

Auto-Photography in Aging Studies:  
Exploring Issues of Identity Construction in Mature Bodybuilders.



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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute empirically, theoretically, and methodologically to the literature on aging bodies and identity construction by analyzing auto-photographic data from a project that explores the embodied identities of mature bodybuilders. The analysis identified three salient identities that the participants constructed via the auto-photography task. These identities were; *a healthy body-self*, *a performing body-self*, and *a relational body-self*. In combination, these three identities offer insight into what mature bodybuilders themselves regard as important in their lives and social worlds. The ways in which the respondent driven photographs might allow additional insight into the meaning of aging, and also act as counter-narratives to dominant narratives of decline in older age is reflected upon.

## Introduction

Contemporary narrative scholars are now integrating photography, and more recently video technologies into data gathering. As part of this movement, auto-photography – sometimes referred to as self-directed photography, and / or photovoice – has become increasingly popular. To date, auto-photography has been used to explore experiences of homelessness (e.g. Johnsen, May & Cloke, 2008), school life (e.g. Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007), illness (e.g. Frith & Harcourt, 2007), intellectual disability (e.g. Booth & Booth, 2003), issues related to gender (e.g. Stiebling, 1999), health promotion (e.g. Wang, 1999), and the educating of health professionals (e.g. Quinn, Albrecht, Mahan, Bell-Ellison, Akintobi, Reynolds & Jeffers, 2006). There has also been a long standing interest in visual methods within the field of gerontology (e.g. see Blaikie, 1999; Bytheway & Johnson, 1997; Bytheway, 2003; Cunningham, 1977; Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Markson, 2003; Woodward, 1999 e but a few). However, published studies which utilize *auto-photography* as a form of data collection (e.g. see Gosselink & Myllykangas, 2007), whilst certainly emerging are still relatively uncommon.

The contribution that photographic research, including auto-photography can make to the field of gerontology has been highlighted by Shenk and Schmid (2002), who propose that it can be used to productively assist in answering specific gerontological research questions, particularly in conjunction with other research methods. For them, photographs are a medium with which many older adults are familiar and comfortable and can thereby act as a useful research tool for eliciting data and illustrating research findings. This article seeks therefore, to contribute empirically,

theoretically, and methodologically to literature on aging bodies and identity construction by analyzing the use of auto-photography in a project exploring the embodied identities of mature bodybuilders. Prior to outlining this project however, it is important to highlight what auto-photography involves, the relevance of this method in identity research, and its potential contribution to aging studies.

Auto-photography involves the power of the camera being turned over to research participants to document the images they choose, and to story their meanings collaboratively with investigators. This process involves using informant produced photographs during the research interview, or form the basis of a photo essay to assist with the elicitation of stories and the overall interpretive process (e.g. see Johnsen, May & Cloke, 2008; Quinn et al., 2006, respectively). According to Noland (2006), auto-photography can provide another layer of insight into individual lives by enabling researchers to view the participant's world through their eyes, and in doing so provide them with a sense of agency and opportunity to speak for themselves. For this reason, auto-photography has been recognized as an especially useful form of data collection for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups because its use can help to erase the traditional power imbalance between researcher and participant (Prosser, 1998; Pink, 2007; Packard, 2008).

In addition to addressing issues of power within the research process, a further strength of auto-photography lies in the ability of pictures to portray "real, flesh and blood life" (Becker, 2002:11), and subsequently persuade their audience to "bear witness" to the life pictured, whilst also providing them with the means to reflect upon their own (Holliday, 2004: 61). Furthermore, by allowing the participants the freedom to use their surroundings, to select the people and places that are important to their

identity, and to decide what issues and what items are the most salient to the ‘who they are (not)’, the images produced through auto-photography can illuminate the construction of identity particularly well. Photographs embody a way of seeing and can help illuminate what people value, what images they prefer, how they make sense of their world, and how they conceive of others. Producing photographs allows the photographer the opportunity to amplify their place in, and experience of the world. As such, auto-photography invites the researcher to look at the world through the same lens as the photographer and to share the story the picture evokes for the person who took the picture (Booth & Booth, 2003).

Given these points, it would seem that auto-photography can shed light on what people take for granted, and / or what they assume is unquestionable. It therefore has the potential to offer insight into the process of identity construction by allowing participants to use their bodies and the space around them to ‘*show*’ rather than just ‘*tell*’ about their lives (Reissman, 2008). Indeed, discussing the relationship between visual images, identity construction, and narrative, Harrison (2004) proposes that photographic images have a material and symbolic significance that act as important channels of communication which, in turn contributes to the fabric of social relations. For her, photographs are an important site for the embodiment of identity and memory, by providing means by which individuals can consider the self in relation to past and present. Finally, Harrison suggests that photographs are a means by which people in everyday life can narrate experience, and in this way we can come to some understanding of what those experiences mean. To that end, the purpose of this paper is to draw upon auto-photographic data and illuminate the ways in which two mature bodybuilders narrate their sense of identity in relation to their everyday experiences.

## 'Doing' Auto-Photography: (Re)examining the Aging, Sporting Body.

This auto-photography study forms part of a wider project exploring the aging sporting body (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006a, b, 2007, 2008, in press). More recently, this has involved examining the lives of older adults (ages 56-73) who are involved in competitive bodybuilding. There has been a steady increase in the popularity of men's and women's bodybuilding since the 1980's (Grogan, Shepherd, Evans, Wright & Hunter, 2006), which has been reflected in a subsequent growth of academic interest in the subject. To date, this research has focused upon issues such as body image (Pickett, Lewis & Cash, 2005), steroid use (Bloor, Monaghan, Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Monaghan, 2001, 2002), diversity within the bodybuilding sub-culture (Monaghan, 1999), health (Andrews, Sudwell & Sparkes, 2005), identity construction and gender (Brown, 1999; Wiegers, 1998; Bolin, 2003; Patton, 2001). Curiously however, the subject of aging has consistently been overlooked and little has been learnt about the meaning of bodybuilding to people as they age. Yet mature bodybuilders can potentially challenge traditional views of the aging body, and what might be considered as 'age appropriate' leisure pursuits. Like the participants in previous studies who also engage in intense physical activity during later life (e.g. see Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Tulle, 2007, 2008a, b; Grant, 2001) mature bodybuilders can offer a counter-narrative to stereotypical assumptions regarding the gentle types of physical activity that old people want and are able to participate in such as lawn bowls, rambling, card games and gardening (Dionigi, 2006).

Perhaps because of this, it has been this strand of the project (i.e. incorporating mature bodybuilders) which has generated the most reaction from friends, family,

students and colleagues. Indeed, as my interest in these participants gathered pace, I became increasingly aware of other's reactions toward them. Comments such as, "They look unnatural", "Those people are so obsessive", "They must be lacking something in their lives to do that", were frequent and whilst not always expressed with overt malice, it became clear that most people had something to say about bodybuilders – and even more so once they learnt of the participant's ages. Of significance, what was said more often than not related to *the type of person* that onlookers believed them to be. These observations support those of Monaghan (2001) who points out that like tattooing and scarification, bodybuilding in general has long been associated with the improper, the dark side, and the underworld. Indeed, many bodybuilders as reflexive body-subjects are aware that there exists a widespread negative reaction to them. How then, do older people who engage in bodybuilding view *themselves*? What do *they* feel is salient to their sense of identity? How might *they* depict their situation and their experiences of the world through their aging bodies? It was research questions such as these that lead me to adopt auto-photography as a research method, and examine issues of identity construction in mature bodybuilders using two case studies: Bill and Carol.

Bill is 73 years old and has been competitive bodybuilding since he was in his mid-thirties. He trains every other day at his local gym, alternating between different muscle groups. He has won a number of prestigious competitions and competed both in and outside of the UK. Bill's ex-wife and two children live abroad and he currently lives alone. Aside from bodybuilding Bill enjoys coastal walking, reading, and meeting friends. Carol is 56 years old and also lives within the UK. Though a regular gym-goer from the age of twenty-one, it was not until Carol was 49 years old that she entered her first bodybuilding competition. She trains everyday starting with an hour of

cardiovascular training when she wakes up, followed by a one hour weights session at the gym later in the day. Carol works part time and lives with her husband. Though her two grown up children have left home, she meets with them and their families regularly. In addition to bodybuilding, Carol enjoys belly dancing, socializing and spending time with her best friend who is also her training partner. Both Bill and Carol define themselves as natural bodybuilders, and by this imply that they approach bodybuilding without the use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids and human growth hormone.

The chosen cases were already involved in the wider research project exploring the aging, sporting body. As a result of previous contact (via email and telephone) and at least one life history interview having already been conducted, a research relationship had been established between us. Bill and Carol were aware of what the research project was about when I invited them to participate in the auto-photography task. They were chosen because having learnt a certain amount about their lives already, it was felt that the auto-photography task would assist in further directing the inquiry toward understanding what was important about the individual within their own world including their own issues, contexts and interpretations. In this sense, Bill and Carol offer examples of what Stake (2000) terms *intrinsic* case studies.

### *Analysing Auto-Photography*

With regards to data analysis, Harper (1986) argues that there is no single recipe for analyzing photographic data. This is because visual analysis is shaped and informed by many different perspectives and methods (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). I used the



six basic stages outlined by Rose (2007) as a template to conduct and analyze the auto-photography task. First, least one life history interview was conducted with the participant. Second, having completed the life history interviews, the auto-photography task was explained to the participants and they were invited to participate. Upon accepting the invitation, they were provided with a disposable camera. A brief demonstration of how to use the equipment was offered along with some guidelines regarding the type and amount of photographs to take. Following Noland (2006), the participants in this study were asked to take 12 pictures that say “This is me” and 12 pictures that say “This is not me” (due to space limitations, this article covers the analysis of the “this is me” task only)<sup>1</sup>. An instruction / information sheet about the task was also provided<sup>2</sup>. Whilst the participants were not forbidden to take photographs of other people, it was explained that for ethical reasons they should not take photographs of strangers, that permission must be granted by the individual prior to the image being captured, and that such images would not be reproduced in any reports (i.e. publications / conference presentations etc.) emerging from this research. Third, upon completion of the task, the cameras were returned to me and the films were developed. I numbered the images and sent a full copy set to the participant who had created the images.

Fourth, a follow up interview was undertaken during which the photographs were discussed in detail. Specifically, I worked through each image with the participant asking if they could explain the image to me. Following this, questions such as ‘what does this image represent? Why did you take this image (and not another)? Can you tell me what is significant for you here’ and so forth, were also asked as and where necessary. This stage was vital in clarifying what the photos taken by the participants mean to them. Fifth, the interview material and photographs were interpreted using

conventional social science techniques (see also Collier, 2001). According to Wolcott (1994) analysis addresses the identification of essential features and patterned regularities in the data, and the systematic description of interrelationships among them. In short, how things work. Finally, Wolcott asserts that interpretation addresses processual questions of meanings and context: “What is going on here?” “What does it all mean?” “What is to be made of it all?” The sixth and final stage involves the representation of the images. Here, Rose (2007) points out that the finished research tends to be presented such that talk about the photographs between the participant and researcher takes precedent over the photos themselves. Indeed, some studies have gone so far as choosing not to replicate the images in their research write up, but instead focused solely on the results of the content analysis (e.g. see Booth & Booth, 2003; Noland, 2006). Clearly, this has some relevance for ongoing debates regarding the ability of photographs to narrate independent of the written word (e.g. see Chalfen, 2004; Harrison, 2004; Rich, 2004).

During this interpretive stage of the images, my thinking shared similarities with the description, analysis, and interpretation approach advocated by Wolcott (1994). The representation of my analysis includes both the *showing* of the respondent produced images, and the *telling* of their meaning using the participants words. Whilst pictures can tell stories by themselves, and viewers can be invited to see images in a certain way, social scientists need to be familiar with what these readings are if they are to relate the meaning of the photographs to the research questions (Harrison, 2004). Furthermore, as Reissman (2008) points out, there is a need to make arguments in words about images, by contextualizing and interpreting them in light of theoretical questions in our respective fields. Accordingly, in what follows, images are interpreted alongside spoken

text. The intended result is a visual narrative inquiry into the identity construction of two mature bodybuilders.

#### Auto-photographic insights: Self-representations of mature bodybuilders.

Analysis of the auto-photographic images and their accompanying commentary revealed three distinct identities shaped the participants understanding of who they are. These have been termed; *a healthy body-self*, *a performing body-self*, and *a relational body-self*. Following Frank (1995), I use the term ‘body-self’ to acknowledge the inter-relatedness of the body and the self in this embodied process.

#### *A Healthy Body-Self*

INSERT FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

In response to the ‘this is me’ auto-photography task, the participants created numerous images associated with food and healthy eating. For example, Figure 1 features a section of a fresh produce aisle at a supermarket. In addition to this image, Bill also took photographs of a box of apples, a box of green tea, a health food store (selling natural remedies, organic foods and supplements), and the ‘Organic food’ aisle sign at the supermarket. The content of these photographs indicated that *being healthy* was a salient aspect of Bills identity and that he accomplished this identity in part through his engagement with certain food ideologies.

According to Fieldhouse (1995), food ideologies describe what people think of as food. They are defined by attitudes, beliefs, customs and taboos, and accordingly can

influence the diet of a given group by rendering certain foodstuffs acceptable whilst rejecting others. Referring to a group of bodybuilders for instance, Monaghan (2001) notes that as part of the social construction of cultural identity, these individuals achieve a sense of self-satisfaction through their determined efforts to eat ‘correctly’ and a willingness to consume unrefined, plain and natural food necessary for bodybuilding success. These unrefined, plain foods were evident in Bill’s photographs, yet his description of such images focused more upon their association with health than competitive performance. He said:

“Here are some of the healthier foods that I enjoy. Only apples, peppers and tomatoes are in the photo, but broccoli, cauliflower, green beans and other vegetables could be included. I have recently started blending some of the fruit and vegetables raw from time to time for a change, and I have read that this gives you the most health benefits.”

Conscious of the limited range of ‘healthier foods’ that were captured in his image, Bill lists other items that he feels could have been featured in his photograph. He also draws attention to the way in which he prepares some of this food, notably blending it while still raw – a method advocated for sustaining optimal nutritional properties in raw foods. The importance of food preparation to his identity of being healthy was further emphasized by a photograph Bill produced of a local restaurant, describing it as his favorite eating place (not included here). He explained “I can have my food cooked just the way I wish – no sauces or fancy dressings, just fish, vegetables and a spot of olive oil”.

Bills engagement with food seemingly contrasts traditional assumptions and patterns regarding older people and food intake outlined by Dickinson (2003). Specifically, rather than adopt the traditional British meal structure of meat, potatoes, vegetables and a rich gravy dressing, Bill's focus is on fresh fruits, vegetables, fish and an absence of oils or dressings. Furthermore, while Lupton (1996) has proposed that we rarely choose foods for physiological reasons based on their nutritional content, Bills photograph and accompanying commentary challenges this by suggesting that eating foods which provide optimal nutritional benefit is of great importance to constructing and maintaining his identity of being healthy in older age. In this sense, the data supports more recent observations by Moss, Moss, Kilbride and Rubinstein (2007) concerning masculinity, food and eating. These authors noted that men often speak of feeding the body as if it were a machine, and they saw food as a fuel to maintain strength and functioning of the body and its parts.

INSERT FIGURE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Similar to Bill, *food* also emerged as an identity theme from the images produced by Carol. Figure 2 shows four filled supermarket carrier bags positioned on a table that has two chairs. With regards to constructing an identity of being healthy, it is perhaps significant that the named supermarket (M&S) caters for the upper end of the market in the UK, and has purposefully forged a reputation of sourcing high quality produce. Whilst the food itself is concealed by the shopping bags, Carol captures in this image the salience of good quality ingredients to her identity as a healthy body-self. Furthermore, an additional photograph that she produced (not included here) showed a

large steaming saucepan on top of a gas cooker, suggesting that for her, the tasks of food preparation / cooking is also central to who she understands herself to be as a 56 year old married woman. Indeed, the identity of a healthy body-self was portrayed visually quite differently by Bill and Carol. For example, Bills photographs focused on the 'healthy food' itself, as opposed to the skills or tasks associated with food preparation. Given that such tasks are traditionally associated with notions of femininity, the absence of such tasks may be a strategy that Bill draws upon to maintain his sense of masculinity (Moss et al., 2007). In contrast however, the errands and responsibilities associated with eating healthy food, namely shopping and cooking featured strongly in the images created by Carol. Furthermore, the task orientated nature of her photographs was further emphasized by her during the follow up interview when she said:

“With this one [photograph], it's more what's in the bags. I do seem to spend a lot of time shopping considering there are only two of us. I mean I do cook every night. I cook something healthy so I'm always shopping and cooking, dragging it home. I can't believe the amount of food we get through ... I cook most things from scratch and I do like good quality ingredients to start with, I don't buy the convenience food. It has to be good quality mince or steak or chicken or fish”.

According to Murcott (1998), what people eat, whether it is prepared from scratch, bought ready to microwave, carried home from a take-away or eaten in a pub or café, is an important element in their sense of self and respectability. While both of the

participants drew attention to *how* their food was prepared, and *where* it was sometimes eaten in the case of Bill, it was Carol in particular that referred to the labors associated with healthy eating (e.g. ‘shopping’, ‘dragging’, ‘cooking’). Like the images that she produced, her accompanying explanations signal the demands that are made on her time and energy in order for ‘the two of us’ to consume a healthy diet. In this sense, her visual narrative of being healthy also reveals a number of gendered dimensions at play with regards to seemingly mundane, everyday issues such as food, cooking, caring (food preparation for an other), and control of time during midlife.

For Bill, it was not just photographs of food that were used to construct an identity of being healthy. Rather, Figure 3 shows a collection of books resting against the back of his sofa.

INSERT FIGURE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

From their titles, two of these books in particular (‘You Staying Young’ & ‘Healthy at 100’) appear to advocate not just living for longer, but staying ‘young’ and ‘fit’ for longer. In this sense, the titles might be seen to echo recent calls from popular gerontological, commercial, marketing, media and even governmental spheres to become successful members of a new senior citizenry by growing older unburdened by the limitations of aging (Katz, 2005). Furthermore, the books photographed by Bill can contribute to what Stephen Katz (2008) refers to as *coerced asymmetry* whereby individuals are socially encouraged to embody the tension between young and old. This tension can foster a fantastical allure of anti-ageing technologies, such as diet and exercise, in the face of a ‘war on aging’ (see Vincent 2003, 2006). In light of these points, it is interesting to note the use of First World War propaganda (i.e. ‘You’ with

pointing hand) on one of the book covers that Bill selected for this image. Such imagery could (purposefully?) reinforce to the reader that the responsibility to *do what's right*, and *do ones bit* in the war against aging, lies with you, the individual.

Similar to the earlier points made regarding Bill's mechanistic relationship with food, the machine metaphor was also present in the text books that he chose to photograph (e.g. "The Owner's Manual for Extending Your Warranty"). The importance of the increasing appearance of this metaphor in lay perceptions of illness and health is noted by Shilling (2003). For him, this metaphor allows individuals to feel that the body is *their* machine, which can be maintained and fine tuned through healthy eating and keeping fit. Furthermore, acting as a key masculinity script (Spector-Mersel, 2006), the body as machine metaphor can potentially reinforce a sense of prevailing individualism regarding the maintenance of functionality and absence of illness – themes which previous authors (e.g. Watson, 2000; Robertson, 2006) have found to comprise male lay perspectives of health and well-being.

The combination of books included in this image concerning what might be termed life extension (physical well-being) versus life expansion (mental well-being) is telling with regards to Bills self-identity. Indeed, the importance for him to adopt a holistic approach to health as he ages by incorporating both body *and* mind was not only demonstrated in the careful staging of his photograph, it was further confirmed as he explained the image during the follow-up interview:

"This is a sample of reading material which I enjoy. I got really interested in this kind of stuff about 15-16 years ago ... I love reading books by experts on nutrition and training and you can learn from those people how to look after



yourself in periods of illness and how to work your way around injuries ... I have found books such as these to be of great benefit in helping to maintain a health body and clear mind ... All the training keeps the physical side good, but it's nice to be mentally sound as well, have a peaceful mind.”

### *A Performing Body-Self*

A second identity to emerge from the analysis of the ‘this is me’ auto-photography task was that of a performing body-self. In the majority of instances, this identity related to the performance of bodybuilding over time. For example, Bill’s photograph illustrated in Figure 4 shows two trophies in the form of a sword, and a large gold colored medal. Their size suggests prestige and glory. The words “Integrity, Excellence, Dedication, Spirit” are engraved into the centre of the medal, which has been hung by its red ribbon around the handle of a silver sword.

INSERT FIGURE 4 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Bill has accrued many trophies in his forty years of competitive bodybuilding. That these two trophies were selected to feature in this photograph would seem to suggest that they hold particular meaning for Bill. Indeed, his description of this photograph illuminates why this might be the case. He explained:

“These are the most recent and two of my most prestigious ‘rewards’ for competitions on the bodybuilding side of life: 2<sup>nd</sup> place in my category (name of

competition, 2006) and 1<sup>st</sup> place in my category (name of competition, 2007).

Just to compete at these events was wonderful in itself, but to get those placings made me feel really good.”

The trophies that Bill chose to feature in this image were awarded when he was aged 70 and 71 years old respectively. Thus, his choice of trophies implicitly reinforces the notion that his identity as a performing body is situated firmly in the present as an older, physically active adult, rather than being a distant memory of a youthful past.

Moreover, their inclusion into the ‘this is me’ photo task enables Bill to *do* masculinity. Of significance here, the version of masculinity that he *does* is tied to notions of physical strength and body shape - a hegemonic masculinity script more usually limited to the youthful male body (Laz, 2003; Spector-Mersel, 2006).

The image also illustrates how Bills aging body has become a bearer of value (Bourdieu, 1978). That is, it highlights one method by which his body has become a more comprehensive form of physical capital as the years have passed. For example, physical capital is accumulated via recognition and approval of his performing body in the form of competition placings. In this sense, the trophies shown in Figure 4 are imbued with symbolic value in that they are recognized within the social field of bodybuilding as being awarded to the competitor who has accrued the highest physical capital.

INSERT FIGURE 5 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Figure 5 adds a further layer to understanding Bill’s aging performing body as a bearer of value. The image is dominated by three bulk containers of whey protein – a

daily food supplement that is taken to maintain and build new muscle, and recover from intense training. Two smaller containers of L-Glutamine – consumed to assist with protein synthesis – are stacked next to the whey. Unlike the earlier images of food (supplements), which were used to construct an identity of a healthy body, this image links directly with the performance of bodybuilding. Dissimilar to apples, peppers, green tea and so forth, protein is the most important supplement bodybuilders rely upon (Monaghan, 2001). Describing this image, Bill said:

“These are bodybuilding supplements on the top shelf in my garage kindly provided by my sponsors [name of sponsors]. This saves me quite a bit of money over the year, approximately £1000. The quality malt whisky is also me. I enjoy some from time to time in the company of family and good friends.”

Thus, from the image and accompanying commentary presented above, it would seem that Bill's physical capital can be translated into economic capital in the form of sponsorship, which in turn provides him with protein supplements throughout the year.

An additional indication of Bill's economic capital, on my reading, could be seen as being evident in the row of quality malt whisky bottle casings lined up on the shelf below. Their presence offers an additional layer of complexity to the visual narrative. That is, a photograph of protein supplements in isolation might tell one story based on stereotypical assumptions about the bodybuilding lifestyle and the continuous desire to get bigger (e.g. extreme dedication to training and diet, see Fussell, 1991). However, when juxtaposed with a line of neatly arranged quality whisky bottles, the storyline might alter. Now, bodybuilding (represented by the supplements) is depicted

as one of two interests. Furthermore, indicating that relationships with others is key to his sense of self, Bill emphasizes that the malt whisky is not enjoyed in isolation, but in the company of significant others.

According to Bolin (2003), competitive bodybuilding is an unusual sport in that the majority of the athletic component that underwrites the display of muscularity during a contest is not presented, but rather re-presented during that contest. Such athletic components however, were highlighted in the images produced by Bill and Carol. These images involved the *making* and *doing* of their aging bodies relative to the ongoing performance of competitive bodybuilding. Moreover, they depicted a number of body technologies that the participants had engaged, and continued to engage with in order to accomplish an identity of a performing body alongside the process of aging. According to Wesely (2003), body technologies are the techniques we employ to change or alter our physical appearance. For her, a continuum of body technologies might range from temporary alterations such as makeup or attire at one end, to more permanent changes like cosmetic surgery or drugs at the other. Figure 5 offers insight into Bills identity as a performing body, by extending beyond ‘the display’ and showing one form of body technology (i.e. protein supplements) that Bill currently utilizes.

The identity of a performing body and the body technologies involved in its construction over time was also evident in a number of images produced by Carol. For example, Figure 6 shows a free weights area of a gym. This was one of three images that she produced depicting the athletic component of performing bodybuilding. The other two photographs (not shown here) featured a cross trainer, and weight lifting equipment. These images had been taken at her local leisure centre.

INSERT FIGURE 6 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The photograph shown in Figure 6 was taken in a gym which caters more specifically to the training needs of the bodybuilder. This is evident from the weights shown being larger and therefore heavier than would be found in a more commercial health club marketed at the general public. The spacing around the exercise stations is generous, possibly to allow the safe maneuverability of bigger weights and movement of larger bodies within that space. Finally, the amount of space dedicated to free weight exercises appears larger than that typically allocated in commercial health clubs.

Describing this image, Carol said:

“This photo is of another gym that we go to, this is a bodybuilding gym. The guy who owns it is a former champion ... There are other bodybuilders there, usually a few competitors. Compared to the other gym I’m a member of [name of leisure centre], you get less aerobic equipment and more free weights. It’s more motivating there too. The owner will give you advice on diet and competitions and things. They’ve also got a dance studio in there, there’s a stage with a spot light and so when you’re getting ready for a contest, you can get on there and practise your posing. You know, you wouldn’t want to get your kit off in the studio at the other gym [leisure centre], you would get some funny looks. I’m better off here [bodybuilding gym], people don’t stare at me so much, or make comments. It’s much more supportive.”

The facilitation of making and doing bodies suitable for the bodybuilding performance is facilitated within this gym through the arrangement of space, provision of equipment,

and presence of other similar bodies. These aspects were all important for Carol's identity as a performing body.

Carol's description of this image also sheds light on her sense of self relative to other bodies. Maintaining the performance of being a fifty six year old female bodybuilder in a mainstream leisure centre seemingly situates Carol beyond the normative assumptions of that environment regarding what the aging female body does, and subsequently generates (unwanted) stares and comments from others. This offers further support for previous research suggesting that female bodybuilder's musculature and size challenge norms of emphasized femininity and accordingly often renders them the subject of controversy (Patton, 2001) Moreover, Dworkin (2001) notes that "women in fitness – especially those who seek muscular strength – may find their bodily agency and empowerment limited not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity" (p. 337). These issues may be even more pronounced for the mature female bodybuilder who also exceeds the norms of physical activity involvement across the life course. Indeed, Carol's images of two separate gyms and the descriptions she provided about each, offered some insight into her shifting sense of (dis)empowerment relative to her aging performing body in space.

INSERT FIGURE 7 APPROXIMATELY HERE

For Carol, constructing an identity of a performing body was not just restricted to the context of bodybuilding. Rather, this identity was also constructed via her engagement with other activities and their associated body technologies. Figure 7 depicts numerous pieces of brightly coloured material draped over some form of

support. Each piece of material is decorated ornately with gold and / or silver metal coins. Occupying the centre of the image, is a crimson strapless bra with detachable straps and red beads sewn along the bottom. In the foreground is a second bra, sky blue and decorated with coins along the top of the cup. When asked to describe this photograph, Carol explained:

This is a picture of my belly dancing clothes. This is beautiful this is. I've got one [outfit] in every colour and it represents my dancing which again is very, very important to me. I've done this for maybe 6 or 7 years and it's something that I would never leave behind. I love it. I think it's so sensual, full of self-expression and I just love it, and I love the dressing up that goes with it. I mean I love dancing, you only have to slip it on and you're away. Just walking with these clothes on, it makes such a lovely noise. The whole thing, it's just so feminine and beautiful.

Carol reinforces her identity as a performing body by photographing her belly dancing clothes in response to the 'this is me' task. In the process, she also reinforces her identity as a performing *female*. Indeed, contrary to Figure 6, one interpretation of this image could be that its production draws attention to the way in which Carol actively accomplishes gender and more accepted notions of femininity alongside her construction of a hypermuscular physique. This supports previous literature which has pointed out the ways that body technologies can *challenge* and *reinforce* the 'natural' conception of gender (Balsamo, 1997; Wesely, 2001). Carol's photographs illustrate how body technologies such as free weights and belly dancing attire are not only central to her identity as a performing body, but also act as resources as she shifts between

contrasting gender ideals. That is the use of free weights to achieve hypermuscularity (generally associated with definitions of masculinity), and belly dancing (attire) to reinforce accepted notions of femininity. Certainly, Carol's description of her photograph highlight how for her, belly dancing and the clothing that is worn to perform this style of dance is associated with beauty, sensuality, self-expression and femininity. Thus, the images shown in Figures 6 and 7, and the meanings that they hold for Carol, draw attention to the multidimensionality of her current body-self relationships and her identity as a performing body during midlife.

#### *A Relational Body-Self*

The third identity to emerge from the auto-photography task was that of being a relational body-self. This identity draws attention to the complex interdependent connection between two people. Whilst it could be said that all individuals are relational in that they exist within relations with others (Eakin, 1999), the term here is used to highlight that, for the participants, the relationship with the significant other is considered especially salient to their understanding of who they are. Their sense of self is defined and lived in terms of their relationship with the said individual. Many of these relationships existed in the present. For example, Carol's images included a photograph of her training partner who was also described as her best friend, and a photograph of her husband (not included here).

INSERT FIGURE 8 APPROXIMATELY HERE



However, it was not only photographs of *people* that Carol used to construct this identity. Figure 8 shows a photograph of three children's chairs. We can assume they are children's chairs because of their small size, their bright colors, and playful design. Describing this image, Carol said:

“This picture is the children. We bought the 2 pencil chairs as a set, and then Esme came along, so we bought the third one for her. That's made a big difference in my life. It's just added an extra dimension. They are lovely, I love having them ... It was very, very hard when my children were growing up because I always worked full time, I didn't go to the gym so much then, but I was still getting pulled in so many directions. But now I've got the grandchildren and you've got more time for your grandchildren, you can have more fun with them. They are lovely and I love spending time with them.”

The importance of Carol's relationship with her grandchildren is signaled through the production of this image in response to the statement 'this is me'. Furthermore, her description of what this image means to her emphasizes the positive experiences associated with being a grandmother and the additional dimension that this has brought to her life. Instrumental to this is the different way in which *time* is currently experienced compared to the past. Whereas previously, the different roles that Carol undertook within the family and work space competed for her time and attention, through the process of growing older, the grip of what Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes (2007) term *pressured time* has seemingly loosened its grip. Accordingly, Carol is able

to enjoy spending time within the company of her grandchildren and in doing so is able to construct and maintain an identity of a relational body-self.

INSERT FIGURE 9 APPROXIMATELY HERE

This identity was further confirmed by Carol's image shown in Figure 9. The focal point of the photograph is an iron resting on an ironing board. In the background is a row of men's white shirts, ironed and hanging neatly on a rail. As Carol described what this image meant to her during the follow up interview, it became apparent that the photograph had not been taken to depict ironing per se, but to symbolize certain aspects of the relationship with her husband. She explained:

Well there's a row of white shirts there [pointing to the background of the image] and my husband often says, 'I'll iron my own shirts', but I can't let him do that. I get it done but I don't iron the sheets and towels and things, but I like him going to work looking like someone looks after him. And of course, with training, you get through so many clothes. I am constantly washing and ironing.

The combination of the image and the commentary emphasizes the gendered work that Carol does in relation to looking after her husband. The degree to which Carol identifies with this role is seen by her dismissing the suggestion that he might do his own ironing. Furthermore, that her husband is seen by others to be well looked after (by his wife) appears important to this identity.

The inclusion of photographs depicting family relationships in response to the ‘this is me’ task is perhaps unsurprising given that one’s sense of identity evolves in and through the process of interaction within the family (Hockey & James, 2003). Indeed, for Hockey and James, the family is traditionally regarded as the primary site of socialisation across the life course and subsequently can be seen as one of the key contexts within which individuals come to know who they are as they age. Family, they suggest, “can be seen not just as a site which bestows identity, but also a vehicle through which individuals seek to *create* identity” (p. 158). In relation to Carol therefore, shopping, cooking, looking after the grandchildren, and ironing were all ways in which she established her role within the family as a wife and a grandmother, and in doing so assumed the identity of a relational body-self during midlife.

Bill also used his family as a resource when responding to the ‘this is me’ task. His photographs, however, differed from those produced by Carol. Specifically, when constructing the identity of a relational body-self in older age Bill produced images of *places and / or locations* which he associated with significant others from various stages in his life. This identity was also predominantly accomplished through his use of memory. These observations are perhaps revealing of Bill’s current life situation in that both of his parents have passed away, his ex-wife and children live abroad, and he subsequently lives alone in the town that he grew up in.

INSERT FIGURE 10 APPROXIMATELY HERE

For example, Figure 10 shows a three story building with two cars parked outside. Part of the top floor is surrounded by a balcony, and lined with windows which face out into the distance. Describing this image, Bill said.

“This is a refurbished version of the H.M. Coastguard lookout hut close to where I live. My Father was a coastguard and when I was a young boy I spent quite a bit of time up there fascinated by the high powered telescopes and binoculars, looking out across the sea at the passing ships”.

The coastguard lookout therefore is a vivid reminder of the times that Bill spent with his Father in the past. In this sense, the image shown in Figure 10 offers support for Randall and McKim’s (2008) observations that our only access to the past is by means of the present. For Bill therefore, it is the visual presence – the materiality of the lookout hut that, in the absence of his father becomes the access to particular memories of his childhood and therefore salient for his identity as a son, and as a relational body-self.

INSERT FIGURE 11 APPROXIMATELY HERE

This identity was also supported by the image shown in Figure 11. Similar to Bill’s previous photograph it differs from those produced by Carol, which depict artifacts or *things* associated with people who are significant in her life. Indeed, Figure 11 shows a stretch of rocky coastline. The sea water is calm and the visibility of rocks below the waters surface suggests that it is shallow. Carved into the extending piece of

flat rock in the centre of the image are what look like steps. Bill spoke at length about this image and what it meant to him during our follow up interview. He said:

“This is an old Jetty close to where I live. I learned to swim about 400 meters from here, but it was at this jetty where many summer hours were spent enjoying sun, sea and good company... When I was younger, my friend George and I would go into the water (sea) and you'd be in there for a couple of hours swimming out and around ... Sunday morning swims were part of the winter routine for many years. Rain and snow made no difference – calm sea was all that was needed.”

It would seem therefore, that this image was produced to represent happy memories of swimming in the sea. Notable in Bill's comments is the presence of 'good company' and in particular his friend George. This friendship was referred to again later in the interview when I asked Bill if he could describe a situation that was 'typically him'. He replied:

“What I like to feel, when I go and visit my old friend George who I've talked about, the fact that he had meant so much to me over the years, and that he had influenced me, as I say, in a positive way, all of the good things he has taught me. The fact that I can now, when all his other so called friends have deserted him, even members of his own family don't pay too much attention to him. He's up there in that nursing home and I can go up and visit him 3 times a week and give him 3/4 of an hour to an hour of my time 3 times a week. It makes me feel

that I am, not being self righteous, but I'm glad that I can do that to repay him for what he, his good influence on me over the years. It makes me feel good about that. When I am leaving him and he says 'thank you very much' and it makes me feel good.”

When interpreted in conjunction with Bill’s comments, the image shown in Figure 11 takes on additional meaning in terms of friendship and identity over the life course. The coastline, it would seem, is significant for the memories that Bill holds of his and George’s childhood together. Furthermore, with the passing of time, the friendship between them becomes increasingly salient to Bill’s understanding of who he is and is evident of his identity as a relational body-self. These observations seemingly contrast with those made by Gergen and Gergen (1993) regarding the gendered dimensions of autobiography. For them, rumination about the significance of intimates plays but a minor role within men’s stories. Yet for Bill, - relationships with others via family ties and friendships - was a salient identity to emerge from the images he created in response to this task.

### Reflective Comments

This paper aims to contribute implicitly to the sociology of the body literature (e.g. see Featherstone, Hepworth & Turner, 1990; Nettleton & Watson, 1998; Howson, 2004; Shilling, 2003) in general, and the *ageing athletic* body (e.g. Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007, In Press; Tulle, 2003, 2007, 2008a, b; Wainwright & Turner, 1993) in particular. Specifically, as part of my attempt to create conceptual bridges by exploring how two older adults who engage in competitive bodybuilding make sense of who they are, my

analysis is firmly grounded in their experiences and perceptions of the worlds they inhabit. Following Nettleton and Watson (1998), I “assume that action and lived experience may be grasped from the vantage point of the actor who is invariably *embodied*” (p 4). As such, I seek to endorse the view of Simon Williams and Gillian Bendelow (1998) regarding the need for an *embodied sociology* that shifts from theorizing “*about* bodies in a disembodied, typically male way (e.g. a sociology *of* the body, which ‘objectifies’ and ‘subjectifies’ the body from the ‘outside,’ so to speak), to a new mode of social theorizing ‘*from*’ lived bodies” (p. 3). Only on this basis, they claim, can a truly embodied sociology have any real hope of putting minds back into bodies, bodies back into society and society back into the body.

That noted, the primary purpose of this paper has been to focus on auto-photography as a research method within aging studies. Specifically, the potential of using respondent produced images in conjunction with interview data to expand the research agenda on the aging (athletic) body. Throughout this process, a number of lessons have been learned. A first lesson relates to the use of auto-photography as a methodological tool to learn more about body-self relationships in older adults. The analysis identified three identities that the participants actively accomplished via this task, and would seem to be especially meaningful in terms of who they view themselves to be at present. These are; *a healthy body-self*, *a performing body-self*, and *a relational body-self*. In combination, these three identities offer insight into what mature bodybuilders themselves regard as important in their lives and social or cultural worlds. Through employing auto-photography as a research method, certain places, spaces, people and objects that help to construct and reinforce these body-self relationships are rendered visible. Furthermore, asking the participants to describe the images that they

produced provided additional insight into the process of making sense and assigning meaning in the accomplishment of multiple identities.

The present study, therefore, reinforces the sentiments of numerous authors outside of gerontology who have found using auto-photography in conjunction with other methods such as interviews to be a fruitful form of research, which can provide additional, and at times more nuanced insights into individual lives (see e.g. Johnsen, May & Cloke, 2008; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Packard, 2008). Supporting this further, it is worth noting that despite me undertaking two interviews with the participants prior to the auto-photography task, at no point had the topics of belly dancing, ironing (Carol), swimming, and whisky drinking (Bill) arisen. Thus, when used in conjunction with interviews, auto-photography might be one way of expanding our methodological repertoire and gathering additional layers of meaning and experience within aging studies.

A second lesson relates to the insight that respondent produced images can provide into how narratives of aging shape individual's everyday experiences of as they grow older. According to Harrison (2004), photographs provide symbols of experience that represent the meaning of that experience, and subsequently prompt spontaneous storytelling. Indeed, Bill and Carol told stories through and about each of the photographs that they produced. Such stories simultaneously echoed and reinforced existing narratives circulating within society concerning **gender and aging**. For example, the analysis of Carol's images and the stories that she told about them were also informed by broader social narratives regarding gendered expectations in family domains and the inequitable division of labor in household work (Shelton, 1992). Indeed, shopping, cooking, ironing, and caring were all salient to Carol's identities as a



relational and healthy body-self. The importance of this for individual experiences and expectations of the aging process is highlighted by Barrett (2005). For her, such cultural norms about the appropriate roles of women and men may have implications for their age identities by signaling which stage of the life course they are associated with (youth, adulthood, old age, and so forth).

The images that Bill created also reflected existing narratives circulating within society concerning gender and aging. In this sense, the study contributes to our understanding of masculinity and older men – an area that Thompson (2006) describes as being “in its infancy” (p. 634). For example, the subjects that Bill chose to photograph in order to represent who he was (“this is me”) illustrated a number of Western hegemonic masculinity scripts being performed including the ‘body as machine’ metaphor (via healthy foods, nutritional supplements), and ‘the victor’ (via trophies). Thus, Bill’s successful performance of masculinity was seemingly achieved primarily in relation to his ability to portray physical prowess. This is important given Spector-Mersel’s (2006) assertion that “masculinities are bound to social clocks that ascribe different models of manhood to different periods in men’s lives” (p. 70). In other words, hegemonic masculinities are tied to specific phases of the life course, with those associated with the physicality of the body generally being restricted to youth. However, through his engagement with bodybuilding, Bill is seemingly able to maintain this narrative, or script into his seventies. Furthermore, it is maintained alongside other identities which may be less central to (youth) masculinities, namely, a relational body-self. Whilst this area needs further investigation, it is suffice to say that via auto-photography this study draws attention to the importance of masculinities in later life

and the ways in which older men may be capable of challenging hegemonic masculinities, but also be complicit (Connell, 1995) in supporting their ideals.

In addition to supporting and reinforcing existing narratives, a third lesson that has been learnt relates to the utilization of counter-narratives by Bill and Carol as they story their aging process. In describing how photographs might act as counter-narratives, Harrison (2004) explains that they can allow for the probability that what people themselves consider as important in their lives and social worlds, may be different to how others may have viewed them. In terms of the present study, the salience of a performing body-self to the participant's understanding of who they are might challenge the prevailing narrative of decline generally associated with aging within Western society (Eichberg, 2000). This grand narrative typically positions older people as weak and less able. Subsequently physical performance narratives concerning physical improvement and competition are not commonly associated with older adults. However, echoing the Master athletes in Dionigi and O'Flynn's (2007) study, physical performance – in all its guises (fitness, competing, body sculpting, dancing) is important to Bill and Carol in terms of how they experience their aging body over time. Moreover, especially in relation to Bill, the visual narrative associated with the identity of a performing body in older age might challenge the notion of diminished social worth that may be associated with the narrative of decline. Through his images depicting competitive success and sponsorship, a counter-narrative regarding older bodies as bearers of value is constructed. This supports and extends previous observations by Tulle (2007) regarding the ability of (elite) athletes to potentially challenge dominant discourses about the aging body. She noted that elite runners are able to do this by deliberately and reflexively reconstructing their aging bodies, along with the meanings

given to fluctuations in physical performance, thereby demonstrating some ability to control their aging identity through embodying themselves as *both* ageful and competent.

On the topic of counter-narratives, a fourth lesson learned from this project relates to the comments outlined earlier in this paper, that were made by friends, colleagues, family and students regarding the type of people that mature bodybuilders were generally assumed to be. Specifically, the study responds to the stereotypical assumptions regarding bodybuilders per se, that is, that they are often obsessive, unhealthy, unnatural, antisocial individuals who invest everything into this one domain at the expense of other identities. It does this by drawing attention to the multiplicity and multidimensionality relative to the participant's senses of self. For example, through the use of auto-photography health and relationships with others (in addition to performance) are shown as being central to the participant's sense of self. Moreover, the apparent diversity within their lives – which included belly dancing, whisky drinking, restaurant going, coastal walking, babysitting, house working – offers a powerful counter narrative relating to the potential diversity of bodybuilders lives. In other words, for some, and perhaps contrary to some popular belief, bodybuilding can be *just one aspect* of the mature bodybuilder's identity.

That said, perhaps a fifth lesson might respond to some further considerations (what some might see as limitations) regarding this study. Namely, by drawing in detail upon the experiences of two older adults who engage in competitive bodybuilding, I acknowledge that their experiences do not necessarily represent those held by the majority of older adults. Like many older adults involved in serious physical leisure (e.g. elite runners, masters athletes, etc.) what Bill and Carol *do* as they grow older is

unusual. Bodybuilding itself, across all ages is still a minority sport when compared to more traditional activities such as athletics, tennis, football, badminton, and so forth. Thus, to be a *mature* bodybuilder is unusual both within the field of competitive bodybuilding, and within the realm of aging bodies. However, my intention throughout this article is to be illuminative as opposed to definitive. I feel that much can be gained by embracing and illuminating the experiences of minority / marginalized groups if every voice is to be heard. In other words, if it is multiple and varied stories of aging experiences that we are interested in, then casting our net wide and incorporating a range of aging individuals seems sensible. After all, it is through generating alternative and additional insights into the process of growing older, that the stronghold of an inevitable decline narrative might loosen its grip.

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Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Due to space limitations, it is not possible to present the findings of the ‘This is not me’ part of the auto-photography task. Suffice to say that Bill and Carol demonstrated similarities in their choice of images, which included fast food outlets, junk food, book makers / betting shops, and casinos.

<sup>2</sup> The instructions on the information sheet were as follows:

*“This activity involves taking two different kinds of picture. For one kind of picture, I want you to describe yourself. To do this, I would like you to take 12 photographs that tell who you are. These photographs can be of anything, just as long as they reveal something about who you are. These pictures should say “This is me!” For the other kind of picture, I want you to describe who you are not. To do this, I would like you to take 12 more photographs. These photographs can be of anything as long as they say “This is not me!” Remember that you are the only one who can take these pictures, so you cannot take any pictures of yourself.*



FIGURE 1: Photographer: Bill



FIGURE 2: Photographer - Carol

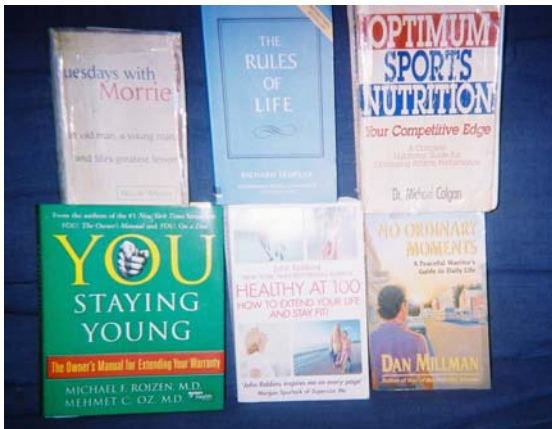


FIGURE 3: Photographer - Bill



FIGURE 4: Photographer: Bill



FIGURE 5: Photographer: Bill



FIGURE 6: Photographer: Carol



FIGURE 7: Photographer: Carol





FIGURE 8: Photographer - Carol



FIGURE 9: Photographer - Carol



FIGURE 10: Photographer - Bill



FIGURE 11: Photographer - Bill