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The changing man

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The changing man

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Abstract

This study explores the vulnerabilities and difficulties of living with burnout, clinical depression and anxiety. It does so by providing moments from my narrative of self that focuses on an interrupted body project as the result of burnout, and its impact to past, present and future selves. In the presentation of my now public experience, I invite you to emotionally relive the events of my life through the various writing genres that are available within qualitative research. In this way, the subjectivity of my life’s events will be communicated to you. My narrative is firstly considered in relation to the concept of masculinity formation within western culture and examines the possible limitations of such available narratives. I progress with an evocative account of my periods of self change and my subsequent relationship with obscurity. Finally, I discuss my current sense of self and the cultural framework of narrative resources that have been identified through the process of self-reflection.

Terms:
An interrupted body project results in an impact upon an individual’s sense of self. Identity dilemmas thus ensue and in a reconstructive or indeed destructive process, and in direct relation to the availability of narrative resources, a new sense of self emerges.

Introduction: the body-self, how to relate


Come with me. It’s 7.30 a.m. and the gym is already alive. The remedial squaddies can be heard groaning under the watchful eye of the QMSI (Quartermaster Staff Instructor). “Hold it, hold it”. Droplets of sweat splash upon contact with the wooden buffered floor as the unlucky few struggle to maintain the arm flexed press-up position. He could be a real bastard in the mornings. It was his gym all right. I am ready. My white vest is spotless, ironed to perfection and adorned with cross swords. My working dress trousers exhibit razor edged starched creases and my boots glisten under the bright lights. “Threlly, your squad are outside mate”. “Cheers Nev”. I jog out to confront 76 anxious soldiers. Heads don’t move, only suspicious eyes. “CFT (Combat Fitness Test) today folks, you all know the score by now. Eight miles of steady work, keep it tight in the ranks, let’s work together and crack on. Last chance
now then, does anyone need to fill their water bottles? Turn to your left, by the front, quick march”. Welcome to my world. June, 1995.

Come with me. It’s 7.30 a.m. and I am on my hands and knees in my bed. My jaw strains as I gasp for air. I feel nauseous as a sickening dryness grips my throat. As I hyperventilate I begin to sweat profusely and my heart races with an echoing thunder. My body tightens as the palpitations begin to do their worst. I am dizzy now and fall flat on the bed, the attack is over. The feelings of fatigue and confusion are overwhelming. My bed is sodden with sweat. I lay motionless, my once solid psychological state disintegrates as I distinguish the fear of death. Welcome to my world. August, 1997.

The above recalls two days within my life. I initially invited you to join me in my capacity as a Physical Training Instructor (PTI) within the army. I felt a warmth inside that day. I was solely responsible for the individual and collective training of the 76 unit personnel and was a highly respected member of my regiment. It was a good day. The second day that I recall seems like yesterday. That experience, as described to you, will live with me always. I invited you to join me in my capacity as a highly anxious, depressed undergraduate suffering from burnout. My once strong masculine identity, embodied within a well sculpted body had faded to a fragmentation of its former self. These initial thoughts present certain questions. What of the aetiology (origin) of this dramatic self change? What of the mental and physical consequences of an interrupted body project (Sparkes, 1996) and the changing concept of self? How and why do I come to define masculinity as I do? Who am I?

Brief memoirs

“Go on son, get yourself down there”. These words of my father exposed me to the sporting arena. Little did he know that this gentle push would mould the construction of my self-identity. It was at the age of eight when I attended my first training session with the Barrow Island Rugby League U9’s team. I was taller, stronger and quicker than most of the other boys of that age group. In retrospect, maybe this was why I equated masculinity with competition, physical strength and skills. I knew that my masculinity would have been confirmed. My physical dominance and the realization that acceptance by others was aided by being good (a winner) (Donnelly and Young, 1988) meant that I quickly became a confident, well established member of the subculture. Levels of performance served to define my success and winning became increasingly important to me. As Schafer (1975) argued, I had developed a conditional self worth.
We trained twice a week and played our matches at weekends. I never missed a training session or a match. My early exposure to sports and the discovery that I had some ability, shortly followed by peer, family, and community recognition via the local rag, led to hours of playing, practicing and dreaming of future stardom (Messner, 1990). As I entered Secondary School the sporting world was mine to explore. I wanted to play everything. Little attention was paid to adolescent overtraining and burnout within the sporting community at that time and the fragile anatomy of a child seemed to escape the consciousness of the sporting bodies. I played everything and anything.

At the age of fifteen I represented my county at football, rugby league, and cricket and had signed associate schoolboy forms for Bury F.C. I played sport every day of the week. As Sparkes (1996) cited, a core strand of my sense of self was now defined as a sports performer. I spent a month on trial at Bury F.C. in the summer of 1987. We played football and then some. Well, what did I expect? Training twice a week, a competitive match at the weekends and to be able to cut off from ‘soccer talk’ in the evenings. No chance. We would train for four hours, Monday to Thursday and play a match on the Saturday. Even the family I lived with had connections with the club and never stopped talking about the game. Football and all that was associated with it had saturated my life.

I joined the army in November 1987. The flexible nature of subculture recruitment processes (Donnelly and Young, 1988) meant that I soon renewed my membership within various sporting groups. My competitive nature meant that I was soon accepted. For the majority of the time I was a professional sportsman, my occupation upon enlistment taking the secondary role. I spent three quarters of my time playing sport and got paid for doing so. Boxing and athletics became other areas of involvement for me.

I was a fit member of my regiment and was invited to attend a PTI’s course in Aldershot. I passed the course and returned to my unit to be introduced to my new schedule. I had five classes per day. My working days consisted of aerobic runs, circuit training, fartlek training, the assault course, log runs and the out dated beasting in the gym.

Postings to Germany, Canada and England followed. My role as a PTI remained the same. The only freedom from the rigours of the gymnasium came in the form of operational tours to Belize and Bosnia. The working days and nights were long. The amount of physical activity that I was involved in dropped dramatically but what with the inconsistent hours of work and the risk of being shot, my lifestyle remained both feverish and arduous.
Upon returning to my unit following my tour to Bosnia in 1994 I found myself distracted. The PE lessons were outdated, equipment was substandard as were facilities and I failed to see what the Army had to offer me other than that I had previously experienced. I left the army after seven years of service.

Within two weeks of leaving I enlisted onto an access course at Barrow Sixth Form College. This was a new form of stress for me, mental stress. I passed the required units and enrolled onto a Sports Science degree at Exeter University. This is the position from which I write this piece. I was just about to complete my first year finals when my body said ‘no more’. An imbalance in my training, competition and recovery cycle (Kreider, Fry and O’Toole, 1998) in conjunction with my newly found stress had caused the overtraining syndrome called burnout. I was fatigue personified.

I currently find myself at the upper end of the self-reflexive process, prior to this biography this process has been somewhat neglected, my life dominated by sport and physical activity. Sparkes (1998a) notes that the loss of one’s self can serve to heighten reflexivity and awareness of previously taken for granted aspects of the body-self relationship. Thus, my involvement within the process of reflection may be attributed to the sudden loss of what I had previously taken for granted.

**Writing my life**

What of the literature that is relevant to this tale? What are the theories and conceptual frameworks that will guide and inform me during this reflexive exploration? How do I relate?

Satre (1966) insisted that the body is the self, and that the self is the body, “I live my body, the body is what I immediately am, I am my body to the extent that I am”. Gerschick and Miller (1995: 183) argue that the body is often the central foundation of how men define themselves (cited in Sparkes and Smith, 1999). Gadow (1982) cites that the self is inseparable from the body. If this is so, why is it that I feel so distant from my body? The terrain on which I walk is rough and alien. The performing body that once was myself seemingly lost.

Silver (1996) refers to self-identity as the individual’s subjective sense of his or her biography being continuous, coherent and unique, arguing that the formation of self-identity is a process beginning in adolescence and continuing throughout the life course, as individuals reconstruct their biographies in light of changing information about their past and future. For McAdams (1985) identity is a life story. For both men and woman it is a continuous narrative process in which the self cannot
disappear, although identities can and do. The latter happens when the signs that give meanings to a person lose their signifying force (Sparkes, 1997).

What happens when people have chronic illness or injuries that weaken, challenge, or negate valued images of their bodies? How do beliefs, images, and expectations of one’s body effect present identity and future hopes and plans (Charmaz, 1995)? Charmaz (1995) argues that chronic illness assaults the body and threatens the integrity of the self. Taken-for-granted assumptions are shaken, the sense of wholeness of body and self disrupted. Frank (1995) refers to a loss of the “destination map” that has previously guided the ill person’s life. Sparkes and Smith (1999) discuss the disrupted body-self relationship explaining that the body becomes disharmonious from the self and inescapably embodied. In this way it is seen as an oppositional force which becomes problematic. “Therefore, chronic illness with impairment can intrude on a person’s daily life, undermine a person’s sense of self, and initiate various identity dilemmas”, Sparkes (1998a: 644). Within this area of research I utilize two frameworks to inform and shape my interpretations. The first “framing device” (Sparkes, 1998a) for the interpretation of my experiences comes from the work of Frank (1995) who proposes three types of narrative; general storylines that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories, that people compose by adapting and combining narrative types that culture makes available. These stories have to repair the damage that illness has caused and serve to give direction to those who are ill:

- **The restitution narrative**- a basic story line can be seen, yesterday I was healthy, today I’m sick but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again. The stories can be told prospectively, retrospectively, and institutionally.
- **The chaos narrative**- chaos is the opposite to restitution, its plot imagines life never getting better. They are chaotic in that there is a lack of any coherent sequence of narrative order.
- **The quest narrative**- illness or injury is met head on, accepted and exploited by the storyteller. The illness is the occasion for a journey that becomes a quest.

Furthermore, Frank (1995) notes that only the communicative body can reclaim interruption because only it associates with its own contingent vulnerability. The communicative body makes this contingency the condition of its desire, reaching toward others who share this vulnerability. The body grounds the story that in its telling allows the body to realize itself. The body’s story requires a character, but who the character is, is only created in the telling of the story. The character who is a communicative body must ‘bear witness’. Witness requires voice as its medium and voice finds its responsibility in witnessing.
The second framework comes from the work of Athens (1995) who argues that dramatic self change is a long, arduous process that occurs in five stages:

- **Fragmentation stage** - people must witness firsthand the splintering of their own selves.
- **Provisional stage** - people desperately struggle at assembling new, unified selves to replace the former ones that have split apart.
- **Praxis stage** - if the provisional challenge is not enough, they must then summon the courage and conviction to subject their new unified selves to the ‘test of experience’.
- **Consolidation stage** - should their new unified selves withstand this test, then people must patiently await the social repercussions that they hope will follow in wake of their feat in order to generate the psychological momentum needed for them to embrace fully their new unified selves during the consolidation stage.
- **Social segregation stage** - people must invariably gravitate towards groups in which they will be most comfortable and away from groups in which they will be least comfortable whilst expressing their new selves. Thus, once started, dramatic self-change may never be completed.

I shall discuss how my conceptions of masculinity were defined by my performing body and the cultural forces that guided it in the hope that it may inform this narrative of the self as to why I was the person that I was, to be affected in the way that I was and why I have become the person that I am. From the literature abd veing of relevance to my personal ethnography is the work by Messner (1990) who discusses boyhood, organized sports and the construction of masculinities whilst focusing on the importance of family and peer relationships. Also Laberge and Albert (1999) discuss the conceptions of masculinity and of gender transgressions in sport among adolescent boys. Furthermore, Clatterbaugh (1998) provides an insight into masculinities and what may be problematic about them.

Upon sifting through the available literature on depression, I generally found myself as a distant reader due to the scientific, experimental form of presentation that the authors utilized. They had failed to narrate the lived experience of depression. Likewise, Bruner (1986) notes that examinations into depression rely largely on the traditional, logical, scientific mode of knowing and ignore a form of narrative cognition or storied knowing. Of the few that did strike a chord within me was the work of Smith (1999) who explores the particular processes, vulnerabilities and difficulties of living with depression. His evocative narrative style depicts the ambiguities, ongoing struggles and gendered nature of depression in ways that display how the past continues in the present and crafts the future. Karp (1996) also offers an in-depth account of depression discussing disconnection and the meaning of the illness. The author offers the Career View theory of the depression experience that consists of four stages:
• *Inchoate feelings* - people lack the vocabulary to label their experience as depression.
• *Recognition* - people conclude that something is really wrong with them.
• *Crisis* - this stage thrusts them into a world of therapeutic experts.
• *Coming to grips with an illness identity* - during this stage they theorize about the cause(s) for their difficulty and evaluate the prospects for getting beyond depression.

Each of these career moments assumes and requires the redefinition of self. I will use these theories and conceptual frameworks to critically evaluate my male body and identity; manifested in a transformation and crisis (Sparkes and Silvennoinen, 1999). In doing so, I attempt to present a personal and evocative autobiographical account of my ‘now public’ experience in order to relate its impact upon my relationship to past, present and future selves. Pachter (1981: 10) usefully contextualised the value of personal narrative,

> One hopes that one’s case will touch others. But how to connect? Not by calculation, I think, not by the assumption that in the pain of my toothache, or my father’s, or Harry Crosby’s, I have discovered a universal condition of consciousness. One may merely know that no one is alone and hope that a singular story as every true story is singular, will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a major chord.

A narrative is a discourse or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings. Narrative research according to the definition of Lieblich, Mashiach and Zilber (1998) refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. I invite you to feel and appreciate my emotions and to think with me, to not only feel my pulse, but to empathise with my consciousness. My thoughts are presented to you in the text as *personal reflections*. I will use dramatic recall, strong metaphors, vivid characters and unusual phrasings. In this way, I invite you to emotionally relive the events of my life in such a way that you may be stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine (Sparkes, 1996). Short tales will be told and then critically evaluated in a ‘messy text’ format. Denzin (1997) talks of facts; events that are believed to have occurred, facticities; the description of how those facts were lived and experienced, and fiction; the narrative constructed to deal with the real or imagined facts (Sparkes, 1996). In order to create my vision this narrative of the self will hence contain facts, facticities, and fiction, though I have not intentionally fabricated any details within it. I do not concern myself with narrative accuracy and ‘strict’ historical versimilitude, rather I seek to facilitate an understanding of my cultural story (Sparkes, 1996). The qualitative lens and the tools that I shall use within it suit my storytelling requirements and is ‘ours’ to explore.
Why is it that I have made such a choice? Why do I not work within the positivist paradigm whilst applying a quantitative methodology? Lock (1989) acknowledges that much of the literature which contrasts qualitative and quantitative methodologies is infused with the sort of annoying zealotry produced by true believers in any new enterprise. That is, advocators of qualitative methods attempt to justify the utilization of their methods by finding fault with the more traditional approaches to research (Schutz, 1989). I do not attempt to find fault with quantitative methodology but state that it is not suited to my needs. A philosophy of strict empiricism does not meet my storytelling requirements. I do not, in writing, attempt to draw a general conclusion, but I attempt to highlight my experiences. If this research attempted to eliminate individual differences, to divide and separate out the elements of truth, and in doing so provide a universal law, quantitative research may be more appropriate. This research focuses on the socially constructed nature of reality. Consequently, qualitative research may be best suited.

Validity and the problem of criteria

What then of the narrative of self criterion? Can the term self-indulgent be branded as a charge against this narrative form? Mykhalovskiy (1996) discusses this charge citing that those who have used this genre have expressed concern with the characterization of their work in such terms (De Vault, 1996; Jackson, 1990). Sparkes (2000) argues that to write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience and that the claim of self-indulgence is absurd. Smith (1999) argues that self-indulgence refers to something that a person takes gratification from. Both he and I take no such pleasure from the writing of extremely painful and emotional narratives of self. We should concentrate on the positive attributes of the narrative of self. Many texts are dull and strip the flesh off the human experience, thus by using the transformative possibilities of this story I hope to add “the stuff of living” (Mykholovskiy, 1996). In doing so I challenge those who accept the view of silent authorship and author evacuated texts (Sparkes, 2000) and promote a push towards finding new ways of representing research.

What of the suggestion that autobiographical sociology speaks only to those who produce it? Upon reading several narrative works (Smith, 1999; Sparkes, 1996; Sparkes and Smith, 1999; Sudwell, 1999) I found myself locating my own experiences within them. As Ellis (1993) indicated from his research, I hope this piece allows you to include feeling and participatory experience as part of knowing and reading and serves to challenge the limitations of available narratives.

What of the quality of this work, the notion of validity and the criterion for judging this piece? Validity remains a key issue in debates over the legitimacy of qualitative
research and communities within qualitative inquiry have conceptualized the notion of validity from a range of available possibilities (Sparkes, 1998b). Although Sparkes (1998b) makes specific reference to qualitative sport psychology he highlights key issues that are relevant to this story and to qualitative research in general. Thus, I deem it necessary to discuss this issue as it will serve to define my work.

Sparkes (1998b) notes that some communities whilst acknowledging that qualitative research represents an alternative paradigm to positivistic research have attempted to develop a set of criteria unique to qualitative inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1985) were influential in shaping this approach and developed a trustworthiness criteria and the techniques for meeting the criteria: the criteria of credibility (internal validity) could be achieved by prolonged engagement and peer debriefing, confirmibility (objectivity) could be achieved by inquiry audit and audit trial. When looking at the terminology used in the above criteria Sparkes (1998b) noted that they are consonant with positivistic standards and although useful, they are not entirely satisfying.

A diversity of meanings to the notion of validity are discussed in which versions of validity have no reference points in traditional forms of inquiry. Some of the multiple versions of validity include; reflexive, rhizomic validity, paralogical and catalytic (Sparkes, 2001: 538). Although such a stance could be encouraging in terms of extending the debate, such attempts seem problematic as when holding on to the term validity, even when radically transformed into catalytic, we hold onto the baggage associated with the term and still the notion of [objective] validity remains ever present. Therefore, the author concludes by suggesting that we should renounce validity and seek alternative criteria. In this way, if this piece allows you to enter my world and my consciousness, to gain an understanding of the culturally manipulated story of burnout, depression and anxiety and their powers of self change in relation to the conceptual frameworks and theories that I have identified, and if you have learnt from the narrative perspective from which I write, then the criteria of a good, authentic story will have been met.

At the same time, I do acknowledge that no matter what I state as the criteria for this piece, ultimately you, the reader, will judge them, use them, reject them or modify them. All that I ask is that you join me with an open mind and not abstract standards or rules. Ellis (1995) asks the following questions in relation to the judgment of her tale. Did you want to give the story to others to read because you think it speaks to their situation? How useful would this story be as a guide if you encountered a similar experience in your life? Did the words I wrote elicit from you an emotional response to examine (Sparkes, 2000)? I hope that this multilayered text allows for a wealth of insights beyond my predicament. As Church (1995) notes, it is possible to
learn about the general from the particular. She notes that as her subjective experience is part of the world, the story which emerges is not private and idiosyncratic. This is true for my tale, although it is unique to me, it is culturally yours. I welcome you all to learn from my story, depressed or happy with life, man or woman. As Frank (1995) notes, you may add your own lives to mine and learn from what I have written to fit your own situation (cited in Sparkes, 2000). Come with me and share my human vulnerability, my fragility and my experience of embodiment (Smith, 1999).

**Man-made to fall**

In order to provide a more complete insight into my interrupted body project it is necessary to critically reflect upon my masculine identity prior to its transformation. Why had I chosen certain identities? Why was I the person that I was, to be affected in the way that I was?

Sparkes and Smith (1999) note that contact sports have long been associated with the construction and maintenance of specific forms of embodied, hegemonic masculinity. Connell’s (1990) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally idealized form of masculine character, which associates masculinity with toughness and competitiveness, the subordination of women and the marginalisation of gay men (Laberge and Albert, 1999). Consequently, it is fair to suggest that due to my early participation in contact sports that I may have been subjected to some of these conceptual prompt mechanisms. Therefore, I am directed towards addressing the issue of hegemonic masculinity in the hope that I will identify some of the components that have contributed to the construction of my identity.

Connell (1995) extended upon earlier works citing that sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture by providing a continuous display of men’s bodies in motion (Laberge and Albert, 1999). Whilst supporting Connell’s (1995) theory in that it is particularly relevant to my story; sport has played a large part in defining my masculinity, I am not entirely satisfied with it. It fails to acknowledge the process of interactions with people; my brother, father and mother and social institutions; school and the armed forces, that are related to my boyhood development of masculine identity and status (Messner, 1990). Those interactions that may have been crucial in the initiation to and continued participation within sports may have further contributed to the construction of my broader masculine identity. For this reason, I will address the issue of hegemonic masculinity in conjunction with the above interactions.
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**A hard act to follow**

My brother jogged up and delivered the ball from around 25 yards at a slow/medium pace. This continued until I executed a rather good off drive. Consequently, the jog turned into a run, the dimensions of the strip diminished to 22 yards and the ball beat the edge at a medium/fast pace. And so it continued. I soon learnt that if I was not going to hit it then I would let the ball hit me and not my wickets. After a lengthy discussion it was decided upon that the leg before wicket ruling would not come into play. *Serious stuff.* The tennis ball rose sharply off the black tarmac surface, hence, I accumulated several bruises. Would I give him the satisfaction of a hurtful cry or the request for him to slow down? No way. The interaction with my brother was already shaping my masculinity. It ended up with the driveway gates open, steaming in from over the road, traffic permitting, and letting me have it. I loved it. The competition, his aggression, his passion and most of all his tuition was shaping my concept of self. My biological masculine traits were in the process of social construction (Clatterbaugh, 1998).

Our performances in the driveway can be seen to relate to the hegemonic form. The exhibition in the face of bravery, aggressiveness in competition and the control over one’s own emotions (Laberge and Albert, 1999). Messner (1990) suggests that an older brother can act as a standard of achievement against whom to measure oneself and that attempting to emulate or surpass the athletic accomplishments of older family members can create pressures that are difficult to deal with. What of the consequences?

**Talking bodies**

As Messner (1990: 263) points out,

> Athletic skills and competition for status may often be learned from older brothers, but it is in the boy’s relationships with fathers that we find many of the keys to the emotional salience of sports in the development of masculine identity.

Simpson (2004) states that sport is one of the few arenas where males, particularly those from the working classes, can express their love for each other and talk about the body in specific ways. Indeed my father finds it difficult to express his love for me in ways other than body-talk. He has never told me that he loves me although I know his love for me is unconditional. As did Sparkes (1996), my father and I talked/talk about performing, material bodies and not feelings and emotions. As Sudwell (1999) notes, I have a feeling within me that writing of one’s father in such a fashion is strictly taboo. Uncovering his weaknesses, while he still lives and breathes, makes me feel as though I have taken a step of paternal disrespect.
Scott’s note to his father in 1997...

Dear Father,
I want you to know that I mean no disrespect and that I cherish all that you have given to my life. I love you very much and in uncovering your weaknesses, I uncover mine, so alike are we. I hope that I may one day learn to better myself as a man and verbalize my feelings for you. I hope that I have the courage to say the things I want to say to you, the courage to dismantle the body bridge (Sudwell, 1999) that exists between us in the hope that our banks will come closer together. The point that I make through the evaluation of our relationship is that you were a driving force in my initiation into and maintained participation in sports. In this way, your interactions with me were influential in the development of my boyhood masculine identity. I am very proud of the man that I have become, for this I thank you.

Love always,
Scott.

Poem, the English Rose – a product of Scott’s personal reflections in 1997...

English Rose

This flower thrives upon snow and frost,
the potential cultural stain lost,
cultivated foundations are laid,
Strength, verity and fortitude, its working class roots are splayed,
man-made,
a double edged blade.

The armed forces were the perfect playground on which to nurture my masculinity; the competitive sporting involvement, the mantle of a PTI and success in the boxing ring. As I cradle my aching scalp I look up from my seat. There it is before me. A figurine on which is written Middleweight Winner, 1994.

Personal reflection by Scott in 1997...

Why have I chosen to place this one medal on public view? Its base is tarnished and weary. My loft is full of silent memorabilia that are much more pleasing to the eye. Why have I not replaced this token of battle with my excellence in catering studies certificate? After all its frame is spotless and more in fitting with my clean cut and precise nature. Boxing came naturally to me, catering was a difficult task in which I feel that I accomplished the greater personal achievement. Consequently, I wonder why it is that the latter remains silent? Am I blinkered in that I fail to recognize my own accomplishments? Look at me, a hero within a Western culture. …………Where’s that certificate?
As Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999) note, our Western culture loves heroes. We want to make those men who face extreme adversity our heroes, we admire them for their bravery and courage. But with men this traditional hero form is particularly problematic. Where masculine is constructed around a compulsive warrior mentality it locks men into a singular and inherently limiting pattern of masculine behaviour. To be a man in our culture means being tough, physical, athletic, fearless, powerful, competitive, aggressive, superior, conquering, unemotional and uncomplaining. Kleiber and Hutchinson (1999) point out that this model teaches men to override their needs and limitations and they learn instead to push onward relentlessly in spite of fatigue, hardness or illness.

I pushed on through the pain of many injuries. It is laughable. How many of you out there have done this I wonder? I had my brother’s success to live up to, the expectations of my father, or those that I perceived he had of me and the great expectations that my perfectionist self demanded. I now had a sense of bereavement, something inside me had ‘died’.

Burnout!

**Career on track: train off the rails**

Kreider, Fry, and O’Toole (1998) note that a chronic problem in sports remains the continual risk of an imbalance in the training, competition, recovery cycle as the cause for developing the overtraining syndrome called burnout or staleness. They note that glycogen deficit, neuroendocrine imbalance, amino acid imbalance, autonomic imbalance and catabolic/anabolic imbalance are all attributed to too much training and too many competitions with too little time for regeneration. At the time of my “interruption” (breakdown/burnout) I was playing one competitive game per week in addition to four steady state aerobic training sessions. I do acknowledge that my body had taken some serious abuse over the years but at the point of failure, the amount of physical activity that I was involved in was by no means excessive. Thus, answers as to the aetiology of the syndrome that I was experiencing may have lay elsewhere.

What of the non-training stressors that I was subjected to at the time? The social, educational, economic, nutritional and psychological stressors that may have served to exacerbate the problem. Morgan and Goldston (1987) argue that these factors must be taken into consideration. In my case it appears that these factors may have contributed to my downfall. I was fatigued, confused as to why I was feeling so low and I found myself angry at my inability to motivate myself to train. Consequently, certain components of Morgan and Goldston’s Iceberg Profile were seemingly
apparent at this degenerative stage of my transformation. My maladaptive responses to the burnout were in line with those as suggested by Hackney, Pearman, and Nowacki (1990). I felt lethargic, I was mentally exhausted and I constantly found myself in or seeking isolation. In addition to these responses I felt a heightened state of arousal and anxiety.

At this stage of my biographical disruption (Sparkes, 1996) my periods of isolation became more frequent. Burnout had taken my athletic identity. I missed the banter with the lads at training, I missed the sport related social events and most of all I longed for the opportunity to exhibit my masculinity on the pitch. My athletic identity was placed at the apex of my personal, identity hierarchy (Sparkes and Smith, 1999) and the loss of it was extremely difficult to cope with, such was its close association with my masculine sense of self. Sport had been a proving ground for my masculinity and it had been taken from me.

Brewer (1999) suggested that there were both positive and negative consequences associated with a strong athletic identity. The identity could act as either Hercules’ muscles or an Achilles’ heel (Sparkes, 1998a). My athletic identity, through illness, was acting as an Achilles’ heel to the survival of self. As it was for Rachael (a character in Sparkes, 1998a), my body had failed me. This restricted self became the focus of my life and hit at the inner core of my being. My ‘self’ was firmly located within the fragmentation stage of dramatic self change (Athens, 1995). As Athens (1995) notes, the highly stubborn character of ourselves confirms the aphorism that people are always very reluctant, if not steadfastly resistant, to making any changes of a deeply personal nature. People take great comfort from viewing and acting in the world the same way they always have. Thus, my adherence to the restitution plot (Frank, 1995) during this stage of fragmentation was no surprise. I wanted to be healthy again and as Frank puts it, to be as good as new. As the days dragged themselves through the weeks the psychological signs and symptoms of my maladaptive response (Hackney, Pearman and Nowacki, 1990) became more intense. I had put on half a stone in weight, my sleeping pattern became inconsistent, whilst my anxieties and insecurities engulfed me. As negative thoughts intoxicated my mind I would slip into Frank’s (1995) chaos narrative but still my noxious masculinity made sure that I didn’t lose the [restitution] plot. Had my so-called ‘career’ (Karp, 1996) been in motion for some time now? In these first weeks of burnout I felt different, uncomfortable, marginal and in pain without attaching the notion of depression to my feelings. Stage one (inchoate feelings) was complete. My career had definitely begun.
Poem, False Betrayal – a product of Scott’s personal reflections in 1997...

False Portrayal

Another day get on parade,
charades all round, the face of the clown,
the smile but thinly painted,
washed with the darkest of water,
water in which we precariously tread,
both of us; the clown and I,
as we sink the water darkens,
smile erased,
alone.

As the days lingered on I knew ‘it’ was not right and that something was really wrong with me. I kept telling myself this can’t be right. But I didn’t seek help, I was too much of a man for that. Stage two of the ‘Career View’ was not going to get me down. The fact of the matter was that I was already down. In keeping with stage two, I recognized that something was wrong.

Come with me. It’s 7.30 am and I am on my hands and knees in my bed. My jaw strains as I gasp for air……………….. etcetera. At the time of the attack I had sunk, I was ‘chaos embodied’ (Frank, 1995). I acknowledge in agreement with Frank (1995) that it is only through this retrospective gaze that I can tell the tale of chaos such was the lack of mediation in my lived chaos, my mind was filled with the fear of death. As the author notes, I felt only immediacy, my body imprisoned in the frustrated needs of hyperventilation. Karp (1996) notes that nearly everyone in his study could pinpoint the precise time, situation or set of events that moved them from the recognition that something was wrong to the realization that they were desperately sick. This was very much the case for my-self as the attack thrust me into crisis. As for many of the people in Karp’s (1996) study, this was my point of entry into the pool of the therapeutic world.

Personal note to self – a product of Scott’s reflections in 1997...

God help me, if you are there then please help me. Dazed, restless blood drags through my veins and the air is thick and grey with rain. My world is shattered. I am terrified. I am vacant, a massive void exists within me. I feel behind my eyes an insensate, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a forged nothingness. I do not know who I am or where I am going. Who will find the answers to these hideous questions? I am tired and weak. What will I do?
Diary entry – a product of Scott’s personal reflections in 1998...

Dear Diary
I will never take another antidepressant in my life. The side effects are sickening.

The hairs on my back catch the rim of the glass;
they pull me back with such vigour and thrust;
that I repeatedly smash my fleshless skull on the walls;
tingling sensations of motionless time;
to pull one’s self through the small opening;
to squirm, to writhe, to self narrate your downfall

Twenty laborious months slipping from the chaos narrative (Frank, 1995) to the want for restoration and the restitution narrative (Frank, 1995). Throughout this period I had remained within the fragmentation stage (Athens, 1995) of dramatic self change in that I was not freed from the bindings from which I had previously viewed my world, and thus I had failed to assemble a new self (Athens, 1995).

At times I could see some light, and in this way, my subsequent entrance into the provisional stage (Athens, 1995) of dramatic self change. I had reached a depth of understanding in that the viewpoints from which I had previously approached my world of experience were ill-suited for the task of traversing the social experiences that were confronting me (Athens, 1995). Simply, something had to change or I was going to break. This change in the plot represents my entrance into the quest narrative (Frank, 1995). Although not fully clear as to what I was questing for, I believed that there was much to gain from my experience of chronic illness.

Final thought of madness
This tale has no transcendent epiphany (Smith, 1999) or happy ending. I have yet to climb from my cavity of hopelessness. Depression and anxiety remain in my past, my present and in my foreseeable future. I remain within the provisional process of attempting to assemble the new, on a quest to come to grips with my developing identity. Chaos is never far from my side and I often slip into crisis. Some days I awake with hope and I attempt to use my disruption as a platform (Sparkes, 1998) from which to reconstruct my sense of self. However, I am well aware then once one’s self is fragmented, there exists no guarantee that one will develop a new unified self to replace what is lost (Athens, 1995). This concerns me deeply and in my days or weeks of solitude I truly believe that my chance to unite is lost. Such is the immediacy of the chaos (Frank, 1995).
Frank (1995) notes that the moral imperative of narrative ethics is perpetual self-reflection on the sort of person that one’s story is shaping one into, entailing the requirement to change the self story if the wrong one is being shaped. Prior to this study I was involved in self-reflection. Breaking points were reached and changes had to be made. Furthermore, in the writing of this narrative of self and whilst continuing the retrospective gaze, I have acquired the knowledge that I am going in the right direction. I’m in the process of changing my story as the wrong one was being shaped. The understanding that I have gained through this intimate experience has opened the gates to the world of narrative resources that I had previously suspected were there. I feel that the potential openings have been clarified. Insights gained via my past experiences are present within these pages and will hopefully serve to craft a bright future. At the same time, I do acknowledge as Frank (1997) and Radley (1997) argued, narrative is not in itself the royal road to an understanding of embodiment nor is it a grand solution to the multiplicity of dilemmas that accompany my current state of health.

Through my learning I have developed new standards of masculinity in place of the old; a reformulated and idealized masculinity that allows for the judgment of my manhood in relation to my strengths, perceptions, emotions, vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Why is it then that I feel emotionally naked at having told this tale? Why will I feel comfortable at letting some read it and not others? I take heart from the fact that I have not fallen into the trap of presenting a vision of masculinity that projects a unified self. In many men’s eyes within this pressurized Western culture I have not put on a brave face. I argue otherwise and suggest that in the divulgence of my emotional experiences I have done just that.

What of this narrative of self? Did you at times enter my consciousness? Have you in some way gained an understanding of my illness? Did the words I wrote elicit an emotional response from you? If this study has done some of these things then the criterion for this qualitative piece may have been met. Moreover, in collapsing the distance between my narrative and yourself, and in illuminating my experiences by peering through the auto-ethnographic lens I sincerely hope that you have gained an understanding of my life.

References


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