

## I just want to be me when I'm exercising: Adrianna's construction of a vulnerable exercise identity

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“I Just Want to be *Me* When I am Exercising”: Adrianna’s Construction of a Vulnerable  
Exercise Identity

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This study explores the social and dynamic aspects of the concept “exercise identity”. Previous research, mainly in psychology, has documented a link between exercise identity and exercise behaviour. However, the process of identity formation is not straightforward but rather something that can change with time, context and interaction with others. Subsequently, the present work is informed by a social constructivist approach that views exercise identity as a social product and the formation of it as a social process. Our case study of ‘Adrianna’, examined through a biographical narrative analysis, how such an identity may be constructed through interaction and over the life course. Three themes were identified; Adrianna’s relationship to (1) significant others, (2) her body, and (3) sociocultural norms and expectations. Reflecting this fluidity of exercise identities, we suggest the alternative concept “vulnerable exercise identity” to better understand the subtler dynamics of exercise identity formation and development. Adrianna’s case is presented as a “recognizable story”, representative of the struggle many people face when trying to become more physically active in contemporary western societies.

**Key words:** embodiment; exercise identity; health; narrative; physical activity; social expectations; symbolic interactionism; work place health

## **Introduction**

In the current Western world ‘inactivity’ has become a public concern. Inactivity is assumed to lead to ‘the major public health and human welfare problem’ (Blair & Morris, 2009, p. 255) of today. As a response to this, the promotion of ‘sufficient exercise’ is regarded a public health priority (World Health Organization, 2010) and public measures are initiated within several domains (e.g. schools, leisure contexts, workplaces). Moreover, the commercial fitness sector is rapidly growing and the mass media is massively focusing on exercise and healthiness as an individual responsibility. Within this predominant discourse, a substantial section of the population still ‘fails’ to adhere to physical activity recommendations.

In an attempt to understand this ‘adherence problem’ and how individuals’ relate to the public discourse, research has focused on the role of self and identity in understanding exercise behaviour (Strachan & Whaley, 2013). How do individuals form a sense of being an exercising person, and how do they respond to the predominant health discourse by managing their individual behaviour? To this we take a sociological approach to exercise identity which points to the importance of understanding how individuals lives are “constructed and shaped by institutional processes and social structures and by individuals and groups” (White & Wyn, 2004, p. 7)

The field of exercise identity research, largely in psychology, has suggested a causal link between exercise identity and exercise behaviour (e.g., Strachan, Brawley, Spink, & Jung, 2009), as if the former were something that an individual simply ‘has’ (or has not) that leads them to exercise (or not). However sociological work has recognized how meaning making related to participation in exercise and physical activity is formative to identity creation. Although emphasize has been put on exploring specific contexts (e.g Physical Education at school), research participants found the clear contextual boundaries to be

nonsensical to them (Walton & Fiset, 2013). Similarly, Wright and Lavery (2010) emphasized how young people's physical activity identities can change from school to post school influenced by contextual conditions. In addition, Garret (2004) claimed that there are few studies addressing a lifelong perspective to illuminate how people's involvement in exercise and their exercise identity might change during the lifespan. We also argue, in line with Walton and Fiset (2013), that a careful consideration of the embodiment of exercise identities is needed. Thus, it is important to realize that the process of identity formation is not straightforward but rather something that can change with *context*, *time*, and *interaction* with others (Banberry, Groves & Biscomb, 2012). Subsequently, the present work is informed by social constructivist thought, recognizing that our sense of self is continuously shaped and reshaped by the way we understand our interactions in social situations and embedded in culture specific conditions (Lawler, 2008). Exercise identity is thus conceptualized as a social product, and the formation of it is as a social process.

In the case study we present below of Adrianna's story, we explore the following questions: How does a person *construct* an exercise identity as a situated process? How is exercise behaviour interrelated with the social settings in which it takes place? How might the sense of being a physically active individual *change* through the life course? The qualitative research approach is based on narrative methodology which recognizes a biographical perspective, which may stimulate a more nuanced and process-oriented conceptualization of personal exercise identities than seen in current psychologically-dominated exercise identity research. Adrianna's story is also valuable as a typical case or 'recognizable story' (Baerger & McAdams, 1999), representative of the struggle many individuals may face when trying to become more physically active within contemporary western societies.

### **Background: the concept of exercise identity**

Most previous research on exercise identity has been from a psychological perspective. This applies interchanging concepts<sup>1</sup> with no specific agreed upon definition, however, when conceptualizing exercise identity the literature leans on self-schema theory and identity theory, where role identities is supposed to have implications for identity related behaviour (Burke, 2006). Research based on these theories provides support for the notion that self-identification as an exerciser is reliably related to patterns and habits of exercise behaviour. Consequently, exercise identities are viewed as robust and slow to change. Once individuals endorse a role identity, they are said to be motivated to maintain consistency between their identity and their behaviour (Stets & Burke, 2003).

This approach has led to the reification of the exercise identity construct and its quantitative measurement through exercise behaviour, for example with the Exercise Identity Scale, which presumes a causal link between exercise identity and behaviour (Anderson & Cychosz, 1995). For instance, in a study of older adults, Strachan, Brawley, Spink and Glazebrook (2010) showed that those reporting a stronger physical activity identity were more active and possessed stronger and more frequent exercise intentions. Similarly, in a study of undergraduate students, Hamilton and White (2008) found that physical activity identity was the second strongest correlate and predictor of physical activity behaviour. Recently, exercise identity has been seen as a marker of psychological variables important in the self-regulation of exercise, such as self-efficacy, satisfaction of psychological needs, and motivation to exercise (e.g Vlachopoulos, Kaperoni & Moustaka, 2011).

There are a number of limitations with this research. First, Carraro and Gaudreau (2010) found that exercise identity *changes over time*. Second, Strachan claims “little work has examined *how* such [exercise] identities might be formed” (Strachan & Whaley, 2013 p.

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<sup>1</sup> Interchanging concepts used within this body of literature; exercise identity, exercise schematics, physical identity, exercise self-identity, athletic identity, sport/exercise identity, health identity

218, cf. Vlachopoulos, Kaperoni & Moustaka, 2011) through social relationships and interaction. Finally, few studies have used a *qualitative approach* (eg. Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005) and more qualitative research is advocated to clarify the significance and meaning of identities to individuals engaged in exercise (Strachan & Whaley, 2013).

Studies within the sociology of sport and physical education, meanwhile, have applied a social constructionist approach, and focused on identity as a continuous process of becoming. This literature has looked into how experiences of school PE lessons (Bignold, 2011), gender (Fisette, 2011), disability (Sparkes & Smith, 2002), age and clothes (Hendly & Bielby, 2011) can affect the construction of an exercise identity. Walton and Fisette (2013) argues that this research, as a whole, makes a strong case for the relationship between the particular context and the understanding of social identities, while their participants “did not see the boundaries of context in a fragmented way” (p. 199) when constructing cultural [exercise] identities.

Other sociological research recognizes the complex contextual influences of the school, media, families, government policy, and material circumstances. For instance, Wright and MacDonald`s (2010) longitudinal study found biographies to be produced in relation to changing material and discursive circumstances and that “attention to the complex and dynamic nature of lives is necessary to more fully understand how identities are constituted” (p. 4). For example, in relation to the current moral panic about obesity, Cale and Harris (2013) caution that the contemporary “discourse surrounding obesity in physical education and some of the reports, messages, policies and measures being taken to tackle it are misleading, misguided and could do more harm than good” (p. 433) to a individual`s (exercise) identity. Wright and Lavery (2010) also argued that negotiating a physical activity identity after leaving school introduces new dilemmas, as these choices are made in a new context of intensified media pressure and changing family relationships..

Walton and Fiset (2013) argue that we must include careful consideration of the process of embodied exercise identity. Similarly, in his study of male dancers, Gard (2001, p. 32) calls for “a relational analysis of the body in which subjective experiences is never divorced from its discursive context, but at the same time is not reducible to it”. Thus, our identities are not just who we think we are, but do also provide us with a strong sense of embodied mode of being in the world.

In this paper we use the term exercise [identity], to mean “any structured and/or repetitive physical activity performed or practiced where the main intention is to achieve improved physical fitness (Pink, 2008, p. 3). We aim to extend the outlined body of work by adopting a lifelong perspective to shed light on adults’ continuous identity negotiation of their identities in relation to significant others and within the contemporary hegemonic health discourse. This involves considering how societal pressures to be (or appear to be) an ‘exercising person’ are experienced: for example, how perceived bodily ability (Wright & Burrows, 2006) is interpreted relative to discourses about appropriate amounts and types of exercise. A case study and narrative approach illuminates how fluid an exercise identity can be throughout life, and how its construction is dependent on the shifting and blurred contextual boundaries between self and others. This in turn highlights how prominent social discourses are an interwoven part of ongoing identity formation.

### **Interactionism, embodied discourse and narrative identity**

Symbolic interactionism argues that our sense of self is influenced by the way we understand our interactions in social situations. Encounters with significant others throughout the life course shape our understanding of who or what we are and who we might become, insofar as we are concerned with how we are perceived and judged, relative to culturally normative standards (Mead, 1934). In social encounters, the involved individuals continuously ‘impinge’



on each other, contributing to the joint definition of the situation and the social construction of reality (Goffman, 1974). Identity is also relational (Williams, 2000), as individuals define themselves in relation or contrast to other people, objects, ideas and discourses. Thus, our identities, rather than our identity in singular, are seen as `self-understandings` produced both through social interactions embedded in societal discourse. Whereas Foucault's (1976) post-structuralist theory asserts that selves are merely `subject positions` as unstable discursive products, Symbolic Interactionism retains the idea of a thinking subject who negotiates this process: the self is `in flux` depending upon with whom the person interacts, in what circumstances, and to what purpose.

Within the predominant discourse of healthism (Crawford, 1980), the body has become a symbol of the individual's ability to meet the physical activity standards and how we judge ourselves. Sociologists have long argued that self-identity is embodied and that these bodies are in turn embedded in the fabric of society (Shilling, 1993). According to Bourdieu (1991) the body in modern societies has become a source of physical capital that is not only about the embodied capacity or ability to use the body, but the appearance of the body that has considerable `exchange value` in today's healthism. The appearance of the body is assumed to be an indicator of not only good health but the work done on the body, and the dispositions to managing the self that is taken to imply. Shilling (1993) describes how the body is viewed as a source of physical capital, "the possessor of power, status and symbolic forms" (p. 122). Similarly, Wright and Burrows (2006) suggest ability to be "the embodied capacities to perform movements that are located and valued because of their relationships with particular cultures and societies" (p. 285) rather than simply a measurable, observable capacity, which is the focus of many contemporary sports discourses (see for example Tinings, 2009 on `performance discourse`). Narrative accounts of embodiment reflect not just

the experience of the author, but also of the productive workings of discourse and power (Pringle, 2001).

According to Giddens (1991), the constitution of self-identity is a 'reflexive project' involving introspective questioning and sense-making through coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives. 'Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood in terms of her or his *biography*.' (Giddens, 1991: 53, italics in original). Thus despite the fluidity of social selfhood, we may perceive our identities to be relatively stable, telling the story of ourselves through some recurrent themes. For example, Gearing's (1999) research on ex-professional football players' self-narratives, found that their past sporting experience was a central theme that still continued to give meaning to their lives.

Just as we have storied lives, we have storied bodies. As Smith and Sparkes (2009) argue, 'our lives hinge on our bodies; we depend on them; engage with the world and the people around us with them; live in and through them' (p. 5). Subsequently, when investigating the place and meaning of physical activity in Adrianna's life, we focus on her ideas about 'having (or not having) the body' that fitted with dominant discourses on health and fitness, and being seen as able (or not able) to achieve this in the eyes of others. Adrianna's beliefs about whether or not she could call herself an 'exercising person' were contingent on the way she compared herself to others and the reactions she had encountered from them.

In sum, we define identity not seen as something foundational and essential, but rather as produced through three social processes: the interactions we have with significant others, the contextual and embodied discourses we navigate and the biographical narratives we use to explain and understand our lives within these discourses.

## **Method**

We adopted a narrative analytical approach, using the narrative interview technique as the method of data collection. This perspective is fundamentally concerned with understanding how people construct and continue to construct social reality, given their interests and purpose (Andrews, Mason, & Silk, 2005). Listening to and interpreting Adrianna's life story about how she became and struggled to remain a physically active woman revealed the social construction and fluidity of exercise identity, and how social discourses plays a role part in ongoing identity formation.

### *The Research Process*

The main source of data for this article was two narrative interviews conducted with Adrianna (a pseudonym), as part of a larger ethnographic study of a workplace exercise program in Norway. This larger project had included repeated interviews with 6 members of these exercise groups, diary-log books kept by 18 of these men and women, and participant observation carried out by Author A of a total of 300 hours of observations which included around 200 informal field conversations. Thus Adrianna had participated in several formal and informal field conversations and interviews about the exercise program and her participation in it (reported elsewhere, Author A and co- author, 2013; Author A and Author C, 2014). Like the other members of these workplace-based aerobics groups, Adrianna was a white, middle class woman, and was aged 53.

The narrative interviews were conducted four weeks apart. The time and place were of Adrianna's choosing, at her workplace, after working hours, in a small meeting room next to her office. The interviews lasted for one and a half hours and three and a half hours, respectively. In the first narrative interview, Adrianna was presented with a visual, though unfinished, timeline of her account of being an (in) active person; she was then asked to

reflect on this through a broad question about her exercise experiences in life. While transcribing, the researcher noted some gaps in the story and presented this as a starting point for the second interview, which encouraged uninterrupted storytelling (Chase, 2011) about her experiences of physical activity from childhood and into different stages of adulthood. Regularities between the stories told by Adrianna and others led to her identification as a typical case (Cain, 1991), which promised to shed light on the process of exercise identity formation.

### *Data Analysis*

Narrative identity research is concerned with how individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal unity and purpose from diverse experiences across the lifespan (Singer, 2004). Adrianna's narrative story underwent a thematic analysis, whereby the focus is on societal context of the narrative and less on the immediate local context of the interview (Riessman, 2008). Richardson (1990) has discussed how a single occasion of telling can be oriented to multiple audiences: a co-conversationalist, a wider audience and so on. Subsequently, life narratives can be understood as a situated construction, produced in new versions although shaped by understandings and expectations (Taylor, 2010). Thus, narratives are social, because the talk in which they appear draws on commonly held, already existing discursive resources and shared culture. Furthermore, we attempted to keep the narrative intact for interpretive purposes, preserving sequences from the story rather than coding fragmented segments of it.

Riessman (2008) argues that in thematic analysis "prior theory serves as a resource for interpretation of the written or spoken narrative" (p.73). In this case, we emphasize the social forces at work in personal narratives, as storytellers negotiate broader institutional frames. Following Cain's (1991) model of narrative analysis, we first conducted a careful textual

analysis for each paragraph, noting the main points and which episodes were included. This gave an overview of the component stories that were interwoven within the overall narrative. These stories were then sketched out with a main plotline, involving key events, characters and turning points. Finally, we identified some recurrent propositions that reappeared in the form of thematic assumptions taken for granted by the storyteller (for example, that in order to call oneself an exerciser, one must train at high intensity several times a week).

## **Findings**

As outlined above, we took a sociological approach to understand identity as relational: defined in relation to other people, objects, ideas and discourses (Williams, 2000). An exercise identity, like all social identities, is formed and negotiated in a sociocultural context, through relationships and social interaction with `significant others` (Mead, 1934). We define ourselves by comparisons with these others, in terms of contrasts, similarities and differences (Williams, 2000). Thus alongside positive self-definitions (who I am, or what I aspire to be), we find equally important negative self-definitions (who I am not, or what I can never resemble).

Consequently, we present Adrianna's story along three dimensions of social comparison that emerged as being relevant and meaningful to her and which recurred throughout her story. These were her ideas of herself in relation to her brother (being competent/incompetent), her body at other times (being overweight/normal weight), and dominating societal health/fitness discourse (perceiving herself as being a sufficient or insufficient exerciser). These themes are interpreted as essential features in Adrianna's story of the construction and (re-)negotiation of her exercise identity. Although they are represented below through episodic examples, they should not be considered as time-specific or

categorical. In the concluding discussion they are discussed as interlinked aspects in Adrianna's on-going struggle to define herself an exercising person.

*Finding her own way in the shadow of others*

Adrianna frequently compared herself to others whom she perceived to be better than herself at sports, both at school and in her family. Although she was a quite healthy and physically active child, by comparison to these significant others, she often felt that she was falling short of the standards they set. Summarizing her childhood years, Adrianna recalled an everyday life filled with physical activities: biking to school, swimming in the lake, running in the neighbourhood, and playing in the snow: *'Well, we were highly physically active, much more than kids are today, we had to use our bodies just to get to school and every other activity we participated in'*. However, there was always a cloud hanging over her head: she had neither the body nor the necessary capacity to become a *real athlete*, and nowhere was this more obvious than in the gymnastics class at school.

I truly dreaded it you know, we were all standing in line watching everybody jump the vault, and all that kept rushing through my head was, how can I possibly do this without beating myself half to death? I was short and a bit overweight and it was totally unrealistic to get over that vault. And everybody was watching each other as to see who did the best. Nobody talked about these things back then, you know, there was no talk about facilitating the activity to suit all types of children. It was just; brush yourself off and literally get back on the horse.

Like the young women with eating disorders in Rich and Evans' (2009) study, Adrianna's narrative conveys a critique of the social conditions of her school's performative culture, yet claim she was unable to 'voice' that critique within the school setting at the time, or to resist performing according to these regulatory norms and measures of corporal excellence.

According to Wellard (2006), sporting activities during childhood and school are often considered either enjoyable or unpleasant depending upon the individual's success, or not, in 'making the grade': that is, one's ability to perform appropriately, in line with cultural discourses about physical fitness. Compared to the significant others in her peer group, Adrianna perceived herself as a relatively unsuccessful sportsperson. She saw herself as lacking the necessary embodied capabilities to reach the goals and standards normatively prescribed by the dominant culture (cf. Wright & Burrows, 2006), for example, not being able to perform the movements required by her school's PE curriculum. Similarly, Cale and Harris (2009) found little evidence to support the idea that fitness testing in physical education would "promote healthy lifestyles and physical activity, motivate young people, or develop the knowledge and skills that are important to a sustained engagement in an active lifestyle" (p.89). Subsequently, Adrianna learned that within the interaction context of PE lessons, her 'exercise self' was not as strong as that of her peers, and could not fully embrace this as a social identity. Nevertheless, she continued to enjoy individual sporting activities that she could practice alone (running in the woods, swimming in the lake, and skiing), and so retained the value of an exercise identity, albeit as something that was more privatized and subjectively defined.

Often the significant others to whom we compare ourselves are those who possess an ability that we desire. The self is an internal dialogue between these two phases of 'I' and 'Me', as individuals imagine how they might appear and the public definitions are internalized into the private world of the 'I' (Mead, 1934). Adrianna's story illustrates this process, as her image of herself as lacking the 'right' kind of exercise identity came from repeated perceptions of and comparisons to Competent Others (Author C, 2007) in the sporting arena. A significant figure here was her older brother. Adrianna vividly remembered spending summers happily running, swimming and playing.

But whenever my brother came along, he always had to put a sporting spin on the play by dividing us up in teams, running on time, etc. I have clear memories of us kids running around like crazy. It was never just enough to have fun; it always had to be a competition.

Her brother was perceived as a `real athlete`, as he was one of the best cross country skiers in the country, and a lot of focus and attention was given to his training and competitions. There is an element of Clance's (1985) impostor phenomenon here, insofar as this contrast led Adrianna to think of herself as *not* a real athlete: someone who was making a fraudulent claim to the identity and thus did not really deserve it. Just as Clance (1985) found with women academics, Adrianna expressed a sense that the exercise identity was something that belonged to others, who appeared much more competent than herself: it was not something that could fit with her own self-image, and thus it remained forever out of reach.

My brother was really preoccupied with skiing and my family as well. Because you know it is kind of easy to make your family proud when you are doing good in sports, it is so easy for everybody in the local community to notice you when you are doing well and winning medals. Skiing turned out to be more or less his whole life; he still is totally immersed in his training and competitions, and that's all he talks about.

Subsequently, for Adrianna, being a competent exercising and sports person became associated with performance rather than participation. Just as with Author C's (2007) shy participants, not only was Adrianna worried about momentarily embarrassing herself through performing ineptly in front of more capable others, but she was also concerned with the consequences of giving a performance that fell below the standard of the group (school mates or family), within a sports discourse, and of being rejected by it. In addition, being short and overweight (compared to the others) was an aspect that would influence her exercise identity



construction throughout her life. Adrianna pulled away from this when she realized she could not measure up. Therefore, although her family was interested and supported her skiing, Adrianna ended her skiing career and searched for different fields of activity where she felt more competent and could *find my own way*.

### *The 'good enough' body*

We understand ourselves as social beings in part by how we move, perform and display our bodies in social space, and experience our relations with others through the body. Williams and Bendelow (1996) further argue that the *'embodied social self'* is also emotional, as feelings of self-esteem, health and wellbeing are affected by social reactions (real or perceived) to our bodies. Subsequently, learning that one's body does or does not measure up to the "normalizing gaze" (Foucault, 1976) of others or accrue social capital can therefore reinforce a self-consciousness of her bodily appearance. Adrianna's perception of her body moved from being judged on physical measurable ability to being judged on visible appearance, indicating a disciplinary ability to conform to the strict health discourse (Wright & Burrows, 2006). This involved two stages as sub-narratives: stories of first *having* and then *losing* the appropriate or adequate body.

*Having the appropriate body.* After finishing school, there came a period in Adrianna's life in her early twenties, where she was introduced to mountain hiking by her cousin. They were out all year round, hiking in all kinds of weather *'and this was highly strenuous trips, 'cos my cousin was kind of a dare devil: "the more extreme the better" was his point of view, and I kept up with him, I did'*. During this time Adrianna also started working for a national outdoor life organization, making trekking simultaneously part of her work, hobby and exercise. This was also a phase of life in which her body was close to *'normal size'*, as she described herself, being in what she considered to be the best shape of her life. She *'had the body'* that was

necessary to comfortably push herself in physical activity. This enabled Adrianna to define herself as an exercising person, and she became one - not by competing in sport, but by living an active outdoor lifestyle. The appearance of her body became an indicator of the work done on it (Bourdieu, 1991), symbolising physical fitness and health. This embodiment of being corporeally 'good enough' meant that it became less important for her to perform competitively in sport.

*Losing the appropriate body.* In her early thirties, Adrianna moved to another city to continue her education. Unfortunately this transition did not go well, as she experienced recurring illness, preventing her from exercising. Compounded by feelings of loneliness from a scarce social network, she channelled her problems into compulsive eating. Returning to her home town after two years, she had gone from close to normal weight to a 'large plus size' woman, and while she tried to get back into hiking, she soon found that she could not manage it anymore.

This is an example of what Giddens (1991) termed the 'fateful moments' in life, whereby the normality and 'taken-for-grantedness' of an individual's body-self relationship is disrupted or interrupted and so their whole ontological security becomes problematic and uncertain. Such individual experiences of biographical disruption (Bury, 1982) can be defined as turning points, 'where the person is never quite the same again in that there is a fundamental rethinking of the person's biography and self-concept as they attempt to narratively reconstruct and reinvent themselves' (Sparkes, 1996, p. 465).

One of the reasons Adrianna felt so lost in her body was that she could no longer do some of her preferred activities. In addition to some exercises being almost impossible to do with a large body, she now hated breaking out a sweat while exercising.

I have always been a person who sweats, but now [after gaining a lot of weight] it seemed to become worse, and although a lot of other people are sweating as well, I truly dread it. I feel nasty and filthy, even though I know I do not smell or anything.

Being out of breath, sweaty and tired with sore muscles, were feelings that Adrianna had previously associated with having an appropriately fit and healthy body, for example in her experiences of skiing competitions and strenuous hiking. Now, however, sweating held more negative symbolic connotations for Adrianna, for it reflected her 'unhealthy' body image. Sweating and getting out of breath became synonymous with appearing, to herself and everybody else present, as overweight. This illustrates Giddens' (1991) and Shilling's (1993) arguments that the cultural conditions of modernity have generated an increasing emphasis on social image and self-presentation, and in particular the display of ability and physical capital via the body. This discourse is difficult to navigate and often anxiety-evoking, making the maintenance of a coherent self-identity increasingly problematic.

However, other forms of exercise made fewer demands of bodily appearance, and Adrianna turned towards these. In water, for example, despite its state of near-nudity, the body can be hidden under the surface (Author C, 2010), where sweating is also less noticeable. Thus Adrianna returned to an activity that she felt great comfort in as a child: swimming and playing in the water. Every week for the last 20 years she had successfully, as she saw it, participated in a water aerobics group for overweight women. This swimming group was the only activity she had adhered to, and she spoke about with a sense of pride:

'Cos in the water big people become light, and you get a sense of achievement. And it makes it easier to exercise in an efficient way, because it is a much harder workout than you might think. In the water you can get a good workout without it being uncomfortable and you hardly notice if you break a sweat.

In sum, Adrianna lived in a body well suited for `real exercise` and strenuous outdoor life, but the loss of what she saw as a socially desirable, appropriate body, made her realize how fragile and precarious an achievement this was. In turn, she also reflected on the instability of her exercise identity, and its propensity to disruption, contingency and loss. Adrianna perceived the bodily consequences of exercise (sweating, tiredness, soreness) to be a visible confirmation of this mismatch between her old, `fit` body and her new `too large` body as signifiers of more and less successful engagement with normative standards.

Here again we see Adrianna's attitude of ambivalence towards her adequacy and acceptability within this health discourse: on the one hand, her actively constructed and hard won exercise identity seemed to have faded away with the loss of her body, yet on the other hand, she had resumed her active life and continued to attend a regular class in water aerobics, which she strove to define as evidence that she still had the remnants of an exercise identity. It seems that she was seeking to redefine the meaning the health discourse held to her, finding her own place within it. She accomplished this by widening the definitions of fitness and health to include more modest and achievable markers—ones that lay more realistically within her grasp.

*`I just want to be me when I am exercising`*

Wider cultural discourses also shape the embodied social self, as actors are exposed to images and messages about whom and what one `ought` to be. For example, Lupton (1995) demonstrated how representations of `ideal body` shapes and practices (such as dietary plans and exercise regimes) created a dominant and pervasive `imperative of health`: a strong discourse of what it meant to be healthy and how to achieve this, which became taken for granted as objective fact. Rose (1989) adds that such “disciplinary discourses” are so pervasive that they may be internalized by individuals, who turn the normalizing gaze into

themselves: we do not perceive ourselves to be externally controlled, as we apparently show willing compliance with these regimes.

A constant theme through Adrianna's life had been her focus and strong commitment to health and exercise. As one of the initiators for providing a low-scale exercise program at her work place and a strong promoter in recruiting participants, she felt she both could and should participate in one of the weekly easy aerobic exercise groups at work. However, as she struggled to participate on a regular basis, the symbolic standards underpinning this exercise program at work, also reflected in the media, constructed meanings about healthiness which took a toll on her perceived exercise identity. Once again she was, in the eyes of the others, reduced to someone who did not exercise sufficiently. As Wright and Burrows (2006, p.9) argue, "we need to consider how and what forms of physical capital [and ability] we promote, for whom, and with what effects for the formation of particular selves and social relations". Adrianna explained how the current promotion of sporting activity in terms of disciplined training and high intensity, on top of maintaining a slim body, did not match her embodied capabilities:

The strong initiative and motivation to promote a healthy lifestyle comes from within myself. But nowadays you cannot turn either left or right without bumping into commercials, ads, media that pour out information about health this and health that, but I kind of had more of this personal engagement even before the massive `health boom` came along. It is kind of a torment and makes me lose interest, `cos if you are not doing interval training every other day you can more or less just forget it. It becomes an excessive focus on exercise and much less on just moving your body and being active. For people like me, that do not have any goal of running like crazy in competitions, it should be enough to be doing normal activity and to feel that our physical condition is ok.

Adrianna struggled to find her place within the strict norms promoted by the health industry, and to be content with her own accomplishments. Her resignation to the `massive health boom` can be interpreted in line with Crawford's (1980) still very current comments on `healthism`, which imbues these messages with moral connotations: to be healthy is to be a morally good person, with self-control, while to be unhealthy implies a lack or failure in this respect. Nevertheless, the above quotation shows that although Adrianna had a knowledgeable awareness of cultural ideas about `healthy` lifestyles and exercise behaviour, and recognised that she may not measure up to these standards, rejecting them did not mean rejecting the idea of an exercise identity altogether. Instead, she sought to redefine this concept in her own terms, making the profound statement that, *I just want to be me when I am exercising`.*

### **Conclusion: the vulnerable exercise identity**

In contrast to a psychological way of measuring a (stable) exercise identity, using a biographical perspective gave us an insight into the complex social processes through which individuals navigate through different relationships, changing bodies and evolving discourses. Adrianna's narrative portrays an `energetic` woman, who has been involved in various physical activities through her life. However, three dimensions of contrast served as self-definitional landmarks in her struggle to see herself as a `real exercising person`, as she compared herself to Competent Others, a functional and socially acceptable body, and culturally defined discursive standards of health, exercise and fitness. In telling her story, Adrianna positions herself variously within, between, outside or in resistance to these dominant discourses.

Adrianna's narrative demonstrates the construction and storying of what we call a `vulnerable exercise identity`. An intriguing aspect of her case is that she saw herself as a `capable exercising person` in some situations (e.g. the swimming group) and quite the

opposite in other situations (e.g. the workplace aerobics group). A similar ambiguity was present in her childhood years: she was a practising cross-country skier and ball player yet did not regard herself as a 'real athlete' or a 'good gymnast' at school. These ambiguities are embedded in the narrative by which she still lives today: the recurring contrasts in the story created limited space for Adrianna to perceive her behaviour as consistent with the notion of 'proper' exercise. What she saw as having prevented her from successfully developing into a "genuine" exercising person was her notion of exercise, drawn from two constitutive discourses. In the first part of Adrianna's narrative, exercise was closely linked to a *sports discourse*, with its focus on measurable aspects of the moving body and comparison with other sports persons. As Adrianna realized she would never become a "real athlete" in this sense, she reconstructed her way of being physically active within a *health and fitness discourse*. This emphasizes the importance of working on the body in a quest to avoid lifestyle-related health issues, but also the equal importance of developing and displaying a "healthy exterior". As discourses also *produce* the subject and define the subject-positions from which knowledge (including knowledge of the self) proceeds (Foucault, 1976), Adrianna struggles to position herself within both discourses. With their emphasis on performance-related standards and having a functional or an visually appropriate body, they seem too narrow to include her.

Exercise behaviour is a highly embodied phenomenon, in two ways. First, the functionality of the body becomes a tool with which to perform the physical activities necessary to form and consolidate an exercise identity. Second, body shape becomes an outer display of the successfulness of this very involvement in exercise. Subsequently, Adrianna's dislike of having a larger body did not stem solely from an inner feeling of discomfort, but rather from the way it becomes a symbol of her status as a 'non-successful' exerciser. This illustrates how the body-self is embedded within discourses of health. Sparkes (1996) reveals

the fragility of a rugby player's masculine, sporting self and the problems that ensue given the limits and rigidity of the discourses available for an athlete with a chronic back problem.

Similarly, Adrianna's story raises critical concerns about the lack of availability of alternative interpretations of 'healthiness' for those who do not fit the typical model presented in dominant discourses.

Adrianna's exercise identity, constructed despite rather than within these discourses, is a site of contestation, tension and resistance. Her narrative is complex, precarious, socially contingent, and composed by opposites: it is by no means uniform, but rather divergent and context dependent. She regards herself neither as an 'exerciser' nor a 'non-exerciser' in a complete sense, but rather somewhere in between, moving back and forth between the categories. Within the limitations of the lived experiences, contextual relations and discourses in Adrianna's life, then, she constructs a vulnerable exercise identity. Her narrative demonstrates this vulnerability by showing how her exercise identity varies with changing discourses, changing social situations, changing activities and a changed body. It is succinctly expressed in her statement that, 'I just want to be *me* when I am exercising'.

By constructing such a tale of precarious identity accomplishment, Adrianna creates and sustains a sense of personal unity as what we might call *one who struggles to become an exerciser*. Moreover, her account of continuous striving carries wider cultural resonance as a 'recognizable story'. In contemporary Western societies, many people struggle to find their place as exercising persons in the tight space between the sports and health/fitness discourses. Emphasizing bodily performance and capability, these discourses exclude the less fit and able, despite the public health authorities' efforts to promote modest physical activity in order to improve health (World Health Organization, 2010). Subsequently, we argue for a wider definition of what counts as an 'exercise identity', to reflect the wider range of meanings that participants can give to this unstable concept when accounting for its place within their life



stories. Further research is needed to explore the social and cultural factors that shape the lived experience of our `moving bodies`.

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