

Classify, Divide and Conquer: Shaping Physical Activity Discourse Through National Public Policy

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Abstract

This paper aims to draw attention to the role of public policy in shaping power relations discursively, and highlight how these power relations can be debilitating for particular groups in a public policy setting. These aims shall be accomplished by analysing the construction and implementation of a New Zealand physical activity policy which compares physical activity rates around the world. Utilising Foucauldian theorising, we show how classifying and dividing practices construct a view of New Zealand and the world which automatically and problematically favours particular nationalistic conceptions. The article concludes that Sparc's use of the term "international standards" is inherently problematic when comparing rates of physical activity, and such a policy serves to dominate by default over other nations.

Introduction

Throughout New Zealand's political history, sport, physical recreation and physical activity have been valued for a variety of reasons, many of which have contributed an iconic image of New Zealand's citizens as rugged, capable, physically hardened people. Jock Phillips (1987) wrote that as New Zealand was a relatively young nation in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the physical and disciplined nature of rugby union assisted in promoting the values essential for work, family and military service. In the 1930s there emerged a different rationale for central government promoting sport and recreation: the 1935 Labour government took a particular interest in programmes focused on recreational activities that would "help disperse post-depression gloom and apathy" (Church, 1990, p. 5). During World War 2, Bill Parry, the Minister of Internal Affairs

had a more pressing reason for promoting physical activity: "The instinct of self preservation should induce people to make themselves as fit as possible for sudden action" (p. 5).

However, throughout the past fifteen years the medical, economic and social implications of sedentary lifestyles and an increasingly overweight and obese population have contributed to government policies which seek to reinforce the image of New Zealand as a nation of active people. For instance, as well as the government money already directed to sport, recreation and health, the 2006 Labour government budget included an additional \$76.1 million to fight the "obesity epidemic". Regarding the allocation of this funding, Health Minister Pete Hodgson explained that "the problem is only getting worse. If we take no action we face the very real possibility that the current generation of New Zealand children will be the first to die younger than their parents" (Johnston, 2006). The problem of physical inactivity in New Zealand is also framed such that it is receiving significant attention in the private business sector, where "corporate wellness" schemes are increasing in prevalence. While the rationale for such schemes is often framed in terms of improving "work-life balance" of employees, their logic is also heavily informed by the desire to increase productivity and profit. Other elements within the social climate have added to widespread concern about the physical capabilities of the New Zealand population. In the sporting realm (often conflated with physical activity) there was a media and public outcry at the poor performance of the New Zealand contingent at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Former Olympic gold medallist John Walker attributed this result to the belief that "schools are telling kids it is alright to lose" (Coffee, 2000, p. 4). There was much public debate that New Zealanders were not as "competitive" as they should be. Thus, there is a range of social arenas where citizens are expected to consider and use their bodies in particular ways.

In 2001, a Ministerial Taskforce concluded that sport, fitness and leisure could counter obesity, as well as lead to positive economic and social effects for the nation. The Taskforce's report explained that these "sectors" had "been virtually ignored by successive governments" (Graham et al., 2001, p. 9). Following the publication of the report, the

Labour government established Sport and Recreation New Zealand (Sparc), replacing the Hillary Commission for Sport, Fitness and Leisure which had existed since 1987.

According to its website Sparc is “dedicated to getting New Zealanders moving” (Sparc, 2007). Officially launched in June 2002, Sparc produced and distributed its first strategy document named “Our Vision, Our Direction” which explained how its budget of nearly \$NZ42 million dollars in its first year of operation (rising to more than \$NZ70 million dollars in 2006) would be spent. To suggest that Sparc merely allocates this budget to various organisations and programmes trivialises the significant power Sparc has within the sport and recreation sector. Throughout its five year existence Sparc has explicitly dissociated the organisation from being merely a “funding body”. Instead Sparc is positioned as an investor; “... going forward, funding decisions will be made on the likelihood of achieving a return on that investment. Sparc will assess returns against its mission” (Sparc, 2002, p. 10). The idea of measuring this “return” is clearly important. Summing up Sparc’s philosophy, CEO Nick Hill once said “everything is measured at the end of the day” (Hill, 2002a).

One of Sparc’s most conspicuous goals which forms part of their mission statement is “being the most active nation” (Sparc, 2002, p. 6).¹ Of paramount importance is not only the notion of nationalism, but of being a “world leader”. The emergence of an emphasis on international comparisons of physical activity rates can be seen in the 2002 restructuring of the Hillary Commission (Sparc’s predecessor) to Sparc. Juxtaposing the Hillary Commission’s mission statement with Sparc’s reveals this discursive shift, which was explained by Sparc chair John Wells as “a whole new way of doing business” (Sparc, 2002, p. 3). That is, the Hillary Commission had as its three goals: “to increase the number of people involved in sport and physical leisure activities, help people succeed

1 Two other components of Sparc’s mission statement include “having New Zealand athletes and teams winning consistently in events that matter to New Zealanders” and “having the most effective sport and physical recreation systems” (2002, p. 6).

and achieve their potential, [and] improve the way sport and physical leisure services are delivered" (Hillary Commission, 2000, p. 5, italics added). Compared with Sparc's mission statement it is clear that while there is a thematic continuity with regard to the ideas of activity, sporting success and delivery "systems", there is a discontinuity regarding how the themes are articulated:

"By 2006 be recognised as world leading in our approach to sport and physical recreation, as measured by:

Being the most active nation

Having the most effective sport and physical recreation systems

Having athletes and teams winning consistently in events that matter to New Zealanders". (Sparc, 2002, p. 6, italics added)

This construal of overarching goals in line with a wider neo-liberal agenda in New Zealand has significant implications when considering how such an objective is measured and how government funding is distributed. What follows is an analysis of the discursive shaping of the "most active nation" goal. The article is divided into three sections. Firstly, it discusses the research approach. Next the article explains Foucault's conception of classifying and dividing practices, and the process of subjectivisation through bio-power. Then, these ideas are applied to Sparc policy, problematising how the aforementioned practices are used in constructing public policy. Finally, a discussion addresses some of the effects of articulating a physical activity policy in such a way.

Research approach

While there is a multitude of sources and texts available for analysing a given policy discourse, we direct our analysis toward official Sparc policy which relates specifically to the goal of "being the world's most active nation". In particular, we consider here that claims to knowledge about physical activity in public policy serve a significant discursive function. Such claims are at the heart of any analysis of discourse, as statements of "fact" in public policy both influence the legitimacy of particular claims and impact on the perceptions and behaviour of citizens.

It is important here to outline which texts were used in this research. The sites used to investigate the shaping and dissemination of the physical activity discourse primarily include, but were not confined to, Sparc policy documents spanning from June 2002 (Sparc's official launch) to June 2006 (the end date for Sparc's original mission statement). The criteria employed for selecting texts within this time frame was based on a consideration of whether they articulated or informed Sparc's mission to be the "most active nation". Three factors were taken into account while collecting the data. Firstly, the context of the various articulations of the mission was noted with regard to whom the audience for the message would likely be. Secondly, the various utterances were also considered in relation to their chronological distance from the end point of the mission. Thirdly, various annual reports and statements of intent were examined with regard to the possibility of a change to the mission statement. While the focus in this article is on formal written policy, it is acknowledged that numerous other texts such as interviews, speeches, advertisements and images are all important sites for the transmission of Sparc's policy.

Three reasons make these particular sites compelling. Firstly, "being the most active nation" comprised one of Sparc's three overarching policy goals, and as such has guided much of Sparc's subsequent policy, planning and operations. Secondly, the generally enduring nature of such an objective (a mission statement) allows the discursive strategies employed by Sparc to be investigated over a four year period. Thirdly, it is through policy documents that Sparc representatives have the ability to put across their ideas planned, edited and uninterrupted, something that is not always possible at other sites of investigation. Along with Sparc policy, other sources also proved valuable to establish an understanding about the development of the physical activity discourse studied here. These included the International Physical Activity Questionnaire and World Health Organisation sources, particularly since these were essential to Sparc's measurement of their stated goals.

It is important to note here what we mean by "discourse", since the term is used in various ways. Despite often disagreeing as to the specific uses and effects of discourse, there is a general acknowledgment

that discourses are forms of knowledge created through text, speech, imagery and everyday interactions. For this study, we follow Foucault's (1972) conception that a discourse governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. For example, physical activity discourse, like the discourse of madness for Foucault, has been constituted by all that has been said in "all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own" (Foucault, 1972, p. 35). By both limiting and producing how a particular topic can be thought about and reasoned about, discourses play a powerful role in the shaping and dissemination of public policy.

Classifying and Dividing Practices

Foucault explained that his research focused on three facets which serve to construct our social reality: scientific classification, dividing practices and subjectivation. These practices allow a researcher to analyse how certain ways of understanding come into existence and change throughout the history of human thought. Firstly, Foucault explained classifying practices arose out of peoples' curiosity in the seventeenth century; "if not to discover the sciences of life, at least to give them a hitherto unsuspected scope and precision" (1970, p. 125). During this time, institutions developed to sustain this curiosity, such as botanical gardens and natural history collections that examined the structure of plant life. In the same way, organisations such as Sparc, the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation are constructed to satisfy the curiosity surrounding the ideas of "health" and "fitness". The importance of such organisations "does not lie essentially in what they make it possible to see, but in what they hide and in what, by this process of obliteration, they allow to emerge..." (Foucault, 1970, p. 137).

Following this process of classifying, dividing practices allow one to distinguish what is normal from what is abnormal, who is fit from who is unfit, as well as any number of deviations from a particular norm. For Foucault, dividing practices are an important part of cementing a particular discourse as legitimate while excluding another as illegitimate.

These dividing practices are techniques whereby “the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the ‘good boys’” (2002, p. 326). Such divisions are commonly used in discourses of health, fitness and physical activity today. For instance, body mass index (BMI) calculations are used to ascertain whether one is a “normal” weight, “underweight”, “overweight”, or “obese”. Organisations such as Sparc encourage a population to meet expectations of normality by encouraging participation in a certain number of minutes of physical exercise every day. These practices serve to maintain a particular way of understanding the body and how it can (or should) be used.

Nationalism as bio-power

Foucault explained that dividing and classifying practices are employed by institutions to make subjects out of a citizenry. Individuals are subjected “to someone else by control and dependence, and [are] tied to [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (2002, p. 331). Foucault argues that “the health and physical well-being of populations comes to figure as a political objective that the ‘police’ of the social body must ensure...” (1980, p. 95). This policing of the social body is concerned with the preservation and conservation of the labour force, and traced the beginnings of measurement “demographic estimates ... the calculation of the pyramid of ages, different life expectancies and levels of mortality” (p. 95).

Foucault’s concept of bio-power is useful here, since it allows for an explanation of why certain discourses of physical activity emerge while others do not. Foucault defined bio-power as the technologies used to analyse, control, and define human bodies. He argued that “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” were constructed by various institutions (1980, p. 140). By promoting self-regulating subjects, Foucault argued that bio-power assists capitalistic goals of production (through labour) and consumption (through purchasing goods and services to maintain a particularly constituted body). Thus, the governing of a population is

made easier, whether is it in the interests of a specific government or various corporate enterprises. It is here that we consider "nationalism" as a technology of bio-power brought into existence through neo-liberal discourses, and employed by the New Zealand government (through Sparc) to subjectivise: to encourage the population to understand physical activity and the nation in a particular way and behave accordingly. What follows is an explication of nationalism with regard to the shaping of a national consciousness, and how nationalism is utilised through public policy as a form of bio-power.

One place that the nation is actively constructed is through public policy. Kedourie (1960) notes that the "nationalism doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate self government is national self government" (p. 12). By promoting a sense of national belonging, nationalism is a view of the world which consists of nations and one's place within it is inevitable and natural. In other words, nationalism is a "common sense"; a world without nations being "an unimaginable impossibility" (Bishop & Jawoski, 2003, p. 247).

When examining nationalism in public policy it is also useful to consider Higson's (1998) conception of a nation as both inward and outward looking. That is, nations have at once an internal history which is defined specifically by a unique development over time, as well as being defined out of difference; an understanding of "us" and "them". Thus, Finlayson (2003) argues that the idea of the "people as one nation" becomes a kind of elite. When people are part of the nation, Finlayson contends they share in something that makes them feel "chosen". These shared identifications are reinforced, according to Smith (1986), by the production of myths, collective memories, persistent traditions and shared symbols. With regard to the construction of shared identifications in New Zealand public policy, this study utilises Billig's idea of banal nationalism as a site for producing and reproducing the nation; "ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced" (1995, p. 6). Distinct from "hot" nationalism, which is epitomised by "a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent

passion" (p. 8), Billig argues that banal nationalism has as its metaphor "a flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (p. 8). As such, public policy provides an intriguing site where such a banal construction of the nation may take place.

National physical activity policy is utilised as a technique of bio-power to impart a particular way of viewing the world and interacting with it. For example, Sparc's rationale for investment in physical activity policies is most often not couched in terms of intrinsic benefits such as enjoyment and healthiness of citizens, but with regard to ideas of the population's collective physical health as having a positive effect on the nation's economy. We posit here that the "health" of a nation is a form of bio-power, albeit a form of power which is exercised in a banal fashion.

Classifying in national public policy: Narrowing the range of nations in the world

Poliy writers hold a powerful position in classifying what is, and what is not health. With their ability to craft statements, definitions, images, and narratives about New Zealanders, policy writers can impart a particular understanding of the nation upon individuals and groups that read and are influenced by the policy. It is through examining policy that one can see what understandings emerge as areas for concern, measurement and attention. When Sparc originally compared physical activity rates around the world in a document named "Sport Facts", a statistical chart showed New Zealand's adult physical activity rate was 68 percent (Sparc, 2003b). A cursory perusal of the chart would indicate New Zealand was the second most active nation in the world in 2003, ostensibly comparing well with other nations, behind only Finland with 70 percent. However, a further reading of this chart reveals its limitations. For instance, all of the six countries included in the comparison (New Zealand, Australia, U.S.A, Canada, United Kingdom and Finland), are developed, highly Westernised nations. As such, this measurement is limited to the extent that it conveys a narrow portrayal of global physical activity rates. No nations from Africa, South America, the Pacific region (excluding New Zealand) or Asia are included in the measurement, many of which have divergent economic, political and cultural conditions.

Sparc does note the countries listed are “similarly developed countries” (Sparc, 2003b, p. 24) yet still utilises the statistics to aid in contextualising the “most active nation” goal. The effect of this juxtaposition of physical activity rates serves most importantly to generalise across all nations.

As well as a limited range of nations used in Sparc’s original analysis, the chart is particularly important in defining the boundaries of the physical activity “problem”. Indeed, a number of meanings can be derived from the chart. These include; a) since other countries also struggle with physical inactivity, the problem is “global”; b) New Zealand seems close to being the most active nation on the list, and therefore, in the world; c) other nations have a desire to be compared; and d) other nations *can* be compared. Such assumptions that emerge from the construction of the table serve to delineate ways of thinking about and becoming the world’s most active nation.

A reading of Sparc’s explanation of measuring physical activity rates illustrates little concern for alternative understandings of physical activity in non-Western countries. For instance, the chart’s associated text notes “by international standards New Zealand appears to be a physically active nation” (Sparc, 2003b, p. 24). A section entitled “Issues with Measurement of Physical Activity” bears this out further. The issues are framed around variations in questionnaire design, including concerns around what is defined as physical activity and whether the interviews are “conducted by telephone” (Sparc, 2003b, p. 25). These issues further narrow readers’ conceptions of the idea of measuring physical activity. Cementing this conception is the use of the phrase “by international standards” (Sparc Facts, 2003b, p. 24). Such an articulation has the discursive effect of promoting Westernised conceptions of physical activity rates as the standard to be attained, despite anecdotal evidence which suggests that physical activity rates in developing nations are *higher* than developed countries. For example, it is commonly considered that people who live in developing nations work for more hours each week, their work is more labour intensive, and daily life is more likely to involve more exertion than populations in developed nations. Thus, as

a classifying practice, producing charts of physical activity rates around the world serves to classify all nations as being affected by, and interested in, the problem of physical inactivity.

Dividing in national public policy: Constructing a global physical activity discourse

As a dividing practice, the discourse of positivist, scientific measurement is well ingrained in Western societies. Regarding physical activity in particular, the growing significance of obesity has meant scientific measurements of health and fitness are ubiquitous in Westernised nations. Thus, to have a physical activity rate measurement applied to the whole nation (and ostensibly, to every nation) is not surprising. However, combining this scientific discourse with the explicit goal of being the “most active nation” is novel to the extent that no other nation has attempted this in the past. While successive New Zealand governments have taken much pride in the nation’s sporting performances, and have used such performances as an exemplar of the strength of the nation, the comparison of national physical activity rates is only a very recent phenomenon. In a Sparc document called *Trends in Participation in Sport and Active Leisure 1997 - 2001*, there was no reference to comparing physical activity rates between countries (Sparc, 2004b). That is, the discourse of international physical activity rate comparison did not exist in official policy as recently as 2001.

It is important here to distinguish between the colloquial usage of “world’s most” and the use of the term in a policy document. One way of construing the term “most active nation” is a colloquial sense. Thus it is possible to understand Sparc’s mission of “being the world’s most active nation” as solely a rousing, emotive goal with no pretence of statistical measurement. For instance, in the lead up to Sparc’s official launch event, CEO Nick Hill stated these goals were not necessarily being imposed by Sparc, but belonged to the nation; “New Zealanders want to win, we want to be healthy and we want to be known as the most active nation in the world” (Hill, 2002b). However, as a Crown agency, Sparc is heavily influenced by ideas such as rationalisation (Sam, 2003; Sam and Jackson, 2004). This is exemplified by references to setting “setting

priorities" and "target[ing] funding and resources" (Sparc, 2002, p. 10). As such, there is an expectation that achievements are quantified through statistics and rankings. In a press release Nick Hill once commented that "We're asking others to be accountable, and so we need to set a high standard for ourselves too" (Hill, 2002b, p. 1). As such, "being the world's most active nation" transforms the non-specific rhetoric of the Hillary Commission into an ostensibly measurable objective. By making the goal a measurable one, Sparc's policy echoes Foucault's explanation of the essence of dividing practices. Populations appear as "the bearer of new variables ... between the more or less utilizable, more or less amenable to profitable investment, those with greater or lesser prospects of survival, death and illness, and with more or less capacity to be usefully trained" (2002, p. 95-6). New Zealand citizens automatically become bearers of these new physical activity variables, by which they are measured and assessed.

Conquering: Sparc's use of the International Physical Activity Questionnaire

From this context of the classifying and dividing practices of national public policy, we now problematise Sparc's discursive strategies used to instigate and cement a discursive dominance over nations from this original framing. Sparc's original tool for measuring progress to become the world's most active nation was the New Zealand Health Survey (Sparc, 2003a, p. 14). However, this would only serve as a temporary measurement until Sparc could "Establish the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) baseline" (Sparc, 2003a, p. 14). From 2003 onwards, Sparc documents make numerous references to the central measurement tool being the IPAQ, with policy documents from this point on articulating the mission as New Zealand being "the most active nation as measured by the International Physical Activity Questionnaire" (Sparc, 2005, p. 13).² It is important to note here that the

2 Since historically, comparisons of physical activity rates between countries between countries have not been measured, and no empirical measurement system has been available to compare physical activity rates, the production of the IPAQ makes the discourse possible.

IPAQ researchers had no previous formal affiliation with Sparc specifically.

The IPAQ researchers explained the purpose of the questionnaire was to “provide a set of well-developed instruments that can be used internationally to obtain comparable estimates of physical activity” (IPAQ website, 2005a).³ According to the international research group undertaking the project, the rationale was based on the fact that “the public health burden of a sedentary lifestyle has been recognized globally, but until recently, the prevalence and impact of the problem has not been studied in a uniform and systematic fashion” (IPAQ website, 2005b). The resounding discourse employed by the IPAQ researchers is thus couched in the realm of public health spending (an economic “burden”) and identifies the problem of “sedentary lifestyles.” To be clear, it is apparent the IPAQ researchers do not purport the questionnaire to be applicable to every nation, and highlight this limitation in an explanation on “cultural adaptation”. They note that “in developing countries, occupational activities and transportation may involve more activity than in more developed countries” (IPAQ website, 2005c). The implication is that since developing countries “may” have higher rates of physical activity, results would not be comparable to populations with “sedentary lifestyles”. It is here that Sparc’s use of the term “world’s most” becomes limited to the point of being immeasurable; since the IPAQ researchers themselves are assuming that physical activity rates may be higher in developing nations than developed nations, then Sparc’s use of the IPAQ to make its grand declaration of world dominance is inherently flawed.

Various other sources bear this out. World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics from the 2003 World Health Survey indicate that the physical activity prevalence in some sub-Saharan nations would surpass New Zealand’s physical activity prevalence. Among those aged

3 The countries originally involved in the first international prevalence study included Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Czech Rep, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden and the United States of America.

18 to 69 in Ethiopia for instance, those classified as “inactive” made up only 12.7 percent, while those who were minimally active constituted only 11 percent (WHO, 2004a). These relatively low rates of inactivity, implying high rates of physical activity, were similar for Kenya; 9.8 and 12.1 percent respectively (WHO, 2004b) and Malawi; 11.4 and 18.1 percent respectively (WHO, 2004c). These WHO measurements employed the same scales as the IPAQ, thus suggesting that rates of physical activity are far higher in these nations than in many developed nations. Consequently, the notion of “international standards” of physical activity is paradoxical in a policy setting. That is, for a Westernised, sedentary population, the physical activity “standard” which might be considered a goal may indeed be physical activity rates of *developing* nations.

Sparc’s statistics are juxtaposed too, with nations that face major long term health threats such as Swaziland (52.3 percent and 9 percent respectively) and Namibia (39.8 percent and 20.4 percent). The specific disparities between developing and developed nations at the time Sparc launched its goals can be seen in a WHO description of health risks in developing nations around the world:

“The need to view such risks in their local context is obvious when analysing perceptions of risk in [developing] countries, especially when risk factors are considered alongside life-threatening diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS. There are also other daily threats, such as poverty, food insecurity and lack of income. In addition, families may face many other important ‘external’ risks, such as political instability, violence, natural disasters and wars”. (WHO, 2002, p. 50)⁴

Thus, the notion of measuring physical activity rates in various developing nations pales in comparison to other health concerns. Despite policy documents that purport to measure a range of socio-geographic nations, Sparc policy elides comparison with countries in which physical inactivity is not perceived as a major health risk due to an acutely disparate set of conditions. The World Health Organisation describe

4 The authors appreciate that the WHO also communicate through particular discourses, which could also be the subject of a discourse analysis.

this disparity as “the global gap between the haves and the have-nots” (WHO, 2002, p. 7).

We argue here that policies related to measuring rates of physical activity are only currently in the discursive domain of developed countries. As such, inferring that a nation could hold the title of “world’s most active nation” illustrates an instance of dominance by default over many developing nations which are excluded from measurement. Asante (2006) refers to Europeans maintaining both a “chauvinistic nationalism,” since they are “so different from the rest of the world that they define issues, ideas, civilisation and how one approaches reality” (p. 5) and a “ruthless culturalism; the promotion of the European-American political ideal as the most correct form of human society” which is defended by “numerous machinations of science, politics, statistics and literature” (p. 6). Asante also argues ruthless culturalists maintain their hegemonic imposition by creating symbolic, economic and cultural domination in most sectors of society. For the present study, considered mainly in terms of the “banality” of the transmission of nationalism, the term ruthless may seem overly bombastic. However, it may be an apt description of a reading of the policy by those being discursively dominated. The writing of banal, nationalistic policy at once actively attempts to construct a sense of where New Zealand sits in the imagined world ranking of physical activity statistics, and constructs a view that this construction is both normal and valuable.

In Sparc’s 2006 Annual Report, by which time Sparc’s mission proclaimed that it aimed to be “the world’s most active nation”, a “*Statement of Service Performance*” (Sparc, 2006b) reported on the result of Sparc’s four year mission. The report espoused the outcome measure had been “partially achieved” (2006b, p. 7), and that “preliminary results from the International Physical Activity Questionnaire show New Zealand is among the top three active nations along with the Czech Republic and the United States” (p. 7). Sparc also offered statistics around physical activity promotion which seemingly detract from Sparc’s apparent (partial) success in their goal. As recently as Sparc’s *Statement of Intent 2006-2009*, Nick Hill stated that “at least half the adult population is insufficiently active to protect health” (Sparc, 2006a, p. 7) while three

months later Sparc's mission of being the most active nation is reported as being "partially achieved" (Sparc, 2006b, p. 7). The idea of a nation in which the majority of adults do not meet recommended levels of physical activity, yet is also "among the top three most active nations" (Sparc, 2006b, p. 7) highlights a discursive disparity which is not reconciled within Sparc's policy.

Discussion

Foucault insists that power never achieves what it sets out to accomplish. He believed there is not a single dominating discourse that authorises truth. Thus, despite Sparc's attempts at constructing both the nation and the world in terms of a particular physical activity discourse, this understanding is not given free reign over citizens' consciousness. This is because of the multitude of other discourses governing conceptions of the world, not only regarding "physical activity", but also other understandings of a nation's place in the globalised world, such as discourses concerning living standards, gross domestic product, safety (with regard to the discourse of terrorism) and traditional discourses of New Zealand as a "clean and green" nation.

Regarding the dissemination of such a problematic discourse, Sparc's policy is debilitating for particular groups (or entire nations) inasmuch as the usage of this phrase in various mainstream media, promotions and policy documents, without a limiting caveat, serves to insinuate that all nations know about, are interested in and involved in such a measurement. While we propose that this dominance by default exists in New Zealand's physical activity policy, it is not necessarily borne out of a conscious decision by policy writers. We consider it is useful here to consider Stone's (2002) assertion that "people aspire to convince others that their interpretation best fulfils the spirit of the larger concept to which everyone is presumed to subscribe" (p. 37). With this in mind however, it is still possible to follow Chalip's (1996) lead and analyse, challenge and resist debilitating policy assumptions, or, as Foucault suggested, encourage power relations to be formed with a minimum of domination

Regarding measuring physical rates in countries without a history of doing so, namely developing nations, one might consider the ethical limitations of undertaking such research. In comparative instances such as these, policy makers might consider the basis for framing a country as the world's most active nation when others face many far greater health risks than the onset of diseases linked with overweight and obesity.

The discursive production of "the world" has implications beyond the issue of international physical activity comparisons. Any type of public policy that employs ostensibly measurable goals can be questioned, namely with regard to who is included, who is excluded, and what assumptions and values lie beneath particular policy positions. Future research might investigate various articulations of "the world" in public health policy, as well as critique the underlying assumptions of public health programmes that purport to measure various factors around the world. Also, the implementation, measurement and effects on citizens of these subjectivising policies would be worthy of further inquiry.

Further analysis of Sparc's policy might question at which point such a policy would be resisted by groups that are excluded from participation (through measurement) while being discursively included by the colloquial dissemination of the goals. It is posited here that due to the "default" nature of the policy (that is, those populations excluded from measurement are both non-participants and most likely *unknowing* of the policy), any resistance attempting to question the validity and legitimacy of Sparc's measurement practices is currently limited to analyses such as this current study.

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