not.

That the choice of leisure time activities is complex is shown in the girl’s reflections, illuminating the interaction between individual needs, perceptions, and wishes, together with organizational demands.

-I cannot, or do not, want to go riding by myself because I like being with my family very much. I am not sure if I... I do not want to go there by myself. There is a lot you want to do. Because you do not have time, or because you... for example, that things... because it is kind of expensive, that it costs much money. Therefore, the two of them are connected. In addition, it is this far away, and then like this... Too stressful, then, so you have to... to bring the things that you should have, and stuff.

Participation in sports is organized activities that demand an active choice made by the child and active support from parents, and it can be seen as a step in the growth from childhood and socialization in primary groups towards relations with more distant persons. However, for the girls in the present study their own pictures of stairs can symbolize the many steps that had to be taken if another leisure time was desired.

Discussion

This study was designed to analyze how girls that belong to a specific category of children who are at risk of exclusion and poor health reason about their leisure time activities. They have been labeled “outsiders” by well-meaning social scientists for decades in Sweden. We wanted to analyze their reasoning and experiences as autonomous social actors without neglecting their position in the generational order and wider structures of society. Analyzing the message from the interviewed girls, we find that (a) overall, well-being seemed not to be a problem for the girls, (b) the girls mainly interacted within their primary groups, and (c) their physical activity was not promoted by sports because it was too organized and structured.

a) The girls did not seem to report much worry about their leisure time activities. They appreciated the autonomy their leisure time brought, although many of them planned and trained for future enrollment in sports.

b) The girls seemed to be highly interdependent on their primary groups, including close friends, family, and pets, where they found support when needed. Even though not very missed, they seem to have weaker secondary relations due to their lack of participation in larger groups during leisure time. Limited social
relationships provided by secondary groups seemed to be compensated by the interactions and information provided by the screen and internet access.

c) The girls described sports as highly gender- and age-structured, too organized and demanding. They had even more stereotypical opinions about gender divisions than what the participation rates describe. Physical activity was seldom related to well-being, instead mainly thought of as something unwanted and tiresome, if not part of playing. The girls were aware that they were already slightly old to apply for memberships in sports clubs. This means that health and well-being dependent on physical activity seems to be a potential threat to health if no alternative can be found.

The generational order of late modern societies structures childhood into a long period of life, preparing for the following adult life, advanced educations, and working life. Investment in children is at the center for any welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 2005). And even though many argue that neoliberal globalization and welfare retrenchment have had devastating effects, especially for people living in precarious urban communities such as the place of study here (Schierup et al., 2021), and the stages of the institutionalized life course slowly dissolves (Guillemard, 2005), children still have special privileges, and vulnerabilities connected to their age. Childhood is also distinguished by a tacit understanding of a social development process meaning that newborn children are highly dependent on their parents and primary groups but gradually supposed to integrate more with secondary groups and eventually lead autonomous life’s by themselves. In the generational order of late modernity, children are costly social investments and expected to act for the future to come. One of the most deviant acts you can do as a child, or young person, is to behave as you ignore your future adult life. However, the girls in the present study were aware of their future, with wishes and longings for a partly different leisure time. But their hopes for more organized activities had to be balanced with an increased need for rest and interaction in primary groups. The girls were developing their autonomy with an understanding of their own needs, wishes, and capabilities. By keeping their sense of control and influence, they also created their health and well-being here and now. But their exclusion of sports also meant less physical activity and by that they run the risk of impaired health due to an overall more sedative lifestyle made possible in the digitalized era with secondary group interaction online.

Together with the school system, sports make a significant contribution to the structuration of age and gender. Sports is in general gender divided and age fixated. Competition is central to sports, and even if many clubs have increased their social orientation (Bjärsholm and Norberg, 2021) it is unlikely that the interviewed girls ever will be able to join any clubs, the older you get, the less likely it gets. These girls are probably not alone in their wish for less organized activities, and also the supply of self-organized and commercial activities is increasing (Fahlén and Stenling, 2016). However, the girls were still too young to choose. Their parents still restricted their freedom of movement, and the girls lack resources to choose among private options such as gyms or indoor playgrounds. Other options could be special activities aimed to reach “outsiders” or less privileged children not restricted by membership, regular participation, or
competition. But research show that such attempts primarily attract already physically active boys (Stenling, 2014). To attract excluded girls, such as the ones interviewed in this study, one suggestion have been to direct the attention more closely to these girls preferences and organize the activities according to their choosing instead of what adults think they want. The activities should be more social, playful, and open for different levels of intensity and engagement. They should still contain the structure that adult leadership offers and be led by adults sensitive to existing gender, class, and generational divisions (Högman and Augustsson, 2017).

Many of the girls had left the playing stage but not yet found an alternative for physical activity. In parallel to findings in school research (Ivinson and Renolds, 2013) the girls in our study said that leaving girlhood also meant being less physically active. The girls saw a less physically active future ahead as growing meant more autonomy, more solitude, and more time for primary groups. For boys, playing and spontaneous sports seemed to develop more smoothly into organized sports, but girls doing sports need to position themselves in relation to male gender coded sports such as football, that dominate the field. Paechter (2010) claims that children construct their identities in conformity with the stereotypes of “macho masculinity” and “girly-girliness” and unless they got strong reasons for doing differently, they follow the gendered order. We can conclude that most of the girls interviewed in this study did not see reason enough, now or ever, to break the masculinity matrix and enter into sports. The construction of gender take place in local groups and communities and some girls in the present study described themselves as “different” when they practiced sports or took part in physical activities like climbing. Paechter (2010) use the expression “tomboy” for girls who like to do “boys’ things” or not behaving like a “proper” girl. This comes with the risk of losing relations to other girls, also described by Schippers (2007) which was not worth it for the girls in the study.

To conclude we want to stress that, even though this was a small-scale explorative study, it gave new insights into how a highly policy relevant group of young girls’ reason on childhood, gender and sports and how their everyday activities contribute to recreating existing structures. The group interviewing method meant a rare opportunity for the girls to discuss complex generation and gender structures in society. The relational perspective acknowledges children’s agency without neglecting families and adult society’s responsibilities to protect children based on their special vulnerabilities. Agency is not only a positive right, but it can also be a burden to choose (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002); children are faced with ever more opportunities that can be of major importance for their future life course. And all relations and activities are not positive, children also need protection from relations that lead in the wrong direction (McLaughlin, 2020). We must conclude that there were more signs of doing than undoing the existing structures. But even though constrained by their positioning in the masculinity matrix and generational order the girls tried to fend for their autonomy and well-being. The relational perspective focused on autonomy proved to be useful for guiding the analysis towards the conflict between actions and choices made for the present well-being as a child and the future self as an adult. The results indicate that childhood studies have much to gain on further studying the dualism between becoming and being: (a) Individual children are increasingly forced to act for their future to come, since they are important investments for
the welfare state, and they have longer expected lifetimes compared to history, and to the
rest of us. (b) Childhood is a phase of life worth living for its own sake as is every other
phase of life. The social relations in childhood differ from other phases of life as an effect
of the specific generational order in late modern societies. The widespread hopes that
organized sports will reach every segment of society seem to be misdirected. The welfare
state has never aimed at reaching the most precarious groups of society, and it is not
developed in opposition to capitalist democracy and its accompanying structures and
patterns of social relations. The welfare state is rather a fundamental and specific mode of
government in late modern societies (Garland, 2014). Individual agency is of increasing
importance for this mode of government and need to be learned, encouraged, trained, and
practiced during childhood. Autonomy is an ongoing process, not an individual capacity
learned in childhood and practiced in adulthood. Autonomy is relational, practiced and
shaped in its context. The generational order means that children cannot be autonomous
by themselves, they always need to be aware of their becoming future selves and their
existing guardians, parents, sports trainers, and friends.

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