

1 Identity, Becoming and Shoes

We're introducing our work on shoes by talking about some of the theoretical and methodological challenges thrown up by the concept of identity, particularly the implications of treating identity as always in process – an endlessly incomplete 'becoming' – along with methodological questions about *how* we 'become' and how we can do justice to this as sociologists. Our theoretical interest in shoes and identity is rooted in two previous projects: one on heterosexuality that looked at the way people from different generations within extended families took on a heterosexual identity – or not. We were interested in becoming, or transition, across social or familial time – as well as historical time, for even hegemonic heterosexuality changed since the 1930s when our oldest participants grew up. Our project on masculinity looked at transitions *within* the individual, exploring the way men 'did' identity at work and at 'home'. Did they 'become' a different kind of man in the time and space between these environments?

So we're asking how sociologists can explain the subtleties of becoming a somewhat different person, particularly when Romantic notions of an enduring interior self remain pervasive. Our approach reflects the call for a return, not to the 'the body', but to embodiment, the lived body that is the site of subjective experience. **2** Jenkins argues that although 'selfhood does not stop at the skin ... it always begins – literally or figuratively – from the body. There is nowhere else to begin' (2004:46). So his work makes the body key to identification – and we're focussing on its transformations as a way of understanding processes of becoming in that these are integral to its status as a social phenomenon. **3** 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).

Since we're treating identification as an embodied social process we've chosen a situated bodily practice, shoe-wearing, along with an item of material culture, shoes. Both shoes and shoe-wearing have been described as markers of distinction which form part of a cultural assemblage that includes clothing, dress or fashion. Shoes are not functionally essential to walking. Wearing them atrophies the sole muscle which

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otherwise wraps around even jagged, stony ground quite comfortably. ⁴ Today shoes are part of a rapid-turnover world of consumption and disposal - and we plan to examine this. But shoes also reach into mundane environments of everyday use, as well as specialist spheres such as climbing, and memorable life-course transitions such as weddings.

From fetish wear to football boot

Any glance at displays of greetings cards and gift items shows the prominence of shoes in popular culture. ⁵ In 2001 Benstock and Ferriss asked ‘what is it in our culture that has led to this fascination?’ Part of the answer is the promise of personal transformation that shoe advertising and imagery often offers. Shoe designer, Brian Atwood claims that: ‘the relationship between women and shoes is magical: they can completely change the way a woman feels’. Shoemaker Natacha Morro says ‘Shoes turn you into someone else’. Marketing data show that ‘shoes have moved centre-stage in fashion and have grown much faster than clothing in the last five years’; they are ‘no longer seen as a clothing essential to be bought on a replacement basis only’ (*Mintel Reports*, August, 2007). In 2006 a *Harper's Bazaar* survey revealed that 25% of British women would buy shoes before paying bills. ⁶

All this suggests a uniquely modern identity project which prioritises bodily transformation. ⁷ But earlier folklore also depicted quasi-magical transformations in stories of shoes: ⁸ the seven league boots that lend *Puss-in-Boots* aristocratic status; *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. ⁹ In pop music, footwear can be pivotal role to a relationship: Nancy Sinatra's ‘These boots are made for walking’; and the Everley Brothers' ‘Put my little shoes away’.

These materials – contemporary and traditional – all suggest that shoes have some kind of symbolic efficacy. Worn on the body as it moves within and between social environments, shoes potentially

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materialise abstract notions of power and agency in their fabric. But what about the more mundane ‘transformations’ that make up identification? Certainly shoes are evident within familiar life course transitions. **10** For babies ‘growing up’ into independent adulthood in an individualistic western society, walking can be symbolically loaded - their first shoes may be kept and even bronzed for display. White satin slippers help shift a single women’s identity as she walks up the aisle, symbolism extended in the traditional tying of shoes to the going-away car. The shape of a foot imprinted on a shoe can also evoke loss, **11** whether in an Auschwitz memorial or a couple’s once shared wardrobe. **12** Elizabeth Wilson talks about the *clothing* of the dead ‘hint(ing) at something only half understood, sinister, threatening, the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life’ (Wilson 1985:1).

The project starts this autumn but people are already giving us their stories. The following account shows shoes being used to restore an earlier identity at the time of death: Pauline, in her 60s, described the final years of her mother’s life when she changed from someone very physically active, obsessively busy with housework, very concerned with her physical appearance and a self-confessed hatred of ‘old age’ to someone inactive and disconnected from life. One of her hobbies into her late 70s had been ballroom dancing – and she could manage high-heeled shoes with ease and style. Her deteriorating mobility and frequent falls forced her to wear ‘sensible’ shoes. **13** As Pauline said, ‘when she died my daughter and I went to the care home to clear the room. We had to choose her clothes for the coffin and the outfit we chose was smart – but still glamorous. We looked at the shoes in the wardrobe and agreed that Nana could not be seen dead in them! In a large department store, we found just the right ones – they were extremely elegant, not too high, looked expensive (indeed they were) and something she could wear to a dance. We declined offers of trying them on and giggled about how - as long as they were big enough – it didn’t matter. The shop assistant seemed puzzled by our state and we did not feel the need to explain. Buying the shoes gave us a real sense of achievement as if we had done something really important that we knew she would have loved. Writing this has made me feel terribly sad, I think because she could not see for herself that we would not let her leave without being ‘properly turned out’.

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So, while shoes have become today's 'hot', transformatory objects of desire, their contribution to this family's experience of a life course transition suggests a more enduring symbolic efficacy. With the capacity to change embodied experiences of time, place and identity, shoes appear within transitions between: **14** 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).

Fashion theorists have argued that *all* clothing evidences a curious entanglement of the biological and the social - but shoes stand in an intimate relationship with the body, 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 swaying of hips when high heels are worn. Gonzalez refers to 'prosthetics' of the self when describing objects marked by their owner's embodied usage. As such, shoes occupy the boundary between self, other and environment.

This approach promises to help us understand how people 'move' between activities and identities, how they 'become'. But we're also interested in the way shoes can transcend time, fusing past and present identities in the moment. Knowing who we are, partly derives from knowing who we have been. This kind of memory is crucial to reflexivity and the 'reforging' of the self. **15** As Antze and Lambek argue 'memory serves as both a phenomenological ground of identity ... and the means for explicit identity construction'. So shoes can be both bodily prosthetics and biographical objects. As Hoskins says, such objects 'grow old, and may become worn and tattered along the life span of its owner ... (they) anchor the owner to a particular time and place'. So shoes can act as autobiographical devices as well as revealing everyday processes of identification. This is evident in another example of the anecdotal material we've been offered: Grace, in her eighties, described the pair of small Wellingtons that her mother displayed on a doll-

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size sofa in her living room. They had belonged to Grace's 5 year old nephew who had died whilst undergoing surgery for a congenital heart condition. **16** Grace said 'when you look at them you can see him kicking up the leaves – a happy little body. He was there and then three days later he was gone'. His Wellingtons stand for this poignant memory, long long after the nephew's death, quite literally moving Grace as she recalls them.

How will we carry out this work?

We're combining a focus on representations of shoes – the promise of transformation – with indepth work with individuals. **17** So our project student will work with folklore, popular culture and advertising materials – and observe – possibly participate – in the consumption of shoes. This will take place at shoe shops of different kinds: specialist sports shoes – high end fashion shops – and charity shops where the shoes of the dead often end up. This work will complement the data collected by the research assistant. **18** They will begin with 3 focus groups recruited on the basis of age and gender – reflecting our interest in age-based life course transitions – and combine women and men equally. A 4th group will recruit people with a specialist shoe interest such as sport – and a 5th will comprise people responsible for someone else's shoes – their children's or possibly dead family members. **19** From around 50 focus group participants we'll recruit 20 for year long case study work. This involves:

First Interview: to include a shopping trip, to browse or buy shoes – to be discussed during the interview. Images of shoes will also feature in discussion – our own and those of participants.

After the interview people will begin a shoe diary of what they wear and buy – and what this meant to them. And we'll encourage them to attach pictures. We'll maintain contact and accompany them on further shopping trips or outings in their shoes – and video them wearing their shoes.

Second Interview: will utilise diaries, photographs and video materials as a focus for building the picture of the participant's 'life in shoes'

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Third Interview: will focus on shoes as biographical objects - shoes that have been important, particularly at key moments of transition – and if participants still have those shoes we will work with those.

Conclusion

Put together, then, these methods are designed to tell us about the integration of shoes into everyday life and allow us to explore people's memories of occasions that impacted on changing and enduring aspects of the self. We've only outlined the activities planned – but participation by the people among whom we'll be working has been a watchword – and will continue to be so. By choosing an item of material culture with both a broad cultural resonance and an intimate relationship with the lived body, we aim to address the methodological problems that working on abstract identity categories can bring. Sociological concepts such as gender, ethnicity, heterosexuality, age are shared with the people among whom they work. We can ask people about them directly - but the more privileged those who inhabit them are, the less apparent the distinctiveness of these identities are likely to be to them – for example, if they are heterosexual or male their identities are unmarked and potentially less visible to them. Grounding our project in an embodied experience, and locating ourselves in environments where shoes are bought, worn, stored and disposed of, provides a way of working *with* participants towards a subtler understanding of identity as a lived process of becoming.