

Embodied Thought of the Month (ETM) – August 2017

John Day

Intimate Embodied Socialisation, Physical Activity and the Self

There exists a tendency to think of intimacy as something that requires physical contact and some form of sexual activity. Intimacy is broader than this and characterised by feelings of closeness and the privileged knowledge people chose to share amongst, about, and trust each other with (1). Physical contact may enhance intimate relationships, but this broader conceptualisation of intimacy has taken on increased importance in contemporary Western society, especially since the detachment of sexual intercourse from conjugal relationships (2). Intimacies are therefore a predominant feature of qualitative research into experiences of belonging to a family, and essential to my research on families and physical activity.

By conducting life history interviews to collect data for my research, participants retold and relived some of the most intimate memories they had shared with family members. In doing so, and trusting me with this sensitive knowledge, they also established a form of intimacy with me, as the interviewer. According to Franco Ferrarotti (3), the founder of Italian sociology, the most intimate and personal family stories will provide the most comprehensive, profound and revealing data. For some, such as Becky, these recollections stirred emotions similar to those she had experienced at the time, like when she visited her Father in hospital after his heart surgery,

He had to have the operation, so we went to see him afterwards, I mean he recovered fine, he's, he's fine, erm, but he was like in the intensive care unit, like, and he was just lying there and he was, I remember him saying to, erm... (cries)... sorry..... (cries)... like he said to me... (cries) he said to me and my Sister... 'I don't want, ever want you two girls to be like in this position', erm... and it's not like... something that... it's not something that I like think about, like on a daily basis... but I think from seeing that and... I just, that makes me think about the, the importance of staying like fit, and active as well, erm... and obviously that's an extreme.

This story also unveils something about how memories of the bodily experiences of those we care about might 'stick with us' and alter the way we think about our own bodies in the present. Some participants were conscious of how self-perceptions they had held about their body came to define a particular stage of their lives. Paige relayed how being abused by her boyfriend became manifested in an eating disorder during early adulthood,

I have actually had eating disorders throughout my life, erm... going from anorexia, but not ever being so thin that anybody would notice, erm, and then going through into the bulimia side of things... erm, along with that came a lot of depression, that resulted from a bad relationship I had as a teen, and as a young woman, where I was actually in quite an abusive relationship, so when I came out of that I felt really demoralised and, erm, really bad about myself.

As an adolescent, Chris's desire to have a 'bigger' body so that he was more like his Dad and less like his Mum was the main motivation for his physical activity involvement,

Erm, cos my Dad was always a big bloke, I was always very small, I was, erm, I remember I was like 14 years of age and well, I must have weighed about eight stone, there was nothing of me. My Dad's always been a big fella, my Brother's always been a big fella and kind of took after me Mum, she's only diddy and it was kinda like, I dunno, I just always had that thing, like I should be... "why ain't I bigger?" Sort of thing and, er, it was always in my mind that more physical activity and that I did the more bigger, more muscular I'd get and the more like my Dad I'd become, sort of thing, so I suppose that had a big input into why I played sport and definitely why I started going to the gym, to gain weight and get a bit of power and then obviously that influenced my Rugby and made me better at Rugby and it all kinda, kinda mixed in.

Much of the research surrounding children's levels of physical activity involvement, and particularly the extent to which parents provide physical activity opportunities for their children, is informed by the sketchy and far from clear-cut notion that an active childhood increases the chances of lifelong physical activity participation (4). The persistent finding from the 30 life history interviews I gathered for my PhD is that the perception people form of their bodies during childhood, through their intimate socialisation into physical activity with family members, etches itself into their biographies for the rest of their lives. That is, while physical activity levels fluctuate across the life course regardless of physical activity participation levels during childhood, the way people are socialised into thinking about their bodies as children serves as a lifelong reference point. At the age of 46, Evan could still remember this quite vividly,

My Dad had three sports, one was watching, which was, erm, horse racing, which I never got interested in... then shooting, and then, erm, boxing, and when I was a little boy, effectively, my Dad used to spar with me because he always thought it was a good way of getting fit and, erm... yeah, so I remember in the kitchen when I was six or seven, he would teach me how to punch... it was a very tough, male thing to do, and I guess when you're between the ages that I was, of eight and sixteen, you're tryin' to prove yourself, so it mattered to my psychology that I was tryin' a just be something strong... in the family on both sides, there were strong men, erm, my, my maternal Grandfather was, erm, remarkably strong, he was

only about five foot eight, erm, he was an engineer, and I remember him, as a kid, you know, doing feats of strength, which probably now you and I could do, but seemed to me pretty strong, at the time, so he could crack walnuts with his hands, he could, he didn't need, erm, wrenches to undo nuts, he could, you know, all that kind of stuff, and he was immensely striking, lift things in ways I could never imagine me doing, so I associated, erm, strength with being a man, that way, Dad, erm, I think just genetically, really, both my parents, Mum and Dad have been blessed with, 'um, degrees of physical fitness, erm, they never did any organised sport, as such, although my Mum did as a young woman, from the age of about sixteen to nineteen, twenty, erm, she swam competitively

In support of this finding, there is evidence from statistical research in exercise psychology, which highlights how parental perceptions of their children's physical competence plays an influential role in children's own self-perceptions of physical competence and their physical activity levels (5). Thus, it would appear that intimate embodied socialisation during childhood is the process through which the relevance of childhood physical activity experiences might manifest themselves throughout the life course, and subsequently influence future participation in myriad ways.

Yet the importance of future qualitative research into lived experiences of how these interesting statistical trends play out across the life course, extends beyond the remit of simply increasing public levels of physical activity. In keeping with Paige's narrative, important research in Canada, which is rarely, if ever, mentioned in childhood physical activity studies, found that levels of physical activity dramatically increase in adolescent females around one year before they are diagnosed with Anorexia Nervosa, and that their parent's physical activity levels may also play a role in this (6). These hidden, untold and 'darker' tales of physical activity are just as important to future research around intimate embodied socialisation, and is an area I will continue to study after the completion of my PhD.

References

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