

Who do you think you are?

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Rachel is going to present some of the very early findings from a 3 year ESRC funded research project at Sheffield University in Sociological Studies, but before that I'll give you an outline of the project itself – to let you know what it is about shoes that interests us.

We have been working together since September 2010. My background is in work on identity – who we think we are – and Rachel is interested in how we live out our identities in the ways we move, hold ourselves and interact with one another. What does this tell us about being a particular woman or man, our class, our age? So together we want to get a better understanding of identity, not as a label we hang round our necks or the information we wrote on our census forms – but as something that resides in our bodies as we go about our everyday lives and mix with other people who have similarly embodied identities (Jenkins, 2004). And this is not necessarily easy to describe to someone else – like a researcher – precisely because it is so much part of just being ourselves.

This is where shoes come in. So far we've carried out focus groups with people of different ages, backgrounds, and relationships with shoes, asking them to discuss what part shoes play in daily life and in being themselves. In the summer we're starting work with 20 people, also very different, asking more in-depth questions about their memories and experiences around shoes. But because shoes aren't just static objects – they sit between our bodies and the ground beneath our feet and move along with us – Rachel will be going out and about with people, when they're shoe shopping, taking part in sport or leisure – or maybe just walking around the house or going to the front gate. We'll talk to people *as* they move about in their shoes and we'll film them, the way their bodies move, the clothes worn with the shoes, the expressions on their faces.

Some people only have one or maybe two pairs of shoes – others have hundreds. I've surprised myself to find I've got over 50 pairs, all told. But even if we only have one pair, we're unlikely to keep them on 24/7. So taking shoes off and putting them on, or choosing one pair rather than another, patterns our time, probably marking the difference between day and night – but also between being at home and being at work, or out shopping, or at a wedding or funeral, or climbing or dancing. So getting into the details of people's shoe lives takes us a long way into the fine grain of how they live out their identities. It makes us aware that they are likely to move between different roles or aspects of themselves – so we are treating identity as something dynamic that accommodates to different things we choose to do, or different people's expectations of us. It doesn't always accommodate smoothly – we may find ourselves 'wrong-footed', 'out of step', 'putting our foot down' even – but being able to imagine ourselves 'in someone else's shoes' is an important skill for fitting into our family, work setting and so on.

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Sociologists do already talk about identity as a process, as something multiple – and something that takes shape through our interactions with other people – those who we ‘identify’ with – and those who we see as very different from ourselves. How other people see *us* is of course the other, important, side of the coin and we may know the experience of being stereotyped or looked down on by other people. But until recently sociologists haven’t given a lot of thought to the fact that what we think and say is just a small part of all this. Human beings have and are bodies and relate to each other as embodied creatures. So if we properly want to understand identity we have to work with the body.

So, on the theme of the body, as well as moving between shoes and therefore different elements of who we are, shoes move or change *us*. They alter the shape of our feet – for better or worse – but also affect our whole body shape. High heels are the obvious example. And that’s before we even take a step. Once we start to move, our shoes seriously influence the way we walk, our posture – and also how we get about the world (running, climbing, taking a taxi, riding a bike).

Another part of our project is about shoes as objects – the memories that shoes can hold – and how the properties of shoes help this along – their feel and smell, how they might date and therefore take us back to a particular era we’ve lived through. So shoes can ‘move’ us emotionally, they can ‘take us back’ to the time when we were starting out in a new job, or an important relationship. Someone else’s shoes may have even more impact – our children’s first ‘proper’ shoes – the shoes left behind when someone dies, the shape of their feet imprinted on the leather, a very personal smell lingering inside, scuff marks from the life they lived, a shiny surface reflecting all the care they invested. So shoes can act as symbols – they can conjure up a whole set of memories, rather like the smell of perfume, tobacco or food.

So: the list adds up. Shoes play their part as we live out the twists and turns of who we are, getting up in the morning, getting sick, getting married. They also work on our bodies directly, changing our posture and style of movement. And they can move us emotionally, something about them enabling us to return to earlier times, with pleasure or with pain. High fashion shoe advertising promotes the idea that shoes can change us – we’re often sold the promise of transformation. One designer said ‘the relationship between women and shoes is magical: they can completely change the way a woman feels’; a shoemaker said ‘Shoes turn you into someone else’. But shoes have a historical presence that is not so different. Many fictional characters go up in the world when they wear the right shoes: Puss-in-Boots seven league boots; Cinderella’s ‘glass’ slippers; the red shoes worn by Hans Christian Andersen’s Karen, Dorothy’s ruby slippers, Billy Dane’s magic football boots.

And shoes themselves change, just as being human is a strange combination of remaining who we are whilst undergoing routine or one-off changes. So the thing we call a shoe has its own life and identity. It changes – and this can occur within a single pair as they move from shoe shop to recycling bin or charity shop – or in the design of particular kinds of shoes, or in the role a particular type of shoe plays, why it is bought and where and how it is worn, by whom. All these are dynamic processes and the sport shoe exemplifies this very effectively. Before the late nineteenth century there were few specialised sports shoes and even after that some people would adapt shoes designed for other sports – road runners might wear cycling or bowling shoes.

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During the early twentieth century all sorts of differentiated sports shoes became available but something resembling the all-purpose training shoe that we know today didn't appear until the mid-70s. Trainer production is now a multi-million dollar industry and trainers are designed to appeal to many different markets. But what do potential consumers make of them? Rachel will describe what we're finding.

Just to sum up - today's shoe advertising and the magical shoes of fairy tales suggest that what we put on our feet can have some kind of symbolic power. But even if we all had the same disposable income as Imelda Marcus, not everyone would spend it on shoes. Many people wouldn't describe themselves as shoe lovers. Most of us have shoes we take very much for granted. It is precisely these variations and subtleties that we need dig into as sociologists trying to understand the complexities of identity. Blanket statements won't do. What we need to understand is how people come to differ from one another and what they all share, how staying the same involves changes of many kinds. Using the example of trainers we give you a taste of how we're going about this task.

The Case of Trainers

In order to explore all these issues that Jenny's been talking about we're conducting focus groups and case studies as Jenny mentioned earlier - and I'm currently in the middle of the focus groups. Each group consists of 6-8 people and lasts between 1h30 to 2h. I've completed 8 so far, totalling 58 people from different socio-economic backgrounds, including men and women and people of different ages, from 18-88. There are another 3-4 focus groups to go and these will take place in May. After that the case studies will begin.

Today I'm going to discuss just a few of the preliminary findings in relation to trainers that have emerged from the focus groups that have been conducted so far. As the research is qualitative - working with a relatively small number of people to gain a depth of understanding rather than quantitative, where a larger section of the population can be canvassed but which normally lacks depth of understanding. Therefore we do not make any claims that these findings are representative of the wider public but what they do provide is a more detailed understanding on some people's identities in relation to shoes and this includes their trainers. This in-depth approach allows us to ask what is going on in people's lives as well as why things are happening in the very particular way that they are.

From sport to street?

The fact that only 20-30% of trainers are worn for sport and physical activity indicates that the trainer has indeed made the transition from sport to street. However, within our focus groups, we found significant gender differences in relation to this. For many of our female participants, and some of the men too, trainers have not yet made that transition from sport to street. Most of our participants owned a pair of trainers (usually only one with the exception of some of the young men and women) and they would be worn only for sport or physical activity such as going to the gym, running, skateboarding, golf, walking and playing basketball. Our research participants also made a significant distinction between different kinds of trainers, particularly Converse and sports trainers. As Tenner (2004) notes, since the early 1990s,

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consumers have been rediscovering Keds and Converse. This is part of a broader resurgence of the retro look in a postmodern society where the search for authenticity has brought the original models of the canvas sports shoe into youth cultures as a fashionable everyday casual shoe that is no longer associated with sport.

Nor are trainers universally loved and appreciated. The strength of negative feeling some of the female research participants associated with trainers came somewhat as a surprise. Trainers are the second best selling shoe world wide and a cursory look at what both men and women are wearing on their feet in any high street in Britain illustrates their popularity as casual leisure wear. But it seems the sales figures and the numbers of people wearing them belies what is for some a far more complex relationship with the trainer.

When trainers first came up in the discussion in the older people's group and the female shoe lovers group many of the participants recoiled in their seats and pulled faces to indicate disgust. Typical responses were 'Urg, urg', 'ugly', 'horrible', 'I do not like trainers' and 'I don't find trainers aesthetically pleasing'. The reaction of the older people's group went along the lines of:

F [They're] the worse things they brought [out] because they are destroying people's feet, sweating and horrible and they, and when they take them off they smell horrible.

This response echoes the medical advice and the rhetoric of competing shoe manufacturers in the 1950s when trainers first started to become popular. Life and dress was becoming more informal after the Second World War and trainers were gaining a greater percentage of the market share, especially of children's shoe sales. At the time, both the medical profession and leather shoe manufacturers warned against the dangers of rubber-soled canvas shoes, as they were thought to cause flat feet, fat feet, swollen ankles and in-growing toenails. By the 1960s however, medical opinion was starting to change; the so called 'dangers' of the trainer to growing feet were dispelled and their comfort compared with more formal shoes began to be regarded positively (Tenner, 2004: 88). Indeed, it was during this period that Converse coined the term 'limousines for the feet' (Gill, 2006: 337).

Comfort was almost universally acknowledged by our research participants, as one of the older men said:

M Trainers are comfortable aren't they. Comfortable to wear. I wear them for bowling you know.

Nevertheless, for some, owning trainers was a disagreeable necessity due to the need to have the appropriate footwear to exercise in. This was discussed in the female shoe lovers group:

F2 I've got some trainers with me actually and I bought them the other day, I did not want to buy them at all but I've started going to the gym, my boyfriend said you can't go to the gym wearing ballet pumps [laughter from the group] It's a valid point to be fair, so but I just resent spending money on shoes I don't like, it's like oh God, I'd rather flush it down the toilet.

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F3 Yeah, I had to buy a pair of trainers for the same reason.

Other reasons for buying and wearing trainers included foot problems that limited people's choice of footwear. For some, trainers were suitable but for others the structure of the shoe was too weak and several participants found that after wearing them for a couple of weeks any support they initially provided was gone. One woman in her 60s had a pair of orthopaedic trainers that she wore most of the time. Having to wear them had a negative effect of her sense of self but she had been told to wear them by her chiropodist, as she explained:

F I've got special ones, you know, where, to support my ankle...
And I feel awful, you know...you can't get dressed up or anything.

FAC Do you have to wear these trainers all the time?

F No, I've got some other shoes but they kill me [laughs]. You know, I've got the inserts and that but these [trainers] have got the support round the ankle, you know, because my, I go over on it and they're very weak my ankles and my feet... it's a necessity for comfort because you've got a thick sole that cushions your foot from the floor.

Some of the other women also experienced negative feelings when they wore trainers. How trainers made people feel about themselves and how they effected their mood is illustrated further in the following quote from an 18 year old women:

F6 I've got trainers but I, but I don't really wear them because I just feel very dowdy and, if I've got a pair of trainers on it's like I just don't feel right really [laughs]. Which is silly because, you know, you can do, you can get around in trainers can't you? [laughs]

This sense of feeling 'dowdy' and 'awful' when wearing trainers, however, is closely tied to the participants' gender identity and what 'dressing up' for a woman means and what 'dressing up' for a man means. Both men and women agreed that shoes 'finish off' an outfit and for many of the women trainers were seen as 'manly' and unfeminine because they made their feet look big, as this discussion from the young women's group illustrates:

F2 And they make your feet look big.

F3 Yeah, I'm really paranoid about having big feet. [laughs]

F1 Definitely. I think that's probably one of the reasons I don't wear them because I've got six seven feet, so they're huge and trainers just aren't flattering.

F2 Yeah, like my gym trainers, like they fit me perfectly and I only have like a size five and a half feet but no matter what I'll look down and be like how have my feet got so big?

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[laughter]

F1 Because they're all laced up so there's no like gap.

F2 Yeah.

F3 Yeah, it's like pumps because they're like, they're thin they make your feet look really tiny so they're kind of like, you can use them in the same situation you'd wear trainers but like just make your feet look nice and small. [laughs]

FAC So what is it about big feet?

F2 They're quite manly.

F6 Manly.

F1 Yeah.

F2 It's really unfeminine to have big ugly feet. [laughs]

F1 Yeah, clumpy feet.

F3 And you just look unbalanced.

F2 Yeah.

This group of women, as well as the female shoe lover's group and many, but not all, of the women in the other focus groups prioritized being seen as attractive to men and the sports trainer was seen as antithetical to femininity. There were indications that their sexuality and therefore their acceptance into the heterosexual domain would be in jeopardy if they did not adhere to a normative feminine appearance in specific spaces and places. Ideas of woman's heterosexual desirability can be seen to play a critical role in these women's choice of shoes and their emotional relationship with trainers, as is illustrated when one young woman in her late 20s began to reflect on these issues:

F2 But my boyfriend said to me the other day why don't you ever wear trainers? And I said well I just don't, I just don't really like them, he said oh, because he showed me some Adidas shell toes, big round toe, I was like even, even my New Balance ones are a bit pointy and they're trainers [laughter from the group]. And I was like Chris, there's no way that I could wear them, they've got a big round toe and he was like [laughter from group] alright then, well have some more pointy ones, and I said well I don't want to wear them, he said well I think girls look cute in trainers.

F1 Oh.

F3 Oh no.

F4 Ooh.

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F2 And I thought, maybe I should buy some trainers, that's a bit sad isn't it?

F3 Yeah.

F1 Oh so that would be to please him wouldn't it?

F2 So then it did make me think, yeah. Do I just dress for other people? I don't know.

'Dressing up' as a heterosexual woman for most entailed wearing painful high heels and small dainty shoes. The lack of comfort and potential damage to women's feet, which may cause health and mobility problems in later life has become a normalized - by which I mean an accepted and expected - part of an emphasized feminine identity. This is also evidenced in health statistics as at any one time one fifth of the population is being treated for foot problems - women are disproportionately represented in this figure and usually begin receiving treatment around the age of 55.

Men, however, have fewer foot problems caused by ill-fitting footwear. Comfort and foot health seemed to be of greater concern to the men in the focus groups. Comfort was in fact expected. Painful feet caused by ill-fitting footwear is not linked to ideas of masculinity - in fact the opposite. In relation to masculinity functionality, technology and the performance of sports shoes, even when not worn for sport, are important signifiers linking trainers more broadly to ideas of hegemonic masculinity.

Advertising for trainers is mainly targeted at boys and men, and uses powerful notions of masculine identity to sell trainers to the male market. Images of competitiveness, aggression, action, physical prowess, success, skill, competence and male bonding are all used to promote sales. Along with an emphasis on technological development, which, it is claimed, can improve sporting performance - despite the fact that the leading sports companies spend substantially more on advertising than on the research and design innovations that much of the advertising is using to promote the next model (Tenner, 2004: 97). The gendered naming of some trainers, such as 'Warrior', 'Tiger' and 'Revenge Plus' (Boydell, 1996: 123) also epitomize the traditionally masculine characteristics of competition, speed, strength, skill aggression, power and force. Indeed, some of our male research participants had a detailed knowledge of the technology of different sports shoes.

Whilst there was an acknowledgement of the aesthetics of men's shoes by some of the male participants, the function, comfort and technological developments were at least as important for most. However, when it came to talking about trainers as status symbols communicating both status and subcultural affiliation to specific youth and sports subcultures, all the participants were aware of this function of the trainer and the subtly in the distinction of how different trainers are worn depending on the affiliation. Whilst many of the older research participants were aware of these differences, they did not necessarily have the relevant subcultural knowledge to 'read' the meaning of the different styles and brands. As one of the older men commented:

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M2 ...for many young people, young men particularly they're a big fashion statement aren't they... how you wear them and how you lace them and all that.

The trainer market has diversified to such an extent that the myriad of different models and special editions released each year is something only the true connoisseur would be able to navigate. But even the connoisseur may struggle to 'read' all the subcultural meanings - the different ways of wearing trainers and the different markings on them. For example, one of our younger male participants had been a skateboarder and he explained:

M3 ... all of my shoes up to now, even now are influenced by when I used to skateboard because when you skateboard like it was not only a fashion thing that you used to wear sort of slightly bigger shoes, you wouldn't wear really small trainers, it was also a functional thing because they'd just get ruined, so you couldn't have like suede on your trainers or anything because it'd just get ripped off, there'd be no point... you can usually tell by how battered somebody's shoes are whether, what kind of skateboarding they do, like if a certain area of their shoe is bad [worn] you know what they've been doing because the same tricks hit the same areas of your shoes.

Here, the young man is emphasizing the function of the shoe as it is used for a specific form of physical activity that has certain requirements in the design. This is coupled with a concern for image, but most tellingly in regards to his 'core' status in the skateboarding community, the knowledge and expertise required to 'read' the story of the skateboarder's performance from the areas of the shoe that are most worn out. Which is something that I, as someone who has never been part of that subculture, cannot read. So in some senses the skateboarder's identity is physically marked onto the shoe - for others 'in the know' to read.

He also went on to talk about celebrity endorsements and the powerful impact this can have on one's own sense of being part of a certain community. Key athletes within certain sporting communities are often used in advertising to provide credibility to the claims that the design of certain trainers will improve sporting performance. One of the most well known being Micheal Jordan donning black and red Nike Air trainers whilst making legendary jump shots. The equivalent in skateboarding a few years ago was Eric Koston, who at the time was one of the best skateboarders on the international circuit and released his own model of skateboarding shoe:

M3 ...there's like seven different models of shoes and I have threes, fours and fives, when I was about thirteen or fourteen I used to be really into that, they were, I went from a three to a four to a five, as they sort of came out. I guess because I wanted to sort of associate myself with that kind of skateboarding I suppose.

FAC So did wearing those shoes make you feel like you were going to be a good skateboarder?

M3 Oh definitely, yeah, if I wasn't wearing skate shoes then it would have, it would have made me feel a lot less confident about sort of what I was doing

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and also it would have definitely adversely affected other people's views of how good I am as a skateboarder, they, they're so important in terms of signifying your sort of style of skateboarding and how much you skateboard.

So it would seem that trainers are central to skateboarding identity. This is both in terms of the relational aspect of how we see and understand each other depending on our own specific set of knowledges and experiences, as well as in terms of how people feel about themselves in certain environments. Confidence can be gained through wearing the 'right' shoes for the job. The fragmentation of identities and lifestyles, however, means that the very specific meanings of certain shoes understood in specific groups are not easily recognizable by those outside the group or subculture.

Conclusion

For some of the participants, their emotional investments and engagements with shoes was central to their identities – this was in terms of what shoes represent in an individual's life, which was often desire and the projection of another self, a future or imagined self or a past self that is unrealised in the present. They could alter mood and ability, like in skateboarding. So perhaps certain shoes for certain people in particular environments do have the power to transform us – not in terms of imbuing us magically with new skills or power but in relation to our emotional state and the sporting competencies we are then able to learn in certain types of trainers.

Whilst in our focus groups young men were the main consumers and wearers of trainers, since the boom in trainer sales that peaked in the 1980s, the younger generation have become a static market. It is amongst middle-aged and older people that sales are growing (Tenner, 2004). This is a reflection of an aging population in which many older people are staying active for longer. However, it also suggests that the meanings and identity associations of the trainer may well be in transition. Indeed, for one of our male participants who had been a runner for most of his life, the decision to buy a new pair of trainers represented the continuation and commitment to a physically active life as he was moving into retirement and older age. His deliberation about whether to buy another pair was framed by the idea of old age being a time to 'slow down', whereas as Tenner (2004) has suggested, trainers represent our enthusiasm for speed in modern times. And with more people staying active for longer, it may well be the silver generation that commandeers the meaning of the trainer – or at least adds to the ever growing diversification of meanings.

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