

# Focus on femininity

**A**S both a Chartered Health Psychologist and an accredited sports and exercise scientist, Precilla Choi is renowned for her feminist research on women's health and exercise. Feminism is crucial to her work. 'By being a feminist researcher, I want to show where injustices are and how they come about, whether through misogynous practices or conforming with a patriarchal way of doing things, and then somehow be able to take what I have shown and for it to be used by practitioners or policy makers, to turn things around and make them more just.' This approach was evident throughout our meeting at Keele University, where we discussed her current projects.

## Premenstrual and postnatal

Precilla began by talking about a study exploring the links between premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and postnatal depression. 'We know from quantitative research – epidemiological work – that there is a link, that often women who present with PMS have a history of postnatal depression. I wondered if it was connected to the monthly vulnerable period of hormonal changes, when perhaps any underlying postnatal depression was able to express itself. I wanted to know how that link comes about, so that I can then hopefully do something about it.'

'To try to find out the nature of that link we interviewed women who had postnatal depression after the birth of their first child, to get their interpretation of what was going on in their lives, and find out what issues might have influenced them getting postnatal depression. That was the qualitative approach.'

Findings have emphasised the crucial importance of good support for new mothers. But as Precilla explains, 'intrusions in the form of trying to dictate to the mother that she should be mothering in a certain way are harmful. For instance, one of the big things that came out in the interviews was the pressure that is put upon mothers to breast feed: when they don't, they feel like they are inadequate mothers.'

'Another issue is that they just feel so tired all the time and so worn out. There are not many situations where the mother, and indeed the father, can acknowledge that they are absolutely exhausted, thinking

**JIM McCOURT** meets Dr Precilla Choi to explore gender and the body.

to themselves "What on earth have we got ourselves into?"'

In addition, a new baby can trigger unfinished business from the past. 'There is eternal conflict for mothers, in terms of motherhood and career, because our society does not enable those to go together. It is still the same as it was – all of the old prejudices and biases are still there.'

As well as exemplifying the interplay of quantitative and qualitative methods, the PMS study also highlighted another of Precilla's views. 'I have come to approach PMS from very much a psychosomatic

persuasions, whether they be doctors or sports trainers, and make them aware of factors such as body image and self-esteem, and so on, that they might not otherwise have considered. This is shown by her work with women and physical exercise.'

Precilla's views originate in this work with women and physical exercise. 'I have been looking at body image in relation to femininity, and this is what my recent book [*Femininity and the Physically Active Woman*] has been about. Following the book I teamed up with a colleague in the USA, and we did focus-group interviews with women athletes from a range of masculine-type sports such as rugby and ice hockey, as well as individual sports like tennis and track and field events that both women and men do. We found that women athletes feel they are different to other women in terms of feeling less feminine. Because they are competitive athletes and they train every day, their bodies are different and that is a real issue for them. They are concerned about getting too muscular and therefore being perceived as masculine and not pretty. Even the distance runners, who tend to be very thin, are worried about their legs being too muscular.'

Precilla sees this as indicative of old patterns of functioning. 'There are archetypal, stereotypical scripts of femininity that we as women are influenced by whether we subscribe to them or not. They all come through even now, in the age of girl power and so-called equality. The old stereotypes still count.'

These scripts of femininity are also important for women exercisers. 'We have known for a long time that far more women than men exercise in order to improve their body. Exercise is promoted for health but what I actually found through my interviews is that looking thin, and looking the way one thinks one should look, has become considered to be health. Exercising for health, for a lot of women, has come to mean exercise for looking good. This is off-putting for a lot of women, in that they think they don't look good enough to actually do exercise.'

These findings are of immense

perspective, in that I believe – and not just in PMS but with any illness or condition – that there is always an interaction between psychological and biological elements. It is important to start finding suitable methods to look at this interaction, and what is it that protects some people and leaves other people vulnerable. Sometimes, when you use the word psychosomatic or when you talk about the interaction between psychology and biology, people think I am saying problems are all in the mind, but that is not what I am saying at all.'

## Girl power

A feature of Precilla's work is the aim to make her research relevant and useful, and for findings to be translated into practical realities. She hopes her work can help bridge the gap between psychosocial researchers and clinicians of all

importance in relation to women's health, and they tie in with another of Precilla's interests – men's perceptions of their bodies. 'Images of men's bodies are changing,' she explains. 'Men are beginning to equate health with appearance. For them, health is not being thin and toned like women. It is to do with having a six-pack, a broad chest, muscular arms, and that sort of thing.'

Precilla interprets these studies as implying a reaffirmation of masculinity. 'Women's bodies are changing as a result of increased participation in sport and exercise. It could be argued that differences between male and female bodies are lessening, so in order to re-emphasise gender, and differences between the masculine and the feminine, men are trying to take another leap forward, while women athletes are denigrated in terms of their bodies. Muscles represent a physical reality that cannot be denied – if women don't have muscles as big as men, they are defined as feminine, so you can still have a divide between the sexes – which has implications for all sorts of things in terms of what is acceptable in society and what isn't.'

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### **Out of the corridors**

Precilla places great emphasis on the social consequences of her work. This seems especially important in the current research climate, with the pressures to maximise the production of papers from any piece of work. 'There is a real danger that longitudinal research projects will suffer. It also affects innovation. People are going to be scared to try something new, in case it doesn't work. I certainly feel this pressure and I know a lot of my colleagues do. As a feminist scientist, I think it is very important to be reflexive, and think about what biases of mine are influencing the

questions I am asking. As scientists, we have to think about the implications of what we do and how it is publicised, because there are wider implications for society and we must take social responsibility. One has got to work really hard to ensure that what one is really saying is interpreted correctly. We cannot just stay in our corridors of academia.'

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