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Case for Support from the Economic and Social Research Council Proposal

If the Shoe Fits: identification and Transition

This project investigates processes of identification; that is, the ways in which individuals acquire particular identities (Lawler 2008). Identification is, however, 'never a final or settled matter' (Jenkins 2004:5) and we will explore transitions between identities, asking how these are achieved. Building on our ESRC-funded work on masculinities in transition (Hall et al 2007; Robinson and Hockey, forthcoming), we aim to develop a nuanced understanding of identification as an embodied social process by focussing on an item of material culture, shoes, and a situated bodily practice, shoe-wearing. Rather than being functionally essential to bipedalism (Ingold 2004), shoes and shoe-wearing are markers of distinction which form part of the cultural assemblage we know as clothing, dress or fashion. As resources for identification, materials which enclose and display the body have received considerable academic attention (Wilson 1985; Crane 2000; Entwistle 2000 a, b; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Banim and Guy 2001; Weber and Mitchell 2004; Styles 2008). In particular, authors such as Entwistle (2000a) have concerned themselves with the changing historical relationship between fashion and identification. Their work draws on sociological theories that describe reflexive self actualisation, or the project of the self, as a particular feature of modern western society (Giddens 1991). According to these arguments, class and gender differences that were made evident in 19th century dress yielded to more pick-and-mix clothing practices within fragmented, 20th century social environments. The sociological case for a specifically modern 'project of the self' has however been challenged by ethnographic and historical evidence. This shows reflexive self actualisation contributing to identification in a far broader range of contexts and eras (Hockey and James 2003).

These debates ground this project. While shoes are now integral to a rapid-turnover world of consumption and disposal where mediatised celebrity culture fuels obsessive reflexivity, they also reach into mundane environments of everyday functioning, specialist spheres such as climbing, and memorable life-course transitions such as weddings. How they contribute to inevitably unfinished processes of identification – and what this reveals about identification more broadly - is therefore the focus of this project.

Reinventing Personhood Within the contemporary world of fashion, shoes have indeed been co-opted into distinctive identity 'projects'. In response to their prominence on greetings cards and in exhibitions, Benstock and Ferriss, ask 'what is it in our culture that has led to this fascination?' (2001:2). The promise of personal transformation which pervades this material provides part of the answer. Thus, shoe designer, Brian Atwood claims that: 'the relationship between women and shoes is magical: they can completely change the way a woman feels' (Buys 2006:100). 'Shoes turn you into someone else', asserts shoemaker Natacha Morro (Newman 2006: 83). Marketing data support these claims; 'shoes have moved centre-stage in fashion and have grown much faster than clothing in the last five years'; they are 'no

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longer seen as a clothing essential to be bought on a replacement basis only' (Mintel Reports, August, 2007). A 2006 Harper's Bazaar survey revealed that 25% of British women would buy shoes before paying bills.

These data appear to evidence a uniquely modern identity project, grounded in bodily transformation (Giddens 1991; Featherstone 1991; Shilling 1993, 2005; Turner 1996; Evans and Lee 2002). Yet earlier folklore similarly evokes reinvented personhood via shoes' capacity to effect quasi-magical transformation. Not only women, but other characters are susceptible. Examples include the seven league boots that aggrandise Puss-in-Boots and are common throughout fairy tales; Cinderella's 'glass' slippers; the red shoes that promise to dance Andersen's Karen out of poverty; the worn-out shoes of The Twelve Dancing Princesses which lead their suitors to either death or a throne; the red-hot shoes that kill Snow White's stepmother. In twentieth century popular culture, Dorothy's ruby slippers transport her home in The Wizard of Oz, and in boys' comics, Billy Dane scores in his magic football boots. In pop music, footwear can occupy a pivotal role within a relationship: for example, Nancy Sinatra's 'These boots are made for walking'; and the Everley Brothers' 'Put my little shoes away'.

Such examples reveal a culturally and historically pervasive scope for personal transformation via the symbolic efficacy of shoes (Verdery 1999). As objects worn on the body as it moves within social environments, shoes potentially materialise abstract notions of power and agency in their fabric. But how might this capacity for symbolic efficacy contribute to the more mundane 'transformations' that constitute identification? Certainly shoes are evident within familiar life course transitions. For example, 'growing up' into adulthood in an individualistic western society (Hockey and James, 1993), can involve the symbolic marking of independent locomotion in the purchase, retention and even bronzing of 'baby's first shoes' (Ingold, 2004); the bride's white satin slippers help shift her identity, a symbolism extended in the tying of shoes to her going-away car and the proscription against going shoeless in the bridal chamber; and the shape of a foot imprinted on a shoe may be an unbearable evocation of loss, whether in an Auschwitz memorial or a couple's once shared wardrobe. The clothing of the dead can thus 'hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening, the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life' (Wilson 1985:1). This sense of alienation from the wearer may intensify when the marks of the body are visible, as in the case of shoes (Entwistle 2000b). Thus, while shoes are today's 'hot', transformatory objects of desire (Benstock and Ferris, 2001:1), their contribution to life course transitions suggests a more enduring sphere of symbolic efficacy. With the capacity to change embodied experiences of time, place and identity, they appear within transitions between: life course categories (baby to toddler, single to married); activities (work to leisure); health and illness (orthopaedic shoes); gendered identities (from man to woman); social classes (from white stiletto to Sloan loafer); everyday and specialist competencies (mother to runner); lay and professional identities (the funeral director's shiny black shoes); the mundane and the magical (schoolgirl to disco diva).

This project therefore engages critically with arguments for a distinctively

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postmodern project of the self, resourced by relatively wealthy, aspirational westerners. It explores evidence of self reinvention across a wider range of cultural imaginaries, and considers the proposition that a focus on its role within high modernity (Giddens 1991) obscures its symbolic contribution to everyday identification.

If the Shoe Fits: Being 'Really Me' Working with an item of material culture and a situated bodily practice, we take up Jenkins' notion of an internal-external dialectic of identification, that is, 'identity as a synthesis of (internal) self-definition and (external) definitions of oneself offered by others' (2004:18). We ask how this synthesis is achieved, and how embodied subjectivities come into being, building on our work on identification (Hockey and James 1993, 2003; Hall et al 2007; James and Hockey 2007); on the role of material culture within life course transition (Hallam and Hockey 2001, Hockey et al 2007); and on gendered bodily competencies (Robinson 2008).

We draw particularly on insights from the sociology of the body. Stressing that 'selfhood does not stop at the skin', Jenkins still insists that 'it always begins – literally or figuratively – from the body. There is nowhere else to begin' (2004:46). However, if the body is key to identification, then its transformations are integral to its status as a social phenomenon. As Shilling argues, 'the body is most profitably conceptualised as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, by virtue of its entry into, and participation in, society' (1993:12). Adding items of material culture to the body – clothing and shoes – may therefore engender social transformation. But how does this figure within identification? Here the distinction between the body we are and the body we have, the 'animated living experiential body' and the 'objective, exterior and institutionalised body' (Turner 1992:41) is useful. Sitting at the boundary of the objective body-we-have, clothing locates the lived body within the social environments of identification, simultaneously 'shield and sword' (Wilson 1985:8). Drawing on the cultural phenomenology of Csordas (1994, 2002) and Merleau Ponty (1962, 1974), then, we treat shoes as integral to bodily engagement with the world, an engagement that Csordas describes as the existential ground of culture and self. Theories of haptic perception have, however, privileged manual touch. Yet 'pedestrian touch', or walking, can play an equally, if not more important role in orienting individuals within their social and material environments (Ingold 2004:330). As Warnier (2001) argues, it is in movement – or through motricity - that embodied subjectivities come into being. Mauss (cited in Warnier, 2001:7), for example, was bemused by the capacity of Kabyle men to run downhill without losing their slippers; Warnier suggests that Mauss should think in terms of the 'man-with-slippers', 'a dynamic synthesis of sensori-motricity in a given materiality' (2001:7).

These perspectives inform the project's theoretical questions. If selfhood begins from the body, a concern with the internal-external dialectic of identification means attending to embodied experience within social environments; hence our focus on 'people-with-shoes'. While all clothing evidences the curious entanglement of the biological and the social, shoes stand in an intimate relationship with the body,

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assuming the foot's shape and so marking the wearer's embodied individuality. While shoes can damage the foot, they also enable culturally-specific competencies: running, dancing and climbing. Indeed, shoes can 'produce' or 'finish' the body, most visibly in the sexy sway of elevated buttocks when high heels are worn. Gonzalez (cited in Lupton 1998:144) uses the notion of a 'prosthetic' of the self to describe objects marked by their owner's embodied usage. As such, shoes occupy the boundary between self, other and environment; externally perceptible; integral to individuals' motricity; and intimately connected with the sensory, anatomic-physiological body. Capable of transforming and being transformed by what they are worn with, shoes have relational potential within dynamic social processes (Banim et al., 2001: 5).

An individual's collection of shoes thus exemplifies Gell's (1998) notion of distributed personhood via objects and items that externalise selfhood. As Dant suggests, 'it is through this quasi-social relationship with things that individuals both express their social identity and experience their location within society (1999:2). The world of objects is, however, anything but 'still life'. Rather, Pels et al argue, objects possess 'constitutive agentic effects within the entangled networks of sociality/materiality' (1998:2). In the case of shoes, their agency is evidenced in the ways in which they condition everyday embodied subjectivity. However, if identification is an endlessly incomplete process, its changing temporal trajectory also requires consideration (Hockey and James 2003:199-214). Knowing who we are, partly derives from knowing who we have been. Memory is thus crucial to reflexivity and the 'reforging' of the self (Jenkins 2004:12). As Antze and Lambek argue 'memory serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity ... and the means for explicit identity construction' (1996:xvi).

Alongside a focus on lived experience, then, we examine the role of material culture within the formation of memory (Hallam and Hockey 2001). Here the agency of shoes is again evidenced, as they mediate between past transitions and contemporary subjectivities, embodying events and eras in their fabric and design, in their marks of wear. While the shoes of the dead can mediate for the person, the shoes of the living also have scope as biographical objects. As Hoskins argues, 'ordinary household possessions ... might be given an extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a person's life and used as a vehicle for selfhood' (1998:2). Thus, the biographical object 'grows old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner ... [i]t anchors the owner to a particular time and place' (Hoskins, 1998:8). Lupton similarly describes the autobiographical qualities of objects which may become 'signifiers and mnemonics of personal events' (1998:144). Clothing too can provide 'a springboard, an axis of rotation, or a structural grounding for a detailed account of life events', one which Weber and Mitchell (2004:4) draw upon in empirical work on abstract concepts such as identity, the body and culture. For precisely these reasons, then, we use shoes not just as a way of investigating everyday processes of identification, but also for their capacity to act as autobiographical devices.

We therefore treat the consumption of shoes as a social process that goes beyond

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isolated purchases into cycles of use and re-use as goods are transformed through incorporation into everyday life (Miller et al., 1998:8). Banim et al. (2001) suggest that clothing is consumed repeatedly, moving from 'best' to 'work' to 'scruff'. In work on second-hand cultures, Gregson (2006) similarly suggests that prioritising single acts of purchase masks cycles of use and re-use which, in cases such as shoes, may involve divestment rituals designed to overcome traces of previous ownership. This dynamic process has been described as 'appropriation'; an impersonal commodity such as shoes becomes part of the person, shifting from object to subject, from 'other' to 'self'. De-commodified, it loses monetary value and acquires personal meaning and a potential emotional charge (Lupton 1998:144).

Alongside the symbolic efficacy of shoes within everyday transitions, then, we explore their role as biographical objects that embody earlier transitional or indeed transformative moments. Binding the styles of particular historical moments with individual biographies, shoes merit an historio-biographical approach (Hockey and James, 2003) that asks how large-scale social changes are implicated in the transitions that constitute the life course.

Drawing on these sources, the study asks the following theoretical questions: (1) To what extent is reflexivity and self actualisation a pervasive feature of identification? (2) What can the consumption and wearing of shoes, as items of material culture positioned at the boundary between the body and its wider environment, tell us about processes of identification and embodied subjectivity? (3) In what ways do shoes figure within transitions between social categories and between categories of experience? (4) How, and through what mechanisms can shoes become biographical objects associated with (memorable) emotional experience?

The Programme of Work

Discussing clothing, Tseelon argues that '[w]hat is missing from the plethora of semiotic and sociological analyses of fashion styles and trends, historical accounts or psychological experiments is the reasoning given by wearers themselves' (cited in Banim et al, 2001:4). Entwistle (2000b) echoes her concern, differentiating 'fashion', as an abstract system, from 'dress', as embodied experience. These methodological critiques inform our study design. We make wearers' 'reasoning' a basis from which to engage critically with the representational focus of literary, cultural and historical studies (see Benstock and Ferriss, 2001; Riello and McNeil, 2006; Styles 2008). How research participants might articulate everyday shoe experience is not, however, self evident. Importantly, Angela Meah, the named SRF, has extensive experience in researching taken-for-granted or sensitive topics such as heterosexuality, divorce, disability, motherhood, sex (Robinson et al 2007); she is an invaluable member of the longstanding ESRC-funded research team that includes Jenny Hockey and Victoria Robinson.

Given the external-internal dialectic of identification, however, wearers' 'reasoning' alone is insufficient. As Banim et al argue with respect to clothing: '[u]ntil we actually take our clothed bodies into the public realm, into the physical and social space we

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chose the outfit for, we are guessing' (2001:1). Thus, the notion that identification has free reign within postmodernity is theoretically inadequate, given the intersubjective dimensions of being and becoming (see Woodward's (2005) discussion of 'the aesthetics of self' within the context of a mother/daughter relationship).

We therefore explore the emotional and social dimensions of shopping, storing, wearing, maintaining and disposing of shoes, using phenomenological and symbolic interactionist approaches (Blumer, 1969; Moran, 2000) that prioritise lived experience. These can address the subject-object relationship in consumption since the consumer object helps produce subjects. Such subjects, in turn, surround themselves with objects which confirm particular subject positions and identities, so locating themselves in relation to others, often occupying multiple and conflicting identities simultaneously. Mort highlights, 'a continual smudging of personas and lifestyles, depending on where we are (at work, on the high street) and spaces we are moving between' (1989: 169). Since shoes, quite literally, move us between social spaces, our aim is to make visible these processes of engendering of identities.

Focus group discussion will elicit accounts of the shared cultural imaginary which both surrounds and arises out of the everyday consumption of shoes. Case studies, comprising participant observation, video recording, photographic and written diaries, and qualitative interviewing, will use shoe shopping to initiate an exploration of embodied, emotional and social aspects of individual experience.

Through these methods, the following empirical questions will be addressed: (1) How is the social process of shoe shopping undertaken (what prompts the visit to the shop; who participates; what happens in the shop; how is a decision to buy achieved)? (2) How are new shoes integrated into everyday life (what happens to them when they leave the shop; when are they worn; how are they stored and maintained; what does wearing them feel like, both physically and emotionally; how might others respond to the shoes)? (3) How does the individual manage and experience their shoes more generally (how often and why are they purchased; how long are they kept; how does the individual feel about their shoes; how are decisions made about which shoes to wear when; what makes a pair of shoes valued; what troubles individuals about their shoes; when and how are shoes disposed of)? (4) Which shoes have been important to the individual (are they associated with particular occasions, emotions, relationships, personal experiences; what is the story of those shoes; who owns them)?

Focus Groups The project explores the way individuals relate to shoes as a category of object – and, conversely, the events and experiences to which the consumption, wear and divestment of shoes contribute. It therefore asks how shared meanings are constructed and negotiated in relation to shoes. Focus groups are proposed because, in not isolating individuals from their social context, they can 'reveal aspects of experiences and perspectives that would not have been accessible without group interaction' (Morgan, 1997: 20).

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While shoes and their wearing may not always feature within conscious reflection, spontaneous, reflexive focus group discussion can illuminate the way individuals narrate differing identities, moods and emotions as lived out through their shoe-wearing; and reveal how different group members construct their narrative identities. For example, the discourses of fell runners are likely to differ from those of women investing in potentially single-wear wedding shoes. To initiate a reflexive process and examine the relationship between shoes and their representation, images depicting different 'shoe stereotypes' (for example, white stiletto heels; Dr Marten boots; red shoes; designer trainers), will provide stimulus material. Given the project's concern with identification across the life course, participants will be divided into three age-based groups. Two additional groups will explore the views of specialist shoe wearers (for example, dance or running shoes) and individuals involved with other people's shoes (for example, children's shoes, the shoes of the dead). Five mixed-sex focus groups will therefore be conducted with 8-10 representatives of the following categories: people aged 16-29; 30-59; 60+; specialist shoe shoppers/wearers; those involved with other people's shoes (for example, parents).

Participants will be recruited from organisations in semi-rural and urban locations around Manchester and/or Sheffield: parent and toddler groups, youth groups, adult education classes, sports clubs/gyms, dance schools, charity shops and bereavement support groups. Focus group data will then be used to refine themes for exploration in participant observation and interviewing.

Ethnography & Auto-driven interviews During focus group work, four representatives of each of the five participant groups will be recruited for year-long ethnographic case-study work designed to explore their changing relationships with their shoes (20 in total). Where possible, a diversity of ages will be represented. Any shortfall in numbers will be remedied by snowball sampling among focus group members. Case studies will include at least two shoe shopping trips and three interviews per participant, with phone contact to update data and arrange shopping trips. Between the first and interviews, the SRF will also accompany participants during at least two shoe journeys or activities (from home to work; during a sport or leisure pursuit) using video techniques discussed by Banks (2001) and Heath and Hindmarsh (2002) to record participants on the move, in their shoes.

Each case study will begin with the SRF going shopping with the participant, to either buy or 'window-shop' for shoes. In the process the participant will be invited to record their thoughts and feelings using a digital recorder. Described by Kusenbach as a 'go-along', this method allows researchers 'greater phenomenological sensibility' (2003:478), and an opportunity to 'explore their subjects' stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment' (2003: 463). The first interview will discuss what happened both during a trip and afterwards, why shoes were bought or rejected, and how they are evaluated. Additionally, media and folklore images will be used to explore participants' cultural imaginary surrounding shoes. They will be asked to organise these images according to their own criteria, and make comparisons with their own

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shoes – and, if they wish, to include their own images in this exercise. Finally, they will be introduced to the use of a disposable camera and a diary, in preparation for a second interview. Following Keleher and Verrinder's (2003) work, a diary with daily closed and open questions will be kept for three months. Closed questions will record shoes worn; associated clothing, events and activities; responses of others. Open questions will explore why shoes were chosen, what emotions they evoked, whether they produced 'change' (for example, feeling relaxed after work; confident in a challenging social situation; more 'grown up', 'cool', or 'old and frumpy'), and whether any associated shifts in mood, bodily state or identity appeared to arise internally or in response to external factors. The diary will also contain space for an inventory of shoes worn during the three months and the participant will be asked to photograph each pair, in a location of their choice (see Horsley 2008).

The second interview, around four months later, will draw on the diary and the photographs as a focus for projective interviewing, enabling 'autodriving' to be conducted. This innovative method generates interviews driven by stimuli drawn directly from participants' own lives (Heisley & Levy, 1991: 257), and allows them to speak with authority (Sherry, 1988 cited in Heisley and Levy, 1991: 257). To a degree, then, participants will 'interview themselves', imposing their own forms of organisation upon the data they choose to include (Bagnoli, 2004). Alongside their independently recorded reflections upon shoe practices, the video material recorded by the SRF between the first and second interviews will be shown to the participant, allowing them to revisit their own experience and respond to its externalised representation. As Pink argues, enabling a participant and the SRF to review video material together constitutes 'a focused, mediated and documented means of collaboratively exploring ... multi-sensorial knowledge' (2008:188).

A third interview will focus directly upon the role of shoes as biographical memory objects. Following Banim and Guy (2001), who interviewed respondents at their wardrobes, participants will be encouraged to use their shoes and shoe cupboards as 'props' during this interview, generating insight into the integration of shoes into everyday life as well as fostering recall of occasions that impacted on changing and enduring aspects of the self. Just as Banim and Guy's (2001: 206) respondents described garments having 'histories', so third interviews will involve reflexive discussion of shoes' capacity to embody key biographical and historical moments, to generate memories of the self.

Frameworks and Methods of Analysis Data generated through these methods will include: focus group transcripts; fieldnotes; participants' diaries and photographs; interview transcripts; and video recordings of shoe wearing. These will give insight into the nature of embodied experiences of transition, and participants' scope for agency within such processes, so illuminating the nature and pervasiveness of self actualisation. In that these data will constitute both reflexive accounts of participants' lives, as well as images that can act as cultural inventories (Heisley & Levy, 1991), they will be used to develop theoretical insight into the synthesis of internal and external definitions of oneself within identification. All data will be coded using NVivo8 . Coding will be organised to reflect the ways in which the

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cultural imaginary evoked in different forms of representation relates to embodied and emotional experiences of shoes. Key themes anticipated include: transition; transformation; self perceptions; experiences of the body; emotionality; shoes in social context; responses of others. This analysis will draw on the applicants' shared expertise in the areas of: embodiment; identity; ageing and the life course; the interpretation of everyday life; popular culture; gender; and the sociology of the emotions.

Outputs and Impacts

1. A dedicated website developed and maintained by the SRF with information about the project; contact details for the research team; links to related websites and sources of information; and blog space for members of the public and other academics to contribute to the project;
2. A workshop to 'test' preliminary findings by inviting project participants to contribute as both speakers and members of a small academic and practitioner audience. Angela Meah, the SRF, co-ordinated a similar event for the team's previous ESRC-funded project;
3. To maximise knowledge transfer, a mobile exhibition of visual data (in the form of a DVD), anonymised textual extracts and shoes will be mounted by a curator, in collaboration with participants. Venues will be retail outlets where the display of these objects/texts will use the aesthetic of shoe merchandising to 'make strange' and thus encourage customers to reflect upon their everyday consumption and shoe-wearing practices, as well as the place of shoes within their everyday and earlier lives. The DVD will also be offered for screening at a local cinema;
4. Pilot work on shoes with a local school will be undertaken to encourage creative participation in research among children;
5. A one-day symposium at which the applicants will present their findings alongside speakers from cognate areas (a similar event successfully disseminated work from a previous ESRC project);
6. Papers from this event will be published, either in an edited collection or the special issue of a journal such as *Fashion Theory* or the *Journal of Material Culture*;
7. Three to five papers will be presented at academic conferences and practitioner events;
8. Five articles will be submitted to scholarly journals such as *The Journal of Material Culture*; *Body and Society*; *Fashion Studies*; *Time and Society*; *The Sociological Review*;
9. Two articles written in a lively, accessible format will be disseminated among practitioners (podiatrists, chiropodists, shoe and fashion designers, sports shoe designers, and sports psychologists) via journals such as *Research Quarterly in Exercise and Sport*;
10. A co-authored volume will be produced for level 3 undergraduate, postgraduate and academic research audiences. Accessibly written, it will also make findings available to a wider public;
11. A PhD thesis.

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