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8 The Narrative Construction of Self in an Ageing, Athletic Body

CASSANDRA PHOENIX AND ANDREW C. SPARKES

Introduction

Emphasising the relational nature of the self, Eakin (1999: 43) proposes that “the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others ... all identity is relational”. For him, in forming our sustaining sense of self, we make use of models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit. Importantly however, “some of these models are life enhancing, some are not”. In this sense, the self as also argued by Sparkes (1997, 2004) is socially constructed, and central to its construction are the stories or narratives told by those around us. In addition to being moulded over time via cultural narratives, selves are also shaped by and through the body. As Baumeister (1997: 192) points out, the self begins with the body, to the extent that “[U]nderstanding of selfhood begins with awareness of one’s body and the body continues to be an important basis of selfhood throughout life”. With this in mind, changes to the body may also therefore bring about changes to self (Synnott, 1993; Howson, 2004).

Using the interrelated nature of self, narrative, and the body outlined above as a starting point, this chapter explores young athlete’s narrative construction of self in time. Such an approach is both important and informative for a number of reasons. Firstly, it addresses a significant gap within the literature regarding our understanding of the self *over time*, particularly in relation to athletes and their perceptions of self-ageing. For these individuals, the passing of time and its connections with inevitable changes to the body can result in a loss of athletic performance and ultimately call into question who they are and who they think they will become. Secondly, exploring young athlete’s narrative construction of self in time can allow the fluid and dynamic interaction between self, body and social context over the life course to be examined, thereby potentially enhancing our understanding of how experiences in the present may shape perceptions of the future, and how perceptions of the future can influence experiences of the present (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Roberts, 1999; Sparkes and Smith, 2003, 2005).

Against this backdrop, in what follows, we draw upon data generated as part of a wider project exploring young athlete’s perceptions of self-ageing (see Phoenix and Sparkes, 2005, 2006a, b, 2007). Given that the methods used within this project have been outlined in detail elsewhere (see Phoenix and

Sparkes, 2006a), they will not be repeated here. Suffice to say that twenty-two young athletes (mean age of 20 years) were involved in a series of semi-structured life history interviews. Multiple forms of analyses were performed in order to explore the complexities of the data (Smith and Sparkes, 2005; Sparkes, 2005). This chapter focuses upon three distinct selves referred to by the participants as they described their experiences of the present and perceptions of their future. These are: the *sporting self* (at present), the *settled self* (in middle years), and the *reflective self* (in later life).

Present: The Sporting Self

At present, athletes live as a sporting self, enjoying the relative absence of responsibility and commitment to anything other than sport, and its associated social activities. To successfully develop and maintain a sporting self, the individual must discipline their body through investing in extensive and time consuming training regimes, and also make connections with team mates and other athletes whilst 'off the field'. Thus, to achieve and live as a sporting self, not only must the individual use their body to perform in sport, but they must also regularly interact with similar bodies via training sessions, competitive fixtures and social gatherings throughout the week. This is illustrated in the following comments from Hannah (age 21, national level netball), who said:

At the moment, life is all about having a good time. There's so much going on, training, competing, socialising. I think it's just a really great time because everybody around you is sporty and likes going out into town, going around the clubs and pubs. We don't really have any worries, other than when we're next going out (laughs), so it's just a great time to be doing your sport and spending time with your friends, without any feeling of responsibility (laughs).

As a sporting self, the focus of the present is to 'make the most of it', both in terms of the body's current physical capabilities and sporting prowess, and also the opportunities embedded within the sporting sub-culture to eat, drink, travel and 'party' with other similar bodies. Importantly, such forms of embodiment were believed by the participants to be most suited to this period in ones life because at present, the body was considered to be in its 'prime' (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006a, 2007).

Making the most of each opportunity in terms of athletic performance and socialising was also thought to provide the building blocks for a narrative of 'no regrets' in the future. The notion of 'no regrets' is exemplified in the following comments from Nick (age 23, national level hockey). He explained:

At the moment, you're sort of making sure that you set the ground work and the foundations for living your life to the full when you're middle age. Like, you're getting out and about, doing as well as you can in your sport, and getting an

education so it's just setting yourself up for life to come. Making sure that you're not going to look back and regret anything, be thinking 'oh if I'd only I'd done this' or 'if only I'd done that'. That's why I think you have to make the most of every opportunity now.

Like many of the participants each spoke of it being "better to regret what you have done, than what you haven't" and described how they sensed a compulsion to "make the most of life" while feeling as though they had no 'real' commitments to anything other than themselves. In this sense, the sporting self was relationally constructed against the self that the participants assumed would shift into the foreground of their life stories in the future as the sporting self slipped out of focus. This future self was anticipated as being 'secure' and 'sensible' and mirrored the cultural expectation to 'settle down'.

Middle Years: the Settled Self

The young athletes anticipated that the settled self would dominate their life story during their middle years. The settled self was believed to 'have it all' in terms of that which is valued in Western society: security, certainty, direction with regards to family, housing, career and finance. When asked what the term 'middle age' meant to him, Gary's (age 20, university level rugby) response echoed those of other participants. He said:

In middle age, I expect that I'll be a lot more responsible, a lot more mature, have a family and be looking after them, have a secure job and making sure that people around me are happy. Middle age takes the focus off yourself because you've got other people in your life.

As illustrated above, whereas the sporting self was believed to be responsible primarily for *itself*, the settled self has responsibility *for others*; perhaps a child, a boss, a spouse. Partly because of this, at present many of the participants interpreted the 'inevitable' emergence of a settled self in negative terms. For example, Laura (age 21, university level basketball) signaled her reluctance to become a 'middle aged' body due to the expected life style changes associated with having a full time job, a mortgage and a family. She explained:

Middle age, it's just stuff like having a boring job; I mean yeah, just working a boring job. Actually, I hope to have kids (laughs), but, um... I don't want to be middle aged, that's just like, it's like the normal thing to be (laughs), you can't do what you want to do, not like now. I'd prefer to stay young.

At present the majority of participants described the prospect of becoming a settled self as “scary”, “restrictive” and “boring” and having implications for their engagement with everyday life. For example, Greg (age 21, university level football) explained how, “If people are relying on you, if you’ve got kids upstairs, you can’t walk in [from a night out] and pass out [drunk] on the living room floor”. In this sense, the anticipated emergence of the settled self in the middle years was believed to restrict what one could do to and through their body. That is, while ‘passing out drunk’ might be interpreted as valued behavior in the context of a sporting self, it was not deemed appropriate for the settled self where the focus of responsibility shifts away from ones own body and closer towards *others*. For reasons such as these, it seemed that the settled self, its perceived associations with being boring, and subsequent stifling of ones former sporting self, further contributed towards many participants viewing their adulthood with trepidation. That said, its emergence was seen as inescapable and natural.

Later Life: the Reflective Self

Following the perceived dominance of the settled self, ageing was associated with the foregrounding of a reflective self in the young athlete’s life stories. As a reflective self, the participants expected to look back over their whole lives making sense of, and appreciating what *had been*. In its ideal form, the athletes commented that by this point in their life they anticipated having successfully responded to the cultural expectations of the sporting and settled selves. That is, their biographies would chart earlier confirmation of an athletic identity within the sub-culture of sport, followed by the identities of a parent, partner, home owner and career person. In this sense, central to the reflective self was the act of *remembering* - the sense that there was more ‘life’ behind, than ahead. The following comments from Nick (age 23, national level hockey) illustrate this more fully:

Interviewer: How do you think that you will feel when you’re 70, 75?

Nick: Hopefully I would feel that I’ve had a really good life. Sort of look back on the good times and just feel that I’ve achieved everything that I’ve wanted to achieve. Feel that I haven’t really let anyone down. I can look back and think ‘well, I’ve had a good job, had my own house and family’. I think that by then, life will feel like it’s coming to a close really, because you’ve pretty much done everything.

The reflective self is connected to the notion of looking back at what was previously gained through an athletic, social, employable, fertile, culturally attractive body. The emphasis on *looking back* for validation and reassurance in the *present* during this life stage may presumably be related to the athlete

not anticipating being *any* of these things in later life. This however, could be problematic in terms of the participants being able to develop a valued sense of self that is tied to the present as opposed to the past. Furthermore, such a preoccupation with the past may lead to any sense of future orientation diminishing as both the present and future become characterised by a sense of loss. That is, loss of a career through retirement, loss of family through children moving away, and / or a spouse, and loss of friends who are passing away. Indeed, the notion of looking back to the past, and also the present being associated with a sense of loss was exemplified by Lee (age 29, university level golf), who said:

Getting old, that's when you're just kind of sitting in a chair, sort of reflecting on what's happened and things like that... Being old I think is constantly looking back rather than looking forwards. People you class as old are always talking about how it *used to be* and things like that, whereas they don't really speak about things that they're going to do. I guess a lot of your friends have gone by then as well, you're pretty much by yourself a lot of the time. I think 'old' is when you're constantly looking back at what you've done, there's nothing to look forwards to anymore. There's nothing going on anymore.

These comments show that as a reflective self, the *past* is perceived to be valued, rather than the present. Here, a once performing and productive body becomes crystallised in the embodied memories of an ageing body as it moves through the latter part of the life course. Accordingly, for the participants of this study, old age held little meaning and virtually no other purpose than reflection and reminiscence and soon death.

Discussion

Clearly there are many interpretations that could be made of the three selves identified in this study including how the young athlete's experiences and expectations of ageing can be shaped through the type of selves they (expect to) embody. As an example, for the majority of participants, feelings of dissatisfaction towards future selves were seemingly exacerbated due to the value and importance currently ascribed to the sporting self that developed in part through their immersion within the sub-culture of sport. This belief was seemingly further solidified through the athletes understanding of the present as 'the time of their lives'. Importantly however, believing that life at present is unbeatable can prove potentially problematic for the ways in which one perceives the future. That is, if the present is seen as 'the peak', by definition everything that follows is likely to be understood as inferior. This, coupled with the sense of inevitability associated with, for example, the foregrounding

of settled and reflective selves can operate to fuel feelings of anxiety towards the ageing process.

Moreover, none of the participants questioned these culturally constructed ageing narratives. That is, all of the participants displayed a sense of impending inescapability and final acceptance of such narratives regarding settled and reflective selves being markers of ageing and therefore being natural, ahistorical innate facts of life. Of particular concern, none of the young athletes acknowledged the 'inevitability' of the settled self, nor envisioned alternative selves for this period of their life course. The inherent dangers of narrative scripts that are considered natural rather than culturally constructed are highlighted by Bochner (2002: 76). For him:

Functioning as socializing frameworks of intelligibility, these narrative scripts are woven into the fabric of our cognitive and emotional experience, and, as we come to take them for granted, we may lose sight of the ways in which they are chosen not so much by us as for us.

This point would appear to have some relevance to the participants of this study. Specifically, by viewing certain selves as a 'natural' part of life, they may become increasingly unreflexive and unquestioning of the seemingly 'finalised' (Frank, 2005) plot lines associated with the sporting, settled and reflective selves. Accordingly, it would seem that the later chapters to one's life are already known, the future appears to be a foregone conclusion and one is destined to live out a story with a pre-scripted ending. Such *narrative foreclosure* (Freeman, 2003) can reflect how the culture within which these athletes live might fail to provide adequate narrative resources for living one's life meaningfully and productively in the future and in such a way that may challenge and change the stranglehold of the decline meta-narrative currently associated with ageing in Western society.

Therefore, with regard to the cultures we inhabit providing models of identity from which we form a sustaining sense of self (Eakin, 1999), at present, it would seem that the models of identity offered to and drawn upon by young athletes *may not always* be life enhancing. By realising that selves and narratives of the life course are socially constructed, and shaped by their social context, the possibility for reconstructing alternative, multiple and varied selves and plot lines in the future is opened up. This, we believe would enable young athletes to draw upon a range of narrative resources when constructing the self over time, thereby providing greater possibilities for this population to construct and tell more positive and meaningful stories of the future and self-ageing.

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