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**'Working out' identity: distance runners and the management
of disrupted identity**

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Abstract

This article contributes fresh perspectives to the empirical literature on the sociology of the body, and of leisure and identity, by analysing the impact of long-term injury on the identities of two amateur but *serious* middle/long-distance runners. Employing a symbolic interactionist framework, and utilising data derived from a collaborative autoethnographic project, it explores the role of 'identity work' in providing continuity of identity during the liminality of long-term injury and rehabilitation, which posed a fundamental challenge to athletic identity. Specifically, the analysis applies Snow & Anderson's (1995) and Perinbanayagam's (2000) theoretical conceptualisations in order to examine the various forms of identity work undertaken by the injured participants, along the dimensions of: *materialistic*, *associative* and *vocabularic* identifications. Such identity work was found to be crucial in sustaining a credible sporting identity in the face of disruption to the running self, and in generating momentum towards the goal of restitution to full running fitness and re-engagement with a cherished form of leisure.

Keywords

Identity work, symbolic interactionism, distance running, disrupted identity

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Introduction

This article seeks to contribute fresh perspectives to the empirical literature on the sociology of the body, and of leisure and identity, in analysing the impact and experience of long-term injury in relation to the identities of two amateur, *serious* runners. Using a symbolic interactionist lens, and based on data from a collaborative autoethnographic project, the article explores the role of 'identity work' (Snow & Anderson, 1995; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Walseth, 2006) in sustaining continuity of athletic identity during the liminality of a two-year injury period, which disrupted a long-term body project. As Scott (2005) notes, symbolic interactionism is of relevance to a wider range of studies in contemporary sociology than we may have been inclined to recognise, and this theoretical perspective certainly offers interesting angles on current discussions surrounding identity, including sporting and serious-leisure identities. Additionally, there is a relative dearth of research into the experiences of amateur, non-élite, older (Tulle, 2003) sportspeople, and this study seeks to remedy this in a small way by taking as its focus our experiences as two non-élite, middle-aged distance runners, one female/one male, both suffering running career-threatening injuries.

The article applies Snow & Anderson's (1995) and Perinbanayagam's (2000) theoretical frameworks to our efforts to maintain running identities through the disruption produced by enforced withdrawal from our primary leisure activity due to long-term injury. In recent years, there has developed a growing corpus of sociological literature on various dimensions of sporting and physical activity-related injury (eg. Young, 2004), in relation to activities as diverse as rowing and classical ballet. The dimensions of analysis include: gender (Young & White, 1995; Young *et al.*, 1994; Nixon, 1996; Pike, 2005); the subcultural context of specific sports and physical activities (Kotarba, 1983; Howe, 2001, 2004; Turner & Wainwright, 2003); and participants' own attitudes toward injury and risk-taking (Young & White, 1995; Creyer *et al.*, 2003; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Wainwright & Turner, 2006), to name but a few. To-date, however, little has been published on the *identity work* undertaken by injured participants themselves, and even less from an autoethnographic perspective. The relatively recent 'autoethnographic turn' in the analysis of sporting and physical activity experiences, including

the impact of injury, offers great potential for perspectives complementary to the literature cited above (see for example, Denison, 1999; Tsang, 2000; Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Sparkes, 1998a, 2002; Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999)

In addition to the autoethnographic approach of the study, its substantive and methodological distinctiveness lies in three principal domains. First, it centres upon the experiences of two non-élite, middle-aged, amateur athletes, whereas most research in this area has focussed upon professional and/or élite, young (under-30), (usually) male athletes as subjects/participants. Second, the study charts the successful transition from the injured sporting body to the rehabilitated body, whereas much research centres on athletes unable to attain their pre-injured sporting status (eg. Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2003). Third, data collection took place during the actual post-injury process, an approach largely under-represented in the literature, which is often based on interviewing or recounting of experiences *retrospectively* (eg. Sparkes & Silvennoinen, 1999).

In order to examine the role of identity work in providing continuity of athletic identity through the disruption to self generated by sporting injuries, the article is structured in the following way. First the general theoretical framework of symbolic interaction is briefly discussed. Second, the autoethnographic approach and research methods are addressed, and the biographical contexts portrayed. Third, the subculture of the serious distance runner is outlined, in order to contextualise the considerable impact of the injury experience. Fourth, the concept of identity work and its constituent components are applied to our experiences as co-runners/researchers. The article concludes with a discussion of the degree of success we achieved in sustaining or reclaiming our athletic identities. To begin then, the analysis turns to symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity.

Identity as interactional achievement

The concepts of identity and self have constituted the subject of intense debate during the past two decades in particular, spurred on by developments in feminism, postmodernism, cultural studies, and queer theory *inter alia* (Callero, 2003). The concept of identity *per se* has of course been highly problematised within postmodernist writings, with their focus on

the fluidity of subjectivities. There are, however, some similarities between postmodernist and symbolic interactionist perspectives, for as Davies and Banks (1992: p. 3) note in relation to the former: 'subjectivity is formulated through discourses, given substance and pattern through storyline and deployed in social interaction'. The fluidity and context-dependency of subjectivities and identities is a common thread within the two approaches, as is the notion of subjectivity/identity as emergent within the interactional milieu. As Biggs (1997: p. 556) notes, however, under conditions of post or high modernity, it might be argued that the social environment is conceptualized as somewhat less stable than that envisaged within interactionist accounts such as those of Goffman (1969).

Some similarities notwithstanding, the primary theoretical focus of the paper is based upon symbolic interactionist conceptions of identity (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1969), which emphasize the processual nature of self and identity, actively developed and negotiated via interactional work between the social actor and others, in an intersubjective, dynamic, ongoing social process (Mead, 1934). Indeed, the concepts of self and identity have often been posited as co-terminous, so that self is defined as 'each individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis à vis* of others in terms of similarity and difference' (Jenkins, 1996: p. 29). Symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity vary greatly along a continuum between what might be termed more processual and more structural orientations, where the former place greater emphasis on the processes of identity construction in interaction, so that 'subject positions' (Day Sclater, 1998: p. 86) are actively negotiated, in contrast to somewhat more passive constructions sometimes implied by 'role'. Although in no way wishing to underplay the power of culture and structural constraints, this article primarily focuses on the processual, interactional elements of identity, whilst acknowledging that social behaviour is indeed both constrained and constructed, and 'role imposition' and 'role improvisation' (Stryker, 1987: p. 93) are experienced and actively undertaken by social actors.

Although open to some debate, a useful distinction is made by Snow & Anderson (1995: p. 240) between: *social* identities and *personal* identities. Social identities are defined as those we attribute or impute to others, situating them as social objects, whilst personal identities

refer to the meanings we attribute to the self. These forms may of course be in opposition. The focus here is primarily on personal identities, although the interconnectedness of, and interplay between personal and social identities is also considered. Symbolic interactionist theorists such as Goffman (1969) have noted the importance of leisure in the construction of personal identity, including via the use of 'props' such as clothing and equipment (as will be discussed), and even cigarettes (Wearing & Wearing, 2000).

A further interactionist concept significant to this discussion, is that of 'felt identity' (Goffman, 1973), that is an identity grounded in self-feelings (McCall & Simmons, 1978), largely tacitly held and taken for granted until an event disrupts the routine processes of everyday life and activities. Incurring an injury can certainly constitute such a rupturing and threatening event for those who pursue sport as serious leisure, resulting in a 'disrupted body project' (Sparkes, 2002), and also potential stigmatisation of the injured sporting self (Young *et al.*, 1994). As Shilling (1993: pp. 4-5) notes: 'In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual's* self-identity' (emphases in original). The healthy body, he posits, is probably the most common form of body project. For serious sports participants, whether professional or amateur, the 'worked upon' and 'worked out' sporting body is often central to athletic identity, and there can be both positive and negative consequences of this. As Brewer *et al* (1993) note, alongside the clear benefits of this kind of identity, such as a strong sense of self, enhanced athletic performance and greater commitment to long-term involvement in exercise, it can also prove somewhat of an 'Achilles' heel'. From a psychological viewpoint, individuals with a strong athletic identity often exhibit greater signs of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem when their body project and athletic self identity are disrupted by a traumatic event such as a career-threatening injury. It is therefore of interest to examine the ways in which committed sports participants themselves manage the social-psychological dimension of the injury (and hopefully recovery) process, and sustain both the felt and interactional dimensions of their athletic identity during enforced withdrawal from the habitual physical routines of their sporting activity. On the basis of the autoethnographic data, the role played by identity work

emerged as crucial, and will be analysed in-depth below. First, a brief outline of our methodology and method follows.

Autoethnography & methods

In order to undertake an in-depth examination of the injury and rehabilitation process, a collaborative autoethnography was selected as the most appropriate research approach for uncovering and analyzing subjective, lived-body experiences, combined with an analysis of the social interactional dimension of these processes. Although there is not the space here to do justice to the richness of the autoethnographic approach¹, a brief portrayal should give a flavour. Arising from the 'crisis of representation' in social science, autoethnography can be viewed as one of the transformative reactions to the 'realist conception of validity' (Hammersley, 1992: p. 2). It forms part of a methodological development termed 'the fifth moment' in the history of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) where for example more participatory research and innovative forms of writing and representation have evolved. Autoethnography is often distinguished from autobiography by its focus not primarily on the writer, but on specific experiences within her/his life that aim to uncover and illuminate wider cultural or subcultural processes, whilst avoiding solipsism (Greenhalgh, 2001: pp. 51-52).

There is still however debate over terminology, what exactly constitutes autoethnography, and indeed the implications of naming it (Charmaz, 2006). A panoply of other terms co-exists, for example, self-narratives, récits de soi/moi, personal narratives, ethnographic autobiography, autobiographical sociology, critical autobiography, analytic autoethnography, reflexive autoethnography, and so on. It has been defined in a myriad of ways, but in general it can perhaps be said autoethnography focusses upon the dialectics of subjectivity and culture, and entails the detailed analysis of oneself *qua* member of a social group or category, for example as an Olympic rower (Tsang, 2000), or in this particular case, as a distance runner (Allen Collinson and Hockey, 2001; Denison, 2002; Allen Collinson, 2003). As Atkinson (2006: p. 402) reminds us, however, 'all ethnographic work implies a degree of personal engagement with the field and with the data ... Autoethnography is, it would appear, grounded in an explicit recognition of those biographical and personal foundations', and this

¹ See for example work by Ellis & Bochner (1996); Reed-Danahay (1997); Ellis (1999).

overtness and reflexivity are central. The autoethnographic enterprise is very broad and encompassing, and best conceptualized as a continuum along which exist numerous ways of collecting, analysing and depicting data, rendering problematic exact definition and precise application (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Consequently, there is no one standard form of autoethnographic method or account.

Researchers working within a more orthodox framework have sometimes charged autoethnographers with solipsism and self-indulgence (Coffey, 1999), and failing to meet the traditional trinity of research criteria: validity, reliability, and generalisability, particularly in relation to the small 'sample' size. In response to such criticisms, exponents of various forms of qualitative enquiry, including autoethnography, have problematised the imposition of such 'traditional criteria' as inappropriate, and posited criteria deemed more appropriate for its evaluation, for example: authenticity, fidelity, evocation, congruence, resonance, and aesthetic appeal (Sparkes, 2000), to name but a few. The commitment to greater flexibility in doing and writing autoethnography and to more innovative, open-ended ways of evaluating it means that: 'there can be no canonical approach to this form of inquiry, no recipes or rigid formulas' (Sparkes, 1998b: p. 380). Hence, judgments regarding the most appropriate textual or visual forms to use, and evaluation criteria to employ, will always be context dependent, and reaching any agreement and passing judgment, it is argued, are practical and moral tasks rather than simply epistemological ones (Sparkes, 1998b: p. 381). In addition, the 'alternative' criteria for evaluating forms of interpretive research will themselves be open to reinterpretation over time (Smith, 1993: p. 139). Autoethnographers thus employ *criteria* in a particular manner, conceptualizing them as characterizing traits (Sparkes, 2000) rather than foundational (Smith, 1984) and mandatory. As Sparkes (2000: p. 37) emphasizes, autoethnographers 'are willing to describe what one *might* do, but they are not prepared to mandate what one *must* do across all contexts and on all occasions'.

Autoethnographers constitute a heterogeneous group, varying widely in the specificity of focus on: the research process and writing up (graphy), culture (ethnos), or self (auto) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Some autoethnographers seek to 'write themselves into' their accounts of fieldwork (Tedlock, 1991) analytically, as an integral part of the research process.

Many have also explored innovative forms of writing, for, as Krizek (1998: p. 93) notes in relation to ethnography: '...many of us "do" ethnography but "write" in the conservative voice of science'. Although the present article is based upon autoethnographic data, the presentational style is not an evocative, narrative-based account, for a particular reason. This in no way reflects a wish to render the article 'devoid of human emotion and self-reflection' (Krizek, 1998: p. 93) but is purely because the analytic focus of the article centres on the processes of identity work, rather than a more creative, reflexive and evocative narrative. The need for such narratives is, however, fully acknowledged and welcomed, and other accounts of the research congruent with the evocative, reflexive and revelatory elements of the autoethnographic genre have been published elsewhere (see for example, Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2001, 2006). Whilst this account is not, therefore, as evocative as other papers written from the same data, it aims to meet other criteria appropriate to what has been termed 'analytic autoethnography' (Anderson, 2006).

In terms of method and systematic fieldwork documentation, as researchers we constructed detailed diaries or personal logs throughout the 2-year rehabilitative period. This in general was a habit already familiar to us, not only via research projects, but as common practice amongst runners, both amateur and professional, who record daily training performance in 'training logs'. Our own data collection was undertaken via field note books and micro tape recorders; the latter accompanying us on training sessions and throughout the day (including sometimes to health-care practitioners), with tapes transcribed as soon as practicable after recording, usually at weekends. Additionally, a joint log was also created, wherein analytical themes and concepts were generated. For example, if one of us had documented a particular narrative theme, we would together search the other's log for a similar theme. Subsequently we would interrogate each other as to the precise composition of that theme, its boundaries and its connections to other themes already generated. Thematic or conceptual differences between our accounts were identified and, wherever possible, reconciled, in terms of definition. Where no analytical reconciliation proved achievable, the difference was accepted and recorded. Subsequently, we discussed the reasons for such divergence and the impact, if any, upon the process of handling our injuries. In addition, we sought to act as the 'primary recipient'

(Ochs & Capps, 1996) of the other's data, discussing events and interpretations, providing regular feedback and critique. We analysed and re-analysed our journal entries, employing processes of re-memory (Pearce, 1997; Sanders-Bustle & Oliver 2001) to send ourselves back in time and recapture past experience, formulating narratives in order to give meaning to our experiences (Sparkes, 1999; Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2001). Data excerpts from both our individual and joint logs are used in the analysis below.

Biographical backgrounds

In order to contextualise the impact of the injury experiences, and commensurate with the autoethnographical spirit, it is appropriate to render visible some accountable knowledge (Stanley, 1990), to situate the researcher-runners within their biographies of running. In terms of 'identity salience' (Stryker, 1987), serious leisure in the form of distance running plays a central role in both our lives. Now 46 and 60 respectively, we have been veteran runners (in UK terminology) for well over a decade, and running has certainly involved us in a 'culture of commitment in leisure' (Tomlinson, 1993). For almost 20 years we regularly trained together, often 6 or 7 days a week. One of us (male) has almost 40 years' experience of distance running, including marathons, whilst the other (female) has 20 years' experience of middle/long-distance running. Nowadays, we do not run in order to win races, and although acknowledging that in common with many serious runners, we: 'regularly (run) further and faster than fitness for health would demand' (Smith, 2000: p. 190), nevertheless we run primarily for the physical (and psychological) health benefits it affords. In common with many runners, our running necessitates that work (to a limited extent), meal, family, and social schedules are organised to accommodate our training (Ogles & Masters, 2003), and as a routine, running 'serves as a relatively fixed point around which other activities are arranged' (Crossley, 2006: p 35). Smith (1998: p. 176) makes a distinction (familiar to subcultural insiders) between 1) *athletes* - elite runners who are potential race-winners; 2) *runners*, 'who run and train, week in and week out, at levels far in excess of that required for basic physical fitness, yet stand no realistic chance of winning, or doing well in *any* race'; and 3) *joggers/fun runners*, who train infrequently, and only if the weather is fair, and race even more infrequently, if at all. Under this categorisation, we qualify as *runners*.

The study was originated when, one winter, we both suffered different knee injuries, and relatively soon it became apparent that these were much more than the ‘appropriate pain of proper exercise’ (Crossley, 2006: p. 40) or the usual minor problems that plague the habitual runner. Subsequently it transpired that both injuries were ‘career’- (in the interactionist sense) threatening, and serious enough to require a 2-year rehabilitative period before a return to full running fitness. Within days of the injury events, we decided to document systematically our experiences and so, ironically perhaps, it was one of those unhappy ‘accidents of current biography’ that provided access, physical and psychological, to the research setting (Lofland & Lofland, 1995: p. 11) and stimulated the study. Initially, we both made every attempt to seek diagnosis and treatment via an array of health-care practitioners: physiotherapists, general practitioners (GPs), an osteopath, and two consultant surgeons, all of whom offered different (sometimes conflicting) diagnoses. Plunged into a diagnostic vacuum, we decided to embark upon our own athletic rehabilitation via carefully devised remedial programmes. In brief, it took approximately a year to return to continuous running in training, and a further year until accomplishment of our normal 60-minute training run was possible. In order to contextualise the significance of the injury events as a threat to physical and psychological health and to core identity, something of the subculture of the middle/long-distance runner will now be described.

The distance running subculture

Within interactionist circles, the concept of ‘subculture’ has featured strongly (see Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Congruent with this perspective, Prus (1996) offers a useful definition:

‘The term *subculture* signifies a way of life of a group of people. Denoting communities within communities, subcultures are characterised by interaction, continuity, and outsider and insider definitions of distinctiveness...it is useful to envision subcultures with respect to the perspectives (or world views) characterizing their members, the identities people achieve as participants, the activities deemed consequential in that context, the bonds participants develop with one another, and the sorts of commitments the people involved make with respect to the setting at hand.’ (1996: p. 85)

This description certainly applies to the distinctive social world of the distance runner, and although there is not the space to portray this in detail here, excellent descriptions of the

subculture can be found elsewhere (eg. Smith 1998, 2000; Yair, 1990; Abbas, 2004). In the current analysis, elements relating to the distinctive norms, values and behaviours of distant running are particularly salient. Within the subculture, certain values, dispositions and characteristics are highly valorised, and these include the qualities of stoicism and endurance. The praxis of distance running is intimately connected with endurance; tolerating fatigue, discomfort and pain constitute an integral part of everyday training routines. Such subcultural tendencies towards the normalisation and routinisation of pain have been noted within the literature (see Young *et al.*, 1994, in relation to gender), and regarding a spectrum of physical activities from boxing (Wacquant, 1995) to classical ballet (Turner & Wainwright, 2006). As Wiese-Bjornstal *et al.* (1998: p. 63) note: 'athletes learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain, and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete in competitive sports'; a definition also applicable to non-competitive sports and physical activity when undertaken as serious leisure. Normalisation of pain and injury is not, however, unproblematic, and the hazards of a culture of risk have also been highlighted (Safai, 2003).

The gender dimensions of pain and injury have also been documented, both in general terms (Bendelow & Williams, 1998) and in relation to sporting activities, though predominantly at elite level (eg. Young & White, 1995; Young *et al.*, 1994), **with some more recent work on adolescent girls' socialisation in to pain and injury in recreational softball (Malcolm, 2006)**. In relation to the current study, although there were undoubted differences between our experiences of, and responses to the knee injuries, detailed analysis of the data did not reveal gender to be a key variable in this instance, and the reasons for this would be interesting to unveil. It has been suggested for example that sportswomen adopt a so-called 'masculinist' model of sports participation which valorizes a 'no pain, no gain' mentality, analogous to those of male counterparts (Charlesworth & Young, 2003). Caution is necessary, however, with regard to essentialist connotations of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour which prevail in some research. Even if we bracket the problematics of the cultural construction of gender and the 'heteropolar paradigm' (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999), what is considered gender-appropriate behaviour is highly fluid and context-dependent, and general cultural perceptions of women as *more* stoic than men also exist (Bendelow & Williams,

1998). Although not usually construed as a dangerous sport or 'risky recreation' (Creyer *et al.*, 2003), distance running incorporates pain and injury as routine and normalised features (cf. Pike & Maguire, 2003). As Young & White (1995) highlight in their research on elite female athletes in general, if there is a difference in female and male athletes' attitudes toward pain and injury, it is to a minimal degree, **although Sabo (2004) found that female athletes were both aware and critical of this glorification of pain and injuries.** That said, however endemic and normalised pain and injury are within the distance runner's social world, serious injury is nevertheless encountered as a threat to running identity, producing a 'disruption of self' that is equivalent to the trauma of chronic illness (Turner & Wainwright, 2003: p. 272). The form of such disruptive events and their impact upon two athletic identities will now be examined in-depth.

Injury and identity work

Whilst the notion that illness *necessarily* creates biographical disruption has certainly been challenged (Faircloth *et al.*, 2004), the assault on identity generated by illness, pain and injury has been well documented in sociology generally (eg. Frank, 1995; Becker, 1997; Sparkes & Smith, 2003). Budgeon reminds us that 'subjectivity and the material body are aspects of the self which are irreducibly linked such that bodies are never just objects but part of a process of negotiating and re-negotiating self-identity' (2003: p. 45). A sporting injury involves the serious runner very directly in the negotiation and re-negotiation of her/his identity, and 'injury time' can have a highly deleterious impact, whether the athlete is professional or amateur:

Serious injury is one of the most emotionally and psychologically traumatic things that can happen to an athlete ... Because athletes are so dependent upon their physical skills and because their identities are so wrapped up in their sport, injury can be tremendously threatening to them. (Petrie, 1993: pp. 18-19)

Research has highlighted the importance of social support for injured sports participants (Johnston & Carroll, 2000), but there is little published on the ways in which individuals themselves actively cope with the 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1973) of injured athlete, the all-too-often subsequent stigmatisation by sporting peers (Young *et al.*, 1994), and the loss of

the former 'gloried self' (Adler & Adler, 1989). One of the key findings of the research project was the central role played by *identity work* in this process; a concept specifically applied to sport and leisure in recent years, for example in relation to young Muslim women and sport (Walseth, 2006).

In general, identity work has been defined as:

...the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. So defined, identity work may involve a number of complementary activities: a) arrangement of physical settings or props; b) cosmetic face-work or the arrangement of personal appearance; c) selective association with other individuals and groups; d) verbal constructions and assertion of personal identities. (Snow & Anderson, 1995, p. 241)

In Perinbanayagam's (2000) categorisation, these activities are reformulated as *materialistic*, *associative* and *vocabularic* identifications respectively, and both these and Snow & Anderson's categories are clearly applicable to the identity work we undertook. First, the analysis turns to materialistic identification in the form of settings, props and personal appearance. Data extracts are taken verbatim from our logs.

Materialistic identification

During the extended period of injury and rehabilitation, physical settings were used in a variety of ways. One of the most salient of these was our adherence to the same geographical routes for the rehabilitative walking exercise as had been previously used for training runs. The use of this particular physical setting had several functions, some practical, some more symbolic. Practically and functionally, walking on the softer, grassy surface of the parkland helped protect the knee joints from the greater impact generated by road or pavement walking. On the symbolic level, continuing to tread some of the same routes represented to us our commitment to the training 'space' – both geographical and temporal - and ultimately to an eventual restitution to full running fitness. This form of 'restitution narrative' (Frank, 1995) signals the belief that the sick or injured person will in the

future be restored to full health and/or fitness, and has been portrayed in relation to various forms of injury and illness, including the devastation of spinal cord injury (Sparkes & Smith, 2003).

A result of our commitment to walking also corresponds with the category of identity work relating to the arrangement of personal appearance. For, whilst not producing the same cardio-vascular effects as running, brisk walking did ensure that we retained the distinctive somatic form of the distance runner, with relatively low levels of body fat. As Grosz (1994, p. 138) notes, the body is an 'inscriptive surface' upon which adornments, practices and actions leave their mark. We were clearly marked by the activity of running, and continuity in our corporeal self was highly significant to us. As veteran runners with years of running inscribed upon us, we had grown accustomed to this body shape, not only in terms of functionality in the relative ease with which our bodies enabled us to run, but also in relation to the psychological investment in a *serious* runner's corporeal form:

I noticed today that it's 4 months since we have run. What's interesting is that neither of us has put on any extra weight, so whilst at the moment we can't run or even jog, we still *look* like distance runners. That helps because I can still see myself in the mirror and not someone else. I feel that would be even more difficult if I couldn't see my proper self. I know I can't run at the moment, I know I'm totally unfit for running, but it looks as if I am still running. That's comforting because objectively I know when I start running again the experience will not be as hard as if I were carrying surplus poundage. More importantly, I feel I am still here. I can see my running self. So because I still look like I can run, the possibility is I will eventually.
(Log 2)

With regard to body image and running identity, functionality and aesthetics were inseparably intertwined. We both valorised and enjoyed the strength and light muscularity of our running bodies, the cardio-vascular conditioning, and also the *lightness* afforded by a relatively lean body. One of us also enjoyed feelings of female empowerment (Theberge, 1987) and we

both benefited from a certain physical capital, that is: 'the prestige flowing from bodily "investments"' (Turner & Wainwright, 2003: p. 274).

Another materialistic identification undertaken during this period combines both props and the arrangement of personal appearance via the use of *objects* in the form of running kit. Not only did we retain the discipline of walking our training routes, but we also continued to don the usual running gear, as a field note testifies:

We've made a joint decision today: rather than undertaking the rehab in our usual street clothes, we are going to walk around the park in our training gear. At least we'll look like runners - to ourselves as much as to anyone else. Feel a bit ambivalent, however, as it's somewhat poignant pulling on the training gear when it's all too apparent we are not running! (Log 2)

Despite the degree of ambivalence, and a feeling of this being all show and no content, again there were functional and symbolic elements to the practice. Running kit was certainly comfortable and practical for all-weather walking, but it also served to mark ritually that this was a distinctive temporal phase of the day. Running kit was a prop used to manage the impression of our sporting roles, to signal continuity with our former running selves and also to indicate to ourselves-as-audience our commitment to the body restitution project. As Silver notes, people undergoing role transitions devise ways to retain continuous identities during periods of profound change, when:

objects can stand alone as critical testimony about the self during role transitions because people can invest objects with meanings that give coherence to these otherwise incoherent and unsettled periods... (Silver, 1996: p. 3)

We fervently hoped that the enforced role transition from runner to non-runner would be a hiatus rather than an actual transition. Sporting the usual running gear provided a significant prop to our faltering running identities and helped us to retain a degree of continuity of personal identity through the liminality of injury time. Running clothes and shoes took on the

status of transitional or boundary objects, serving as symbolic bridges to the former state of the 'gloried self'. As noted by Dant (1999: p. 55), objects also have a signification role in indicating the social group membership of their users. Not only did we signify to ourselves the continuity of our running selves, but also to other members of the running community, despite our current injured state. We sought to claim social identities as runners, and some of the forms of associative identification in which we engaged will now be examined.

Associative identifications

As noted, we continued to sport running kit, including *serious* running shoes, and in common with other members of the subculture could identify these with regard to make, model, and also functional particularities (Howe, 2004: p. 161). In wet weather we donned Gore-Tex® jackets and waterproof running tights, clothing easily recognisable by fellow *aficionados/as*. Via our materialistic identification based on forms of specialist clothing, we also sought associative identification with other members of the subculture, for, as Stone has indicated:

As the self is dressed, it is simultaneously addressed, for, whenever we clothe ourselves, we dress 'toward' or address some audience whose validating responses are essential to the establishment of our self. (Stone, 1977: pp. 101-102)

Although neither of us considered such audience responses *essential* to the establishment or maintenance of self, it clearly emerged from the data that when recognition from other runners was forthcoming, it served to augment our sense of athletic identity, as highlighted by a field note relating to an encounter with a fellow regular runner:

Brief but cheering encounter with 'Dave the Rave' this morning... As he came charging up in his usual style, he nodded and called out to J.: "New Nike Pegs (shoes)?" "Aye," responded J.: "I might not be able to run, but at least I look like a runner!". "You're on the way back" was the rejoinder. It lifted our spirits. (Log 2)

These small forms of 'civil attention' (*contra* Goffman's (1966) notion of 'civil inattention'), were welcome acknowledgement of our running selves from other subcultural members.

This was particularly significant given that at the time of the injuries the various clubs and groups with which we had previously run were geographically distant, precluding regular and extensive support from close running friends. We did, however, continue our 'selective association' (Snow & Anderson, 1995) with friends around the UK, via telephone, e-mail, text and letter. We appreciated greatly their encouragement, empathy and practical advice, but perhaps the most valued element of their support was their continuing perception of us as distance runners and their validation of our running identities. Research has emphasized the importance of social support for injured sportspeople (Johnston & Carroll, 2000), and our data certainly confirmed the salience of associative identification in maintaining morale during long-term injury. A further form of identification emerged from the data as significant: that of 'vocabularic identification' (Perinbanayagam, 2000).

Vocabularic identifications

This form of identity work also corresponds with Snow & Anderson's category of 'verbal constructions and assertion of personal identities' and was undertaken regularly in the form of *identity talk*, a powerful medium in the construction of personal identity (Green, 1998). We totally embraced the identity of *real* runner. Such role embracement has been described as the 'verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role' (Snow & Anderson, 1995: p. 245). Even if a 'lay' audience might term a high degree of commitment to running as obsessive or the serious runner as 'negatively addicted' (Leedy, 2000) or 'exercise dependent', the negativity implied by such terminology is often transmuted to the positive, and valorised by subcultural insiders. Correspondingly, we undertook 'associational distancing' (Snow & Anderson, 1995: p. 241) in order to contrast ourselves vocabularically with less committed, fair-weather runners, or 'joggers' in Smith's (1998: p. 180) categorisation. This was illustrated via a whole range of (somewhat value-laden) exhortations and verbal challenges to each other, to retain an identity as serious runner; for example when struggling up a hill with knees protesting:

Come on now [author's name] dig in there! When the going gets tough, the tough ...
Don't moan and groan. You don't want to be an old ... out-of-condition *jogger*, do you
now?! (Log 1)

One of the key subcultural phrases employed to describe the practice of enduring in running – whether racing or in training - is ‘digging in’. When our rehabilitative efforts became particularly painful and/or frustrating, we would employ this vocabulary, exhorting each other regularly to dig in, to keep working at the remedial programme, reminding one another of previous struggles where we had come through bad experiences and ‘endured’, as good distance runners should:

The weather has been foul, and combined with the dark, there’s not much incentive to get out of the door. We are walking around the park, but that seems little consolation. We know it’s the only way back, but it’s not running, and it’s difficult to keep warm! ... J told me a story last night about finishing a “bad” marathon in Rotherham where he was exhausted at 25 miles, and going so slowly that a woman pushing a pram overtook him around a roundabout! The point of the story was of course all about finishing. The time didn’t matter, where he came in the field didn’t matter; what mattered was that he kept going and finished. We have a laugh over the story, and plod on. (Log 2)

In addition, ritual utterances used previously during training runs were subsequently resurrected during various rehabilitative sessions; indeed our runner’s talk pervaded the injury and rehabilitative period. We would for example proffer encouragement via sayings such as ‘Come on, Rosa’ (ironic reference to the legendary Portuguese marathon-runner, Rosa Mota).

Another form of identity talk we used to enliven the tedium of the rehabilitation regimen were the stories of a happier running past. The links between narratives and identity construction have been well-theorised, both in general (Ochs & Capps, 1996) and more specifically in relation to illness, injury and the self (Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Sparkes & Smith, 2003; Wainwright *et al.*, 2005). As emerged from the autoethnographic data, both the running subculture and our own running biographies provided a profusion of material from

which to construct such narratives. Above all, there was repeated recourse to narratives which stressed endurance and perseverance in the face of difficulty:

Today we have been struggling with the repeat 5-minute 'shuttle runs', trying to keep our running form, which is difficult because of lack of fitness, and monitoring our knees intently, as they begin to complain when our form goes due to that lack. In between repeats we have been reminiscing about other struggles, like when I decided to try to reduce my asthma medication and eventually managed to come off it completely - even for running - much to my delight. "God, there were times when I thought you were going to pass out with the effort," says J, "but you always kept going, no matter how tough it got. I reckon you would pass 'P' Company (UK parachute forces selection test)!" (Log 2)

Discussion: restoration, transformation?

This article has portrayed the forms of identity work utilised during a 2-year injury and rehabilitation period in an attempt to sustain athletic identity, via: the use of settings and props, arrangement of appearance, selective association with subcultural members, and identity talk. These forms were found to correspond with Perinbanayagam's (2000) formulation of *materialistic*, *associative* and *vocabularic* identifications, and with Snow & Anderson's (1995) various categories of identity work respectively. Perhaps a key question remaining is whether via this identity work we managed to maintain our athletic identities as runners.

During the two years from the initial injury event, through the rehabilitation period to the point when we could both run for our accustomed 60 minutes per day, we had managed to maintain our distance-runner identities in certain ways. We had retained social identities as runners in the eyes of our fellow runners. We had also managed to sustain personal running identities in terms of the meanings we attributed to ourselves, and which were brought into play during the interactional flow between ourselves and with others. Fortunately, given that we were able to continue walking our training routes (deeply frustrating though it was not to run them) we managed to avoid some of the deleterious effects of the 'demise of the

disciplined body' (Sparkes *et al*, 2005) and retain some degree of fitness and also of somatic form. With regard to the more generalised other, in the form of the public whom we encountered on training runs, our social identities as runners were somewhat problematic – as for long periods we were not actually running! To this particular audience we may well have appeared relatively fit and healthy, but we were not validated specifically in our running identities. This however did not, on the basis of the data analysed, present any great challenge to our personal identities, as our affective community of friends and fellow runners did provide affirmation of our running selves along the various dimensions of materialistic, associative and vocabularic identifications cited. Thus, there was not too great a dissonance between our self-concept, the balance between our 'former gloried selves' (Adler & Adler, 1989), the idealised (and somewhat historic) images we held of ourselves as serious runners, and our current 'imputed social identities' (Snow & Anderson, 1995: p. 240), which others attributed to us.

Despite the general maintenance of our running identities, however, there were some significant changes. On commencing the rehabilitative programmes, we frequently engaged in 'restitution narratives' (Frank, 1995; Sparkes & Smith, 2003) which identified as the principal objective the 'restored self', to regain as near as possible the same self as pre-injury, 'to recover something (we) had lost, to return to former glory' (Crossley, 2006: p. 31). Our fervent hope was to return to running at the same level as prior to the injuries, and much of our identity work was based on that premise. Our expectations that we would return to running - at some point, however distant - clearly inspired and informed much of the identity work in which we engaged. Our identities have, however, despite the return to running fitness, been indelibly affected, re-inscribed, and certain elements fundamentally altered.

As the time-frame for rehabilitation and recovery extended, way beyond our original, optimistic predictions, the realisation dawned that the injuries threatened our capacity to run *in toto*. Consequently, it was no longer a question of training and racing well, it was a question of running *at all*. The very meaning of running was fundamentally changed, and this represented somewhat of an epiphany, forcing us to confront our embodiment (Wainwright *et al.*, 2005), and re-evaluate our athletic identities. In brief, we became much more cautious,

and careful; new caution evident in our substantially revised training practices, some of which now run counter to the usual 'culture of risk' of the distance runner, particularly in relation to obdurate stoicism. Previously, we would have forced ourselves to train (and sometimes race) through pain and injury - a syndrome well-known to many athletes, professional and amateur. Nowadays, we have less bodily and psychological investment in achieving the kinds of race times or positions previously so emblematic of our running identities (cf. Smith, 2000: p. 350). Such short-term goals have been replaced by the longer-term objective of running (and secondarily racing), for as long as our ageing bodies will permit. The challenge to identity occasioned by injury experience has thus engendered a radical change in the meaning of running, and correspondingly both a restoration and a degree of transformation of our athletic identities.

In a review of the literature on body narratives, Sparkes (1999) raises a series of issues and questions for future research, including the need to ascertain the conditions that shape whether an injured athlete reconstructs a positive identity or sinks into depression. It is therefore of interest to examine the ways in which committed athletes and other sports participants themselves manage the social-psychological dimension of the injury-recovery process and sustain both the felt and interactional dimensions of their sporting identity during enforced withdrawal from the habitual physical routines of their activity. As noted above, an event such as serious injury, which disrupts or ends such a core activity, is often experienced as highly threatening to identity in general. As emerged from our autoethnographic data, the ways in which the various dimensions of identity work helped in coping with, and managing such disruption and threat were highly significant. Given the current lack of research on non-élite, amateur, and older sports participants and specifically in relation to the role of remedial self-help (Williams, 2003) in managing the disruption to self provoked by serious injury, it is hoped that in a small way this article starts to address the lacuna.

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