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Swimming as self-care – a Foucauldian analysis of swimming for Danish Muslim women

Abstract

This article scrutinizes the highly contested, yet largely unexplored space of gender-segregated swimming which caters for Muslim women. Combining participant observation of weekly women-only swimming sessions with interviews of regular participants, the aim of this paper was to shed light on the ‘non-white’ space of women-only swimming and explore the lived experiences of Danish Muslim women within this specific setting. Drawing on a Foucauldian framework that situates women-only swimming in a wider space of power relationships and multiple intersecting discourses, we observed the operation of disciplinary power, particularly relating to the maintenance of hygiene and safety and tacit norms relating to the dress code and standards of modesty. However, contrary to competitive and lane swimming, here, women-only swimming sessions were loosely structured, with participants emphasizing freedom, pleasure and relaxation in this context. Our findings suggest that women-only swimming offered the opportunity for participants to practice self-care, whilst also highlighting ambiguities relating to participants’ critical self-awareness about the discourses governing their identities and sporting practices. Still, the loosely structured practice of women-only swimming poses an alternative to the current instrumentalization of sport and physical activity, as well as dominant discourses that position sport as a culturally integrative, homogenizing policy tool.

Keywords: Sport; physical activity; integration; religion; technologies of the self

Introduction

Globally, competitive and recreational swimming are some of the most popular forms of sport and physical activity (PA), promising significant health benefits (Chase et al., 2008). Simultaneously, sociological research has highlighted how swimming spaces are contested, where swimmers' (half-naked) bodies are regulated and on display, and where lifeguards, coaches and other swimmers engage in techniques of surveillance (Johnson and Russell, 2012; Lang, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon and Penney, 2013; Scott, 2009, 2010). Moreover, research illuminates the gendered dimensions of swimming, in which gendered norms impact upon swimmers' lived experiences (Evans et al., 2017; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti, 2017). Nevertheless, whilst several studies have focused upon gender in swimming, the experiences of racialized women remain largely unexplored.

Such research is nevertheless timely given frequent discussions around women-only swimming in several countries, including Denmark, due to its association with Muslim-women participants (Almila, 2019; Shavit and Wiesenbach, 2012). Indeed, in 2017, the city council of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, decided to ban women-only swimming during the public opening hours of all municipal swimming pools. In the political debate preceding the ban women-only swimming was discursively constructed as a religious (Muslim) and 'un-Danish' leisure practice that conflicted with regimes of truth relating to an assumed sexual liberation and gender equality prevalent in the country, thereby producing a binary between 'conservative' Islam and the 'progressive, liberated' West (Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018). This debate is just one example of numerous political and public discussions which serve to problematize non-Western (Muslim) ethnic minorities, who are often portrayed as a homogenous group who put pressure on the welfare state and 'Danish' identity (Jensen et al., 2017).

However, despite such populist anti-Muslim discussions, including an increasing political focus on Muslim women's bodies across many Western countries (De Genova, 2018; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2014; Nielson, 2020), research focusing upon politicised sporting activities such as women-only swimming is limited. For example, although Kuppinger (2015) focused upon a Muslim women's sports club in Germany which offered women-only swimming sessions, this study took the organizer's viewpoint rather than that of participants. Elsewhere, whilst studies show perceived barriers and facilitators to active lifestyles (particularly regarding Physical Education) amongst Muslim girls and women, swimming is often peripheral (Miles and Benn, 2016; Walseth, 2015; Walseth and Strandbu, 2014). Nevertheless, such research suggests that gender-segregated swimming spaces are important for many Muslim women, among other things, because they can provide a space of belonging, in which they are protected from both the male and the 'white' gaze that turns Muslim women into racialized 'others' (Lenneis et al., 2020; Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018).

Yet, there remains a dearth of research, which outlines Muslim women's subjective, lived experiences from *within* the women-only swimming environment. The aim of this article is to contribute to filling this research lacuna, by scrutinizing the 'non-white' space of women-only swimming from the perspective of racialized Muslim women. In so doing, we adopt a Foucauldian lens to situate women-only swimming in a wider configuration of power relationships and intersecting discourses of health, exercise, gender, religion and integration. Specifically, we explore the interplay between regulation and self-care, examining if and how women-only swimming offered participants the opportunity to engage in the technologies of the self and transform dominant discourses on sport and PA. Here, we will include the work of transnational Islamic feminist scholars in our interpretation of Foucault's ethical self-formation.

We begin by describing previous Foucauldian research which has focused upon lived experiences of swimming spaces, particularly relating to disciplinary power, before focusing on Foucault's later work on the technologies of the self. In the main part of this article, we will highlight Muslim women's experiences with women-only swimming, which we argue are contoured by both the workings of disciplinary power and the technologies of the self. We conclude by reflecting on the limitations of the technologies of the self, specifically on Foucault's notion of critical self-awareness, which proved to be difficult when judging pious Muslim women's problematization of the discourses governing their (sporting) practices and identities.

Lived experiences of swimming spaces and Foucauldian power in the 'outside' terrain

Foucault outlines how power operates both on the body in the 'outside' terrain, and is enacted by the body through human agency in the 'inside' terrain. The two terrains 'fold' together (Markula, 2003). Indeed, several scholars have examined swimming spaces by drawing upon a Foucauldian perspective to understand the operation of power in the outside terrain, particularly focusing on the operation of disciplinary power (Foucault 1995). Such work has demonstrated several consistencies in relation to how gendered bodies are judged, surveilled and disciplined in aquatic activity. For example, research has demonstrated how different disciplinary techniques (specifically relating to the organization and control of activity, space and time) and disciplinary mechanisms such as classification, normalizing judgment or surveillance turn swimmers' bodies into docile (yet, productive) bodies (Foucault, 1995: 138; Johnson and Russell, 2012; Lang, 2010; McMahan et al., 2012; McMahan and Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahan and Penney, 2013). What's more, Foucault's (1995) metaphor of the panopticon illustrates how disciplinary power functions in the outside terrain to encourage individuals' self-regulation of behaviour. Indeed, research has demonstrated how swimmers can internalize the (panoptic) gaze and self-monitored their training and dietary

practices (Lang, 2010; McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon and Barker-Ruchti, 2017; McMahon and Penney, 2013).

Similarly, scholars have also focused upon disciplinary power, surveillance and the gendering and objectifying operation of power within leisure swimming settings. For example, research outlined how mothers with pre-school aged children engaging in swimming were subjected to the judgmental gaze of other participants (often attributed to male ‘others,’ but also inclusive of other mothers), through which they perceived others to not only evaluate their own body shape and conduct, but also their parenting techniques and their children’s behaviour. Although mothers reported that they felt more comfortable in their bodies due to their children taking the attention of potential observers, this did not lead to a disengagement from dominant gendered discourses; rather, it shifted disciplinary techniques from self to children (Evans, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Evans and Allen-Collinson, 2016).

Such disciplinary techniques also spatially regulate swimming pools, influencing the way bodies interact and negotiate space in this context. Such negotiation depends upon several processes, including: i) the distribution of bodies according to their mental, physiological and personal attributes (the art of distribution), ii) the temporal, spatial control of the techniques of the self in which bodies engage (the control of activity), iii) regimes of learning in social configurations which makes possible the control of activities (the organization of geneses), and iv) organization of power relations within and between social groups (the composition of forces) (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010; Foucault, 1995). For example, Evans and Sleaf (2012), Evans and Allen-Collinson (2016) and Scott (2009, 2010), demonstrated how the architecture of the pool (e.g. balconies and viewing areas) can resemble Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ (Foucault, 1995) and impact upon swimmers’ conduct. The presence of lifeguards and instructors can also enhance the panoptical structure of the pool, driving adherence to an implicit ‘swimming etiquette,’ despite a lack of direct intervention from such poolside staff.

Whilst Scott (2009, 2010) highlighted the prevalence of health and fitness in the pool discourses, her research also pointed to gendered practices. For example, women were more likely to socialize with one another, whilst men considered swimming a form of fitness activity and predominantly talked about their exercise regimes. Scott (2009: 130) also described a ‘free area’, however, which was unmarked by signs or lane ropes, in which children and adults alike could swim lengths, but were also able to practice strokes or diving and could jump in and splash. Accordingly, this area “provides an opportunity for licensed carnival (Bakhtin 1968), insofar as swimmers are not expected to follow a role (such as the ‘fast swimmer’) or observe the rules of a disciplinary fitness regime”.

In sum, previous research has outlined multiple rules and norms, which prevail in different aquatic activity spaces, each of which affect individuals’ lived experiences. Yet previous Foucauldian research on swimming has tended to focus upon the experiences of ‘white’ swimmers in majority-ethnic spaces, hence, ignoring timely issues relating to ethnicity and ‘race’. Moreover, previous research has predominantly drawn on Foucault’s conception of disciplinary power, although scholars have also been concerned that studies predominantly focusing on disciplinary power as a technology of dominance might lead to pessimistic representations of sport and PA practices. For example, Gruneau (1993, quoted in Markula and Pringle 2006: 48) argued that a focus on the repressive and normalizing elements of disciplinary power can “too easily deflect attention from analyzing the creative possibilities, freedoms, ambiguities, and contradictions in sport”. Hence, some scholars have turned on to Foucault’s (1987, 1990) later work on the technologies of the self that refer to individuals’ processes of self-formation. We will now provide further details about the key tenets of the technologies of the self, which have only been used marginally within the sociology of sport.

The technologies of the self

Deriving from Foucault's study of practices of self-cultivation and self-mastery in Greco-Roman philosophy, the technologies of the self are an expression used to describe practices in which individuals can form themselves as ethical subjects. According to Foucault (1988, p. 18) the technologies of the self

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

For Foucault (1987), because power pervades society, such 'subjectivation' takes place within power relationships, and yet does not constrain and lock subjects into particular identities (Markula and Pringle, 2006). Indeed, as emphasized by Markula (2003, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006), such technologies can act as practices of freedom from dominating power relationships. However, subjectivation in the 'inside' terrain involves three interconnected steps, which are critical self-awareness (problematization), ethical self-care and aesthetic self-stylization.

The first step in the technologies of the self is *critical self-awareness*, which implies an active problematization of one's identity and of the codes that govern one's actions. For example, Markula and Pringle (2006: 151) explain that, although a female bodybuilder would challenge the feminine ideal of beauty, "without an active problematization of such an ideal, she is engaged in reactive politics, not in practices of freedom in the Foucauldian sense." Such critical self-awareness is, however, crucial, as it is through questioning the limits of one's self, "the possibility of transgression emerges and thus, the potential of creating new types of subjective experiences" (Markula, 2003: 102).

Secondly, *ethical self-care* focuses on developing one's self. In ancient philosophy, "to be concerned, [and] to take care of yourself" (Foucault, 1988: 19) were important ethical practices

which mobilised a number of purposively and consciously directed skills techniques (or *techne*), such as active self-examination, letter writing or artistic expression intended to facilitate self-mastery (or *askesis*). Importantly, one took care of oneself to “learn how to practice freedom ethically” and, hereby, “administer one’s power in a non-dominant manner” (Markula, 2004: 307). In this sense, Greco-Roman self-care entailed a relationship with others; self-care was also a form of caring for others (Foucault, 1987: 118). Consequently, Foucault argued that these ancient principles of ethical self-care can still give individuals the opportunity to create an active, different self in the present, as much as it might have done in the past (Markula, 2003, 2004). Notably, such ethical work takes place in everyday relationships and practices, and is as much about developing a reflexive awareness of technologies of power acting upon a subject, as it is about care for the self. Basically, any practice can act as self-care; yet its ethical value depends on its origin (from the self), its intention, and ultimately its enactment through the aesthetics of selfstylization (Markula, 2003, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006). For example, practices such as dieting or exercising are often docile responses to prevailing discourses about the ideal, slim body (Foucault, 1995). On the contrary, an individual using PA as ethical self-care exercises because of mere enjoyment or other less visible exercise benefits such as everyday functionality and self-fulfilment (Markula, 2004).

Finally, ethical self-care underpinned by critical self-awareness can offer individuals the opportunity for *aesthetic self-stylization* and the possibility to reshape parts of their bodies and develop new identities (Crocket, 2017). Again, inspired by ancient Greek practices and thinking about the body, Foucault (1997, p. 262) maintained a strong anti-essentialist position by arguing that “from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.” Consequently, ethical self-formation is not about returning to a pre-existing subject (Gerdin et al., 2019); Foucault’s thought is here that by understanding the self as art individuals gain the possibility to creatively craft their identity

(Markula, 2004). Notably, self-stylization is a component within most forms of PA, as they form and modify participants' body (Markula and Pringle, 2006: 164).

In sum, Foucault's three steps of critical self-awareness, ethical self-care and aesthetic self-stylization can help us to assess if and how specific sporting practices provide individuals with the opportunity to engage in the technologies of the self and transform dominant discourses in sport and PA. However, scholars' ways of engaging with the technologies of the self have been criticized. Crocket (2017: 37) has argued that scholars are often uncritical when using the conceptual framework of technologies of self to describe participants' critical self-awareness and problematization of (sporting) identities. As he outlines:

I suggest that [sport] scholars have used problematization and critical self-reflection as an unproblematized construct. Problematization has been positioned as if it is a simple task to interpret whether an utterance counts as a problematization or not, particularly given the theoretical emphasis on explicit, rational critique. [...] It is now time to consider [...] that participants may engage in problematization in different ways, to different degrees, and perhaps in ways that we critical researchers may not be entirely comfortable with.

Consequently, Crocket proposes the inclusion of other sub-disciplines in our interpretation of Foucault's ethical self-formation. We concur that the examination of intersections between gender and other dimensions of power and identity such as 'race' / ethnicity or religion would be relevant in such an investigation.

Specifically, the work of transnational feminist scholars who oppose Western feminisms' portrayal of non-Western women as passive victims and reject notions of a 'global sisterhood' have to be highlighted. For example, transnational Islamic feminist scholars have created a counter-narrative to Western feminisms by focusing on the perspectives of Muslim women involved in contemporary Islamic movements (e.g. Mahmood, 2001, 2003). Indeed, Mahmood remarks that secular-liberal feminists often deny pious Muslim women the ability to engage in Foucault's technologies of the self due to a deemed inability to distinguish their own desires from external

religious and cultural demands. Mahmood, however, criticises the notion that there is a universal, innate desire for freedom that is independent of socio-cultural circumstances. Rejecting a distinction between the individual's own, "true" desires and culturally or religiously prescribed ones, Mahmood suggests there is a need to rethink how Western Foucauldian scholarship conceptualizes agency as a synonym for resistance to the relations of domination. Instead, Mahmood (2001: 210) proposes that agency should be understood as a "capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable". Accordingly, Mahmood (2001: 210) situates processes of ethical self-formation (Foucault, 1987, 1990) within specific discourses, describing the technologies of the self as the "ways in which individuals work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a particular discourse".

Hence, in this study, we will adopt a Foucauldian framework and explore how Danish Muslim women's experiences with women-only swimming are shaped by the technologies of dominance and the technologies of the self, whilst acknowledging that women's experiences are context-specific and formed by intersecting discourses of gender, ethnicity, religion etc. Before exploring, whether women-only swimming can act as a practice of freedom, however, we first outline our study methods.

Methods

This article represents part of an ethnographic study in which participant observation of weekly women-only swimming sessions was conducted at two study sites, 'Byensbad' and 'Vestskolen', in the city of Aarhus (see also Lenneis et al., 2020). Byensbad was a municipal swimming pool in a socially deprived area of Aarhus, in which a weekly, mid-week, women-only swimming was organised by a major swimming club located in a wealthier district of the city. Conversely,

Vestskolen was a state school with a swimming pool, in which a multi-ethnic sport club offered women-only swimming at weekends.

After getting in touch with these two clubs, two of the research team (Verena and Sine) conducted interviews with club officials about the swimming sessions' organisation and history. Indeed, club officials from Byensbad and Vestskolen became key gatekeepers who gave access to the women-only swimming sessions. Following preliminary visits to ensure that the women attending the sessions were open to our participation, we attended sessions for two hours, twice a week over a period of two months. Verena and Sine (both women) used an observation guide, which utilised a Foucauldian perspective and helped us shape our focus to the regulation and organization of the swimming space, the spatial distribution of swimmers' bodies, and their interactions. Moreover, showering, changing, swimming and having a sauna with the women gave us numerous opportunities to get to know participants and engage in informal conversations, e.g. about their reasons for attending gender-segregated swimming and their everyday lives. We made detailed field notes about these conversations and observations, which also included self-reflections, particularly regarding our positions as 'white', non-Muslim researchers (Buch and Staller, 2014; Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

In addition, due to our mixed perspectives on the research setting, we engaged in group-reflexivity in the form of two sets of reflexive interviews before and after entering the sites of study. In these interviews, we reflected on the ways in which our pre-understandings of women-only swimming and own biographies affected the research process (Buch and Staller, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Watson and Scraton, 2018). For example, Verena and Adam were also not born and raised in Denmark, being migrants to the country. However, working at a university and with European passports we are often considered as 'expats' rather than as 'immigrants', which puts us in a privileged position compared to racialized minority-ethnic women in some quarters. In line with our

Foucauldian framework, we critically reflected upon our different positions as an ‘expat’ (Verena) and a ‘white’ Dane (Sine) when conducting fieldwork. Thus, Verena and Sine attempted to approach women-only swimming and its participants with openness, integrity and empathy, problematizing how our presence might contribute to religious and ethnic ‘othering’ (Khawaja and Mørck, 2009). For example, in order to not simply declare our reflexivity, but also in an attempt to act in a sensitive and respectful manner (Watson and Scraton, 2018), we adjusted our showering, changing and swimming practices and followed the unwritten dress code regarding the minimum level of body coverage.

Drawing on principles of ‘heterogeneity sampling’ (Patton, 2015), we tried to recruit a heterogeneous group of participants regarding their swimming skills, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status etc. with whom to conduct interviews. In total, we conducted 14 semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), which lasted one hour on average. The interviewees were aged between 26 and 58 years; 12 were first-generation immigrants from Afghanistan (1), Kurdistan (4), Iran (1), Palestine (1), Pakistan (2) Somalia (2) and Turkey (1), whilst two were born in Denmark and by Danish authorities classified as ‘descendants’ (of immigrants). All identified themselves as Muslim and all but four covered their head with a *hijab*.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. We analysed our interviews and field notes using the six-phase model of ‘*reflexive* thematic analysis’, which ascribes great importance to researchers’ thoughtful and reflective engagement in the analytic process (Braun et al., 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020). After listening to all interviews and re-reading the transcripts and field notes (phase 1), we coded the material with NVivo as a tool to organize our data. We used both data-driven codes (e.g. relaxation or physical health) and more theory-driven codes (e.g. ethical self-care or organization and control of space) (phase 2). In phases 3-5, we sorted different codes into (initial) themes: for example, codes such as ‘mental health and relaxation’, ‘pain relief’,

‘mastering a skill’, ‘self-care’ or ‘floating’ were collated into the theme ‘benefits of swimming’, whereas a sub-theme within the ‘benefits of swimming’ was ‘embodied experiences with swimming’. We also paid specific attention to relationships between (sub)themes (e.g. modesty and swimming skills intersected with regulation and use of the swimming space). Finally, we connected the themes to our Foucauldian framework, e.g. to disciplinary power and the panoptic gaze as well as to the concepts of problematization and ethical self-care, which structured our analytic narrative in writing this paper (phase 6).

We judged the quality of our study by adopting a ‘relativist approach’, employing judgement criteria toward our data that were study-specific (Burke, 2016; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Taking Tracy's (2010) list as a point of departure, we included the criteria of worthiness of the topic, rich rigour, meaningful coherence, credibility (in the form of ‘crystallization’, encouraging the use of different methods and discussions in the research team), ethics and sincerity. As we were ‘white’, non-Muslim researchers working with Danish Muslim women we employed self-reflexivity as a tool to reflect on power hierarchies and our different positions throughout the whole research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Results and discussion

In our analysis, we first focus on women-only swimming spaces and their organization and regulation, particularly drawing on Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power. We then examine the meanings Muslim women ascribe to swimming in such spaces, paying specific attention to how gender-segregated swimming provides participants with opportunities for self-care accompanied by critical self-awareness, in accordance with Foucault’s work on the technologies of the self.

The (de)regulation of the women-only swimming space

The women use the swimming pool quite different from what I am used to. Those who are more proficient swim lengthwise – very little though, with many breaks in-between and mostly chatting and in company of another woman. Then there are those who swim width-wise, whilst others who cannot swim yet stay in the shallow part of the water. A couple of women stay on the edge of the pool and either take a rest or do some kind of sit-ups. Two girls jump and dive after rings. (Verena's field notes – Vestskolen, 1.9.2018)

I am impressed by the chaos that is possible in this space. For example, while almost all women engage in aqua fitness, one of the women decides to 'swim' in the middle, in-between the other women doing exercises. (Verena's field notes – Byensbad, 9.10.2018)

The two field note extracts highlight how women-only swimming differed from both competitive swimming and lane swimming in several respects. First, the 'swimming etiquette' described by Scott (2009, 2010) did not exist in the art of distribution (Foucault, 1995) of this setting. Space was not regularly divided, participants did not swim in lanes and individual exercise regimes were hardly a priority. Instead, sessions resembled what Scott (2009: 130) termed a 'free area', where swimmers were not expected to follow specific roles or etiquette (e.g. 'the fast swimmer') or to adhere to disciplinary fitness regimes. Apart from 15-minutes of aqua-fitness at Byensbad, where the two lifeguards acted as instructors, participants chose how to spend their time and use the pool space.

Although we at first were puzzled by the seemingly chaotic nature of women-only swimming, however, the more we observed, participated and talked to participants, the more we came to appreciate the sessions as having an informal order of sorts, and the women made use of their time in different ways. Yet they often followed a regular personal routine:

I talk to Shereen in the pool. She's a better swimmer than most of the others. She only swims a tiny bit every week – she has no clear goal about a number of lengths. She prefers going to the sauna. Usually she manages to go to the sauna three times; it helps to loosen up her tense muscles. (Verena's field notes – Byensbad, 18.9.2018)

Others wanted to swim a quota of lengths (e.g. Nabila and Haya always aimed to swim ten lengths – next to each other and chatting), often whilst swimming between and around others who mostly ‘floated’ or relaxed in the water. To an extent, this art of distribution was defined by the women’s swimming abilities, and it became clear that participants’ swimming skills influenced the extent to which they could use the swimming space, as women who could not swim had no other option but to stay in shallower water.

Although there was little evidence of hierarchical power relations, the swimming activity was still controlled in other ways, which indicated the use of techniques and mechanisms that promoted discipline and could potentially create ‘docile bodies’ within the confines of the session through a specific ‘composition of forces’ (Foucault, 1995). For example, participants at Vestskolen had to sign up in advance, with the lifeguard and instructor checking their attendance. Moreover, the instructor used a chalkboard, on which she wrote the names of participants. Before leaving the swimming pool, participants were asked to self-report how many lanes they had swum, although only few women made use of this practice of classification and examination (Foucault, 1995). What’s more, similarly to behaviours observed in Scott’s study (2009, 2010), at Byensbad the lifeguards indeed sat on a tower reminiscent of Bentham’s panoptical tower (Foucault, 1995), hardly intervening, but keeping an eye on participants and regulating who was allowed to enter the deep water. Unlike Scott’s study, this surveillance was more technical than gendered and involved mainly judgements about swimming competencies. Nevertheless, such regulations enacted by lifeguards were sometimes resisted with participants complaining to us about them:

I can swim, but I’m a bit scared. [...] I can swim alone, but somebody should keep an eye on me. [...] But they [the lifeguards] won’t let me! They told me I need to put on a float belt. But I don’t need one, I can do it! I just need somebody to trust and support me. (Cawo)

The regulation of space was evident elsewhere also. It became visible that both Byensbad and Vestskolen were outside the gender-segregated swimming hours discursively constructed as ‘white’

spaces. For example, posters on the wall in the shower room reminded the women in different languages of their obligation to remove their swimming suit and carefully wash all parts of their body before entering the pool. However, during gender-segregated swimming sessions such hygiene rules were contested because participants considered them to clash with their cultural and religious standards of modesty. Since there were only a couple of private shower cubicles at both sites of study, women either stood in line, impatiently “knocking” on the shower curtain, telling others to hurry up, or took a shower dressed in their swimming suits, which often covered their arms and legs. Contrary to ‘regular’ changing rooms in Danish swimming pools, the tacit disciplinary rule observed here seemed to be that women should not undress or shower naked in the public (albeit single-sex) changing room, which testifies to a temporary reconfiguration of the swimming pool as a ‘non-white’ space around a different set of non-Western ethical norms. We only observed two ‘white’ Danish lifeguards who broke this tacit rule, showering and undressing in public.

Previous literature has described how swimming spaces can be gendered, panoptical settings (Foucault, 1995), in which the pool’s architecture exposes swimmers and their near-naked bodies to the mutual scrutiny of others (lifeguards, coaches, fellow swimmers), causing swimmers to self-regulate their behaviour (Evans and Allen-Collinson, 2016; McMahon et al., 2012; McMahon and Penney, 2013; Scott, 2009, 2010). Clearly, in our study too, the presence of other participants influenced the women’s changing, showering and dressing practices, which were often considered mundane and not worthy of comment. Nevertheless, Shereen observed what others were wearing and did not want others to find her swimsuit unacceptable in terms of religious modesty, whilst Nabila and Cawo wore long swimsuits in an attempt to cover their curve of their stomach.

Still, all women agreed that the surveilling gaze of the other women was not of great concern, and emphasized the great comfort that a women-only environment provided. Here, they

were free of not only the male disciplinary gaze, but also the judgmental gaze of ‘white’ Danes they encountered in other spaces, such as when wearing a burkini on the beach. Consequently, observations and conversations provided little evidence that women-only swimming disciplined participants to docility via disciplinary mechanisms and techniques (Markula and Pringle, 2006). Hence, we therefore further explore the women’s reasons for participation in a gender-segregated swimming environment, paying specific attention to critical-self-awareness, which has been highlighted as a first aspect to consider in an analysis of the technologies of the self (Markula, 2003, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006).

The benefits of a gender-segregated environment

With few exceptions, participants described how a gender-segregated environment was a precondition for their participation in swimming due to their religion. Consistently, the women considered religion an important and positive part of their lives, to the extent to which it influenced their daily practices and ethical conduct (e.g. taking care of elderly neighbours). Israh, for example, explained:

Obviously, I'm not wearing a headscarf. If people see me on the streets, they don't think that I'm Muslim until they hear my name. [...] But I try to pray and fast... I give alms, I've started reading the Qur'an. [...] Once you get to know me, you'll realize that it's a big part of me.

Indeed, most participants described that it was *haram* (forbidden in Islam) to swim together with men. Alternatively, they would have to wear a *burkini*, which few women were fond of; some found such a swimsuit too heavy and many were concerned about the negative attention it could attract. However, in the interviews notions concerning religion, gender, culture and feelings of modesty were intertwined with each other.

Others emphasized that they felt “more safe, more open and themselves” (Farzaneh) than in a mixed-gender environment. Not being subjected to the male gaze provided comfort and was

regarded liberating – a finding which is consistent with the results of Rana (2017). For example, most windows were high above the ground, whilst others were covered with curtains which minimised the threat of male surveillance from the outside. Amira elaborated on this notion of liberation:

I think women have a different understanding of each other than men do of women. [...] It's [women-only swimming] a space, where people remind me more of myself. It's really, really nice that there are such spaces. Because, unfortunately, we live in a very male-dominated world. If we think about beauty ideals... [...] after all, it's men who sit on top of [...] fashion magazines, TV channels, the music industry and so on. Much of it is male-controlled. It's just sometimes really nice to get away from it, to get to a place [...] where it is only us women. [...] Many women are unhappy with how they look like. So it's great to come to a place, where such things don't matter, because we're all women!

What's more, Amira's statement demonstrated a high level of reflexivity, because she not only criticized patriarchal structures in society, but also connected them to dominant discourses about the ideal (yet largely unobtainable) feminine body (Markula and Kennedy, 2011). Thus, Amira's words were suggestive of a sense of critical self-awareness, the first step in Foucault's (1987, 1990) technologies of the self (Markula, 2003, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006). While all interviewees described how they enjoyed the women-only environment, few participants were as explicit as Amira in pointing to oppressive discourses related to the 'body beautiful' in wider society. Notably, contrary to many of the participants at Byensbad, where swimming sessions took place on a weekday morning (thereby mainly targeting women outside the labour market), Amira, who was a participant of Vestskolen's swimming sessions at the weekend, had a high level of education and language proficiency.

Furthermore, although participants described that, due to their religious beliefs, they could only attend women-only swimming (rather than mixed-gender sessions), they were at pains to emphasize that it had been their personal choice to engage in swimming in such a setting. Such a finding concurs with transnational Islamic feminist scholars who criticize a distinction between the

individual's own, "true" desires and religiously prescribed ones, as well as a binary relationship between personal autonomy *or* religious authority, choice *or* constraint (Fernando, 2010; Mahmood, 2001, 2003). For our interviewees, attending women-only swimming was considered both a religious duty *and* a choice. Moreover, participants strongly rejected the portrayal of women-only swimming in Denmark as frequented by a homogenous group of women oppressed by their husbands and religion, and forced to attend (Lenneis et al., 2020; Lenneis and Agergaard, 2018). Meher, for example, felt disappointed about Danish society's generalizations about Muslim women that aligns with understandings of Muslim women as universally oppressed and in need of rescue (Mohanty, 1988):

They [politicians] think that we Muslim women are subordinate to men who control women's lives. But, no, that's wrong. I control our home. My husband can't do anything until he asks me, 'What do you think?' [...] I know many Muslim women. But why do they [politicians] draw another picture of Muslim women? 'She can't decide, she can't talk, the man talks, the man's in control.' I don't want to hear that anymore.

Notably, Meher and others not only rejected the political regulation of women-only swimming, but actually tried to 'reverse the discourse' (Foucault, 1978: 101) on (their presumed) oppression by claiming that the political regulation of women-only swimming oppressed them, as it violated their freedom of religion, choice and expression; not their husbands or religion. Instead, they argued for a multi-cultural society that respected cultural differences and strongly disagreed that swimming in a women-only environment was a sign of unsuccessful integration.

Consequently, although the women did not problematize religious prescripts – which, for many, were the main reason for attending women-only swimming in the first instance – their statements suggested that they did reflexively question other discourses related to integration and media and politics' stereotypical representation of Muslims. Here, the women's articulations may suggest that they used gender-segregated swimming sessions as a way to self-fashion their identities

(Foucault, 1997) as pious *and* liberated women who are in control of their lives. Still, such observations point to ambiguities and tensions regarding what counts as problematization (Crocket, 2017). Specifically, we struggled to determine whether the participants' adherence to religiously prescribed conduct was an act of docility that excluded them from engaging in the technologies of the self.

The work of Saba Mahmood is useful here, as she emphasizes that agency is not enacted in a “private space of cultivation” (Mahmood, 2001: 210), but rather *within* certain discourses of power that form individuals as subjects (Foucault, 1978). This interpretation suggests that our participants showed a ‘capacity for action’ (Mahmood, 2001, 2003) when they criticized politicians’ (mis)representations of Muslim women, albeit acting within certain religious discourses that constructed them as pious Muslim women. Hence, it seems that our informants problematized some of the identities assigned to them within the context of women-only swimming, in accordance with Foucault’s technologies of the self. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Markula and Pringle (2006: 153), the technologies of the self are not only characterized by critical self-awareness but “necessitate an ethical care of the self that actualizes in self-aesthetisation”. Therefore, we now explore the meanings the women ascribed to their participation in swimming.

Swimming and the care of the self

Many interviewees struggled with severe health problems and diseases such as depression, osteoarthritis or chronic pain in hips and shoulders, which in several cases led to early retirement. Indeed, participants considered that having a sauna and swimming was not only beneficial for their aching muscles and joints, but also positively affected their mental health. Similarly to that outlined elsewhere (Evans, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Evans and Allen-Collinson, 2016; Evans and Sleep, 2012), participants described how swimming was relaxing, a way to clear their heads or to focus only upon the self and to be ‘in the moment’. For example, Haya described how “you forget

everything in the world, when you're in the water". Finally, after swimming participants felt tired, but "became another person... in a good way" (Farzaneh). Many women linked such benefits to the particular qualities of the water. Being in the water evoked physical sensations which the women described with terms such as 'playing with' and 'floating in the water', 'feeling weightless' or 'like a feather'.

Moreover, we noticed that the women tended to instrumentalize swimming to a much lesser degree than other forms of PA. This tendency became particularly clear when paying attention to dominant discourses about PA as a means to obtain the ideal and slim body. Although a number of women were unhappy with their by social norms overweight bodies, few participants attended swimming with the specific goal to lose weight or work on the 'body beautiful' (Markula and Kennedy, 2011). Hence, although it was clear that the women, too, were influenced by discourses which construct notions of a healthy lifestyle or the ideal body it did not seem that women-only swimming reinforced these discourses. For several, including Shereen, this made swimming unique:

When it comes to fitness, you mostly think about how much you've walked, how much you've run on the treadmill, how many calories you've burned. [...] Here [in the swimming pool], I only think about that I want to enjoy the time I have in the pool and in the sauna.

Moreover, the absence of the male gaze, the reassurance created by other women and the sessions' loose structure that allowed participants to choose how to spend their time in the swimming pool, produced an environment in which participants could focus on their own needs and well-being (Evans, 2017). Indeed, weekly swimming sessions became a space where the embodied experience of swimming was in the focus, rather than individual exercise regimes, thus giving participants the opportunity to engage in ethical self-care (Markula, 2003, 2004). Similar to others, Shereen explained how swimming offered her the possibility to take a break from her everyday life, which she had devoted to the well-being of her husband and four children:

Swimming is about the tranquillity. You are away from the telephone, you are away from everything. [...] You can be yourself [...]. After swimming, I'm again the mother who has to manage so much. [...] When I swim, it's something I do for myself, I don't think about others. Now it's myself I have to think about.

In line with Foucault's (1987: 118) description of ethical self-care that "always aims at the good for others", a couple of participants explicitly connected the care of the self with caring for others. One of those was Farzaneh, a mother of six who struggled with severe health problems:

I am a wife. I make sure that my husband and my children are doing well, while I also take care of myself. This means that I'm physically active and swim. [...] I also go for a walk every day.

What's more, most women had first started to learn to swim as adults, which they described as a significant challenge. However, learning to swim offered the opportunity to gain a new, potentially life-saving skill, which provided participants with feelings of success and progress. Malika, for example, recounted, how she first had to overcome her fear of water, but then felt that she had "conquered the world... you know, I could lay on the water" once she had done so.

In sum, although participants struggled with a number of health problems and were well aware that swimming was beneficial for their (mental and physical) health, their accounts consistently highlighted how their participation in swimming was not primarily focused upon adherence to 'healthy lifestyles' (Foucault, 1995). Contrary to previous research that has described health and fitness motives as predominant among swimmers in a leisure setting (Scott, 2009, 2010), in this case women-only swimming gave participants the opportunity to gather meaningful, self-oriented and self-directed experiences with PA that focused on the immediate benefits of swimming. For the women, swimming was an act of self-care that also led to the development of *techné* intended to develop new capacities and skills (Heyes, 2006). In this sense, self-stylization and the enactment of care was more directed at the inward terrain; development of water confidence, swimming ability and movement. In order to do so, women became 'just swimmers',

(mostly) removing their headscarves, uncovering their skin – to an extent – and being safe in the knowledge that in this time and place, such actions were possible. Such aesthetic self-stylization was perhaps fleeting; yet it was also empowering in the sense that it facilitated an ethic of self-care directed at the development of water skills and confidence that would be embodied more permanently (Foucault, 1987). Hence, although *aesthetic* self-stylization was not a strong theme in our interview material in a general sense (modification of their body-shape was not why the women engaged in swimming), participants still engaged in an aesthetic of self-stylization that enabled the ethic of self-care to be enacted.

Conclusion

This article gives insights into the lived experience of the politically contested, yet under-explored space of gender-segregated swimming sessions in Denmark. Drawing on Foucault's (1995, 1987, 1988, 1990) concepts of disciplinary power and techniques of the self, we have explored the ways in which Danish Muslim women negotiate the women-only swimming space. In so doing, this article adds timely insights into racialized groups' experiences to previous Foucauldian research on ('white') and gendered swimming spaces.

Contrary to previous research that described (competitive and leisure) swimming settings as panoptical spaces (Foucault, 1995), participants' described women-only swimming as a safe space that provided comfort. Whilst we observed the operation of power over the minutiae of behaviours and *techne* in these spaces (particularly relating to maintenance of hygiene and safety and tacit norms relating to the dress-code and standards of modesty), participants consistently highlighted the perception of freedom permitted to them through women-only swimming. This was a place where they could choose how to spend their time, such as by acquiring or improving

swimming skills, swimming widths and lengths, or floating in the water and taking a sauna, as well as to break free temporarily from the all-embracing male and ‘white’ nationalist gaze.

Indeed, the women ascribed significant meaningfulness to the specific gender-segregated swimming setting due to its relationship with their biographies and religion. Whilst they did not question the religious prescriptions they had been raised with, they criticized prevailing discourses that link their participation in gender-segregated swimming with oppressive patriarchal structures describing instead women-only swimming as a liberating space, in which physical appearance was of little significance. Such statements indicated that some of our interviewees articulated a form of critical self-awareness, problematizing dominant discourses concerning the ‘otherness’ of Muslim women, in relation to assimilationist understandings of integration and the idealised feminine body.

Contrary to current tendencies to instrumentalize sport and PA as a means to prevent ‘lifestyle’ diseases and to obtain the ideal, slim body (Markula and Pringle, 2006), women-only swimming was not discursively constructed by the participants as disciplinary self-regulation (Foucault, 1995), but rather as techniques of ethical self-care (Foucault, 1987, 1988). Indeed, participants focused on physical sensations connected with the somatic qualities of the water, the organisation of the activity and the composition of forces within the space of women-only swimming that enabled it to be a meaningful practice, which permitted them to take a break from everyday pressures. Thus, they could momentarily step outside their ‘otherness’ (and its constant weighing of self against others, both men and women), and, importantly to prioritize their own bodies and needs.

Although a Foucauldian framework proved to be useful to explore the particular setting, including the discourses surrounding and the specific qualities of women-only swimming, our findings also raise important questions related to the use of the techniques of the self (Foucault, 1987). Indeed, we struggled to judge whether our participants’ reflexivity regarding oppressive

body ideals or the portrayal of Muslim women in the media counted as critical self-awareness. After all, none of them problematized religious prescriptions, which had been the main reason for attending gender-segregated swimming sessions. They only questioned the external judgement of these prescriptions. Does this, then, exclude pious women from engaging in the techniques of the self? As suggested by Crocket (2017) in this case it also proved useful to refer to the work of Islamic feminist scholars who have challenged Western conceptions by redefining agency as a “capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable” (Mahmood, 2001: 210). Accordingly, Mahmood (2001: 210) situates processes of ethical self-formation (Foucault, 1987, 1990) within specific discourses. According to this argument, attending women-only swimming due to religious and cultural demands does then not exclude the enactment of pious Muslim women’s agency.

Crocket (2017: 35) also questions whether “sociologists of sport also risk only accepting problematizations that are couched in adequately sophisticated language or that cohere closely with our existing views?” In our case, all but three of our participants were already adults when they entered Denmark, which clearly affected their proficiency in the Danish language and their ability to articulate themselves. Consequently those women with stronger Danish language skills showed greater degrees of problematization and critical self-awareness (Markula, 2003, 2004), and yet we cannot say that the other women did not also do so (and simply could not express how they did). Could we therefore place too much emphasis upon language? Do we risk giving more voice to well-articulated, relatively privileged individuals, whilst dismissing the voice of the less articulate? We believe that these are important questions to consider in future research, specifically when working with socially disadvantaged groups of the population. For now, however, we want to conclude by emphasizing the transformative potential of women-only swimming, which irrespective of our participants ability to express it, enabled feelings of accomplishment, pleasure and relaxation to be

experienced. Such tendencies pose an alternative to the current instrumentalization of sport and PA, as well as dominant discourses of sport as an integrative tool tending towards homogeneity.

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