

s b c

sport and body cultures
research group



Embodied Thoughts of the Month

Volume 2 (2016)



Embodied Thought of the Month

Our 'Embodied Thought of the Month' (ETM) is offered as a regular brief discussion point presented by members of the Sport and Body Cultures research group about topics that we feel are interesting, relevant, topical and important.

This volume contains all the ETMs posted on our webpages throughout 2016.

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About Sport and Body Cultures research group

The Sport and Body Cultures research group (SBC) is a forum for researchers with a shared interest in the socio-cultural aspects of movement and body cultures, particularly within the context of sport, physical activity and dance. Members of the group recognise the significance of applying embodied approaches to the study of movement cultures and embrace an inter-disciplinary perspective.

Although the majority of the group members sit within a broadly socio-cultural framework, the appeal of an embodied approach to the study of movement cultures is in its accommodation of a wider multi-disciplinary lens. Embodiment is considered a central theoretical approach which, as well as seeking to move beyond mind/body dualisms, incorporates the physiological with the social and psychological. This 'enfleshed' way of thinking informs the way that we explore and make sense of movement and body cultures. As such, the body occupies the central focus for our research because:

1. It informs and is informed by experience
2. These lived experiences are informed by a multitude of embodied sensitivities
3. It is dynamic and constantly changing at both the individual and social level

The aim of this research group is to provide a forum for discussion on all aspects related to embodied movement cultures within sport, physical activity and dance and to provide opportunities for these ideas to be shared with a wider audience through a range of academic and social media outlets.

January 2016

Club Running: A Shared Painful Pathway to Pleasure

John Day

Good Session?

JD: Yeah it was good, how was it for you?

[Starts laughing] I'm not sure! I suppose I enjoyed it... in a perverse sort of way [laughs again and runs off]

Once every week we meet at the track. A small group of amateur runners with a desire to improve their race times for distances ranging from 5 kilometres to 26.2 miles. When I first joined I was told “you’ll get more out of this than just going for a run on your own” and “it’s better to run on a track, there’s less chance of injury”. Halfway through my first ‘speed training’ session I was hooked. My heart was racing, my lungs were struggling to cope and a slouched posture was the closest I could get to standing upright. My muscles were probably still hurting just as much as when we had started the session but something meant I was unable to sense them. As my new friends jog past my upper body hunched over my knees, they grin. They enjoyed seeing me like this, it made me one of them.

Talking amongst ourselves during the ‘heavy’ part of the session is frowned upon, as is paying too much attention to GPS watches and other timing gadgets. “Your body will tell you if you’re trying hard enough, you don’t need a watch to confirm it for you” is a phrase the coach regularly shares with us, and is sometimes followed-up with “if you give me everything you’ve got it doesn’t matter what time you do it in, I’ll be happy and so should you!” Nevertheless, one of my fellow runners uses a heart rate monitor just to make sure. She is only content when the heart rate monitor sends a ‘high alert’ message to her watch. When her heart beats fast enough, she is happy.

After markedly improving my 5,000 metre times over the past 6 months I was approached by a competitor after a race, he had been following my progress and wanted to know more about my regular training schedule. I recommended the speed training sessions to him.

Around 10 days later I was jogging around the track as part of a recovery lap, he was doing his third 400 metre sprint, which had been preceded by two 200 metre sprints, one 100 metre sprint and 1600 metres at 'race pace'. As he came past me, dripping with sweat in the cold air and a furrowed expression on his face, he moaned "this is absolutely disgusting". In 20 minutes time we would be warming down together, and he extending his gratitude to me for suggesting that he attend.

Deprived of any social interaction by our coach during the main bulk of the workout, we warm down together and share the responses of our bodies to the training. Everyone is content and the pain we have battled and successfully surmounted is revered and celebrated. Shared experiences of pain, pleasure and suffering are recurrent findings in research associated with the continuous socialisation of becoming and being part of a running community (Tulle, 2007¹; Atkinson, 2008; Shipway *et al.*, 2013²). Shipway and Jones (2008) found physical proof of pain and suffering to represent a 'badge of honour' when completing a marathon. Based on my regular experiences of running club training, any physically distinctive evidence of extreme pain or suffering in the presence of team-mates is met with collective concern. As already alluded to, a central justification for participating is that the surface of the track reduces the likelihood of injury and the severity of any unnecessary pain as the body adapts to the training following the session. Along these lines, it might be suggested that there is something of a rational negotiation in the way that the body is conditioned. This is the intention to feel as much desirable pain as possible from running at and beyond 'race pace', while removing the chances of the unwelcome pain the legs are exposed to during the 'ground-pounding' of road-running.

The relationship between pain and pleasure in physical activity has often been described by scholars as 'peculiar,' as though there is an expectation that the two should be diametrically opposed. A likely explanation for this is that pain tends to be lumped alongside and attached to the study of injury. This approach might be useful for studying welfare issues of being a professional athlete, but the vast majority of us are not professional athletes and the most part of the lives of those who are will be lived as retired professional athletes.

If we remove the preoccupation with trying to iron out comparisons and contrasts between pain and injury, and reflect upon our bodily experiences of and continued attraction to participate in recreational sport, it would appear that something else is going on. When I

run there is a point at which the pain resides, I cannot sense anything apart from my heart and the sound of heavy breathing, my vision becomes narrow, more focused, I can only see what is directly in front of me. Sometimes the smooth rhythm of my motion and a straight piece of track means that I can close my eyes. I feel weightless and my mind is empty, at this point there is only pleasure. It is unclear whether humans can feel pain and pleasure simultaneously, but I encounter a painful pathway to pleasure when I train with my running club.

Notes

1. Tulle, E. (2007). Running to run: embodiment, structure and agency amongst veteran elite runners. *Sociology* 41: 329–346.
2. Shipway, R., Holloway, I. & Jones, I. (2013). Organisations, practices, actors, and events: exploring inside the distance running social world. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48: 259–276.

February 2016

Capturing Freerunning on Camera

Andy Day

This month's ETM comes from Andy Day who is an associate member of the SBC group and regularly visits Canterbury to present his experiences of buildering, climbing and Parkour to students on the Sporting Identities and Lifestyles module. Andy has recently completed his masters in Photography and Urban Cultures at Goldsmiths University and his work on the body's relationship with the built environment, wilful misuse of architecture, subversive practices, reappropriation of space and place, edgework and social interaction has been widely published.

My friend Ash, a professional freerunner, occasionally calls me up and asks me if I'd be interested in photographing one of his latest ideas. Typically, his ideas are unique, perhaps verging on what the average person might regard as a little unhinged. This one only seemed slightly outlandish, however: go to the top of a building in the middle of the night and, with the city below, photograph him climbing around some scaffold. Sounded fairly straightforward.

I met Ash and Pip (another professional athlete who was about to start filming as a Storm Trooper in the new Star Wars movie) at around 4am on a Sunday morning in November 2013. It was cold and damp and I'd not eaten any breakfast. Guy's Hospital, once the tallest hospital in the world, stands 142 metres high and was undergoing exterior refurbishment, possibly to make it look less shabby alongside its glamorous neighbour, The Shard. I assumed that we would be sneaking into the building, its security compromised by the construction work, and climbing the stairs; or perhaps scrambling up a series of ladders linking various scaffold platforms up the side of the building. Arriving early, I did a lap of the surrounding streets and became a little concerned. Upon meeting my friends, my fears were

confirmed: our route to the roof was a temporary elevator frame braced a few metres from the side of the building - 142 metres of vertical scaffolding.

I've been climbing for almost ten years. In terms of the individual movements, this would be a very easy climb, much like a ladder whose rungs are a slightly awkward distance apart with two out of every three being diagonal rather than horizontal. Although I didn't express any reservations to my friends, I knew that their adventure depended on my participation, and this little bit of social pressure and personal pride was enough for me to ignore my apprehension. I pushed it away, instead focusing on the slight nausea of having only had a few hours of sleep and too much coffee. Further help came through the immediacy of the physicality; I was able to switch off some of the rational, questioning part of my brain through the need to negotiate the fence that separated us from the building site followed by some dense scaffolding.

Before I could give it any further thought, we were 30 metres off the ground. Ash led the way, I followed, and Pip brought up the rear. I entered a rhythm, aided by the fact that, every 5 metres or so, horizontal bars braced the frame to the building itself allowing me to stand relatively comfortably, holding on only for balance. These braces were a godsend. It allowed nearly complete rest from the ascent, albeit with nothing but the cold night air below.

Ash steamed ahead. He's strong and apparently has no fear. He spends a lot of time at height, often climbing, hanging, balancing or jumping. He has long completed a process of desensitisation and normalisation that makes him indifferent to the dangers, just as we might be when driving a car along a busy street - arguably a much more dangerous activity. Some people would call him brave but bravery implies performance in spite of fear, whereas Ash simply is not afraid; not out of stupidity or arrogance, but out of repetition and habituation. We do not fear tripping when we run; Ash does not fear falling when he climbs.

Pip overtook me. I might be a relatively experienced climber but I'm not a professional athlete and, whilst I enjoy scaring myself at height on a semi-regular basis, this was something far more sustained. The implications of free-solo climbing are fairly simple: you begin climbing and the potential consequences become progressively worse. A sprained ankle quickly becomes, from farther up, a broken leg. Farther still, a shattered pelvis, perhaps also a broken back - and then death. And when you're climbing a rather cold, slightly damp, somewhat awkward ladder, this progression happens very quickly. Whether I fell from 20 metres or from 120 metres, the consequences would be the same: fatal. I have climbed many times with the risk of serious injury, and on a few occasions with the certainty of death in the event of a slip or broken handhold. What I had never done, however, was sustain this exposure for more than a matter of minutes. The ascent of Guy's Hospital took me almost three quarters of an hour.

The advantage of climbing at height over, say, jumping across a significant gap is that climbing offers you a physical engagement that enables a mental meditation. The continual movements - the very same ones that bring you into risk - gain you access to a peaceful state of mind that creates a bubble free of anxiety and consumed by pure, empty focus. The brain may chatter, but that chatter is far away and the body operates almost on auto-pilot, deploying a degree of confidence gained from countless hours of physical training. Committing to a jump across a gap, by contrast, means standing, staring, waiting, building up and then making a conscious effort to simply go. With climbing, the entry into a zone of serious consequence is gradual and sustained, with its resolution played out over the length of the ascent rather than instantly being resolved upon landing on the other side of a jump. Climbing into danger can almost be involuntary; often on a precarious climb I find that while my mind is still trying to make a decision as to whether my commitment is sensible, my body has already decided and suddenly I find myself pushing ahead.

The bubble - what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would call my flow state - is a sanctuary from the fear, despite existing *because* of the fear. If that bubble bursts, there are consequences.

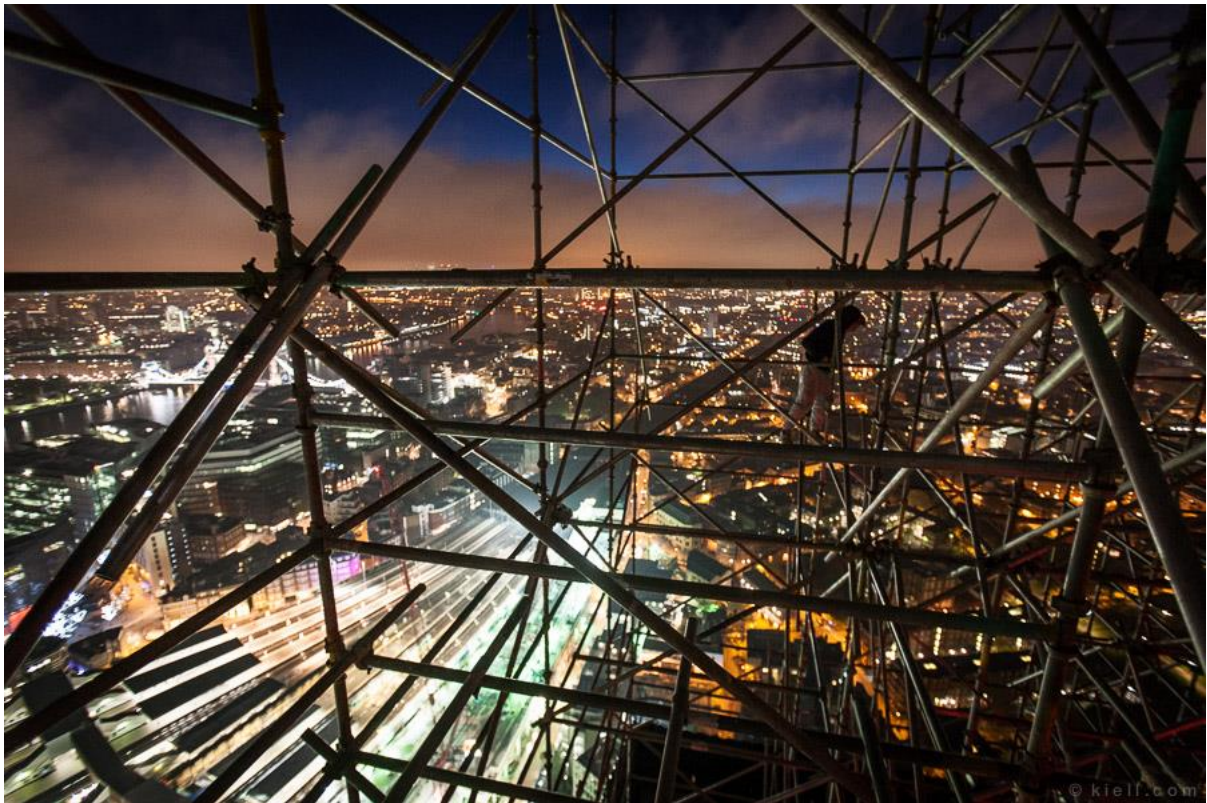
At around 100 metres I was climbing between my precious horizontal braces when my foot slipped. Parts of the scaffold frame were greasy from the rack and pinion system that allowed the mechanism of the elevator to move up and down. The slip was tiny - barely a few millimetres. At no point did I think I was going to fall. However, it was enough to rip away my bubble; suddenly the reality of my situation became overwhelmingly real. As my confidence evaporated, instinct took over and I made it to the next horizontal brace where my body stalled. Significantly.

The physical emergence of my fear has fascinated me ever since. As I stood, I became almost paralysed, feeling this bizarre, warm lethargy swim through my limbs. It lasted only a few seconds but left me bereft of all energy. I forced myself to sit on the horizontal brace as I knew I was becoming unsteady. My mind confronted the reality of my position, facing its seriousness and struggling to fight the strong sense of panic that now seemed to emanate from beneath my ribcage. Strange conversations played out in my head: what would it be like to simply let myself drop from here? If I stay here, how long until someone finds me? Should I wait to be found in the hope of a new solution emerging, or should I simply call the emergency services now before anything else can go wrong? I would be in the newspapers. The BBC might send a helicopter. What would my parents say? What would my parkour and climbing friends say? Resigned to my fate, I started working out the logistics of how I might be rescued.

It shames me a little to say this but, knowing I was safe if I simply sat where I was, it was not fear of dying that shoved me out of my spiral of resignation: it was fear of humiliation, not simply in the eyes of my peers, but of my own self. My own sense of who I am compelled me to find a way to continue.

To be able to force myself to carry on with the climb, I had to change my thought patterns and rediscover the bubble. I knew that one potential means of tricking my brain and switching off unwanted thoughts was to find a new way of recreating the meditative state

that allowed me to get this far. One such method was, in effect, chanting. From my seat 100 metres above the pavements of London, I sat simply repeating aloud the words: “It’s not that far; it’s gonna be ok.” After a few moments, almost involuntarily, I stood, still speaking the words, and continued my way up. Without me realising, the panic was gone.



Ash Holland on the roof of Guy’s Hospital. Photograph by Andy Day, 2013.

Our adventure on the vast, scaffold-covered rooftop is a story in itself, best saved for another time. After exploring, getting our photos, and desperately searching for an alternative route down (40 flights of stairs and an encounter with the police was a far more appealing prospect), we heard voices. Workmen were waking up and a swift exit became essential. We rushed to our scaffold tower and found, much to our relief and surprise, that climbing down was far easier than climbing up.

We scrambled out of the lower-level scaffolding and dropped down from the fence just as men in high visibility jackets were arriving through the nearby gate. We sat a short distance

for a good half an hour, staring up at the building and trying to process what we had just done. The next article will examine our experience on the roof, the photographs we created and their function, and our slightly delirious breakfast in a nearby McDonald's, and how I reflect, rebuild and renew that experience each time I look back on it.

References:

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

March 2016

'Dirty Sport': Experiencing my first OCR.

Amy Clark

'When I say 'nuts' you say challenge! Nuts ... CHALLENGE! Nuts CHALLENGE!!' I'm double checking all my neoprene gear is secured and covering my cold, naked flesh. I'm adjusting my gloves to make sure they cover my bony wrists. Head warmer on correctly? Check! Laces tightly secured? Check! *(Oh god I hope I'm not all the gear with no idea!)* I had been to training day the previous year – but this was nothing like I had ever done before! Looking around and making eye contact with people, looks of anticipation were frequently shared. I had been volunteering throughout the morning and had heard that many had had to stop the course as they had come down with hypothermia, we could also hear the hail and snow bouncing off the tent roof throughout the morning. My cousin, a frequent obstacle course race (OCR) goer, mentioned she was worried this may be the first one she doesn't complete ... *(shit I hope I'm going to get through this ok, what the fuck am I doing here?!)*

'WE ARE ALL HERE TODAY TO HAVE FUN , shouts the announcer, ARE YOU READY TO COUNT DOWN WITH ME! 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 1 GO GO GOOO!!!'

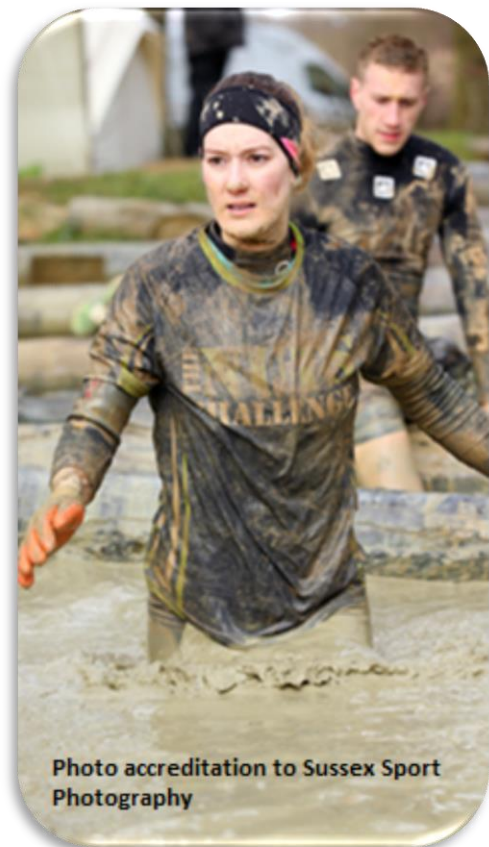
There's no turning back now. I cross the starting line and begin my 7km OCR with over one hundred obstacles. This is my first time doing a race like this. It's cold, wet and muddy and there's no way my body is going to survive this without a few bruises and cuts. Luckily I'm not running on my own, my cousin is with me and her friend is also with us. He has competed in many events before too so I feel that I'm in safe hands! I also reassure myself that I am very active and in the in the build up to the race, I've done a few spin classes, had some cake and enjoyed my yoga sessions. However, there are doubts about how my body cope with this one!

After a brisk but not so unpleasant muddy run along a straw field, my body is pulsating. I can feel the warm movement of my blood engorging through my head and chest. A few slippery obstacles later, we have to do a little cross along a muddy and freezing river and as I enter the water I take a deep breath in. The shock of the swirly muddy water filling my trail trainers isn't as harsh as I initially expected. The water comes up to my waist (*'ok, this one is good, I can do this'*) and I carry on through the river until I accidentally trip and fall into the

icy liquid (*'ahh shit! Shit! I knew I was going to stack it in this bloody freezing water 10 minutes in!*'). I can see the Marshall is chuckling to himself as I drag my body out of the river. Letting out an agonising breath of air, I continue running towards the next obstacle (*'shittttt I can't believe I did that!'*) relieved that I was saved just in time so my head wasn't submerged. This is all much to my cousin and her friend's amusement, and as they chuckle, they tell me to keep on moving and to try and keep my body warm. I'm annoyed, I continue on whilst swearing to myself, shaking off the cold muddy water in the process (*'I'm bloody glad I've got neoprene on'*). I remember reading about intense embodiment¹, although in that case it was about experiences of overwhelming heat whilst running. However, the intensity of the coldness flooding my body in this situation can be considered as a similar 'intense embodied experience', but contrasted in much colder conditions.

Throughout the 7km course, we drag ourselves through muddy lakes, climb up hills with sand bags and tyres, slide down hills, blaze through tunnels and launch ourselves over wooden obstacles. The three of us help each other over obstacles and encourage each other the whole way – on many occasions the mud is so thick and gluggy that it becomes ankle deep. *'How the hell are guys running in this!!'* another woman cries out! *'Expensive shoes'* my cousin shouts, as we continue to watch our step as we see more victims slip and slide in the mud. All the while, my thighs are burning and my breathing is heavy.

'WE ARE AT 5k!' my cousin shouts. *Come on we can do this!* She had messaged me the day before and had said that any time under two hours for this particular race was seen as pretty good within the OCR world. I replied 'game on' and even though this was my first OCR, my competitive side had emerged and I wanted to do this in the 2 hours. The last 1k was the hardest part as we had to run across wobbly platforms over a lake, cross another lake over numerous dinghies. Pulling my dead weight of a body across while letting out signs



of pain at every movement, I could see my cousin one dingy ahead of me and my friend on the other side of the dingy trail, ploughing his way through. The thought of falling off into the 3 degree lake was excruciating and even though I was tiring, I remained focused. Luckily my friend helped me out of the last dingy. Grabbing his hand, absolutely shattered, I thanked him and we continued onto the last part of the race.

'COME ON CLARK, THE FINISH LINE IS JUST THERE!!'

We had two more obstacles to cross. These consisted of bales of hay and straw and metal ladders that had been soaked by the previous runners which meant that there was hardly anything to grab onto. Helping each other over, my legs throbbing in pain, we finally ran towards the finish line. *'Come on, running finish Clark!'* my cousin slaps me on the back and the three of us race to the finish line. There we are congratulated and welcomed by more Marshalls. A hard green medal is placed around my neck, I am thrilled and let out a huge sigh of relief. A Marshall who I had been chatting to at the beginning of the race notices me, *'AH WELL DONE! How was it?! Amazing! Well done!'* I nod back, barely being able to breathe a response. *'I think we did it in under two hours!'* I add, swiftly grabbing a hot black current drink with my mud packed gloves. The Marshalls clapped and congratulated us again and I realise that I am starting to shake and feel the cold even though adrenaline fills my veins. At that stage I was buzzing and felt like I was filled with electricity. I sip the hot drink, nearly missing my mouth because of my shaking, and the feeling of the hot water passing through my chest is welcoming with its warmth. We retreat to the changing room tents.

When we finally enter into the female changing rooms, I am aware of feeling less inhibited in the way that I usually do at my gym². My priority was to get out of my cold wet clothes, but the changing area was distinctly different in that although the tent was heated the floor was covered with mud (*where's the clean space?!).*

The tent was filled with shaking bodies, teeth chatters and groans. I looked around, trying to find a place to drop my stuff on the floor, cringing when I had to put my clean bag on the muddy surface. We started to undress, layer by layer, puffing and groaning whilst ripping the

soaking wet neoprene and other polyester layers off our skin. I realised at the time that I was near the opening of the tent. It wasn't private here, anyone could see in. I had joked around before on the journey to the OCR about my boobs popping out at some point, but I realised that after the race, I was too fatigued, too drained and too cold to even care if someone saw part of my naked body.

Standing in only my knickers, with only a t-shirt and no bra on underneath, I felt no shame³. Women were topless, half-naked, fully naked although it seemed like the atmosphere after finishing the gruelling race made everyone share the same spirit and intimacy. It was an acceptable environment to display the body after the hard grafting of pursuing the race.

Women were undressing accompanied by grimaces. I tried to preserve some of my modesty while my cousin held a towel around my lower half and managed to change into fresh clothing. At that stage I really didn't care who saw my naked body, even those who could see inside from the entrance. I ended up saying to my cousin that I didn't care if anyone saw me in my knickers, I just needed to get changed and warm. During my glances around the tent, I caught eye contact with a few fellow 'nutters'. We didn't have to say anything as our shared pain and exhilaration was understood in that moment of non-verbal communication.

To my surprise, out of the 668 people that managed to finish the race (roughly 3000 people had initially started), I finished the race in 1:46:42, came 2nd in my age category, and was 20th out of 323 women, and 91st out of the 668 overall. Not bad for a first timer! I had initially doubted my ability, and found my final placing an unexpected surprise.

During the journey home, the three of us chatted about the race and remembered how we had been initially worried about the weather and were thankful that wearing the right gear had helped immensely with our performance (*'I definitely wasn't all the gear no idea- yes!'*). Returning to the sanctuary of my clean house, I headed straight to the shower and relished every second under the hot water, letting out satisfying moans like the woman in the shampoo add on TV. Every bruise and cut on my arms and legs became prominent, as I washed my sore legs the mud that covered them dispersed into the water down the plug hole. I smiled to myself as I thought about the past day's events. I sent a message to my cousin the following day with a picture of my bruised legs – a symbol of my battle scars. Feeling on a natural high for days after, I'm now already considering my next one. In the summer this time - although I still must be nuts!

1. Allen-Collinson, J., and Owton, H. (2014) Intense Embodiment: senses of heat in women's running and boxing, *Body and Society*, p, 1-24.
2. Sassatelli suggests that certain body practices, such as undressing and direct body care, are usually powerful signs of a private situation, and are exclusively and rigidly confined to the changing rooms - Sassatelli, R. (1999) 'Fitness Gyms and the Local Organisation of Experience', *Sociological Research Online*, 4(3), p. 1-21.
3. Dolezal describes how shame is an individual and necessary body experience, resulting from intersubjective relations, and is always contained in a nexus of political and socio-cultural norms. It also reveals our most personal parts - our hopes and aspirations - Dolezal, L. (2015) *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books.

April 2016

Metamorphosis (into a CrossFit creature)

Ian Wellard

In September 2015, I started a six month programme of training. The main motivation was so that I could chart my embodied experiences taking part in an intensive period of physical training and also explore first hand more about CrossFit. Throughout this time, I maintained a research diary and posted many of my thoughts about my experiences on a blog (1). The following is a recent post I wrote in February which marked the end of the six month programme.

September 2015



February 2016



Metamorphosis is a great word. It was a word that came into my head yesterday when I had an email from CrossFit.com telling me that I had successfully passed my level 1 CrossFit trainer course. The news coincided with the completion of my six month period of training and made me take stock of my relatively short CrossFit journey. It is now approaching the end of February and I am on a rest week prior to the announcement of the qualifying events for the 2016 CrossFit Games which start tomorrow. This means that I have now achieved what I set out to do when I first started in September last year. At that time, I was hoping to

complete (or get through) the training programme and register for the Games. I hadn't really thought too much about transformations, but it is only now that I realise how much I have metamorphosed into some form of Crossfit creature.

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2) the central character, Gregor, turns into an unidentified insect-like creature that he finds repellent and so too do the people he comes into contact with. Hopefully, that is not what has happened in my case (I don't really find the CrossFit creature that I have become that repellent, in fact there are quite a few aspects of it that I do like). I'm using the analogy with metamorphosis in terms of the notion of transformation and rather than this being a process that just happens there is much more input by the individual through learning, experience and 'performance'. So, in the case of my initial intentions to undergo a period of CrossFit training so that I could be exposed to a range of embodied experiences, this process has revealed far more about questions of identity and performance than I had initially expected. I hadn't at that time been completely aware of the many other 'requirements' of becoming a CrossFit athlete. Although, in my first post, I had outlined some of my reservations about what CrossFit represented and whether I would be able to fit in, these were concerned more with my own perceptions of my ability. However, it is interesting to reflect, now that I have completed the six months, how other boxes have been ticked along the way – boxes which appear to present a checklist for what a CrossFit participant should tick off (and, indeed, look like).

Suffer numerous injuries	✓
Attend a CrossFit box	✓
Buy lots of CrossFit gear	✓
Take part in the CrossFit Games	✓
Take level 1 CrossFit trainer course	✓
Get tattoos	✓ (?)
(for males) grow beard	✓ (?)

While my original goal was to complete the whole period of six months training, in addition I have now registered for the CrossFit games and last weekend I attended a level 1 training course which means now, according to the email that I received, I am a level 1 CrossFit coach. Although this is not necessarily very remarkable it is interesting on many other levels, especially when I think that this time last year I wasn't really completely sure about what CrossFit was. Now, according to this certificate, I have become legitimate within the world of CrossFit. Thinking about it from this perspective makes me realise that there has been a transformation of some kind and although I do like the idea that I've biologically turned into some other form of creature in the way that Kafka describes, it is nevertheless interesting to think about transformation in terms of the social and temporal aspects. I'm using the Kafka analogy purposefully because it is dramatic but also to demonstrate the seemingly bizarre aspects of social and individual constructions of identity. Negotiating and manoeuvring through my relationship with a CrossFit identity has ended up preoccupying me throughout the past six months much more than my initial fears about my physical capabilities and my capacity to cope with the physical demands of the activities.

So, now that I have had this new identity bestowed upon me, rather than feeling like Gregor in Metamorphosis maybe I should really feel like the scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. When he received his certificate from the wizard it provided 'proof' to the world that he was intelligent and he subsequently 'became' intelligent. That might apply to the scarecrow, but in my case I am not so convinced about my CrossFit credentials on the basis of my certificate. I still have so many causes for doubt and maybe there are a couple of significant ones remaining.....



Notes

1. lanembodiedresearch.blogspot.com
2. Kafka, F. (2007) *Metamorphosis*, London: Penguin Modern Classics

May 2016

“Use your attributes”: Reflections of my black body in PE and sport

Nyall Simms (with James Brighton)

In setting the scene for our July special edition that will comprise of a number of reflections from current undergraduate students, this month’s ETM is offered by one of our Alumni, Nyall Simms. During his time at CCCU Nyall learned to be critical of the way that his black body has been received in professional sporting cultures that he was part of before starting his degree in Sports Science. During his dissertation, he played with alternative forms of representing these realities. What follows this month are three ‘vignettes’ from his embodied autoethnography.

PE and the evolvment of an elite sporting body

Attending a school in South London, the background of pupils was pretty multicultural. Physical Education was always my favourite subject. I knew from a young age that I was physically capable and it was the only subject I felt teachers tried to highlight my strengths, rather than in other subjects where my academic weaknesses were identified. I was often singled out by teachers to come and give demonstrations on physical skills to other pupils in the class and this built my confidence and gave me a sense of belonging. I therefore figured, and perhaps others presumed, that I would always have a career in sport. This is not to say that I did not have an interest in other subjects, it’s just that I was never really made aware of great black doctors, politicians or scientists to aspire to. Rather, I was bombarded with similes from iconic black athletes such as Ian Wright, Michael Jordan, and Michael Johnson. Indeed, in broader culture “black male heroes” are typically athletes (Evans, 2001). Lacking a “repertoire of cultural narratives” upon which to draw upon (Sparkes, 2004: 398) other than those in sport, I felt that developing my physicality was the *only* way to achieve success and respect. Subsequently, I concentrated all my efforts at being the best footballer, the best athlete and the best gymnast at my school. Furthermore, as my athletic identity developed, I found myself becoming ruthlessly competitive in achieving these goals and protecting my position as ‘top jock’. Although the development of a “high performance athletic narrative” (Douglas and Carless, 2009) in my latter school years provided direction and a sense of

empowerment, it also made me feel that the only way I would ever be celebrated was through my sporting achievement. The idea of doing anything outside of sport diminished.

The end of the beginning

I knew I was leaving. I had completed a two year apprenticeship at a professional football club in London and I knew that there was no route for me into the first team. In spite of my attempts to hide it, I was also worried that my body was giving away my growing disillusionment with football. When I first arrived at the academy at age 16 I was quietly confident, assured, as well as relaxed and passionate about the sport. Now, I feel my shoulders slumped a little and my head drooped down. I wasn't running as fast, jumping as high or tackling as hard. It's not that I couldn't, it's just that I felt the my performances were under constant scrutiny and this weighed on me, running through my limbs. This feeling was compounded further as I knew that in the eyes of the coaches, it was my physical attributes that were going to get me into the team. "Use your pace Nyall!" they would constantly say, "Make the most of the attributes you have been *given*" they would shout, and often would (perhaps symbolically) add "Use those glutes and shoulders of yours to smash them!" I sought advice from others about how to deal with these pressures and how to respond to an over concentration on my physicality over my technical or tactical awareness - but little support was available. I felt that I was on my own and needed to figure out what to do with my sporting career myself.

Born to perform

As I walked to the player's entrance I met my new team's manager. There he stood at the entrance, cigarette in hand. When he realised it was me he flicked it away and, with a huge grin, extended his hand out to me. "Hello mate! How you doing?" he said as he took my hand in his vice like grip. I replied and gave an apology for my tardiness. "Nah it's alright mate, you're from London! It's rough living down there and the traffic is a nightmare!" Laughing nervously he squeezed my shoulders and pushed me along towards the changing room. I got the feeling he was sizing me up to see if I could physically do the job. When I got

inside, I was introduced to my new teammates. All of the players were white, the majority of them late 20's or early and 30's, and only being semi-professional did not look as fit as other players I was used to being around. I was only nineteen but I had been 'gifted' with a mesomorphic physique and had been working hard in the gym for 5 years now. I was looking and feeling strong. I could tell by the looks from my team mates faces as I was getting changed that they were taken aback by my physique. Furthermore, coming in from an academy my arrival was greeted with an element of prestige. "I have to perform today" I said to myself...ummm...where I have I heard that before? The idea was to help out this team, score lots of goals and get my career back on track again. The typical manager's team talk began with him bellowing instructions to everyone. Without ever seeing me play or showcase my skill, he told the team to play the ball behind the defence so we could use my speed to get in behind the opposition. "Failing that" he said, "Just play the ball directly into Nyall so he can use his strength to hold the ball up and we can dictate the movement up top around him". In this 'game' I began to realise that you have to play the role that is expected in order to further your career. That's just football. Whilst in the tunnel, just before kick-off, a teammate gave me a smack on my bum and wished me luck. Another of my new teammates whispered in my ear; "These guys are a bit naughty, don't lose your temper yeah lad?" I wondered if he thought I was predisposed to being volatile or dysfunctional for some reason. With those thoughts racing through my mind I ran out onto the pitch for what ended up to be for the last time.

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June 2016

Early experiences of sport in family settings: when gender can be less of a 'problem'

Sasha Pay & John Day

This month's ETM draws upon a pilot life history interview with Sasha Pay (a CCCU Sport Science & PE graduate) that John conducted for his PhD study. The following is Sasha's summary of this interview and presents her own life story of physical activity involvement and family membership from her perspective.

Family, as a primary group of socialisation (Ferrarotti, 1981), is simultaneously the most important factor of individual well-being (Layard, 2011) and an institution often blamed for a society's failings within political rhetoric (Chambers, 2012). We know relatively little about the intricacies of family socialisation into physical activities, as the majority of studies are quantitative, while qualitative studies tend to be framed by methodologies that offer much to leisure and household studies, but little to our understanding of the intimacies that characterise family relationships and membership (Day, *in press*)

My enthusiasm and passion for physical activity stems from my Dad and Brother, who encouraged me to participate in sports with them at weekends. One of my earliest and fondest memories was playing tennis at the local park. My Dad always encouraged my Brother and I during the weekly games of tennis and made the game exciting and innovative. My Dad's encouragement and praise was persistent, even when my body felt deflated and tired on a hot summer's day. His enthusiasm for my participation and performance was reinforced when a tennis coach approached my Brother and I and asked us to join his club. This was the first time, as a young female, I felt physically competent and confident that my body could perform equally to my Brother who was older, taller and more muscular.

Participating in a range of sports with my Dad and Brother provided a platform for me to explore new sports and compete for clubs without them. I believed my body was capable of

meeting greater physical challenges than I had experienced with my Dad and Brother. My Brother had already started playing for a football team and seemed to enjoy it, although he also encountered numerous injuries that sometimes limited his involvement. In hindsight, it might have been awareness of the experiences of my brother that made me curious to test the psychological and physiological limits my own sporting body could endure.

Upon reflection, it is interesting to note that the handful of sports which I did try were indicative of my early socialisation into sport with my Dad and Brother. Firstly, I trialled for a football team aged nine but I did not pursue this sport because my experiences of the sport were not congruent with those enjoyed by my Brother. I remember some of the players being apologetic during training if we collided unintentionally and players were more concerned about who was wearing the best pair of football boots. This was in stark contrast to my Brother's socialisation into football which entailed physical contact, top performances and withstanding injuries. However, if my family had not introduced me to football and relayed their experiences of sport participation, I might not have set out to gain similar experiences myself.

I briefly engaged with other sports, including trampolining and dance, but, at the age of ten, I opted to settle for athletics. I decided to continue with this sport as I was interested in training for both individual sprinting events and the group relay. I would also say that my regular positive experiences encountered with my family produced my determination to seek further enjoyment in a sport that I could claim as my own. It would appear that my Dad did not reproduce the dominant idea that women are less physically capable than men within sport and he always provided comparable levels of encouragement and support to my Brother and myself. It remains evident to this day that I have reinforced and acted out my Dad's beliefs through the way I engage with sport.

Athletics was at the crux of my early socialisation experiences within sport, which really shaped my perception of sporting competition and bodily representations. I trained alongside a group of girls, who had already formed something of a clique, making it challenging to fit-in to the group. Despite being only ten at the time, it was evident, through their flirtatious behaviour that these teenage girls were out to impress the male coaches. At the end of an exhausting interval session at the athletics track, some of the girls would lay on the floor, panting, waiting for our coach to crouch on the floor next to them, asking how

they were feeling. It was at this point I realised that the enjoyment of sport for some teenage girls was far removed from the type of enjoyment I had gained from competing with my family. For them, there was a greater emphasis placed upon being considered attractive and desirable rather than enjoyment gained through participation in the game itself. Nevertheless, despite my initial bemusement at watching these teenage girls attempt to please the male coaches, I still thoroughly enjoyed training, albeit in a different way, and having a new set of friends.

My involvement in the sport progressed steadily throughout my teenage years until there was another turning point in my sporting socialisation. This occurred when my coach told me I was good enough to compete. There was an A team and a B team that represented the athletics club in competitions. As one would expect, the athletes in the A team were generally faster, although it seemed that the male coaches' also saw the girls in the A team as funnier and more popular. I noted a shift in the way some of the girls behaved towards me, particularly those who always made it into the A team. There was no longer a meaningful balance between hard work and enjoyment in training, it became feisty and overly competitive. In hindsight, this was my first experience of 'serious' competition in sport, which was different to playing with my family. Despite the tense and unpleasant atmosphere that was created in training sessions, I still loved athletics, especially overcoming mental constraints to push my body to run faster. My early socialisation experiences with my Dad and Brother seemed to have protected me from and prepared me for the hegemonic heteronormativity of competitive sport. While I embraced the activity, many of the girls I competed against to gain entry into the A Team appeared to conform to the heteronormative codes by presenting and moving their bodies in a way that would impress the gaze of the male coaches. It seemed to me that were attempting to impress the male coaches with their perceived sexual capital as much as their running ability. My early sporting experiences meant that I found this behaviour strange and foreign, as I had played sport from an early age in the presence of two men, flaunting the body in a (heteronormative) sexualised way was not something I was familiar with.

One summer, I was honoured to be selected in the B Team for the county relay race. The usual four girls, that I had now nicknamed the 'Dream Team', were chosen for the A team. For competitions during the summer months it is common to wear Lycra in addition to the

traditional club vests. The Dream Team had purchased their own tight-fitting Lycra crop tops that had the club's colours and name on. During the preparation and warm-up for the relays, the gap between the A and B team became more apparent. The Dream Team wanted to show off their slender figures to the whole county while we were left standing next to them in our old baggy club vests.

The socialisation of my feminine physical self through playing sport and being active from a young age with my Dad and Brother has been a significant influence upon the values of enjoyment and hard work that I associate with physical activity. There have been times where I thought my body was not good enough and felt insecure, however, my Dad's belief in women's physical competence continues to inspire me to fulfil any sporting challenges that come my way. Although it would seem that my perception of female participation in competitive sport is an exception rather than the rule, it is noteworthy that this is a consequence of a childhood spent being physically active with family members and where gender was not considered a 'problem'.

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July 2016

“This is a Man’s Game”

Fraser Grimes

*Pulling my socks higher as well as jumping up and down trying to stay warm, I waited in line in a rugby drill with about 5 others behind me, all shivering as it bucketed it down with rain. The frequent murmurs “this is pointless” and “I hate rugby” were ever present, until, Tom, the alpha male of the PE class, moved to the back after literally obliterating a pupil holding a crash pad; followed by the teacher applauding “superb”. The murmurs were extinguished; it was now my turn. As I prepped myself ready to tackle a classmate holding a crash pad, which was of course, the outcome of the lesson, everyone’s attention shifted towards Tom at the back who stated “Any of you f***** girls that don’t tackle that p**** will get destroyed by me, you won’t want that, this is a man’s game”. What followed was sheer panic, this was no longer an ordinary drill - my reputation was on the line. I felt as if I had no choice but to conform to the cultural norms of Tom and his peers, as consequentially, I knew I would be branded a “p*****”, ‘girl or ‘gay’ and have my school life tarnished. I was not brave enough to even attempt resisting. Instead of routinely tackling the crash pad looking for correct technique, I tensed all of my muscles, sprinted as fast as I could and smashed into the crash pad; simultaneously hearing the holder get winded when thudding to the floor. “Excellent Fraser, superb!” applauded the teacher, followed by boisterous cheers and pats on the back by Tom and the other popular boys... another Wednesday morning.*

While I would prefer to be reminiscing about fun and engaging PE lessons, in what seems an eternity ago, my experience of PE was consumed by a ‘disease’ rife within sport and the very subject itself. This so-called disease, was boys embodying a specific masculinity, granting them a hierarchical status within every single PE lesson I can recall. After reading many of Connell’s literature, the sociological theory hegemonic masculinity could not be more applicable in terms of my schooldays in PE. Briefly, hegemonic masculinity, defined by Connell (2005), is “The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). While

the original definition indicates that girls, or women in fact, are oppressed within PE and sport, a huge misconception, particularly in my case, was that other *boys* and myself were, too, oppressed. My embodied experience, as a boy during PE, as well as men's stories about the intricate, delicate maze of masculinities, are growing. The small and overlooked paradigm of boys, men and masculinity is becoming more prevalent in today's society, and rightly so, especially with embodied accounts which encapsulate, rich evocative accounts of meaningful experiences.

A vast majority of my PE lessons consisted of sports, in particular traditional sports such as: football, rugby, hockey, basketball with athletics in the summer. These were sports and activities I loved, watched and followed (and still do) and were activities I should have looked forward to. However, within these sports during my PE lessons, I always remembered a group of boys who were privileged, accepted and ruled proceedings. They embodied specific masculinities that were accepted, and I always had one eye on one of the popular boys in case he saw me interact with a 'loser'. Imprisoned is a fitting adjective to describe my PE lessons. 'He's watching me, I can't miss this basket' to extra-curricular lessons with brutal team talks such as 'Hit em hard, if he skins ya he'll destroy you all game, let him know you're there early'. I never had a moment where I could be free, express myself, or simply have fun. Those who embodied or displayed alternative masculinities, were branded discriminative terms, bullied and excluded.

Alarmingly, my old PE teacher allowed these 'accepted' boys to quite literally, take over lessons and stamp their dominant masculinities into every lesson; equating to nerve-racking and potential reputation sabotaging experiences for others, including myself.

Heteronormativity, aggression, violence, strength, athleticism, power and stoicism among others, were traits that, if I embodied and displayed, would have granted me acceptance and I would have also been privileged by my classmates. Vividly remembering the more cliché behaviours of these boys, ranged from: pushing 'weaker' boys into the showers, throwing shoes into bins, bullying those without Nike or Adidas boots to more severe behaviours, such as myself feeling 'forced' out of fear, to intentionally physically harm a weaker classmate. Was I a bully? I certainly felt sick to my stomach and as less masculine as I have ever felt, after reducing a classmate to tears, but, if I had shown this forgiveness, like each tear cascading down his face, I too, would have certainly been put in his category.

There was simply no chance, none, of displaying any other kind of masculinity, others who did were, again, bullied, forgotten or perceived as homosexual.

Within my lessons, there was a homohysterical culture which is almost predictable with sport being an arena for men, specifically celebrating dominant, hyper-masculinities (Hickey, 2008); rejecting anything alternative. Tom and his friends, within PE lessons, embedded traits within the social-cultural norms of PE and sport, and were accepted and privileged for it. The boy who held the crash pad was perceived as homosexual as he did not conform to the requirements of the masculinity Tom and his peers embodied, along with others who had non-muscular body shapes, not interested in sports, were naturally weaker, less athletic and had had larger body shapes, and were marginalised accordingly. After I crashed into him, winding and making him cry, as a result of utilising my strength, aggression and as it hurt, stoicism, I conformed to the socially constructed accepted sporting masculinity. I gained power and was among the pantheon of pupils who then had power over others, who did not conform and display the same masculinity.

Despite the inclusive, positive news in terms of emerging literature highlighting a gradual shift away from such acts, it is safe to say, I wish I was a pupil now, instead of ages ago in an unforgiving arena of mass consequences.

Acknowledging the socio-cultural norms of certain dominant masculinities entwined within PE will hopefully be fruitful when I embark on my next journey as a PE teacher, with training next year. One thing I am certainly worried about though, and will do everything I can to resist, is that I, like my old PE teacher who saw me flattening a pupil as 'Superb!', will become socialised into repeating and reinforcing such behaviours, which have damaging ripple effects onto pupils.

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August 2016

Finding a sporting self between two cultures

Biba Chuta

I was always told that PE and Sport were not important and that they were just leisure time activities. Throughout primary school, almost winning nearly every race on sports days, I knew that I was good, but could never fully immerse myself into it. It was only at secondary school that my PE teachers recognised I had a talent and encouraged me to join the local athletics club. However, this did not go down well with my parents and they refused to take me or be part of my sporting experience. From their view, it was unattractive and stupid for a girl to play sports. So I had to make my own way to training or share lifts with friends and their parents would take us.

Growing up with a brother was difficult. Because he was a boy my parents would go on a Saturday morning to watch him play rugby at his club. Although I had progressed further and was competing at a regional level, they never watched any of my races. Every time after a big race I would just think, 'I wish my parents were here now to have watched me win.' I wanted so badly to make them proud and I craved for their approval. I would think, 'why am I even good at sports? Why couldn't it be something like maths? Maybe, then, they would have time for me.'

Growing up through my adolescent years in a Bangladeshi Muslim family within a Western culture was a very difficult time for me. There was a lot of confusion between the two different cultures as I often felt stuck in the middle of their different morals and values. During this period of my life I was figuring out what kind of person I was and what principles mattered to me the most. Therefore, having opposing ideals drilled into me from my family home and school initiated this clash of cultures. Personally, I found that the cultural views I was exposed to at home appeared to suppress women whereas the values promoted at school embraced female empowerment. Negotiating these conflicting ideologies, I often found myself battling for the right or wrong answer in order to understand the world around me.

During my early years in secondary school, because of my parent's religious beliefs, I had to wear tracksuit bottoms for PE. Islam requires women to be covered and hide their body so the outline of their figures may not be seen. The main reason for covering is modesty, which is not wishing to receive unnecessary attention from others. Being covered up is supposed to keep the sexual appetites of passing men at bay when women travel outside of the house (Ahmad, 1996). At the time I did not really think of men in a sexual way so this concept of covering up confused me as I never fully understood why I had to do it. However, it was a religious custom that I adhered to for the sake of my parent's religious beliefs and did not argue or question it.

I was the only non-white pupil in my class which immediately made me feel different to everyone else. All the other girls wore PE skirts which made me feel incredibly left out so I ended up buying one behind my parents back and wore it in PE lessons. In this particular situation I tried to adapt myself to fit in with the social norms of my PE class. Foucault (1990) would say that we engage in this body work because of the broader social norms shaped by discourses of knowledge. I altered my behaviour and bought a skirt to conform to the dominant discourse presented by western society. I felt as if my behaviour was under surveillance by the other girls in my class so tried to correct myself and internalise what I perceived as the normal behaviour at that time.

Goffman (1959) describes this notion as dramaturgical sociology. He states that "the expressiveness of the individual appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that (s)he gives, and the expression that (s)he gives off" (1959: 17). The self is a product of social interactions. We are who we are by how we engage and express ourselves with others. Goffman explains this concept by describing a 'front stage' which is visible to the audience i.e. how we would present ourselves and how we want to look in front of others, and 'back stage', which is hidden from the public and describes how we are when not in front of an audience and when we try to refine who we are. I feel as if my front stage and back stage changed and entwined as different parts of my personality were visible in certain situations. Although my personality was the person who I was at school and in front of others, I did not however open up to them about my background, religious beliefs and family values as I kept this part of my life hidden to others. On the other hand, to my parents, I showed them what they wanted to see and was never really myself in

terms of my thoughts and feelings. My life was based around sports and I kept them apart from that as it conflicted with their views of what a young female should engage with. To the rest of the world, all my teachers and friends, I was known as a sportswoman and it was a big part of my life that I had to hide from my family.

When talking about truths and parts of ourselves that we hide from others, Goffman (1959) explained that “when such facts are introduced, embarrassment is the usual result” (1959: 209). This was apparent in both sides of my life. At school I was embarrassed in front of my peers that I had to wear tracksuit bottoms. Whereas back at home, I was embarrassed in front of my parents that I even wanted to wear a skirt to fit in. It is this fear of embarrassment that drives individuals, making us do certain things and feeling the need to portray ourselves in a specific way. It comes down to the underlying issue of acceptance and the embarrassment of not being accepted in certain social and cultural spaces. I wanted the acceptance of the girls in my class and to become ‘one of the girls’ and be included in that social group. During these younger years at school, adolescents are looking for what ‘clique’ they fit into or how to make friends. A big part of this is how you dressed or how you acted. This is what brought about different social groups. Bourdieu (1990) talks about the different forms of social capital that an individual may have at their disposal. In this situation my social capital conflicted with the cultural capital of my family values.

It is not until now that I realise that I was going through an identity crisis. For a long time I was angry at my parents, whether it was for not letting me wear sports clothing or participate in as much sport as I wanted. I felt like I couldn’t be the person that I wanted to be. However, now as I’ve become older, I understand morality through the eyes of my parents. From their own upbringing, they have enriched their knowledge whilst living in this western society and have now become open to different cultures and are slowly understanding diverse beliefs. Instead of feeling angry and confused about not fitting in, this has allowed me to recognise my own complex identity, made up of contrasting forms of knowledge that make up my different beliefs and values. Ultimately, an individual is influenced by a range of factors which are constantly changing. It is, therefore, not surprising that, like in my case, loyalties can be divided and this is not uncommon.

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September 2016

Lad Banter and Apologetic Behaviour

Glen Childs

In this month's ETM we have another contribution from a final year undergraduate student. In this case, Glen provides a reflection upon some of his experiences of school PE and his attempts to negotiate the dominant embodied cultures that continue to prevail within contemporary society. However, Glen's reflections, like those of Biba (August) and Fraser (July), reveal that these dominating discourses of the body are influenced by a range of social factors (such as gender, ability, race) and produce different forms of 'survival' strategies (complicity by Fraser, duplicity by Biba and tolerance by Glen).

While we are still far from the stage where we can say that PE and School sport are entirely inclusive spaces, it is, nevertheless, encouraging that Glen, Biba and Niall are able to use their reflections as a mechanism to highlight the subtle and blatant forms of discriminatory practices that continue to operate, whether knowingly or surreptitiously.

My PE lessons at school never seemed to have a structure to them. Almost always, we would begin by sitting on the school bench and the teacher would ask: 'What sport shall we play today? Let's vote.' Whenever I heard these words I sighed and knew I was in for an awful hour. Yet again, the laddish group with their hierarchical status managed to get what they wanted and would always be on the same team. As the lessons went on, the teachers seemed to strike up a relationship with these individuals where 'laddish-crude banter' would signal that their behaviour was acceptable. In fact it seemed that by engaging in this kind of banter gave the PE teachers some form of 'street-cred' too. This is interesting as I don't really recall it ever being the case in a maths or science class. This hegemonic masculinity was considered normal and resisting these ideologies from the jock group would result in exclusion from participating in games in lessons as well as recreationally at lunch time too. This conformity led to an endorsement of and subsequent reproduction of the jocks' behaviour. They were able to use their 'power' to express their viewpoints and influence what was being taught. The power and control they had over other class members, and worryingly the teachers, was made pretty clear.

The laddish behaviour displayed by the jock group extended itself from the playing fields to the changing rooms. This was another aspect of PE I hated. Once again the jocks of the group had their corner of the room. The conversations were invariably about 'who they had pulled' at the weekend or 'how smashed they got on a school night'. I remember my sexuality being questioned by this group on numerous occasions. 'Oi, why do you always wear trackie's and not shorts? Is it cos you're bent?' I also had several run-ins with teachers for not wanting to wear shorts for rugby. Backchat would get me in trouble, but it seemed that the lads of the group would get away with it. Reflecting upon these experiences, I understood these as socially-constructed ideas of what was considered to be an 'expected' sporting body. The jocks had masculine features including beards and hairy legs, whereas I was a 'late developer of adolescence.' I saw my body as abnormal and wanted to hide these features. Looking back this was probably a large reason for my negative perceptions towards PE based upon my dread of having to change (1).

I unconsciously judged my body based on this dominant group. I did what Foucault described as 'self surveillance', anticipating and internalising the jock's gaze, thinking I was being watched, irrespective of whether I was or not, and then monitoring my behaviour accordingly. I would hide my body in the changing rooms which would allow me to have some element of control. Rather than wearing shorts because they were comfier or more appropriate for the lesson, I chose to punish myself, wearing my tracksuit bottoms to conceal the features of myself I felt to be abnormal so my body wouldn't be examined.

Today, I can draw upon those reflections and allow myself to put these things into perspective. For instance, when I consider my experiences and then I look at my girlfriend, I am proud. For it is when we get side tracked by worrying about what is normal or abnormal, she is a good example of someone who does not allow the fear of being watched to affect her participation. She is a type-one diabetic and is often told she shouldn't play sport because of the risk of potential hypoglycaemias. In certain surroundings she is seen as "disabled" (2). In fact, she has been told many times not to engage in sport but she has

resisted this and gone on to be a high achiever in women's rugby, a sport that is often a primary site for discriminatory banter and abuse in the 'jock culture'. Her participation challenges many of the forms of sexism (and heteronormativity) that prevail in male sports culture which suggests, for example, that women should be slim, sexy, pretty and not sweat. My reflections help me relate to the experiences she had. When I was teased, under the guise of 'banter', about being 'gay' or 'bent' for not being manly enough in my PE lessons, like girls who don't conform to typical femininities, I was made to feel an outsider.

I noticed that my self-surveillance practices, where I tried to hide my body, were similar to how girls quite often seem to engage in apologetic behaviour in response to these stereotypes. Even my girlfriend, who has engaged in practices of resistance, continues to engage in what some might describe as contradictory ways. Sometimes she displays a resistant femininity through choosing to take part in a typically masculine sport but then at the same time presenting heteronormative femininity too. For example, recently, when playing for her university rugby team she has uploaded a group-selfie after a game against local opposition. The photo shows a team of strong girls in rugby gear but at the same time wearing make-up and posing in a sexualised manner. My girlfriend says she wears make-up to feel comfortable in her surroundings. Does this mean she is apologising for something? Perhaps she is apologising for playing in a 'man's' sport and by hyper-feminising her body it will make her feel more acceptable to other male (and female) students who watch the games.

'Can one of you boys help with lifting this? My manager at work asked. I cowered slightly. The two girls to the left of me just stood there and didn't say anything. It's probably not a coincidence I was asked. While my reflections are focused on the laddish heteronormative culture in PE and sport, these norms continually creep into every element of life. I stepped to the side in front of my manager and asked one of the girls to give me a hand as we reached for the box.

Notes

1. See Ian Wellard's discussion of 'expected' performances of the sporting body in *Sport, Masculinities of the Body* (2009), published by Routledge
2. See, for example, Montez and Karner (2005) Understanding the diabetic body-self *Qualitative health research* 15 (8), 1086-1104.

October 2016

Battling the body capital: My experience of Gold's Gym

Amy Clark

Adjusting my stinging eyes to the brightness of my phone, I check the time, *'Oh wow its only 5am, I've got another two hours till I need to get up!'* Flying into LA the night before, I had only had a few hours' sleep. Too excited, I laid back down restless. I had checked the class timetable at Gold's Gym the previous day and the only available spinning class for the duration of my short research trip was scheduled in for 9.30am on the Saturday morning. Shoving down a piece of toast and using my google maps, I dragged my dehydrated jet-lagged body to the metro stop, eagerly traipsing onto the metro where I was eventually one step closer to reaching my destination. Jumping off at the right stop, I was relieved I was on time and quite impressed that I wasn't lost! A powerful black and gold sign dominated the corner of the street *'come see why we are the most famous gym in the world'...* I'm not that far away now!

Walking eagerly to the gym, I was anticipating what the building was going to look like; I hadn't looked on the internet to see what the building or surrounding area looked like, nor had I seen what the equipment or inside of the gym was set up like. I had big hopes to be astonished, seeing as this was considered 'The Mecca' of bodybuilding and that many at the gym back at home followed Arnold Schwarzenegger and admired his training and bodybuilding lifestyle.

I had already read much literature surrounding the history of gymnasiums and also as part of my PhD thesis had written a historical timeline of gyms too. Always, somewhere within the literature, the original Gold's Gym and muscle beach had been mentioned. Sam Fussell in his book 'Muscle', described his bodybuilding journey how he moved from England to California, just so he could train with the 'big



boys' at Gold's Gym. He had stated that knew he had made it big time by doing so - Gold's Gym was the ultimate place to go and see the hard-core body-builders train. And now, I had made it too!

I was immediately greeted by a golden **GOLD'S GYM** sign placed on the front of the building. Flash cars were parked up outside and even though it was still relatively early, many people were walking in and out (some even doing 'the walk'! ¹). Smiling to myself as I walked to the main entrance, I noticed the main art work of the well-known Gold's Gym sign and, as I entered, a wave of anxiousness flooded my body.

I was instantly thrown into a jungle of weights and bars. There was no music playing and the clanking of metal and human grunts filled the room. The reception was immediately in front of the door and to my left was a shop with all the original gold's gym attire for sale while to my right was a Wi-Fi and seating area. As I approached reception, looking around in awe 'The Mecca' sign was dominating the room above the mirrors. I noticed a few cardio machines being used on a second tier next to 'The Mecca' sign and thought, *'pretty decent size, all weights no cardio – proper gym just like I've read.'*



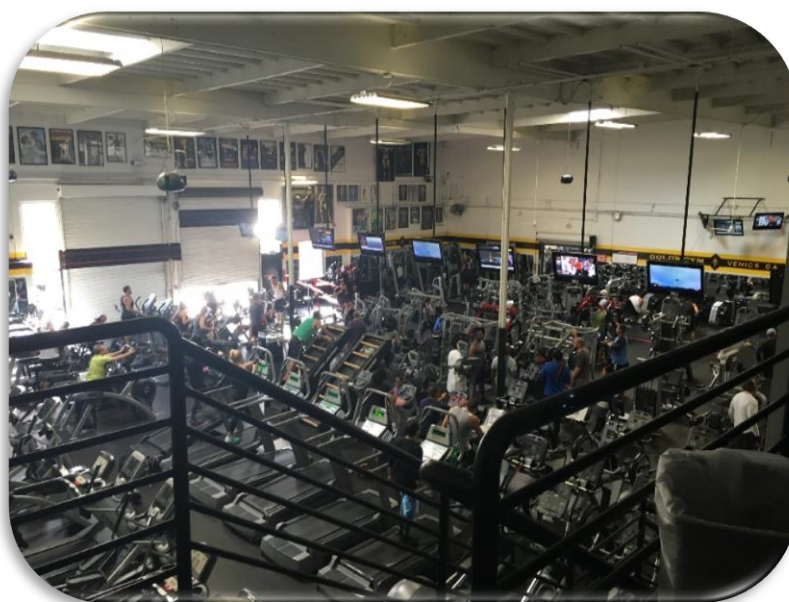
Whilst I was waiting to pay, a guy in front of me was wearing a snapback, his muscles were bulging and protruding from his top and shorts. He asked the receptionist when the least busy time to come was, *'it used to be full of the hard core people down here, now it's just full of f*cking tourists'* he grunts. The receptionist agreed and starting talking negatively about 'tourists' too. Keeping my head down and feeling slightly disappointed by the welcome, I stared at the floor not wanting to give my 'tourist' status away, although I knew as soon I opened my excited mouth, my British accent would be obvious and I would give myself away. I was wearing a bright pink top and shorts and was already standing out like a sore

thumb. I never usually wear shorts back home at my gym, but these shorts would definitely fit in here.²

Paying \$25 for a day pass and signing myself in electronically, I had unlimited use of the gym and exercises classes. I was told that to get to the spin room I needed to continue walking through to the third room where the studio would be up the stairs in the corner. *'Third room? I thought this room was it!'*

Walking through the rest of the gym feeling absolutely overwhelmed with the vastness of it, I was also aware that many eyes were looking my way. The people working out were tanned, very toned and a variety of ages. *'Wow I'm so skinny and pale'*, I thought to myself as I looked down and gave my body the once over. I had been hoping that I might actually look like I was a frequent gym goer in the eyes of the gold's gym members.³

Creeping into the second room and popping my head around the corner, I was immediately immersed straight away into another room full of free weights and resistance machines. *'Holy sh*t, I literally cannot believe the size of this place – look at all the weights ...and muscles!'* Eventually reaching the third room, I was overwhelmed with the amount of cardiovascular equipment that was available to use. This room alone was the same size of my whole gym back at home! I chuckled, thinking back to my initial thoughts about the lack of cardio in the first room. The buzzing of the equipment and stomping of feet echoed



around the room. *'This is bloody impressive, this IS a gym!'* Reaching the top of the stairs by the spin room, I turned around and took a deep breath. I had made it through the whole gym and now I was waiting for a spin class. *'I've made it, I'm just about to workout in Gold's Gym!'* Not knowing where to focus first, my eyes flitted

around the room. Just off the cardio room were shutters and when a member of staff lifted

these up, light flooded the room to reveal that outside there were numerous ropes and huge tyres. Every single space was filled and being used.

After participating the spin class, sweating and flushed, I felt slightly more confident to walk back through the gym. Still aware of being watched, I decided (with a mild panic) that I didn't want to lift a single weight. Instead, and in a slight hurry, I paced back through the

gym, keeping my head down while feeling very anxious about being on watch.⁴

Stepping outside of the gym, the warm air and sunshine bounced off my face and body. Leaving the metal jungle behind, and eagerly anticipating what Muscle Beach had to offer. I began to walk slowly back towards the metro, stopping midway to look back at the gym. I had experienced and survived The Mecca - and I had a t-shirt and towel to



prove it!

Notes

1. 'The Walk' – 'The weightlifters waddle'. Where bodybuilders sweep their arms out to necessitate their muscles or 'lat wings', and burrow their heads slightly into their shoulders to make their neck look larger – Fussell, S. (2015) *Muscle: Confessions of an unlikely Bodybuilder*. Open Road Media.
2. Bourdieu's concept of 'body capital' describes the values that are attached to individuals attractiveness, appearance, or physical abilities which might be exchanged for other forms of social, economic, or cultural capital – Boudieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
3. Dolezal describes how shame is an individual and necessary body experience, resulting from intersubjective relations, and is always contained in a nexus of political and socio-cultural norms. It also reveals our most personal parts - our hopes and aspirations - Dolezal,

L. (2015) *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books.

4. Foucault acknowledges a discipline of power termed 'self-surveillance'. In Gold's gym I constantly worked on surveilling my own exercise practices (and body) and turned this into a technique of discipline. This in turn unintentionally controlled me, I panicked and did not lift a single weight in the gym. Power here was exercised continuously and with minimal expense, due to the inspecting gaze from the other gym goers being directed into myself - Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison*. London: Penguin Books.

November 2016

Putting our bodies in the hands of Experts

Ian Wellard

In the September ETM, Glen talked about his experiences of PE lessons when he was at school and how, sometimes, the actions of his teachers were not always inclusive. In Glen's case, he was aware how his PE teachers tended to favour the boys who were skilled at playing football and how those boys were able to dominate the structure of the lessons. I can sympathise with Glen as his experiences resonate with some of mine during the period of time when I was at school in England. I did not enjoy my PE lessons precisely because the PE teachers seemed to ignore anyone who did not display any obvious football capital (1). For Glen and me (as well as, I suspect, many others) the overall experience of PE was an emotionally fraught time, because of having to deal with those feelings of negative self-worth and feeling excluded even when there was a desire to join in.

It is these thoughts that have influenced much of my research as I have endeavoured to explore the different ways in which sport and physical activity are experienced. While we are constantly reminded about the benefits of taking part in sport and physical activity (and I am not disputing this) there still remain many overlooked obstacles to continued participation. Glen's article reminded me of how influential PE teachers are upon the overall experience of sport within the school setting and how it is often easy for those within such positions of power not to recognise the consequences of their own embodied performances. In this ETM, I want to explore this theme a little further and think about those in positions of responsibility because of their status of having knowledge and expertise in their field. Experts like PE teachers, coaches, health educators, doctors and numerous others, are considered people to whom we should approach for guidance about our wellbeing and, ultimately, trust their judgements about what we should do with our bodies.

In the book I'm currently working on, the role of the expert is figuring quite heavily as I try to understand in more depth contemporary knowledge about the healthy and fit body and what appears to be a greater emphasis that is placed upon achieving health and wellbeing through sport and physical activity. The increased focus upon achieving or 'getting' health and wellbeing is, in turn, fuelling the demand for more advice from those considered able help us in our quest for it. This increased presence of health and fitness 'knowledge' has not bypassed theorists of sport, health and the body. Chris Shilling notes how contemporary society has moved from previously considering health in relation to not being sick, or what he described a 'sick role' to one where we look at ways to maintain health or become healthier and get fitter. Put simplistically this new way of thinking about individual health has sparked a whole industry ready to assist us in our crusade. Consumerism, social media, traditional media and business enterprises that operate within what might be termed a neoliberal framework fuel a demand for a whole new host of experts that the individual can call upon and, ultimately, pay for their services. A good example is the modern personal trainer and it is interesting to think about their role in comparison to that of a medical doctor, especially in the way that the personal trainer is increasingly entering the contemporary psyche as that of a health provider and a health professional. However, there are obvious differences and is important to be aware of the historical trajectories that these expert roles have emerged from.

Our understanding of the Doctor is very much based upon their role as an expert in medicine and our health, evidenced through awareness that they have undergone extensive training and have entered the profession with a 'vocation' to help others. The Hippocratic Oath that doctors abide by provides further evidence to the public about their (ethical) intentions. The personal trainer, however, as Jennifer Smith Maguire points out, is a more recent discursive construction and is a role that creates tension between one of providing a professional, service-based activity whilst also adopting more entrepreneurial aspects of selling a particular service. According to her, personal trainers act as intermediaries between paying clients and the broader fitness and exercise industry (4).

At a superficial level, we might think that it is futile to attempt to make comparisons between a doctor and a personal trainer. However, further scrutiny reveals a shift in public perception as well as policy changes that have sought to erode previously established understandings of public and private sector roles in health provision. The continued move to embrace private sector involvement within the National Health Service has generated a greater demand for complimentary health based services. Consequently, the fitness industry has been well placed to step in and provide a range of preventative and post diagnosis interventions (for instance, exercise referral classes, obesity prevention and fitness rehabilitation). Not surprisingly, with their increased 'public service' role, the fitness industry has had to tighten its belt and introduce measures to demonstrate and monitor the quality of its provision. In recent years, as Smith Maguire suggests, there has been significant move towards establishing personal training as a professional pathway by emulating the requirements demanded by more established professions like doctors, lawyers and teachers, albeit in less time consuming and academically rigorous formats (5). Thus, industry recognised qualifications obtained through courses endorsed by national awarding bodies are expected as pre-requisites before a personal trainer can sell their services.

By adopting established mechanisms of professionalism, personal training has transformed its status within the popular psyche to one of 'expert' within the field of health and fitness. At the same time, contemporary consumer culture, fixated as it is with media 'celebrity' has diminished the reverence previously afforded to established professions, such as doctors and teachers. However, maybe more tellingly and an indication of our current obsession with the body, is that an equally important additional qualification for the personal trainer (particularly in mainstream gyms) is his or her presentation of a 'fit' body. In this case, the white coat of the doctor or the gown and mortar board which are seen as a symbol of expertise (through achieved prior study) have been replaced by 'guns' and a 'six-pack'. Here, the body provides more a proof of 'qualifications' or 'fitness' to personally train others than a certificate indicating a period of study.

While I am not intentionally setting out to undermine the role of the personal trainer, it is important to point out the pitfalls in making claims about expertise without scratching beneath the surface. Glen's reflections in September's ETM show that there is still room for improvement for many PE teachers in terms of how they are able to demonstrate inclusive practices. With this in mind, although I recognise the undoubted beneficial services that a personal trainer can offer, it seems just a little too early to be applying the term expert in the same sentence that we might include doctors. It might be the case that we need to question further what it is that we want an 'expert' to be.

Notes

1. See, chapter 6 in Wellard, I. (2013) *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment: an embodied approach*, London: Routledge.
2. Ian will be exploring the ideas discussed in this ETM in more detail in his book, *Whose Body is it Anyway?: Achieving health and wellbeing through physical activity*, to be published by Routledge in 2017.
3. Shilling, C. (2010) *Changing Bodies: Habit, Crisis and Creativity*. London: Sage.
4. Smith-Maguire, J.(2008) The Personal is Professional, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11(2) 211-229
5. The basic entry requirement for a personal trainer is a level 2 qualification which can be completed within 6 weeks via online study and weekend training courses. Medical training takes on average six year's full time study, before further specialized training.

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