



**“A breath of fresh air”:
Breathing stories of the lived experiences of asthma and sporting
embodiment**

Submitted by Helen Louise Owton, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sport & Health Sciences, October 2012.

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Helen Louise Owton

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to conduct an investigation of the *lived experiences* of asthma and sporting embodiment in non-elite sportspeople of different ages and levels of ability, involved in a range of sports. Asthma is characterised as a breathing disorder and the aim of this research is to add to embodied literature by providing ‘fleshy’ realities of the moving, sweating, sensuous sporting body, which holds meanings, purposes and interests for people who experience sport with asthma. Breathing is not only a physiological process, but it is also cultural and people may deal with their asthma symptoms in ways that reflect cultural attitudes embedded in sport. This qualitative study addresses five exploratory questions: 1) How do sportspeople experience asthma? 2) How do sportspeople negotiate their asthma and sporting identities? 3) How do emotional dimensions play a role in sportspeople’s asthma and sporting experiences? 4) How do perceptions of environment and illness shape one another by examining the relationship between the body, the self and environment? 5) What is the role of trauma in sportspeople with asthma? 6) How do key senses (sound) play a role in sportspeople’s asthma and embodied sporting experiences? Through a symbolic-interactionist and phenomenological-inspired approach, this research places emphasis on the mind-body-self nexus in relation to sensory experiences with a focus upon the centrality of the ‘visceral’ body in the relationship between self-consciousness and the self. A bodily disruption (e.g., asthmatic attack) is likely to heighten awareness of the body-self and contingency and may amplify how sportspeople listen to their own embodied selves when engaged in sporting action. Therefore, sportspeople may become even more acutely aware of, and attuned to, their breathing in ways that link the physiological, the psychological, the social *and* the environment. This may lead to a permanent re-ordering/negotiation of identities (e.g., athletic identity - asthma identity) through ‘emotion work’ and ‘somatic (auditory) work’ in which a concern with the body is central. The findings are represented as a typology consisting of Conformers, Contesters and Creators, which may be used as a framework to assist health care and sporting professionals in developing more appropriate and effective rehabilitation regimes for sportspeople, in order to improve the quality of treatment and outcomes.

Key words: lived experiences, bodily disruption, sensuous sporting body, asthma and sporting embodiment, somatic (auditory) work, identity, emotion work

Table of contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	2
<u>Abstract</u>	4
<u>Contents</u>	5
<u>List of Figures</u>	8
<u>List of Illustrations</u>	9
<u>List of Tables</u>	10
<u>1.0 Introduction</u>	11
1.1 Personal interest	11
1.2 Etymology of asthma	12
1.3 Rationale for the study	14
1.4 Research questions	15
1.5 Synopsis of thesis chapters	16
<u>2.0 Literature review</u>	20
2.1 Positivistic research	20
2.1.1 Anatomy, biology and physiology	20
2.1.2 Environment	27
2.1.3 Role of medicine and sport	31
2.1.4 Psychological factors	34
2.1.5 Summary of positivistic research	39
2.2 Sociological perspectives and qualitative research	40
2.2.1 Nervous diseases if civilisation	40
2.2.2 Symbolic interaction and managing identities	42
2.2.3 Managing asthma selves	48
2.3 'Alternative' approaches	50
2.3.1 Autobiographies and life histories	50
2.3.2 Biographical research	53
2.4 Summary	54
2.4.1 Previous research	54
2.4.2 Shaping the study	57
<u>3.0 Theoretical frameworks</u>	59
3.1 Shaping theoretical perspectives	59
3.2 Civilised bodies	60
3.3 Arthur Frank (1993, 1995)	61
3.3.1 Remission society	61
3.3.2 Four Body types	63
3.3.3 Basic Narrative types	65
3.3.4 Relationships	68
3.4 Taking a phenomenologically-inspired approach	69
3.4.1 The Absent body (Drew Leder, 1990)	70
3.4.2 Flow (Mihalyi Csíkszentmihályi, 1990)	72
3.4.3 Sensory dimensions	75
3.5 Summary of theoretical perspectives	76
<u>4.0 Methodology</u>	78
4.1 Paradigm discussions	78
4.2 'Friendship as method' approach	80
4.3 Methods of data collection	81
4.3.1 Diaries and photo elicitation	82
4.3.2 Interviews	83
4.3.3 Telephone Interviews	85
4.3.4 Interviewing process	87
4.4 Challenges and demands	89

4.5 Ethical procedures and implications	92
4.5.1 Ethics of care and loyalty	93
4.6 Researcher role and reflexivity	94
4.7 Issues of ‘Validity’	96
4.8 Data analysis	97
4.8.1 Interpretive Biographical Analysis (Denzin, 1989)	97
4.8.2 Narrative analysis procedure	99
4.9 Representation of data	102
4.9.1 Ideal types (Weber, 1904/1940)	102
4.9.2 Why poetry?	104
4.9.3 Judging poetic inquiry	105
4.9.4 Characterising ‘Artful Science’	107
4.9.5 Narrative art and integrating arts-based methods	108
4.9.6 Poetic analysis procedure	109
4.9.7 Narrative art procedure	111
4.10 Summarising thoughts	113
5.0 Getting to know participants	115
5.1 Sampling	115
5.1.1 Table of participants	116
5.2 Blurring boundaries	117
5.3 First encounters: Betty, Peter, Brian, Eve, and Joanne	117
5.4 Work colleagues: Lucy, Nick, Matt and Steven	125
5.5. Prior friendships – Olena, Molly and Ivor	131
5.6. Family relationships – Esta & ‘Granny’ Jane	139
5.7. Concluding thoughts	143
Analysis I: Ideal types and lingering embodiment	145
6.0 The Conformers	146
6.1 Narrative affinities	146
6.2 Mind-body self relations	150
6.3 Medico-scientific faith	155
6.4 Self-environmental associations	159
6.5 Sport and spatiality	162
6.6 Summary	163
7.0 The Contesters	166
7.1 Narrative affinities	166
7.2 Mind-body self relations	173
7.3 Medico-scientific faith	177
7.4 Self-environmental associations	180
7.5 Sport and spatiality	183
7.6 Summary	189
8.0 The Creators	191
8.1 Narrative affinities	191
8.2 Mind-body self relations	198
8.3 Medico-scientific faith	201
8.4 Self-environmental associations	207
8.5 Sport and new meanings	208
8.6 Summary	211
Shifting typologies	214
9.0 Analysis II: Sensory knowledge of asthma: the visceral and the aural	215
9.1 Breathing bodies	214
9.1.1 Bodily-felt experiences of breathing	214
9.1.2 Breathing attunement, flow and rhythm	216

9.1.3 Personal engagement and being in the zone	218
9.2 Coughing bodies	220
9.2.1 Bodily-felt experiences of coughing: gunge, fluid, sludge, and choking	221
9.2.2 Management and regulation: Coughing	223
9.3 Wheezing bodies	225
9.3.1 Bodily felt experiences of wheezing: tightness and restrictiveness	225
9.3.2 Management and wheezing regulation	227
9.4 Breathless bodies	229
9.4.1 Bodily-felt experiences: rattles, whistling, and silences	230
9.4.2 The danger zone: management and panic regulation	231
9.5 Concluding thoughts about sensory knowledge	232
9.6 Stigma	234
10.0 Breathing Stories	239
10.1 Integrating Arts-based methods	239
10.2 Fighting Asthma	240
10.3 It's the buzz	242
10.4 I'm healthier now	244
10.5 Transformational	247
10.6 I was raging about it	250
10.7 He'll Change you think	253
10.8 In and out of hospital	257
10.9 I'm going to beat it	260
10.10 A father's son: At the bus stop	262
10.11 It stays with you	263
11.0 Discussion and deliberations	265
11.1 Addressing research questions	265
11.1.1 How do sportspeople experience asthma?	265
11.1.2 How do sportspeople negotiate their asthma and sporting identities?	267
11.1.3 How do emotional dimensions play a role in sportspeople's asthma and sporting experiences?	270
11.1.4 How do perceptions of environment and illness shape one another by examining the relationship between the body, the self and environment?	274
11.1.5 What is the role of trauma in sportspeople with asthma?	277
11.1.6 How do key senses (audibility) play a role in sportspeople's asthma and embodied sporting experiences?	279
11.2 Participant reflections on narratives ('member checking')	282
11.3 Contributions to knowledge	283
11.3.1 Theoretical contribution	284
11.3.2 Methodological contribution	288
11.3.3 Implications for practice	292
11.4 Limitations and strengths of the study	294
11.5 PhD dissemination	296
11.6 Future directions and Reflective deliberations	297
Appendices	299
Glossary of terms	332
References	334

List of Figures

- Figure 2.1.1 Anatomical features of the respiratory system
- Figure 3.3.2 Frank's (1995) matrix of embodiment
- Figure 6.6 Matrix of Conformers' embodiment
- Figure 7.6 Matrix of Contesters' embodiment
- Figure 8.6 Matrix of Creators' embodiment
- Figure 9.0 Matrix of auditory asthma embodiment
- Figure 11.3.1 Matrix of understanding ideal types of asthma and sporting
embodiment
- Figure 11.3.1b A table characterising the different asthma body types

List of Illustrations

Illustration 10.0	The meaning of breathing
Illustration 10.2	Fighting asthma
Illustration 10.3	It's the buzz
Illustration 10.4	I'm healthier now
Illustration 10.5	Transformational
Illustration 10.6	I won't hold back
Illustration 10.8	Part of me is proud
Illustration 10.9	For me
Illustration 10.11	It stays with you

List of Tables

- Table 2.1 Four processes that incorporate respiration
- Table 3.4.1: A table describing Leder's (1990) body types
- Table 4.1. Philosophical assumptions underlying the different paradigms by Sparkes (1992)
- Table 4.3.2 The different characteristics of the different types of interviews based on Markula & Silk (2011)
- Table 4.9.4 Poetic criteria from Faulkner (2005).
- Table 5.1.1 Table of participants
- Table 11.3.4 A table outlining the recommendations for healthcare and sport Practitioners