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

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## **'Working out' identity: distance runners and the management of disrupted serious-leisure identity**

### **Abstract**

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

### **Keywords**

Serious leisure, identity work, distance running, sports injury

## **'Working out' identity: distance runners and the management of disrupted serious-leisure identity**

### **Introduction**

This article seeks to contribute fresh perspectives to the literature on 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 1997) and identity, analysing the impact and experience of long-term injury in relation to the identities of two amateur, *serious* runners. Using primarily a symbolic interactionist lens, and based on data from a collaborative autoethnographic project, the article explores the role of 'identity work' (Snow & Anderson, 1995; Perinbanayagam, 2000; Walseth, 2006) in sustaining continuity of a serious-leisure (Stebbins, 1992) identity during the liminality of a long-term injury period. As Scott (2005) notes, symbolic interactionism is of relevance to a wider range of studies in contemporary sociology than we may have been inclined to recognise, and this theoretical perspective offers interesting angles on current discussions surrounding identity, including sporting and serious-leisure identities. There is a relative dearth of research into the experiences and identities of amateur, non-élite, and older (Tulle, 2003) sportspeople, particularly women, and this study seeks to remedy this in a small way by taking as its focus the experiences of two non-élite, amateur, middle-aged distance runners, one female/one male, both of whom suffered running career-threatening injuries. The article applies Snow & Anderson's (1995) and Perinbanayagam's (2000) theoretical frameworks to the runners' efforts to maintain running identities through the disruption produced by enforced withdrawal from their primary serious-leisure activity.

In relation to pain and injury experiences in general, there is a growing corpus of sociological literature on various dimensions of sporting injury, for example in relation to: gender (Young & White, 1995); the cultural context of specific sports and physical activities (Howe, 2004; Turner & Wainwright, 2003); and athletes' own attitudes toward injury and risk-taking (Young & White, 1995; Creyer *et al.*, 2003; Pike & Maguire, 2003). To-date, however, little has been published on the identity work undertaken by injured sports participants themselves, including those who undertake sport as a form of serious leisure. A relatively recent development has been the autoethnographic turn in the analysis of sporting experiences (eg. Denison, 1999; Authors), including the incidence of sporting injury, and this

would seem to offer great potential for perspectives complementary to the literature cited above.

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

In order to examine the role of identity work in providing continuity of serious-leisure identities through the disruption to self generated by long-term sporting injuries, the article is structured in the following way. First the general theoretical framework of symbolic interaction is discussed. Second, the autoethnographic approach and research methods are briefly addressed, and the biographical context portrayed. Third, the *habitus* of the serious distance runner is outlined, in order to contextualise the impact of the injury experience. Fourth, the concept of identity work and its constituent components are applied to the experiences of the two co-runners/researchers. The article concludes with a discussion of how successful the runners were in sustaining or reclaiming their serious-leisure identities. To begin then, the analysis turns to symbolic interactionist perspectives on identity.

### **Identity as interactional achievement**

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

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

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

Although open to some debate, a useful distinction is made by Snow & Anderson (1995: p. 240) between: *social* identities and *personal* identities. Social identities are defined as those we attribute or impute to others, situating them as social objects, whilst personal identities refer to the meanings attributed to the self, and these forms may of course not be consistent. The focus here is primarily on personal identities, although the interconnectedness of, and

interplay between personal and social identities is considered. Symbolic interactionist theorists like Goffman (1969) have noted the importance of leisure in the construction of personal identity, including via the use of 'props' such as clothing and equipment (as will be discussed), and even cigarettes (Wearing & Wearing, 2000).

A further interactionist conception, significant to this discussion, is that of 'felt identity' (Goffman, 1973), that is an identity grounded in self-feelings (McCall & Simmons, 1978), and largely taken for granted until an event disrupts the routine processes of everyday life and activities. Incurring an injury can certainly constitute such a rupturing and threatening event for those who pursue sport as serious leisure, resulting in a 'disrupted body project' (Sparkes, 2002). It is therefore of interest to examine the ways in which committed sports participants themselves manage the social-psychological dimension of the injury-recovery process and sustain both the felt and interactional dimensions of their sporting identity during enforced withdrawal from the habitual physical routines of their serious-leisure activity. On the basis of the autoethnographic data, the role played by identity work emerged as crucial, and will be analysed below. First, a brief outline of methodology and method follows.

### **Autoethnography & methods**

In order to undertake an in-depth examination of the injury and rehabilitation process, autoethnography was selected as the most appropriate research approach for uncovering and analyzing subjective, lived-body experiences, combined with an analysis of the social interactional dimension of these processes. Although there is not the scope here to do justice to the richness of the autoethnographic approach<sup>1</sup>, a brief portrayal follows. Arising from the 'crisis of representation' in social science, autoethnography can be viewed as one of the transformative reactions to the 'realist conception of validity' (Hammersley, 1992: p. 2). It forms part of a methodological development termed 'the fifth moment' in the history of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) where participatory research and more innovative forms of writing and representation have evolved. Autoethnography is often distinguished from autobiography by its focus not primarily on the writer, but on specific experiences within her/his life, which aim to illuminate wider cultural or subcultural

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

processes, whilst avoiding solipsism (Greenhalgh, 2001: pp. 51-52). Autoethnographers seek to 'write themselves into' their accounts of fieldwork (Tedlock, 1991) analytically, and as an integral part of the research process. They have also explored new forms of writing, for, as Krizek (1998: p. 93) notes in relation to ethnography: '...many of us "do" ethnography but "write" in the conservative voice of science'. Writing in such a personal and often emotional style can involve risk, in challenging the still prevalent construction of the researcher/author as neutral, distanced, 'silent', rendering her/him vulnerable to charges of being 'irrational, particularistic, private, and subjective, rather than reasonable, universal, public, and objective' (Greenhalgh, 2001: p. 55). It should be noted that although the present article is based upon autoethnographic data, the presentational style remains more 'traditional'. This in no way reflects a wish to render the article 'devoid of human emotion and self-reflection' (Krizek, 1998: p. 93) but is purely because the article focuses on the analysis of identity work, rather than the production of a more creative, reflexive and evocative account. The need for such reflective narratives is, however, fully acknowledged and welcomed, and other accounts of the research more congruent with the evocative and revelatory elements of the autoethnographic genre have been published (see for example, Authors).

In terms of method and systematic fieldwork documentation, we constructed detailed diaries or logs throughout the 2-year rehabilitative period. This was a practice already familiar to us, not only via research projects, but as common practice amongst athletes, both amateur and professional, who record daily training performance in 'training logs'. Our own data collection was undertaken via note books and micro tape recorders; the latter accompanying us on training sessions (and sometimes to health-care practitioners), with tapes transcribed as soon as practicable after recording. A joint log was also created, wherein analytical themes and concepts were generated, differences between our individual accounts were identified and, wherever possible reconciled, in terms of definition. Where no analytical reconciliation proved achievable, the difference was accepted and recorded. Subsequently, we discussed the reasons for such divergence and the impact, if any, upon the process of handling our injuries. In addition, we both sought to act as the 'primary recipient' (Ochs & Capps, 1996) of the other's data, providing regular feedback and critique. Data excerpts from both researchers' logs are used (distinguished as Log 1 and Log 2).

## **The injury-experience of the distance runner**

In order to contextualise the impact of the injury experiences, and commensurate with the autoethnographical spirit, it is appropriate to render visible some accountable knowledge (Stanley, 1990), to situate the researchers/authors within their biographies of running. In terms of 'identity salience' (Stryker, 1987), serious leisure in the form of distance running plays a central role in both our lives. Now 46 and 60 respectively, we have been veteran runners (in UK terminology) for well over a decade, and running has certainly involved us in a 'culture of commitment in leisure' (Tomlinson, 1993). For almost 20 years we regularly trained together, often 6 or 7 days a week. One of us (male) has almost 40 years' experience of distance running, including marathons, whilst the other (female) has 20 years' experience of middle/long-distance running. Nowadays, we do not run to win races, and although acknowledging that in common with many serious runners, we: 'regularly (run) further and faster than fitness for health would demand' (Smith, 2000, p. 190), nevertheless we run primarily for the physical (and psychological) health benefits it affords. In common with marathon runners, our running necessitates that work (to a limited extent), meal, family, and social schedules are organised to accommodate our training (Ogles & Masters, 2003). Under Smith's (1998) categorisation we qualify as *serious runners*. For the purposes of this article, we define health as 'functional fitness' (Nettleton, 1995, p. 42), in this case fitness for running, whilst bearing in mind Abbas' (2004) well-founded point that notions of what constitute health and fitness are both gendered and social class-based, and, it should be added, vary according to cultural norms.

In Stebbins' definition, serious leisure is the:

systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience. (1993, p. 23)

Further, Stebbins (1992) has identified a number of defining characteristics of serious leisure: (1) the requirement to persist; (2) the development of personal careers; (3) the requirement of skilled and informed effort; (4) the realization of sustained benefits (enhanced



self image and social interaction); (5) the presence of a particular normative structure; (6) personal identification with a particular activity. All these dimensions are reflected in the biographies of the authors, for whom enforced withdrawal from the serious-leisure activity was consequently highly problematic.

As context, one winter we both suffered different knee injuries, and relatively soon it became apparent that these were more than the usual minor problems that plague the habitual runner. Subsequently it transpired that both the injuries were 'career'-threatening, and serious enough to require a 2-year rehabilitative period before a return to full running fitness. Within days of the injury events, we decided to document systematically our experiences and so, ironically perhaps, it was one of those unhappy 'accidents of current biography' that provided access, physical and psychological, to the research setting (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 11) and stimulated the study. Initially, we both made every attempt to seek diagnosis and treatment via an array of health-care practitioners: physiotherapists, general practitioners (GPs), an osteopath, and two consultant surgeons, all of whom offered different (sometimes conflicting) diagnoses. Plunged into a diagnostic vacuum, we decided to embark upon our own athletic rehabilitation via carefully devised remedial programmes. In brief, it took approximately a year to return to continuous running in training, and a further year until accomplishment of our normal 60-minute training run was possible. In order to contextualise the significance of the injury events as a threat to physical and psychological health and to serious-leisure identity, something of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) of the middle/long-distance runner will now be described.<sup>2</sup>

### **The habitus of the distance runner**

In this article, we take *habitus* to refer to socially-acquired, embodied systems of predispositions, tendencies, and inclinations, manifested for example in outlook, opinions, aspirations and also practices such as posture, ways of walking, running, and so on. McNay (1999, p. 99) neatly terms this incorporation of the social into the corporeal as the process of 'corporeal inculcation', and Wainwright & Turner (2006, p. 241) remind us that the body is 'a

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is not the space here to portray in detail the distance running subculture, other accounts provide excellent descriptions (eg. Smith 1998, 2000; Yair, 1990; Abbas, 2004).

repository of ingrained and durable dispositions'. Within the distance runner's habitus, certain dispositions and characteristics are highly valorised, and these include the qualities of stoicism and endurance. The praxis of distance running is intimately connected with endurance; tolerating fatigue, discomfort and pain constitute an integral part of everyday training routines. Such subcultural tendencies towards the normalisation and routinisation of pain have been noted within the literature regarding a spectrum of physical activities from boxing (Wacquant, 1995) to classical ballet (Turner & Wainwright, 2006). As Wiese-Bjornstal *et al.* (1998, p. 63) note: 'athletes learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain, and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete in competitive sports'; a definition also applicable to non-competitive sports and physical activity when undertaken as serious leisure. Normalisation of pain and injury is not, however, unproblematic, and the hazards of a culture of risk have also been well noted (Safai, 2003).

The gender dimensions of pain and injury have also been documented, both in general terms (Bendelow & Williams, 1998) and in relation to sporting activities, though predominantly at elite level (eg. Young & White, 1995). In relation to this study, although there were undoubted differences between our experiences of, and responses to the knee injuries, detailed analysis of the data did not reveal gender to be a key variable in this instance, and the reasons for this would be interesting to unveil. It has been suggested for example that sportswomen adopt a so-called 'masculinist' model of sports participation which valorizes a 'no pain, no gain' mentality, analogous to those of male counterparts (Charlesworth & Young, 2003). Caution is necessary, however, with regard to essentialist connotations of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour which prevail in some research. Even if we bracket the problematics of the cultural construction of gender and the 'heteropolar paradigm' (Arthurs & Grimshaw, 1999), what is considered gender-appropriate behaviour is highly fluid and context-dependent, and general cultural perceptions of women as *more* stoic than men also exist (Bendelow & Williams, 1998). Although not usually construed as a dangerous sport or 'risky recreation' (Creyer *et al.*, 2003), distance running incorporates pain and injury as routine and normalised features (cf. Pike & Maguire, 2003). As Young & White (1995) highlight in their research on elite female athletes in general, if there is a difference in female and male athletes' attitudes toward pain and injury, it is to a minimal degree. That said,

however endemic and normalised pain and injury are within the distance runner's habitus, serious injury is nevertheless encountered as a threat to running identity, producing a 'disruption of self' (Turner & Wainwright, 2003, p. 272). The form of such a disruptive event and its impact upon serious-leisure identity will now be examined.

### **Injury and identity work**

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

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

Research has highlighted the importance of social support for injured sports participants (Johnston & Carroll, 2000), but there is little published on the ways in which social actors themselves actively cope with the 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1973) of injured athlete. One of the key findings of the research project was the central role played by *identity work* in this process; a concept specifically applied to sport and leisure in recent years, for example in relation to young Muslim women and sport (Walseth, 2006).

In general, identity work has been defined as:

...the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept. So defined,

identity work may involve a number of complementary activities: a) arrangement of physical settings or props; b) cosmetic face-work or the arrangement of personal appearance; c) selective association with other individuals and groups; d) verbal constructions and assertion of personal identities. (Snow & Anderson, 1995, p. 241)

In Perinbanayagam's (2000) categorisation, these activities are reformulated as *materialistic*, *associative* and *vocabularic* identifications respectively, and both these and Snow & Anderson's categories are applicable to the identity work of serious-leisure participants. First, the analysis turns to materialistic identification in the form of settings, props and personal appearance.

### ***Materialistic identification***

During the extended period of injury and rehabilitation, physical settings were used in a variety of ways. One of the most salient of these was our adherence to the same geographical routes for the rehabilitative walking exercise as had been previously used for training runs. The use of this particular physical setting had several functions, some practical, some more symbolic. Practically and functionally, walking on the softer, grassy surface of the parkland helped protect the knee joints from the greater impact generated by road or pavement walking. On the symbolic level, continuing to tread some of the same routes represented to us our commitment to the training 'space' – both geographical and temporal - and ultimately to an eventual restitution to full running fitness. This form of 'restitution narrative' signals the belief that the sick or injured person will in the future be restored to full health and/or fitness, and has been portrayed in relation to various forms of injury and illness, including the devastation of spinal cord injury (Sparkes & Smith, 2003).

A result of our commitment to walking corresponds with the category of identity work relating to the arrangement of personal appearance. For, whilst not producing the same cardio-vascular effects as running, brisk walking did ensure that we retained the distinctive *body habitus* (Wainwright & Turner, 2006), of the distance runner, with relatively low levels of body fat. As Grosz (1994, p. 138) notes, the body is an 'inscriptive surface' upon which adornments, practices and actions leave their mark. We were clearly marked by the activity

of running, and continuity in somatic habitus was highly significant to us. As veteran runners with years of running inscribed upon us, we had grown accustomed to this body habitus, not only in terms of the relative ease with which our bodies enabled us to run, but also in relation to the psychological investment in a serious runner's form. With regard to body image and athletic identity, functionality and aesthetics were inseparably intertwined. We both valorised the strength and light muscularity of our running bodies, the cardio-vascular conditioning, and also the *lightness* afforded by a relatively lean body. Via this form of serious leisure, one of us also enjoyed feelings of female empowerment (Theberge, 1987) and we both benefited from a certain physical capital, that is: 'the prestige flowing from bodily "investments"' (Turner & Wainwright, 2003, p. 274).

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

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

Despite this degree of ambivalence, again there were functional and symbolic elements to the practice. Running kit was certainly comfortable and practical for all-weather walking, but it also served to mark ritually that this was a distinctive temporal phase of the day. Running kit was a prop used to manage the impression of our athletic roles, to signal continuity with our former running selves and also to indicate to ourselves-as-audience our commitment to the body restitution project. As Silver notes, people undergoing role transitions devise ways to retain continuous identities during periods of profound change, when:

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

We fervently hoped that the enforced role transition from runner to non-runner was a hiatus rather than an actual transition. Sporting the usual running gear provided a significant prop to our faltering running identities and helped us to retain a degree of continuity of personal identity through the liminality of injury time. Running clothes and shoes took on the status of transitional or boundary objects, serving as symbolic bridges to the former state. As noted by Dant (1999, p. 55), objects also have a signification role in indicating the social group membership of their users. Not only did we signify to ourselves the continuity of our athletic selves, but also to other members of the running community, despite our current injured state. We sought to claim social identities as runners, and some of the forms of associative identification in which we engaged will now be examined.

### ***Associative identifications***

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

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

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

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

These small forms of 'civil attention' (*contra* Goffman's (1966) notion of 'civil inattention'), were welcome acknowledgement of our running selves from other subcultural members. This was particularly significant given that the various clubs for which we had previously run were geographically distant, precluding regular and extensive support from close running friends. We did, however, continue our 'selective association' (Snow & Anderson, 1995) with friends around the UK, via telephone, e-mail, text and letter. We appreciated greatly their encouragement, empathy and practical advice, but perhaps the most valued element of their support was their continuing perception of us as distance runners and their validation of our running identities. Research has emphasized the importance of social support for injured sportspeople (Johnston & Carroll, 2000), and our data certainly confirmed the salience of associative identification in maintaining morale during long-term injury. A further form of identification emerged from the data as significant: that of 'vocabularic identification' (Perinbanayagam, 2000).

### ***Vocabularic identifications***

This form of identity work also corresponds with Snow & Anderson's category of 'verbal constructions and assertion of personal identities' and was undertaken regularly in the form of *identity talk*, a powerful medium in the construction of personal identity (Green, 1998). We embraced the identity of *real* runner. Such role embracement has been described as the 'verbal and expressive confirmation of one's acceptance of and attachment to the social identity associated with a general or specific role' (Snow & Anderson, 1995, p. 245). Even if a 'lay' audience might term a high degree of commitment to running as obsessive or the serious runner as 'negatively addicted' (Leedy, 2000) or 'exercise dependent', the negativity implied by such terminology is often transmuted to the positive and valorised by subcultural insiders. Correspondingly, we undertook 'associational distancing' (Snow & Anderson, 1995, p. 241) in order to contrast ourselves vocabularically with less committed, fair-weather

runners, or 'joggers' in Smith's (1998, p. 180) categorisation. This was illustrated via a whole range of (somewhat value-laden) exhortations and verbal challenges to each other, to retain an identity as serious runner; for example when struggling up a hill:

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

One of the key subcultural phrases employed to describe the practice of enduring in running – whether racing or in training - is 'digging in'. When our rehabilitative efforts became particularly painful and/or frustrating, we would employ this vocabulary, exhorting each other regularly to dig in, to keep working at the remedial programme. Other ritual utterances used previously during training runs were subsequently resurrected during rehabilitative sessions; indeed our runner's talk pervaded the injury and rehabilitative period. We would for example proffer encouragement via sayings such as 'Come on, Rosa' (ironic reference to the legendary Portuguese marathon-runner, Rosa Mota).

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

Today we have been struggling with the repeat 5 minute 'shuttle runs', trying to keep our running form, which is difficult because of lack of fitness, and monitoring our knees intently, as they begin to complain when our form goes due to that lack. In between repeats we have been reminiscing about other struggles, like when I decided to try to reduce my asthma medication and eventually managed to come off it completely - even for running - much to my delight. "God, there were times when I



thought you were going to pass out with the effort,” says J, “but you always kept going, no matter how tough it got. I reckon you would pass 'P' Company (UK parachute forces selection test)!” (Log 2)

### **Discussion: restoration, transformation?**

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

During the two years from the initial injury event, through the rehabilitation period to the point when we could both run for our accustomed 60 minutes per day, we had managed to maintain our distance-runner identities in certain ways. We had retained social identities as runners in the eyes of fellow runners. We had also managed to sustain personal running identities in terms of the meanings we attributed to ourselves, and brought into play during the interactional flow both between ourselves and with others. With regard to the more generalised other, in the form of the public whom we encountered on training runs, our social identities as runners were somewhat problematic – as for long periods we were not actually running! To this particular audience we may well have appeared relatively fit and healthy, but we were not validated specifically in our running identities. This however did not, on the basis of the data analysed, present any great challenge to our personal identities, as our affective community of friends and fellow runners did provide affirmation of our running selves along the various dimensions of materialistic, associative and vocabularic identifications cited. Thus, our self-concept, the balance between what might be deemed the idealised (and somewhat historic) images we held of ourselves as serious runners and our 'imputed social identities' (Snow & Anderson, 1995, p. 240), which others attributed to us, were not too dissonant.

Despite the general maintenance of our running identities, however, there were some significant changes. On commencing the rehabilitative programmes, we frequently engaged in 'restitution narratives' (Sparkes & Smith, 2003) which identified as the principal objective the 'restored self', to regain as near as possible the same self as pre-injury. Our identities had, however, despite the return to running fitness, been indelibly affected, re-inscribed, and certain elements fundamentally altered. As the time-frame for rehabilitation and recovery extended, the realisation dawned that the injuries threatened our capacity to run *in toto*. Consequently, it was no longer a question of training and racing well, it was a question of running *at all*. The very meaning of running was fundamentally changed, and this represented somewhat of an epiphany, forcing us to confront our embodiment (Wainwright *et al.*, 2005), and re-evaluate our running identities. In brief, we became much more cautious, and careful; new caution evident in our substantially revised training practices, some of which now run counter to the usual 'culture of risk' of the distance runner, particularly in relation to obdurate stoicism. Previously, we would have forced ourselves to train (and sometimes race) through pain and injury - a syndrome well-known to many athletes, professional and amateur. Nowadays, we have less bodily and psychological investment in achieving the kinds of race times or positions previously so emblematic of athletic identity (Smith, 2000, p. 350). Such short-term goals have been replaced by the longer-term objective of running (and secondarily racing), for as long as our ageing bodies will permit. The challenge to identity occasioned by injury experience has thus engendered a radical change in the meaning of running, and correspondingly both a restoration and a transformation of our serious-leisure identities.

If, as some have argued, leisure practice is central to social identity (cf. Gillespie *et al.*, 2002), then the role of serious-leisure practice might be construed as crucial. As Gillespie *et al.* (2002: 286) note: 'for amateur/volunteer participants in "serious leisure", an avocation is a central aspect of their lives. It is time, resource, and therefore identity intensive'. A process, such as serious injury, which disrupts such a core activity, may be experienced as highly threatening to identity. As emerged from our autoethnographic data, the ways in which the various dimensions of identity work helped in coping with, and managing such disruption and threat were highly significant. Given the current lack of research on non-elite, amateur, and

older sports participants who engage in sport as serious leisure, and specifically in relation to the role of remedial self-help (Williams, 2003) in injury management, it is hoped that in a small way this article addresses the lacuna.

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