

Hilde Rossing

## **Role conflict, facework and vulnerable identity:**

Exploring the social complexities of becoming an  
exerciser in a workplace exercise group  
– A longitudinal ethnographic field study

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# Acknowledgments

I have had a lifelong interest in physical activity. With a special interest in facilitating people unaccustomed to exercise feel mastery, motivation and potentially experience the benefits of physical activity. What has challenged me the most is comments many beginners (and even regular exercisers, including myself) make when invited to participate with others: ‘Oh no, I can’t join you, ‘cause you are so much better than me’; often followed by ‘maybe after I have gotten in better condition first’. After feeling my conclusions on the master on inactive employees, gave an uncomplete picture of the problem, I sent in several applications to get a PhD on the topic. Thus, there was a joyful phone call from my previous employer Norges bedriftsidrettsforbud as they were hoping I would apply on a PhD they were in collaborations with Norwegian School of Sport Sciences for. This study was such a welcome opportunity, to further immerse myself in one of my favourite issues, ‘What is this socially excluding and defensive statement all about and how can we become confident exercisers in relation to others?’

A special thanks to the company that trustingly invited me into their organisation, and provided me with the means and opportunities I needed. A heartfelt thank you to participants and informants who generously gave of their time, insight, personal experiences and reflections on their journey of becoming exercisers. Without you this thesis would not have been possible.

Entering this PhD from a psychological perspective, it took some time to wrap my head around the relational and contextual thinking of sociology and how something always relates to something else. My supervisor Lars Tore Ronglan, PhD was patiently suggesting basic books and giving me mini lectures on sociological topics for months.

Thus, an enormous thank you to my eminent team of supervisors. I cannot be more grateful to have had the chance to work with each one of you. You have been by my side every step of the way with encouragement and genuine interest. Lars Tore, PhD, you have been both Head of Department and my supervisor, with a genuine support, and sturdy guidance throughout the whole process. Your comprehensive knowledge and competence on the topic brought out the best in me. Professor Robyn Jones, for your quick response time, pedagogical and patient approach, when teaching me how boxes and arrows do not have any place in qualitative sociological research. You always had encouraging words, when my belief in the English writing at times was wobbly. And a very special thanks to my mentor, co-writer, and close friend Susie Scott, PhD. Though a late addition to the team, without your admirable theoretical expertise, generously giving of your time and our 'creative bubble' writing sessions, without you I would not have been able to cross the finish line.

This study was a part of a larger study 'Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet' and the research group, was of great value in the preliminary face of this project, in shaping and clarifying the scope of this fieldwork.

Thanks to my wonderful warm-hearted former and present colleagues. For your open doors, generously helpfulness and warm hugs. And finally, lots of love to family and friends for their unconditional love and support of my personal journey. A huge thanks to devoted grandparents, who have continuously through the last leg of this journey provided a loving, caring and fun weekend retreat for my baby girl.

**Oslo, July 2016**

# Sammendrag

Fokuset i denne studien er treningsgrupper på arbeidsplassen og særlig erfaringene til ansatte som 'uvant å trene', det vil si de som sliter med å delta, og deres reise for å bli en aktivt trenende person. Gjennom et symbolsk interaksjonistisk perspektiv utforskes sosiale forutsetninger som spiller inn for å skape en inkluderende og varig treningsdeltakelse. Jeg argumenterer for at treningsdeltakelse kompliseres av forholdet mellom sosial identitet og sosial samhandling. Det blir dermed viktig av å se på de kontekstuelle og relasjonelle barrierene for å delta i treningsgrupper på arbeidsplassen og hva er det som fremmer slik deltagelse? Studien baserer seg på et longitudinalt etnografisk feltarbeid i en norsk organisasjon. Fire grupper (72 ansatte) som deltok i et treningstilbud på arbeidsplassen ble observert i 12 måneder: totalt 300 timer observasjon, som omfattet rundt 200 uformelle feltsamtaler. Gjennom intervjuer av fem kvinner og en mann, om deres utvikling og treningsengasjement i løpet av året ga totalt 11 intervjuer. I tillegg skrev 18 deltakere ukentlige loggbøker. Teoretisk viser funnene hvordan ansatte kan finne det pinlig og stigmatiserende å trene foran mer kompetente kolleger. Goffman's dramaturgisk teori gir et innblikk i hvordan ansatte kan takle de resulterende utfordringer rundt selvpresentasjon og inntryksmanipulering ved å opptre som "kjente fremmede" og bruke ansiktsreddende strategier. Funnene setter også spørsmålsteget ved stabiliteten til en treningsidentitet, og foreslår isteden en sårbar identitet som betyr at den ansatte aktivt må navigere og hele tiden rekonstruere sin selvopplevelse som en trenende person. Metodisk er studien en motsats til den kvantitativt drevne forskningen. I tillegg bidrar den i debatten rundt 'insider research' og 'going native'. Tilslutt diskuteres flere praktiske implikasjoner for hvordan arbeidsgivere, helsepersonell og ansatte kan jobbe sammen for å løse de sosiale, relasjonelle og kontekstuelle utfordringene til aktive og inaktive ansatte møter for å 'bli en mosjonist'.

# Summary

The focus of this study is on workplace exercise groups and, in particular, the experiences of those labelled 'unaccustomed to exercise': that is, those who struggle to participate, and their journey to become exercisers. To better engage with this issue, this thesis takes a Symbolic Interactionist (SI) perspective in exploring the social complexities affecting exercise participation in a Norwegian public company. I argue for the need to recognise exercise adherence as an intertwined relationship between social identity and social interaction, manifest through the lived experience of social actors. This discussion is based on ethnographic fieldwork. Four groups (72 employees) participating in an exercising program at the workplace were observed for 12 months: a total of 300 hours of observations, which included around 200 informal field conversations. Repeated interviews of five women and one man, about their developing exercise involvement over the year, gave a total of 11 interviews and 18 participants wrote weekly logbooks. Theoretically, the findings show how employees might find it embarrassing and stigmatizing exercising in front of more competent colleagues. Goffman's dramaturgical theory offers an insight into how employees might tackle the resulting challenges of impression management: by acting as 'familiar strangers' and using facework strategies. The findings, also, question the stability of an exercise identity, suggesting instead a vulnerable identity, whereby employees need to actively work on, navigate and continuously reconstruct their self-perception as exercisers. Methodologically, this thesis is a longitudinal qualitative contribution to counterbalance the quantitative driven workplace participation and adherence literature. Additionally, it engages with debates about insider research and 'going native'. Finally, the thesis offers several practical implications for how employers, health professionals and employees can work together to address the social, relational and contextual challenges facing less active employees in 'becoming an exerciser'.

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# 1.0 Purpose of the thesis

The need to exercise, to be fit, healthy and involved in sport is a constant current message reinforced through many aspects of media. Indeed, even employers have become increasingly occupied with the personal exercise habits of those they employ. This 'obsession' is a consequence of an increasingly social sedentary lifestyle, and society's responsive search for a 'quick fix'. Although on the one hand the sedentary problem is recognised as a social one, rather paradoxically, resultant interventions are often targeted at the exercising person as someone who has insufficient willpower; that is, the decision to exercise is all about individual choice. Given that no doubt an element of individual responsibility, commitment and hard work is evident, what appears equally obvious is that any individual does not make decisions to exercise or not (or any decisions in that regard) in a social vacuum. Rather, they are more than often made in relation to other people, social norms and expectations (to which others are also subjected to) which gives rise to notions of pride, shame and embarrassment, and subsequently affects relation perceptions of self.

In better engaging with this complex issue, this thesis takes a Symbolic Interactionist (SI) perspective in deconstructing the factors affecting exercise participation in a Norwegian public company. Within it, I argue the need for exercise adherence to be examined as a complex and intertwined relationship between social identity and social interaction, manifested through the lived experience of social actors. The focus of the work then, lies in workplace-based exercise groups and, in particular, the experiences of those labelled 'unaccustomed to exercise'; that is, those who struggle to participate.

As opposed to a more psychological perspective where identity is perceived as largely individualistic and stable in nature, SI considers identity as fluid, situational and changeable;

as something that emerges from interaction and is negotiated in relation to significant others. Exercise identity, therefore, is not taken as something a person simply has or has not, (which, in turn, influences behaviour) but rather something that is constructed and reconstructed over the life course, in an ongoing journey of becoming (Becker, 1963). Subsequently, the case made in this thesis is that if the idea of being 'someone who exercises' is not meaningful or relatable to people, they will not see themselves as belonging to such a group and so may be reluctant to participate. Being or becoming someone who possesses an exercise identity then is not a private, personal matter but a socially negotiated process of interaction.

### 1.1 Purpose of this study and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the nature of exercise participation and adherence in workplace exercise groups. More specific objectives relate to determining the following:

- How employees negotiated and overcame social complexities to participate in a worksite exercise programme/ group and;
- How employees constructed and composed their exercise identities within such a setting.

Specifically, the thesis is presented through a build-up of four papers published during the PhD project; 'Inclusive exercise in the workplace? A study of the conditions for inclusion of low-activity groups in physical activity' ('Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet? En studie av betingelsene for inklusjon av lavaktivitetsgrupper i fysisk aktivitet'). In addressing these questions, the thesis offers empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions. First, it provides insights into how employees negotiate their participation in a worksite exercise programme. A key element is how beginners experience social complexities, linked to constructing an exercise identity in front of more competent colleagues. Second, it relates the

empirical findings to theories of exercise identity. The present thesis contributes to developing our understanding of the ongoing formation of exercise identity. Third, there is currently little research considering how doing activity-based ethnography, particularly in settings where the researcher is already an established member, can affect the researcher's relationship to that practice and his or her own exercise identity.

In summary, although several studies have addressed exercise programmes at work, there has been a focus on the effectiveness in terms of the physical or work-related outcomes Proper, Staal, Hildebrandt, van der Beck and van Mechelen (2002), while the work done on the adherence problem has been from a psychological perspective. Very few studies have introduced a sociological perspective exploring how the social context influences exercise adherence or participation in workplace settings.

## 1.2 Context of the study

The study was located within a public knowledge-production company in Norway; a company comprised of 650 employees spread across nine departments. The nature of the work undertaken by the employees was generally sedentary and computerised. Largely because of this, the company had a long tradition of offering many formal sport and exercise programmes to its employees. The focus of the current study was directed towards an ongoing programme termed 'Exercise for better health', which was available for employees during working hours. 'Exercise for better health' comprised low intensity exercise group activities, and was aimed at those staff who had little or no previous experience of exercise.

### 1.3 List of papers

The thesis is based on the following papers, and is referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

#### Paper I

Rossing, H. & Jones, R. L. (2015). 'Stepping away from the computer and into the sweats': the construction and negotiation of exercise identities in a Norwegian public company. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and health*, 7(1), 1-16.

#### Paper II

Rossing, H. & Scott, S. (2014). Familiar Strangers: Facework Strategies in Pursuit of non-binding relationships in a workplace exercise group. *Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works (Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 42) Emerald Group Publishing Limited*, 42, 161-183.

#### Paper III

Rossing, H., Ronglan, L.T. & Scott, S. (2016). I just want to be me when I am exercising: Adrianna's construction of a vulnerable exercise identity. *Sport, Education and Society*, 21(3), 339-355.

#### Paper IV

Rossing, H. & Scott, S. (2016) Taking the fun out of it: the spoiling effects of researching something you love. *Qualitative Research*, 1468794115622561.

## 1.4 Structure of the thesis

Following this brief framing, Chapters Two to Six constitute the body of this thesis. In Chapter Two, I start by offering a short rationale for the research questions before outlining the study's empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions. A critical literature review is then embarked upon in relation to what is currently known about participation and adherence problems in workplace exercise programmes. Here, I argue that the problem of employees' participation in such programmes has not been fully explored, particularly in terms of relational complexities evident within social settings.

In Chapter Three, I present the study's theoretical framework which is based on a micro-sociological perspective grounded in symbolic interactionism. Related frames of reference include Goffman's dramaturgical concepts of self-presentation, role performance and facework strategies as forms of impression management. Subsequently, the purpose of this section is to justify the SI perspective undertaken; in particular its unique features and contributions and how can it help increase our understanding of the puzzling problem of exercise participation and adherence in workplace health programmes.

Chapter Four outlines the qualitative and ethnographic research approach and methods applied in this study. It also describes how the study was planned, performed and analysed. First, it explains how the context and participants were selected, followed by a description of the methods used; interviews, logbooks and participant observation. The chapter ends with considerations about ethics, trustworthiness and credibility.

In Chapter Five, I list the research questions of each paper and provide a brief abstract of all four papers, before a summary of the main findings within each paper.

In Chapter Six I discuss some of the main findings of this study relating to how exercise participation depends on the extent to which an individual can engage with it, how they perform it with others and the meaning such an identity holds for an individual. First, this chapter includes a more comprehensive discussion of the more far-reaching theoretical, methodological and empirical implications than evident in the attached articles. Second, the chapter addresses practical implications for professionals, before discussing avenues for further research.

## 2.0 Introduction

In modern Western society, inactivity has become a considerable public health and welfare issue (Blair and Morris, 2009). A shift towards more sedentary lifestyles and occupations, allied with an increased reliance on labour-saving devices (Kruger, Yore, Ainsworth & Macera, 2006), has contributed to the increased prevalence of obesity and chronic disease (Pronk & Kottke, 2009). Inactivity and sedentary behaviour then, has been found to result in problems such as dysfunctional heart conditions, type 2 diabetes, some cancers and higher mortality risks (e.g. Katzmarzyk, 2010; Rezende, Rey-Lopez, Matsudo & Luiz, 2014). Thus, physical inactivity is a primary cause of most chronic diseases (e.g. Booth, Roberts & Laye, 2012; Durstine, Gordon, Wang & Luo, 2013). Conversely, the health benefits of regular physical activity have been found to be extensive and unequivocal (e.g. Kesäniemi, Riddoch, Reeder, Blair, & Sørensen, 2010; Reiner, Niermann, Jekauc & Woll, 2013), warranting the promotion of ‘sufficient exercise’ as a public health priority (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013).

As the workplace has become increasingly computerised and, by definition, less physically demanding, it has become a compounded area of focus for health development and research. However, despite the obvious advantages of increased physical activity, little evidence exists that such initiatives have found their way to workplace settings in any meaningful way (e.g. Abraham & Graman-Rowe, 2009; McEachan, Lawton, Jackson, Conner, Meads & West, 2011). One of the principal problems faced in this regard is that the success of programmes that promote healthy lifestyle behaviours is contingent upon the engagement and ‘buy in’ of employees, particularly those most at risk. Indeed, as pointed out by Zigler almost two decades ago (1997, p. 26), “all the well intentioned, beautifully structured programs in the world will make no difference to workers’ health if too few workers participate”.



This situation has led to a call for further investigation to better understand how such engagement can be facilitated and constructed (e.g., Strijk, Proper, van der Beek & van Mechelen, 2013). Although some work in this respect has been carried out (e.g., Allender, Cowburn & Foster, 2006; Robroek, van Lenthe, van Empelen & Burdorf, 2009; Thompson, Smith & Bybee, 2005), the absence of work which considers the significance of social context in relation to exercise participation is striking. In this respect, there appears to be a (considerable) gap in the exercise participation literature which has predominantly focused upon individual actions and motivations while generally ignoring the wider social context within which such actions are created and located (Strachan, Brawley, Spink & Glazebrook 2010; Vlachopoulos, Kaperoni & Moustaka, 2010). As stated in section 1.1, the value of this thesis then, relates to better understanding exercise participation within a workplace programme. In doing so, it investigates how employees negotiated and overcame the social complexities of participation, and how they constructed and negotiated their exercise identities.

## 2.1 The research design

As previously mentioned, the project involved the study of a group exercise programme aimed at motivating employees who were ‘unaccustomed to exercise’ to initiate healthier lifestyles. Specifically, through a longitudinal ethnographic case study, I followed four exercise groups throughout a year (two semesters) to explore how it felt being an employee using a work hour to exercise, how participants experienced exercising alongside colleagues and, in particular, how they felt as inexperienced exercisers within this context. To understand the challenges faced, it was important to explore the interactional context on a number of different levels. Questions here included the following:

- a) How can an exercise identity be developed and managed when it could be experienced as in conflict with work role expectations?
- b) What are the social challenges and the following facework strategies related to exercising in front of (more competent) colleagues?
- c) How is an individual's exercise history and related identity formation constructed through situated experiences?
- d) How can doing research on a physical activity you love (and are confident of) affect your exercise identity?

In addressing these questions, the thesis offers empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions. This formed the starting point of the current study.

## 2.2 Previous research

### 2.2.1 The inactivity issue and the workplace as a domain for introducing physical activity

Despite mounting evidence from numerous epidemiological surveys that regular exercise will preserve good health and enhance quality of life (e.g., Apor & Babai, 2014; Buchner, 2009; Lee, Pate, Lavie, Sui, Church, & Blair, 2014; Temporelli, 2016; Warbutron, Nicol & Bredin, 2006), inactivity and its resulting health-related issues is an increasing global problem (WHO, 2013). In extension to this, cardiovascular mortality is higher for persons with sedentary work than for persons with significant levels of walking/ lifting at work (Moe, Mork, Holtermann, & Nilsen, 2013). Public health guidelines prescribe that sufficient exercise for adults is moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes on five days each

week or vigorous-intensity aerobic activity for a minimum of 20 min on three days each week, to promote and maintain their health (Oja, 2010; WHO, 2013).

However, the majority (two thirds) of the (Norwegian) population still fail to adhere to these physical activity recommendations in their daily life (Colley, Garriguet, Janssen, Craig, Clarke, & Tremblay 2011; Helsedirektoratet, 2015). Subsequently, the public health sector is seeking to encourage regular physical activity by introducing different measures such as; public information, exercise prescription from physicians and introducing or encouraging exercise programmes in schools, leisure facilities and workplaces. The workplace has been identified as a priority area through which participation in physical activities can be increased, resulting in the recently adopted White Paper No. 34 (Meld.St. 34 (2012-2013)).

Yet, exercise programmes in the workplace are still struggling to provide scientific evidence for their effectiveness (Conn, Hafdahl, Cooper, Brown & Lusk, 2009; Chu, Koh, Moy & Müller, 2014; McEchan et al., 2011; Strijk, et al., 2013; Pereira, Coombes, Comans & Johnston, 2015; Verweij, Coffeng, van Mechelen & Proper, 2011), both according to physical health variables and variables such as job satisfaction, job stress and absenteeism. There may be different reasons for this lacuna and methodological difficulties have been suggested as one part of the problem. Malik, Blake and Suggs (2014) and Rongen, Robroek, Lenthe, and Burdorf (2013) completed comprehensive reviews of the impact of physical activity programmes at work. They found a lot of serious methodological limitations in the data, with an over-use of the quasi-experimental approach and few high-quality randomised controlled trials. Further factors impacting on the search for evidential effectiveness of these programmes relate to participation and the adherence problem which I now move on to discuss.

### 2.2.2 Research on non-participation and the adherence problem in exercise programmes at work

Exercise programmes in the workplace gained popularity in the early 1970s and subsequently research attention increased during the 1980s (Dishman, Oldenburg, O'Neal, & Shephard, 1998). After more than three decades of effort, researchers still face major problems in identifying significant effects on programme outcomes. In addition to the above-mentioned methodological challenges, a major obstacle is the adherence problem and the challenge of a complex social / work context.

For instance, Kilpatrick, Blizzard, Sanderson, Teale and Venn (2015) found in their study of 3228 employees that those who were active during their leisure time were more likely to participate in workplace health promotion activities, while employees with sub-optimal health were less likely to participate. Similar findings were documented by Robroek, Lindeboom and Burdorf (2012) who indicated the need for more knowledge about how to keep those individuals who need it most attracted to such programmes. An extensively cited review by Robroek et al. (2009) claims that uptakes in health promotion interventions vary between 10 and 64% with an overall median participation rate of 33%. Thus, if the majority of employee participants are in good health at the baseline of a health programme, the impact on overall employee health will be limited. Despite the movement towards increasing physical activity options in the workplace, low exercise adherence seems to prevent people from obtaining the full benefits of habitual exercise (Hallam & Petosa, 2004). Several investigations have revealed that those who need to change health behaviours may find the exercise programme embarrassing and unattractive (Lerman & Shemer, 1996; Anspaugh, Hunter & Savage, 1996; Lewis, Huebner, & Yarborough III, 1996).

Consequently, understanding barriers to participation becomes crucial in order to address the issue of how one can motivate participation. The exercise adherence problem has previously been addressed primarily from an individual psychological perspective. It has been suggested that understanding what motivates people to become physically active is a prerequisite for designing effective exercise interventions (Dishman et al., 1998). Quantitative research has had some success in identifying barriers to participation in worksite exercise programmes. Hooper and Veneziano (1995) surveyed employees and their spouses, in order to see what distinguished starters from non-starters, in a 20-week programme of a physically active lifestyle. They found that a combination of “health beliefs and lifestyle characteristics, health locus of control expectancies, and physiological characteristics accurately discriminated 82 % of the starters from the non-starters” (p. 49). Similarly, Lechner and de Vires (1995) used a questionnaire in a pre-/ post-test design to measure the determinants of different participation levels in a physical exercise programme. This programme offered supervised exercise twice a week. She found that measures of self-efficacy were the best predictor of average exercise frequency, followed by attitude. Interestingly though, as the three levels of participation did not differ on self-efficacy prior to the study, the low-adherence group and the dropouts did show a significantly fall in self-efficacy after the study ended. Lechner and de Vires (1995) believed that a possible explanation could be that the “work situation was such that it included many circumstances that complicated participation in a fitness program” (p. 434). In their study of a private and a public company, Higgins, Middleton, Winner and Janelle (2014) did not find self-efficacy to be a general predictor of compliance to workplace exercise. However, they did find self-efficacy to be a predictor of compliance during 20 weeks in the private sector company. They concluded that a specific worksite atmosphere as well as social and cultural factors, like social class, peers and environment, may better explain barriers or motivation for exercise than initial self-efficacy.

Thus, the social context of the workplace might make adherence difficult and actually challenge the belief and perception of oneself as an exerciser. For example, Bungum, Orsak, & Chng, (1997) conducted a survey on randomly selected participants and non-participants of a worksite wellness programme (WWP). They found that dropouts and non-participants had low levels of self-motivation, were less encouraged to participate by others and perceived more barriers to programme participation than those who did participate. An interesting result was that 16 % of the sample chose to exercise at another facility. Bungum, Orsak and Chng, (1997) assumed that this finding might indicate that many like to exercise alone, or that "some employees associate the worksite with work and therefore prefer to exercise in a different environment" (p. 65).

Although previous (quantitative) research has indicated those characteristics of employees most associated with participation in worksite wellness programmes, it is still unclear from a qualitative perspective why employees may decide not to participate (Person, Colby, Bulova, & Eubanks, 2010). Edmunds, Hurst and Harvey (2013) claimed that the reasons for PA (physical activity) participation in the workplace remains poorly understood and warranted the need for qualitative methods to investigate barriers to workplace PA. They went on to interview 16 non-participants in a workplace physical activity programme and identified six themes; self-efficacy for exercise; attitude towards the PA programme; lack of time and energy; facilities and the physical environment; response to PA programme and PA culture (Edmunds, et al., 2013). Similarly, Huberty, Ransdell, Sidman, Flohr, Shultz, Grosshans and Durrant (2008) examined the physical activity adherence of women employees after a 12-week PA behaviour change programme. The central category derived from focus groups and interviews was self-worth. Motivation, activity enjoyment, priorities, body image, the ability to access support and self-regulation skills had an impact on the self-worth of non-adherers and adherers (Huberty et al. 2008). Similarly, Rice and Saunders' (2001) exploratory study of

a worksite programme found nine concepts essential for exercise behaviour, including self-image, benefits of exercise, ability to managing conflicting priorities, social support and exercise structure. Both Huberty et al. (2008) and Rice and Saunders (2001) found conflicting priorities decisive for exercise adherence, a challenge that might be particularly present in the work place setting. Similarly, Anderson Srivastava, Beer, Spataro and Chatman (2006) found that a high degree of social comparison existed within groups of working peers. Although none of these studies were conducted with regard to developing a new exercise role within a work context, there is reason to believe that similar processes would affect employees' motivation to participate.

Subsequently, Allender, et al. (2006) argued for an alternative approach, which is sensitive to the context and social factors that influence participation in physical activity. Buchan, Ollis, Thomas and Baker (2012) claimed that while research relying on psychological approaches has enhanced our understanding of the determinants of PA behaviour "it is now apparent that behaviour is influenced not only through individual level cognitions" (p. 9). Changing health behaviour is obviously a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that contains multiple levels of influences. Unless more recognition is paid to contextual and relational factors, it is unsurprising that the effectiveness of current physical activity programmes seems to remain short-term and modest.

### 2.2.3 Research on exercise identity, roles and exercise adherence

Attempts to understand the exercise adherence problem has led researchers to focus on the role of the self and identity in understanding exercise behaviour (Strachan & Whaley, 2013; Fox & Wilson, 2008). In summary, this field of research has documented a link between exercise identity and exercise behaviour (Strachan, Brawley, Spink & Jung, 2009). However, despite a growing appreciation of contextual influences, much research within the area of

physical activity in general and exercise identity in particular, has been undertaken from a rather reductionist perspective (Pearce, 2009; Strachan et al., 2010). The purpose of such research has been to uncover causal relationships between exercise identity and exercise behaviour (Strachan et al., 2010), while the social context within which people are situated, and how it impacts on identity creation, appears to have been largely neglected (Valchopoulos, et al., 2011). Similarly, there has been limited research on workplace exercise identity, despite the apparent clash between the dual identities of being an employee and an exerciser, and its subsequent impact on exercise participation (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, 2007). Building an exercise identity at work, then, appears to be far from the linear, straightforward process suggested in previous literature.

This present study argues that incorporating a sociological perspective could expand the understanding of exercise identity, by viewing identities as continuous formative processes going on within and between situated social beings. In this way, the work follows recent suggestions for future research, because “studies that have examined sources and correlates of exercise identity formation are lacking” (Vlachopoulos, et al., 2011, p. 2). Theoretically, an SI approach allows for exercise identity and behaviour to be investigated from a contrasting perspective to much other work within this field of research. Nevertheless, I believe, in line with other researchers in the area (Strachan & Brawley, 2008; Stryker & Burke, 2000), that theories from different research traditions should be seen as complementary rather than competing.

According to an interpretivist perspective, identity construction involves a process of negotiation of social roles and environmental expectations with personal beliefs (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Hence, Dionigi (2002) described exercise identity as representing how an individual sees oneself as an exercising being, with participation in exercise groups being strongly linked to individuals’ self-esteem as exercising persons (Fox, 1997). An SI approach



views identity not as fixed and stable but as fluid, situational and changeable; something that emerges from interaction and is negotiated in relation to significant others. Exercise identity, therefore, is not regarded as something a person has or does not have, which causes their behaviour, but rather something that is constructed and reconstructed over the life course, in an ongoing journey of becoming (Becker 1963).

## 3.0 Theory

### 3.1 Introduction

My initial pre-conceptions on entering this work context were based on research advocating a strong link between concepts such as communities of practice, benefits from social support, group cohesion and their positive effect on exercise participation. However, early on in the research project I did not find these theoretical concepts to be particularly descriptive of the social interaction encountered in the study. Instead, from an initial analysis of participants' experiences, I identified that the employees seemed to struggle in several ways; to make sense of their exercise participation in relation to their work role, to find their place in the exercise group and to construct an exercise identity within the workplace setting.

Therefore, in line with previous studies (e.g. Buchan et. al, 2012) that postulate a need to go beyond individualistic perspectives and look into variables within the social psychological setting, the social context and at the organizational level to address the 'participation problem' (Dishman et al., 1998; Grosh, Alterman, Petersen & Murphy, 1998), the symbolic interactionist perspective (SI) was brought to bear on the final stages of analysis - creating sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). The focus of this study is on workplace-based exercise groups and particularly on the experiences of those labelled 'unaccustomed to exercise', who struggle to participate. The SI approach helps to describe the complex and intertwined relationship between social identity and social interaction, as well as the lived experience of social actors. SI views identity as fluid, situational and changeable; something that emerges from interaction and is negotiated in relation to significant others. Exercise identity, therefore, is not something a person simply has or does not have, but rather something that is continually constructed and reconstructed (Becker, 1963). SI also studies the meanings that

people give to their actions and experiences. I suggest that if the idea of being 'someone who exercises' is not meaningful to or relatable to these people who are 'unaccustomed' to it (within their particular work setting), they will not see themselves as belonging to an exercise group and so may be reluctant to participate. However, this self-identity is defined relationally, through social comparison, and so may vary between situations, contexts or time periods. Being, becoming and doing an exercise identity is therefore not a private, personal matter but a socially negotiated process of interaction.

This chapter presents this study's theoretical context, which is based on a micro-sociological perspective/ framework that incorporates symbolic interactionism to explain the social interactions that was revealed in these exercise groups. Frames of reference also include Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, especially the specific concepts of self-presentation, role performance and facework strategies as forms of impression management. SI research involves empirical studies that illustrate "how identities are negotiated, performed and managed in specific interaction contexts and uses these data as evidence to support or challenge theoretical ideas" (Scott, 2015, p. 21). Subsequently, the purpose of this section is to justify the SI perspective – what are its unique features and contributions that shed light on aspects that the previous literature has not been able to? How can SI help to increase our understanding of the puzzling problem of exercise participation and adherence in workplace health programmes/ exercise groups and how can it fill the gaps in our knowledge about the topic?

The chapter starts by outlining SI and discussing why, despite its limitations and some criticism, this is a relevant perspective for exploring the decision-making process involved in workplace exercise group participation, alongside specific group processes. A central element within this perspective is Goffman's dramaturgical theory and especially his focus on self-presentation and impression management in face-to-face interactions in front of changing

audiences. The chapter continues by exploring how exercise identity construction, management and display are experienced as very self-conscious processes. The construction and negotiation process of exercise identities within the workplace might create an emotional experience of *role strain* (about not meeting perceived expectations of the exercise role) and concurrent *role conflict* (between being an employee and an exercising person), which could be tackled through intricate facework strategies

### 3.2 Symbolic Interactionism and Goffman's dramaturgy: a critical defence

This study attempt to understand how employees negotiate their own participation in exercise groups offered in the work place. The analysis led to the adoption of the symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective. SI emphasizes the communicative processes of actors' interaction (Levin & Trost, 2005). According to Scott (2015, p. 4), it is "concerned with the social dimensions of the mind: imaginations, motivation perception of others, self-consciousness and emotions". In other words, SI explores actors' meaning-making in social encounters and how this contributes to the recurrent social patterning of actors' everyday social encounters.

SI's claim that all social things are created through interaction at the micro-level opens the perspective up for a major criticism of neglecting to examine structure, social control, power and macro-level institutions. During the twentieth century, SI research held a prominent place within sociology despite periods of backlash and criticism for being unscientific, apolitical, and too micro (Fine, 1993). However, Scott (2015) argues that this might be a misinterpretation of the subtler aspects of the perspective, which does analyse power dynamics at the micro-level: SI recognizes society as an ongoing process of reality construction, which often includes negotiation, challenge and conflict. Meaning and order in

social situations occurs based on actors' interpretations and behavioural choices stemming from these interpretations (Scott, 2015). Behaviour and action then, becomes a continuously creative construction and reconstruction, not a mechanical response to objective structures (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

A related criticism is that SI overestimates individual agency and fails to recognize the constraints of power and social control (Stryker, 1987). However, "power relations and social divisions can be found at the micro- level, through patterns of interaction, normative conventions and dominant agreed upon definitions of reality. These [patterns and definitions] impose constraints upon individual agency and limit repertoires of action that are open to social actors" (Scott, 2015, p 18). Subsequently, SI does not describe action as defined by forces from the environment or inner forces such as drives, or instincts, but rather by a reflective, socially understood meaning of both the internal and external incentives that are currently presented (Meltzer, Petras & Reynolds, 1975). Rather, our thinking and feeling, behaviour and action are fuelled by social actors' relational consciousness (Scott, 2015). In other words, what we do depends on "actors taking each other into account, communicating to and interpreting each other as they go along" (Charon, 2007, p. 140 cited in Scott, p. 15). Thus, social interaction is central to what we do. Therefore, using an SI perspective to explore the social complexities of participating in workplace exercise groups means studying the social interaction between members of the collegial exercise group. This in turn can shed light on their negotiation around exercise participation and identity construction.

Subsequently, SI places a special importance on face-to-face encounters on particular small scale interaction between social actors, and the meaning they would describe to their actions" (Scott, 2015). Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy was particularly concerned with what happens in such interactions. Dramaturgy can be understood as a theoretical perspective on its own but,

in line with Scott (2015), I regard his contribution as a variant of, and complementary to, SI. In short, dramaturgy is based on social life resembling a theatre, where we are all social actors constantly performing and playing our part or role in the drama of each social situation, in front of an audience. Thus, we are conscious about *self-presentation*; how we present ourselves to the audiences we encounter in each interaction. As we try to control the images we convey of ourselves, we use techniques of *impression management* (Goffman, 1959). This might also be applicable when exercising together with colleagues in groups, as this is a situation where beginners are trying out a new role in front of an audience perceived as more or less supportive, which in turn can generate more or less stressful feelings.

SI is criticized for viewing actors quite rationally while disregarding emotions and embodiment (Scott, 2015). This study is a contribution to the defence against this claimed limitation, by introducing embodied experiences as an important factor of individual exercise identity construction. As displayed in this study, embodied experiences of awkwardness, soreness and restricted movement were some of the elements contributing to the construction of fragile and vulnerable exercise identities. Additionally, the feeling of embarrassment can be pivotal in tipping the decision (not) to participate in these groups.

### 3.3 Identity construction and negotiation

Scott (2015) neatly summarizes the three main features of the SI (and dramaturgical) approach to identity: Firstly, identity is a process. It is not something that people have or stays the same throughout life, but rather something that continuously unfolds, evolves and is negotiated through interaction. Secondly, identity is pragmatic meaning identity is tangibly expressed through concrete lines of action. Thirdly, identity is performative, as social actors are working together and alone to display a version of themselves. The latter is a *self-*

*conscious process* and identity becomes something that is done by individuals in the course of interaction. Subsequently, this self-identity is defined relationally, through social comparison, and so may vary between situations, contexts or time periods. In the workplace-based exercise group, comparing oneself to (perceived) relatively competent colleagues led members to feel embarrassed, self-conscious and experience role conflict, which was an obstacle to participation.

In exploring actors' decisions about whether or not to participate in workplace exercise groups, the focus is on two related SI processes of identity - *construction* and *negotiation*. These processes reflect the intertwined, concurrent and mutually defining nature of identity, interaction and action. The term 'construction' is used to describe how the individual reflects and thinks about their self-identity. Methodologically, this can be researched by interviews and logbooks; asking people to explain how they think and feel about their lived experience. 'Negotiation', meanwhile, refers to how this constructed self-identity affects role performances in interaction (dramaturgical concerns about whether one can act and manage this identity) and reciprocally, how social reactions and group interaction dynamics shape self-identity. Methodologically, this can be researched through observation.

There is a tendency to perceive and analyse identities in a more or less straightforward way, as social categories such as gender, class, age and ethnicity. There are some good reasons for this – most people will claim membership to such categories in different respects and to various degrees (Jonsson, 2012). However, such categories might also give a limited view of the world. For example, in the context of this project, if we were to say 'employees' even when sub-divided into 'exercisers' or 'not exercisers', this would not recognise the complexity of those labels. The participants did not (yet) define themselves as exercisers, and indeed were explicitly labelled 'unaccustomed to exercise', but the analysis revealed that this should more accurately be seen as a complex picture that depended on the situational context.

Compared to certain other colleagues who were very active, they felt relatively unlike ‘exercisers’, but compared to others, for instance partners or friends, they might feel more like ‘exercisers’. This relatively defined, fluid and changeable form of identity is better understood through SI, "which regards identity, like society more widely, as a process of negotiation: it is relational, communicative and symbolically meaningful. Becker (1963) wrote of people not being but rather becoming social types, as their identities emerge from ongoing patterns of interaction and are never completely finished" (Scott, 2015, p. 11). Subsequently, an SI approach is about understanding the meanings people give to their actions and experiences. If ‘exercise identity’ is not meaningful to people, they will not see themselves as ‘an exerciser’ and might not participate in an exercise group in the workplace.

Individual identity performance and self-presentation, then, are closely related to the design and display of social roles. What happens when an exercise role is introduced in a work context?

### 3.4 Roles: expectations, dramaturgical challenges and solutions

SI’s and dramaturgy’s conception of *role performance* can be contrasted with the more traditional role theories that precede it. The functionalist approach sees a role as the set of expectations that society places on an individual. By unspoken consensus, certain behaviours are deemed appropriate and others inappropriate. For example, you either are or are not an exerciser, and being one demands a certain way of being active. Within this perspective, roles are relatively inflexible and more-or-less universally agreed upon. Subsequently, roles create a socially regulated pattern of behaviour and thus a measure of predictability, which allows individuals to function effectively because they know what to expect of others (Biddel, 1986). However, the functionalist approach has great difficulty in accounting for variability and



flexibility of roles and finds it difficult to account for the vast differences in the way that individuals conceive different roles.

The SI definition of 'role' is more fluid and subtle than the functionalist perspective, and will be used throughout this thesis. A *role*, in this conception, is not fixed or prescribed but something that is constantly negotiated between individuals, actively made and performed: "Roles are emergent and adaptable, as actors navigate a careful path between the demands of occasion and their own personal agendas of self- presentation" (Scott, 2015, p. 84). That is not to say that actors are free to interpret their roles and perform their identities in whichever way they choose, rather there may be a standard idea of what a role entails but there are an infinite number of possible ways of performing it, depending on an actor's different interpretations (Scott, 2015). According to Turner (1962) the focus is on active *role-making* (rather than passive *role-taking*); that is, actors continually adapt to the roles that they adopt through ongoing interpersonal interactions. This can be most easily seen in encounters where there is considerable ambiguity or conflicting demands that must be reconciled. What happens when employees with a strong and professional work role try to pair that role with a seemingly leisure role like 'exerciser'?

According to SI then, adopting and adapting an exerciser role (becoming an exerciser/ making an exerciser role) is a complex social endeavour. A research review conducted by Varzel, Saunders and Wilcox (2008) reveals the complex range of elements and relations in the social environment that influence participation in leisure exercise activity (in women). One of the most significant barriers to exercise participation they found in everyday life were closely related to the difficulties inherent in occupying a multitude of social roles and their conflicting expectations and standards. Consequently, in many cases, it would appear that people steer clear of confronting implications of potential divergence between their various identities by avoiding participation in public situations in which they expect to perform weakly (e.g.

sporting areas). Consequently, Stephens (2007) claims that health promoters need to understand that people are engaged in different identity practices in different fields. In the workplace context, there is a potential for conflicting roles when introducing the seemingly private role/ leisure role of 'exerciser' into the public work sphere of 'professional employees'. Emotional discomfort and embarrassment might occur due to inconsistent behavioural demands, role strain and role conflict. As Freund (1982) pointed out, interaction contexts are not always conducive to an expression of self that feels authentic or desirable. Dramaturgical stress occurs in situations where there is a great discrepancy between an actor's private self-identity and the role performance they are expected to display.

Subsequently, the *dramaturgical challenges* of roles bring us to the concept of *role conflict*, which is a clash between two or more of a person's *roles* or incompatible features within the same *role*. These incompatibilities can consist of *differing expectations*, requirements, beliefs, and/ or attitudes and cause dramaturgical stress and embarrassment. Thus, how might employees adapt and adopt exercise role expectations in the workplace? Is it OK to be an unaccustomed exerciser in the workplace or does this create role strain?

*Role strain*, meanwhile, refers to the felt difficulty of fulfilling the role obligations of a particular role. These specific demands of a single role are created by the norms of the social occasion which may not match the individual's skills or motivations for self-presentation. For instance, imagine a mother, who found out that she was unable to fulfil her multiple obligations as defined by, say, an overly demanding spouse (or religion, or child) - she would experience role strain. The *role expectations* may be beyond what she is able to achieve or may push her to the limits of her abilities. Nezelek, Schutz and Sellin (2007) found that distinct job-related role expectations among working colleagues were associated with a desire to demonstrate high competence in *all* work related interactions within the workplace.

Another form of discomfort and embarrassment occurs with role conflict; when one is forced to play two or more roles simultaneously that do not fit well together. In other words, juggling multiple roles (within one context/ in front of one audience) can create dramaturgical dilemmas in managing consistency between them (Scott, 2015, p. 86). Returning to the example of a mother, a mother who is employed full-time may experience role conflict because of the norms that are associated with the two roles she has. She may be expected to spend a great deal of time taking care of her children while simultaneously trying to advance her career. This supports Swann's (2009) idea of the compatibility principle; that company employees need to feel coherence across their identities at work. Although none of this research was conducted with consideration of negotiating a new exercise role within a work context, it is reasonable to infer that similar processes of conflicting roles would affect the employees' decisions about participation.

A role performance (doing identity) refers to the way actors constantly monitor and adapt the public display of their identities in order to create a particular image, or desirable impression, upon the audience they encounter. Consequently, in many cases, it would appear that people steer clear of confronting the implications of potential divergence between their various identities by avoiding participation in public situations in which they expect to perform weakly (e.g., a sporting area). In other words, people might engage in *role segregation* as a strategy for dealing with role conflict, role strain and possible embarrassment (Goffman, 1961). Role segregation is a strategy whereby one only plays one role at a time; at work I am just an employee, not a mother nor an exerciser. However, this would not seem to be effective when exercising with colleagues in an exercise group, because the two roles must be combined. A different strategy of impression management is *audience segregation*, whereby "we keep apart the audiences who witness our different persona, so that neither audience sees the performance (and contradictory impression) that is given to the other" (Scott, 2015, p.

105). Again, this strategy would not be effective for an exercise group at work, whereby one's collegial audience to the (competent) work performance and (less competent) exercise performance is the same. Another way of dealing with role conflict and anticipated embarrassment when facing the same audience is through different interaction dynamics in the form of facework.

### 3.5 Embarrassment and impression management through facework strategies

The concept of 'face' can be understood as the publicly respectable image of self that an actor presents in a situation, in line with the norms and values of the group, setting and local culture which has implications of their status, image or esteem (Scott, 2015, p. 96). Face is something that is emotionally invested; that can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Goffman, 1967). Embarrassment arises from a real or imagined loss of *face*. Thus, 'to save face' describes how an individual seeks to preserve their established position in society by all means. In other words, actors are taking action to ensure that they are not disgraced or humiliated by their peers. Individuals are motivated to keep themselves and others 'in face' by careful impression management. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 66).

Subsequently, facework becomes an interactional strategy for dealing with the anticipated embarrassment arising from presenting an inconsistent identity that contradicts the actor's claims and creates another undesired impression; for example, a professional soccer player showing up to a game hungover with alcohol on his/ her breath, by not living up to the expectations of a role the player might lose status. Therefore, role strain and role conflict, which cannot be resolved through audience or role segregation, can trigger facework

strategies. Subsequently, how do employees uphold a desired image of high competence as they enter the exercise group as beginners?

Goffman's (1967) theory of facework suggests two kinds of individually performed facework; 'defensive' (to save one's own face), for instance, by declining tasks that might contradict one's self-presentational line, and 'protective' (to save someone else's face), for example, pretending not to notice a blunder that might challenge a fellow actor's identity claims.

However, this does not answer what happens when the compromised face belongs not to an individual but to a group. Goffman's (1959) description of how performance teams are working together to pursue a common line of action lends itself to the possibility of there being a *collective* face that must be sustained. Subsequently, this study proposes that there is a third kind of facework ritual, found in situations where there is a common group face.

'Collective facework' occurs where the members of a group perceive a threat to their shared face, and use tacitly agreed upon strategies to avert this danger. Similar Lee (2009) pointed to instances of collateral face-saving, whereby fellow singers simultaneously stepped in to cover up the mistake of a member and 'keep the flow going' (p. 306). Importantly, they did so for the sake of their mutual performance and felt dignity, rather than out of sympathy for the embarrassed member - it was the whole group's shared face that was at stake rather than just that individual's.

In contrast to previous research attempts to explore exercise participation and adherence problem in workplace exercise groups, utilising an SI framework enables an exploration of the lived experiences of employees. Furthermore, using the SI perspective to explore the social complexities of participating in workplace exercise groups allows for rich descriptions of the social interactions between the members of the collegial exercise group. This in turn can shed light on their negotiation around exercise participation and identity construction.

Thus, SI was used in the final stages of analysis - creating sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) (see Chapter four).



## 4.0 Research methods and analysis

This chapter outlines the methodological approach applied in this study and the methods used to explore and understand the process of how employees negotiated and overcame social complexities to participate in an ongoing worksite exercise programme. It introduces the context of the case study and the participants, with a focus on those unaccustomed to exercise who were the primary informants of the study.

### 4.1 Constructing knowledge

Methodologically this study is a response to the call for research focusing on participation and non-participation in occupational health programmes (McLellan, MacKenzie, Todd, Tilton, Dietrich, Comi, Feng, 2009; Strickland, Pizzorno, Kinghorn & Evanoff, 2015; Strijk, et al., 2013). It also follows Allender, Colquhoun and Kelly (2006), who claims an alternative approach is required which is sensitive to the context; including social, economic and cultural factors that influence participation in physical activity. A qualitative approach is valuable as it directs the attention towards "the multiple meanings that people attach to their subjective experiences and seek to identify, describe and interpret the social structures, spaces and processes that shape these meanings" (Smith & Caddick, 2012, p. 61 ). Qualitative methods are basically used to examine the 'how' and 'what' questions of process and change (Binder, Holgersen, & Moltu, 2012). Thus, this study explores how employees struggle to participate in and adhere to a workplace exercise programme, and what constitutes the negotiation process involved in becoming 'exercisers'.



In exploring these questions, the study draws on an interactionist view of reality.

Interactionists presume knowledge about the world through social construction and social interaction (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Thus, constructivists "generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9). The majority of interactionist research studies aspects of (1) social interaction and/ or (2) individuals' selves (Scott, 2015). In order to immerse into the construction of the complex social world of the employee unaccustomed to exercise, ethnographic "flexible and circular designs" were sought (Smith and Caddick, 2012, p. 61). Throughout the fieldwork and analysis, I stayed in close dialogue with the participants and the material.

#### 4.1.1 Ethnographic field work

Without extensively debating what it means to be doing ethnography, this study draws on Creswell's clarification (2013): "Ethnography is suitable if the needs are to describe patterns of groups' mental activities, that is their ideas and beliefs expressed through language or other activities, and how they behave in their groups as expressed through their actions" (p. 94). Furthermore, as changing behaviour and the process of becoming, constructing and negotiating a new exercise identity might be a tedious process, a longitudinal design was applied. This proved beneficial as White, Ransdell, Vener, J. and Flohr (2005) found that most studies were limited to six months or less, thus few studies have examined long-term adherence.

As well as engaging in extensive fieldwork, ethnographers hold an appreciation of how "the extraordinary-in-the-ordinary may help to understand the ambiguities and obscurities of social life" (Ybema, Yanow, Wels & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 2). In view of this, the focus of this study

was to describe the experiences of the employees in a complex and detailed manner. This was done by taking advantage of multiple methods (Silverman, 2001) which included participant observation, field conversations, the keeping of research logs and individual interviews. Before returning to the specifics of these methods, the selection procedures will be clarified then the organisation and participants will be presented.

#### 4.2 Organization, exercise program and participants; purposeful selection

In line with most qualitative researchers (e.g. Smith & Caddick, 2012), this study used purposive sampling, whereby I “choose an individual, a number of individuals or a group in whom they have an interest and who they feel will provide ‘information rich’ cases” (p. 61). There are several sub-types of purposeful selection; this study used certain criteria based on the research question (Palys, 2008) to select the organisation, exercise groups and informants. The selection of the organisation was based on two main criteria. First, we wanted to explore a relatively large company with an extensive exercise programme. The reason for this is that, as stated, often only 30 % of employees participate in exercise groups in the workplace. To ensure anonymity, where the research aimed for detailed and rich descriptions of informants' experiences, we wanted access to a larger company. Second, we also sought out an organisation that was planning to start a new exercise group specially targeting inactive employees. Exploring experiences of employees who were joining an exercise group for the first time prompted the possibility of more reflexivity and vulnerability in the moment between being an inactive person and (possibly) becoming an exerciser.

The exercise groups were selected on the basis of them containing low threshold activities, which would provide easy access for inactive employees. Concerning transparency in the groups' participation in the study it was important that there were around 15-20 participants in

each group. Finally, the informants were purposively selected based on their struggle to participate on a regular basis and by observing how they managed being at the edge of their comfort zone when participating and interacting in the exercise classes.

#### 4.2.1 The organisation

The study was conducted within a public knowledge-production company in Norway. At the time of the study the organisation comprised 650 employees structured across nine departments. The nature of the work was generally sedentary with the employee spending most of his/ her day in front of the computer or in various meetings. Most employees had their separate office, often keeping their doors closed. Furthermore, they had small common rooms, with simple kitchen facilities in each department and also a large staff canteen centrally placed in the building.

Companies and organisations are required to recruit an approved occupational health service company if there is a need for special monitoring of the working environment or employee's health situations (Arbeidsmiljøloven, 2005). After approaching several occupational safety and health companies, the organisation chose 'Fit for Fight' as a collaboration partner in this respect. They had an established exercise programme in place for beginners. During the year prior to the study, 'Fit for fight' had provided the organisation with fitness instructors, physical therapists and so on. Especially pertinent to this study was that the organisation planned to expand the programme with a new exercise group. This group was targeted towards employees who needed special help and attention in getting started with a physical activity routine.

The initial contact with the organisation was through 'Fit for Fight' and the facilitator of the exercise programme, who was located in the human resource department of the organisation.

The leaders were immediately positive about being involved in the study. As considerable time and effort had been put into the exercise programme, they welcomed the study, perhaps in order to enhance it. The study was introduced on the internal web pages for the exercise programme and through a launch for all employees. I used a couple of minutes before each exercise class to introduce myself and the intention of the study. I emphasized that if any of the participants felt uncomfortable about being observed as part of the study, they should notify me.

#### 4.2.2 Exercise programme: 'Exercise for better health'

The exercise programme was called 'Exercise for better health'. In line with existing literature, it satisfied a number of conditions to ensure success: First, it gave the employees an opportunity to exercise during work hours (structural closeness in time and space). Second, it facilitated low threshold activities targeting beginners (homogenous groups). Third, it was led by an enthusiastic and encouraging facilitator from within the organisation. Fourth, it offered group-based activities (with significant others, social support, group cohesion). Fifth, it was regularly time-scheduled to develop an exercise identity (ref. identity- behaviour link/ psychological perspective). In extension to this, all of the company's employees had access to the 'Exercise for all' programme during work hours (in the morning, midday or late afternoon) as part of a negotiated employment agreement. Participation within it was free of charge as long as individuals committed themselves to an additional hour of exercise a week during their own time.

The programme was popular and prior to the study was expanded from seven to eight exercise groups, with room for 170 participants. Each participant was enrolled in a group for one calendar year at a time, which meant an autumn semester of four months and a five-month

spring semester, giving a total of nine months of exercising. There were 18-25 participants in each group. As there was a waiting list and employees had an irregular attendance rate (average attendance in the groups in this study was 10), the groups were overbooked for the actual space within the exercise rooms. The classes were located in two different exercise rooms within the workplace. The rooms were located in the basement of an adjacent building, meaning that most employees had to step out and cross the road to reach the exercise rooms which had been renovated for this purpose. In addition, there were simply decorated changing rooms, with benches and two to three showers in each, which meant employees sometimes had to wait in line for the showers.

#### 4.2.3 Exercise groups in the study

During several initial conversations with the facilitator who handled the signing of employees to groups, I got a picture of the history, content of the groups and members of each group. She did not have full information on the employees' exercise histories but had, through email correspondence, a notion of their experience level and whether or not they had prior experience of workplace exercise groups. She also collected attendance sheets of each group. The latter was a way of encouraging attendance and also encouraged employees to use their place in the group or give it up for the next on the waiting list. However, the participants might of course perceive this differently.

Out of the eight groups in the exercise programme, the four selected groups were chosen to represent a range of different group activities, with a particular focus on the groups which had most 'first timers' and employees unaccustomed to exercise. Most of the exercise activities were provided by 'Fit for Fight', with each exercise session being led by qualified fitness instructors. However, the groups selected consisted of a mixture of individuals who had never

participated, infrequent exercisers and regular exercisers with previous exercise history. Despite this apparent diversity, it is important to note that the vast majority of the participants were new to exercising at work. Furthermore, the newly established 'Easy Aerobics' group was an attempt to encourage those employees who did not feel they had the necessary physical background or condition to participate in the other groups. It was stated that this group was specifically targeting those employees that needed particular attention to find exercises and motivation suited their needs. In this respect the groups were considered 'information rich' cases (Patton, 2002). There is an interesting ambiguity inherent in naming groups like this; the 'easy' part is supposed to seem welcoming and doable, however the potential loss of face from not even managing the exercises of such a group would be greater. Thus, the study included observation of one easy circular strength class, one hard circular strength class, a newly started 'Stretching' class and the newly formed 'Easy aerobics'. Here follows a description of the groups:

- **Stretching** (Monday 12-13 pm, easy level Pilates, new dressing for the year, was previously a Mensendick/ physical therapy class); 25 signed in participants, several of these participated irregularly over the year and three dropped out after the first few classes.
- **Easy Aerobics** group (Monday 14-15 pm, completely new in this year); 21 signed participants, several of these participated irregularly over the year, four did not participate at all or dropped out after one to two exercise classes.
- **Station training** (Thursday 14-15 pm, meant to introduce beginners to strength training); some regulars, most new 19 signed participants and two dropped out.
- **Strength** (Thursday 15-16 pm, for the regulars wanting a hard work out); 19 signed participants, among these eight regulars and experienced with exercise, three dropped out.

Several of the 84 signed in participants were new to exercise. Although both experienced and inexperienced participated irregularly over the year, the majority of those with an irregular attendance were unexperienced exercisers. Given that 12 participants dropped out after the first few exercise classes, 72 individuals constituting four exercise classes were subject to observation over a year (nine months' actual exercise).

#### 4.2.3 Informants

Of the 72 group participants in this study, six complied with being repeatedly interviewed during the research project and additionally 18 participants wrote weekly logbooks. In terms of the research questions of this study, aimed at exploring employees unaccustomed to exercise in the starting phase of becoming physical active at work, some ethical considerations were present when approaching specific employees for interviews and logbooks. Thus, purposive sampling was used with caution. Access to the informants was enabled through participating alongside them in the groups. One approach was presenting the intention of the project to the groups in a plenary and asking for volunteers. Such a strategy only yielded a couple of informants, who tended to be those who were physically active rather than those who struggled to become exercisers. As a field worker participant in the exercise groups, I could observe which employees struggled to participate on a regular basis and search for opportunities to ask individually for an interview or writing of logbooks, as there would be less (peer) pressure to comply with the research project this way.

A key approach to inductive research is using numerous and highly knowledgeable informants who view the focal phenomena from diverse perspectives (Eisenhard & Graebner, 2007). The six interviewees were considered information rich informants as they

came from different departments within the company, had worked for the company for an average of 19 years each and held different positions in the organisation. Alongside this, they participated in different exercise groups, with four of them having struggled to adhere to a regular exercise programme throughout adulthood. The intention was to interview the participants at the start, halfway through, and at the end of the nine months (see table 1). However, one dropped out, leaving five participants to complete the interview component. In addition, 18 participants wrote logbooks via their private company email account. These respondents consisted of four men and 14 women, from various departments in the company and were recruited from all four observed exercise groups (see table 2). Eight of the participants wrote logbooks in the autumn term while 10 others wrote logbooks during the spring term.

#### 4.3 Methodological design: participant observation, field conversations, interviews and logbooks

This section describes the methodology used to explore the meaning construction of employees unaccustomed to exercise, as they entered a workplace exercise group. Table 1 portrays the timeline of the fieldwork and the different methods used throughout.



Table 1. Timeline of fieldwork August 2009 - June 2010

Aug 2009	Aug- Oct	Oct- Nov	Nov- Dec	January 2010	Jan- Feb	Feb- March	March- June	June 2010
Interviews facilitator and 'Fit for Fight'	Logbooks kept by 8 participants across all four groups				Logbooks kept by 10 participants across all four groups (different from first semester)			
Emma	O B S	Interview	O B S		O B S		O B S	
Adriana	E R V	Interview	E R V		E R V	Interview	E R V	Interview
Paige	A T I		A T I		A T I	Interview	A T I	Interview
Ben	O	Interview	O	Interview	O		O	Interview
Charlotte	N	Interview	N	Interview	N		N	
Laura		Interview		Interview				Interview

#### 4.3.1 Participant observation

“Living with, working with, laughing with the people one is trying to understand provides a sense of self and the Other, that isn’t easily put into words, it is a tacit understanding that informs both the form of research, the specific techniques of data collection, the recording of information, and the subsequent interpretation of materials collected” (Dewalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 264).

I entered the field making broad descriptive observations, trying to get an overview of the social situation and describing what went on (Spradley, 1980). After preliminary analyses of the initial observations and the initial interviews, a phase of engaging with more focused observation was warranted as unexpected social interactions occurred. The focused observation is also expressed through the ethnographical units of each paper; the whole exercise programme, organised, structured, facilitated to inactive employees (paper I), the unexpected social interaction within the easy aerobics group (paper II), one employees' journey of constructing an exercise identity (paper III) and finally the researcher's ‘observation of participation’ (Tedlock, 1991).

The observational work was carried out over a period of a year, with nine months of participating in exercise classes. The observation was usually conducted during the hours from midday until 4.30 in the afternoon, two days a week, giving an approximate total of 300 hours of observation. I would normally be entering the building at the same time as some of the participants, striking up a conversation about how they were doing, commenting about the weather etc., before joining them as a participant in the group exercise class.

#### 4.3.2 Field conversations and reflexive field notes

After class, I would take my time putting away my matt and gathering my things in order to be accessible for conversations both as a researcher and as a participant. In these situations, I observed the participants' interaction with the instructor and each other, after class and in the locker room. While 'shadowing' (Purdy & Jones, 2011) the participants, I kept a written record of my observations primarily related to descriptions and interpretations of settings, events, conversations, things heard and overheard amongst the prime actors. This included a total of 200 field conversations, with a duration from one to 10 minutes. Particularly interesting conversations were written down when I took a water - or bathroom - break during the exercise class, with a more extensive writing session immediately after the class.

After each class, I also made notes of how my body and emotions felt both during each exercise class and for the duration of the fieldwork (Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham & Cochrane, 2009). As employees' experiences in the exercise group are very much embodied, I aimed to encompass all my senses whilst participating in the exercise group (Sandelowski, 2002). As reported in paper IV, I did encounter emotionally challenging situations during the fieldwork. However, the reflexive notes and subsequent conversations with colleagues helped me take a step back and better interpret what was going on, both regarding myself and how these notes brought me to a closer understanding of standing in the shoes of the other participants.

#### 4.3.3 Semi structured interviews and narrative interviews

In addition to field observation, field conversations and logbooks; Paper I and II are based on semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1) and paper III is based on two narrative interviews with one participant. Thus in this study, five females and one male agreed to be interviewed

about their developing exercise involvement over the year, giving a total of 11 interviews.

Alongside this one of the five females also conducted two narrative interviews.

Simply relying on interviews to obtain information is an unreliable way of reconstructing the social world, as what people say and what people do is not always the same (O'Reilly, 2012).

For instance, studies using activity trackers and structured interviews have showed people to both underreport and exaggerate their exercise participation. Thus, asking people to describe experiences of exercise will not yield the same information as observing people engaging in the activity (Schuler & Namioka, 1993). Subsequently, I needed to be aware of the interactional dynamics that shape the interview in order to make sense of the information.

Interviews were employed to explore individuals' intentions and subjective interpretations of their exercise experience (O'Reilly, 2012). The qualitative interviews seldom proceeded with the same questions asked of each informant, rather assuming everybody had a unique story to tell. Hence, although a loose structure was adhered to, space existed to explore any new issues that emerged during the course of the interviews. The approach provided freedom in relation to the time given to each topic and the sequencing of the questions asked (Berg, 2001). In many ways, the interviewer assumed the role of an active listener (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), asking relatively open ended, interpretive questions (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Furthermore, the interviews were to a large extent loosely based on the unfolding observations, thus providing an opportunity for participants to communicate their own understandings, perspectives and attribution of meaning to observed behaviour.

More precisely, the questions were centred around the participants' relating of how they came to know about the exercise programme and their initial encounters and experiences of it.

Furthermore, the aim was to explore their relationships with colleagues, potential barriers to participation and how they tried to negotiate them. It was also interesting to learn how

employees considered their participation in and understanding of the groups, and how they viewed themselves as exercising persons. The interviews took place during or just at the end of the workday, lasted about an hour each and were situated either in the informant's office, in a designated meeting room or other suitable private place (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I took notes during the interview about the participant's body posture, volume of speech, eye contact and so on, as well as noting particularly interesting topics to follow up. Immediately after the interview I wrote down impressions, feelings, preliminary interpretations, questions and important aspects to follow up. The interviews were also audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by research assistants. There are strengths and weaknesses with each of these techniques, as both note taking and using a voice can be off-putting to the informant. However, I was a skilled note taker and the interview lasted for a period of time, so the recorder was less intimidating after a while. Decisions about the appropriate number of interviewees and interviews were guided by the notion of data 'saturation'. Being aware of Dey's (1999) cautionary note related to closing inductive categories early, we also felt the need to recognise when more data became 'counter-productive', where the "newly discovered does not add to the overall story, theory or framework" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). Such a process also echoes Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2010) emphasis on the need to continuously assess the variations found in 'new data' in terms of the investigative aim.

### Narrative interviews

The main source of data for paper III was two narrative interviews conducted with a key informant named Adrianna (a pseudonym). Adrianna had participated in several formal and informal field conversations and interviews during the fieldwork, about the exercise programme and her participation in it (reported in paper I and II).

A narrative interview technique is 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 play a part in ongoing identity formation. For a detailed description of the interview procedure, see paper III (attached).

#### 4.3.4 Logbooks

There were 18 participants who kept reflective logs through the duration of the project. The purpose here, as opposed to garnering a description of events, was to generate reflections upon personal experiences, reactions and questions. The main aim then, was to get the participants to consider their own personal development over time, related to their involvement in the exercise programme; a process taken as mediating experience and knowledge (Schon, 1983). Here, they were encouraged to make sense of unfolding perceptions and experiences in relation to their existing understandings and identities. After each class they were individually sent an email containing several related questions, which they were encouraged to reflect upon. Typical questions included the following: How did you experience the group today? Why? Any examples? How did you feel? Why? How did you experience the other participants? Why? Examples? Where appropriate, as mentioned earlier, the responses were explored in some depth in subsequent interviews.

#### 4.3.5 Specific methods design related to each paper

Paper I: Used participant observation and field conversations from all four exercise groups, all interview data and all logbooks.

Paper II: Used participant observation from one exercise group, informal field conversations, interview from two key informants and logbook from three females.

Paper III: Used in-depth interviews from one key informant and narrative methodology. Which takes a biographical perspective.

Paper IV: Used reflexive analysis of the researcher's own experience of participating in all four exercise groups, as well as to a fellow research colleague's experiences from her own project.

Table 2: An overview of the methods and participants involved in papers I, II, III and IV.

	<b>I</b>	<b>II</b>		
Data collection	Pilates	Easy aerobics	Station training	Strength training
Participant observation		300 hours		
Reflexive field notes				
Field conversations			200	<b>IV</b>
Interviews	Laura x 3	Paige x 2 Adrianna x 3	Charlotte x 2	Ben x 3
Narrative interviews		Adrianna x 2	<b>III</b>	
Logbooks	Female x 5	Female x 3	Male x 3 Female x 3	Male x 3 Female x 1

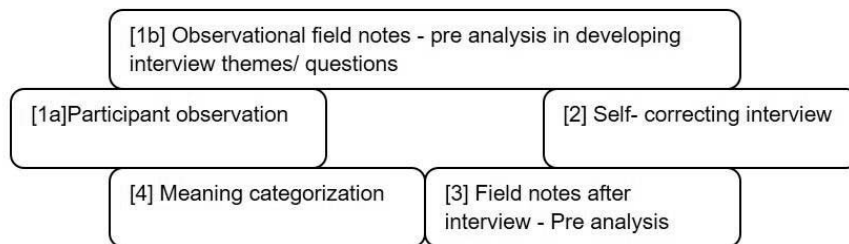
#### 4.4 The process of analysis

Analysis of the data proceeded through four phases, interlinked in a hermeneutic spiral (see fig. 2). An inductive approach (Patton, 2002), characteristic of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and meaning categorization (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), enabled the pursuit of extensive insights into the participants' experiences. First, a period of observation was followed by subsequent interpretation of field notes. These interpretations served as preliminary analysis for developing interview themes and questions. Second, during each interview conversation, densification and interpretations of the meaning were developed from the informants' utterances and verbally expressed these ideas back to the informants. This resulted in continuous interpretations and an opportunity for immediate confirmation or disproving of the initial interpretations. This is what Kvale (1996) termed a self-correcting interview. Third, after each interview, I wrote field notes on the interview situation, including



preliminary interpretations and pinpointing ambiguities and interesting descriptions to guide the subsequent meaning categorization. The fourth phase in the analysis started with repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to explore participants' construction of meaning of their participation in the exercise programme (Janesick, 1998). Meaning categorization (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) was used by identifying meaning units in the data (what Charmaz, 2006, calls initial coding) and meaning units with similar content were categorized in the same code by using MAXQDA qualitative software. This part of the process moved the analysis from constantly comparing experience near descriptions (Geertz, 1973), to more abstract analyses and conceptualizations. The meanings actors attach to their behaviour can be interpreted through sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). According to Blumer (1954), these concepts are not fixed but changeable through communications around empirical findings. These sensitizing concepts become ways of navigating the empirical material in order to understand and explain the socially constructed reality (Wadel & Wadel, 2007).

Figure 2: Phases of data analysis



Garfinkel (1967) claims that, in order to interpret the meaning of a behaviour or a story, the behaviour or utterance must be viewed in the light of the context where it took place. Thus, in addition to the analysis of the interviews and logbooks, a new period of participant observation was conducted. This followed the four phases of analysis, before a second round of interviews was initiated. It allowed an exploration of the informants' processes, of

negotiating their participation in the exercise group over time and to explore barriers and enablers within these processes.

#### 4.4.1 Analysing interviews, field notes and logbooks

The overall data material was subject to inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). By combining a constant comparative analysis with a line-by-line examination of interviews, field notes and logbooks, common words, phrases, meanings and ways of thinking were identified and constructed as initial codes (Charmaz, 2006). The importation of the data into MAXQDA assisted this process. Interpreted repetition from within the raw data set established further patterns and topics that became focused coding categories (Charmaz, 2006). A final stage of induction involved linking similar categorisations together to generate higher order themes. A person's story is co-constructed between the interviewee, storyteller and socially shared conventions (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). From an interpretivist perspective, narratives are inevitably social: a story cannot be regarded as the objective truth, but rather a co-construction of meaning within a social context (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Therefore, in order to get as insightful stories as possible, the informants and I collaborated in (a) trying out possible narrative interpretations of the findings from both observations made and previous conversations, during the interview situation and (b) encouraging elaboration on meanings and ideas that occurred in the logbooks (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

#### 4.4.2 Analysing narrative interviews

Adrianna's narrative story underwent a thematic analysis, whereby the focus was on the societal context of the narrative and less on the immediate local context of the interview (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are social because the talk through which they are formed draws on commonly held, already existing discursive resources and shared culture (Taylor, 2010). We attempted to keep the narrative intact for interpretive purposes, preserving sequences from the story rather than coding fragmented segments of it. Following Cain's (1991) model of narrative analysis, I firstly 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 into the overarching narrative. These stories were then sketched out with a main plotline involving key events, characters and turning points. Finally, I identified some recurrent propositions that appeared in the form of thematic assumptions taken for granted by the storyteller.

#### 4.5 Pre-understanding - methodological reflexivity

Qualitative research is always, inevitably, subjective and biased by the researcher's interpretations of what they find noteworthy. Thus, the researcher's experiences and prior knowledge is recognised as part of ethnographic field work. Thus, prior understandings may be recognised as a personal asset which contributes to the generation of rich data; for example, by enabling an awareness of what to talk about and what to look for. The risk, on the other hand, is that the pre-understanding brings a series of pre-conceptions functioning as fixed categories in which the data is forced into. This warrants a particular reflexivity around one's own experiences and pre-knowledge. Reflexivity can be understood as a constant awareness of an anthropologist regarding his or her own position and its influence on the

research and the consequent findings. Thus, a careful consideration of one's pre-understanding, and being a 'sociologist on oneself' during the research process, becomes decisive (Wadel, 1991).

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), when doing fieldwork in familiar settings one need to consider distance, marginality and estrangement. They further emphasize the need to maintain and, if necessary, re-create a sense of strangeness during fieldwork. Through extensive experience within the field I had developed great interest and certain understandings. Tailored for this study, came years of experiences participating in and instructing 'easy exercise groups' both at workplaces and in other settings. Having participated in numerous informal conversations, I had developed a sense of the language, social practices and sensitivity to the culture. Being primarily occupied with educating beginners and facilitating exercise to their needs, there was a particular interest in why it was difficult to become a regular exerciser. Thus, it was with great optimism I entered this particular workplace to explore an exercise programme that employed several of the strategies that was considered important to encourage beginners to exercise. However, gradually I found myself experiencing interactions and social patterns contrary to what she initially expected. To discover and explore patterns differently from expected might strengthen the capability to seeing "the extraordinary-in-the-ordinary" (Ybema et al., 2009). Unfortunately, these findings could also have made me overly interested in particular sides of the social interaction, paying less attention to others.

Self and identity have to be created and/ or established in all social encounters, thus one is always engaging in impression management (Goffman, 1959). In fieldwork, impressions that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered, while those that facilitate access should be encouraged, within the limits set by ethical considerations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Subsequently, reentering the field, my prior knowledge and involvement

with the research contributed to being positioned in certain ways in relation to the participants. At the start I was viewed as a kind of co-instructor. This was a position which was both attributed to me and self-constructed, as the participants considered me part of the 'Fit for Fight' team and, through individual experiences, as an instructor. After some months in the field, this position (co-instructor) produces certain limitations in accessing the participants' interactions. Subsequently, mid-way through the fieldwork, I slowly and sensitively pulled away from the instructor team and emphasized mirroring the participants' behaviour. The success of this endeavour was confirmed when asked, in line with the other participants, to contribute to flowers to thank the instructor for her efforts at the end of the study.

#### 4.6 Is this good qualitative research?

Qualitative research is a broad conception including a variety of traditions and approaches and there are competing claims as to what counts as good quality work. According to Sparkes and Smith (2009), these competing claims "revolve around the issue of criteria and how they are used to pass judgement on qualitative research" (p. 491). Hammersley (2007) points to the continuous debate around the question of whether or not it is appropriate to have criteria and if it is even desirable or possible to identify common criteria. Sparkes and Smith (2009) agree with Hammersley (2007) in stating, "such a criteriological approach closes down conversations, blunts the knowledge of the discipline, and stifles creativity so that concepts and issues are not explored in new ways (p. 496).

This study is founded within a social constructivist perspective, where knowing about the world and human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others (McKinnley, 2015). Thus, constructivists argue that social phenomena

"can only be understood by describing the processes by which they are culturally constituted as the things they are" (Hammersley, 2007, p. 298). Subsequently, the focus of this study was not how exercise might create an exercise identity or vice versa but rather how exercise participation, for employees unaccustomed to exercise, is a process of constant negotiation. Furthermore, Smith and Caddick (2012) suggest applying a "set of universal criteria would mean going against a subjective and constructivist epistemology" (p. 70). They suggest a different approach called a 'non-foundational' approach, where qualitative researchers do not apply universal criteria, but develop (add, subtract and modify) a list of criteria in light of the specific research to be evaluated (Smith & Caddick, 2012, p. 70).

I will apply Smith and Caddick's (2012) list of criteria and in line with Hammersley (2007) use them as 'guidelines' in the following assessment of this study:

- *Is this study a substantive contribution to our understanding of social life?* Using a symbolic interactionist perspective throughout the four papers with the aim of broadening our understanding of becoming an exercising person within the workplace, new theoretical concepts were applied and developed. These concepts deepen the understanding of how employees unaccustomed to exercise are in a constant negotiating process within the context and social interactions they encounter to view themselves as exerciser.

- *How comprehensive are the evidence?* This criteria coincides with Tracy's (2010) 'rich rigour', concerning whether a study uses sufficient and appropriate methods, time spent in the field, data collection and analysis. The fieldwork was undertaken over the course of a year and the material obtained aimed to provide a holistic analysis by taking advantages of multiple methods (Silverman, 2001). In reporting the study, numerous quotations were applied in order to support the readers' understanding and own considerations about the value

of the interpretations. However, during the publication process, some of these quotations were reduced.

- *Does this study possess coherence?* As portrayed in the discussion (Chapter Six) of this thesis, the internal coherence is supported by how the four papers build on and enhance each other. Also other parts of this thesis discuss how the study “eloquently interconnects their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals” (Tracy, 2010, p. 848).

- *Does the study creates and impact or resonance on the reader?* The goal has been to stay as close as possible to the socially constructed experiences of the participants, in order to create recognisable stories. The study has not shied away from using emotionally charged terms and concepts like stigmatization, embarrassment and familiar strangers when describing the social interaction among colleagues in an exercise group. By sharing stories in this study, it “may prepare their and others minds for different, anticipated or unexpected experiences” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 281). To share the story of one that has struggled to see herself as an exercising person throughout her life, might expand the knowledge base of those initiating physical activity programs, alongside others who might have experiences supporting a confident exercise identity.

- *Is this study credible?* In line with a social constructionist framework we employed 'member reflections'; "a practice that does not aim toward accuracy of a single truth, but rather provides space for additional data, reflection, and complexity” (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). All participants were encouraged to contact me after an interview, if they had any thoughts or question about what we talked about. In extension to this, in conducting subsequent interviews and logbooks, participants were asked about my initial interpretations. It would possibly have been

advantageous to have the participants engage with some of the written analysis. This was done only to a small extent.

- *Is this study transparent?* During the entire analytical process, the second author of each paper acted as a 'critical friend' "to encourage reflection on and exploration of alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in relation to the data" (Sparkes & Smith 2002, p. 266). Initial analyses were also presented in different academic fora for scrutinizing matters like theoretical preference, methodological considerations and the quality of the analysis.

#### 4.7 Ethics: formal procedure

Approval for the research was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) (Appendix 2). This required following all ethical guidelines in relation to the rights of research participants and field in terms of privacy and confidentiality. There are several effective strategies to protect participants' confidentiality, for instance secure data storage methods, removal of identifier components, biographical details amendments and pseudonyms (applicable to names of individuals, places and organizations) (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Here, the respondents were appraised about the purposes of the work, the scope of their involvement within it, guaranteed anonymity during the process and in the dissemination of results (through the use of pseudonyms). They were also notified that they could leave the project at any time without explanation or fear of penalty.

Ethnographic fieldwork which emphasizes participant observation is a subject of debate from an ethical point of view. The sustained presence of a researcher in particular groups or cultures necessitates informed consent. Participants should always be aware of the information that has been obtained and is being recorded, and consent to it (Sanjari,



Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). In this study, informed consent was sought through repeated oral information about what was being observed and the intention of the research project prior to exercise classes (see Appendix 3). The participants were asked to address me after class with any concerns, hesitations or questions. In hindsight, the participants might not have fully comprehended the recording of field conversations and the developing intentions of the study. The reason for this lies in the goal of informed consent being complicated. Ethnographers are unsure not only of the “effects of explaining our plans but often we do not know what we want until well into the research project” (Fine, 1993, p. 274). Thus, developing intentions could have been explained more in detail, however this could also have obscured the delicate relationship between the informants and me. Prior to interviews, the same information was orally presented, and the participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix 4).

In ethnographic fieldwork the researcher is intensely involved in all stages of the study. This is with regards to defining a concept to design, participant observation, interview, transcription, analysis, verification and reporting the concepts and themes. Therefore, the researcher is his or her own research instrument (Fink, 2000). As discussed previously in this chapter, the role of the researcher and how to establish a ‘self’, necessitates engagement in identity work, which can be both problematic and productive (Coffey, 1999) and desires a high degree of sensitivity and reflexivity.

The ethics of narrative research is in a state of evolution, and will not be extensively discussed here. However, there are particular ethical considerations when conducting narrative inquiry where the informant is particularly vulnerable and their personal story is elicited. This scenario requires a trusting relationship and reassurance that the researcher will treat them and their story with respect and fairness. Josselson (2007) noted that the researcher must be transparent about his/ her interests to create collaboration about the topic. Prior to

conducting the narrative interviews a connection was established between the informant and me, both through participating alongside each other for a year but also through semi-structured interviews about the exercise programme. Thus, Adrianna was highly familiar with the overall study and its intentions. In approaching Adrianna to write her story, she was informed about the particular interest in her experiences, the scope of the paper and which journal it was aimed at and she was given repeated opportunities to comment upon preliminary analysis, quotations used and the end product before publishing. The narrative text of Adrianna is presented as both collaborative and interpretive. Thus, “while the task of the researcher in the data-gathering phase is to clarify and explore the personal meanings of the participant’s experience, the task in the report phase is to analyse the conceptual implications of these meanings to the academy” (Jossleson, 2007, p. 549). Subsequently, the primary ethical concern in telling the story rests with the researcher’s authority, stressing that the end product is the researcher’s understanding or interpretation of the text (Josselson, 2007).

Further, the prolonged engagement with the research field yielded considerably ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973). However, despite the broad information obtained from the respondents, the critical debriefing sessions, the constant member reflections and general reflective process as related to data interpretation (Shenton, 2004), there is an awareness that the *trustworthiness* of the case presented will hinge on the quality of the logic linking study purpose, data and the conclusion (Wells, 2011) and if the tale presented justifies the interpretations made (Riessman, 2008).



## 5.0 Summary of the papers and findings

### 5.1 Research questions for each paper

The following section gives a summary of the principal findings of this study. They correspond to the research question and objectives posed in each paper, as follows:

- Paper I investigates how employees negotiate between their situated work identity and situated exercise identity against the backdrop of the organization's identity and goals.
- Paper II investigates group behaviour and how the employees' embarrassment at being perceived as less competent than their colleagues led to intricate face saving strategies to protect their exercise selves.
- Paper III analyses how an individual's social, bodily and contextual experiences throughout life can form a fluid and vulnerable exercise identity.
- Paper IV investigates activity-based ethnographic research on a beloved activity and the challenges this poses to the researcher's own exercise identity.

### 5.2 Synopsis of each paper

#### Paper I

*'Stepping away from the computer and into the sweats': the construction and negotiation of exercise identities in a Norwegian public company*

The aim of this study was to explore some of the social complexities at play in terms of how company employees construct and manage their exercise identities within a workplace setting. The primary barriers to exercise participation included high levels of social comparison in a competitive working context, particularly in relation to 'competent colleagues' and feelings of

guilt associated with partaking in ‘recreational’ activities during work hours. Strategies engaged with to overcome and negotiate such obstacles included justifying participation through a health-related discourse, and constructing a more distinct ‘worker-exerciser’ identity. This study provides insight into how participating in workplace exercise groups is a complex social process, tied to notions of identity, competence and role expectations.

The methods used within the study were participant observation, individual interviews and weekly exercise logs. Four groups participating in an exercising programme at the workplace were observed over a 12-month period; a total of 300 hours of observations which included around 200 informal field conversations. The four groups consisted of 72 employees subject to observation. Of these, five females and one male were interviewed about their developing exercise involvement over the year, giving a total of 11 interviews. In addition, 18 participants wrote weekly logbooks.

## Paper II

### *Familiar Strangers: facework strategies in pursuit of non-binding relationships in a workplace exercise group*

This study explored the interactional dynamics of a workplace exercise group for beginners. Dramaturgical stress occurred here as individuals who already knew each other as competent colleagues felt embarrassed about encountering one another in this low ability exercise group. To resolve this role conflict, participants sought to define themselves as familiar strangers (which they were not) through minimal interaction in non-binding relationships. This was achieved through three types of facework strategy; not only the defensive and protective kinds that Goffman (1959) identified as saving individual faces, but also collective strategies which sought to repair the face of the whole group. Paradoxically, therefore, in attempting to deny

their 'groupness', these actors actually displayed and reinforced their solidarity as a performance team. These findings challenge the view espoused in sports science literature, that participating in an exercise group will enhance its members' cohesiveness, social support and adherence. Furthermore, the analysis develops Goffman's model of facework.

The study was based on longitudinal data from one of the four groups participating in the exercising programme at the workplace. This group, 'Easy Aerobics group', consisted of 19 signed up members (all women), all former non-exercising employees. Observational fieldwork was carried out in the exercise sessions, locker room and walking to and from class, giving a total of 90 hours of observation and around 130 recorded conversations. I as first author, kept a written record of my descriptions and interpretations of settings, events and conversations. I also conducted six in-depth interviews with three women over the course of the programme, while another three women agreed to keep weekly logbooks.

### Paper III

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

This study explored the social and dynamic aspects of the concept 'exercise identity'. Our case study of 'Adrianna', examined through a biographical narrative analysis, demonstrated 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 on this fluidity of exercise identities, we suggest the alternative concept of '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. Theoretically this study contributes a different view to psychology, by applying the usefulness of relational identity to deepen the understanding of exercise participation.

The study was based on a narrative analytical approach, using the narrative interview technique as the method of data collection. Prior to the narrative interviews, Adrianna had participated in several formal and informal field conversations and interviews about the exercise programme and her participation in it (see paper I and II). This enabled a common understanding, though unfinished, of Adrianna's account of being an (in)active person as a starting point for the interviews. The narrative interviews were conducted four weeks apart, and lasted for one-and-a-half hours and three-and-a-half hours respectively.

#### Paper IV

##### *Taking the fun out of it: the spoiling effects of researching something you love*

This reflexive analysis of two sports ethnographers' studies of an aerobics class and a swimming pool explores the effects of doing fieldwork on a physical activity that one loves. While using our bodies as phenomenological sites of perception initially created an epistemological advantage, researching the familiarly beloved not only 'took the fun out of' the activity, but also more profoundly challenged our 'exercise identities'. Emulating poor technique, enduring interactional awkwardness, and deep acting role performances, combined to take their toll, so that 'going native' became a matter not just of intellectual disadvantage but of ontological destabilisation. We conclude that doing activity-based ethnography on something personally special is a double-edged sword; on the one hand elucidating awareness, but on the other depriving us of pleasure and 'spoiling' aspects of their identity.

This article is a reflexive piece in which two qualitative researchers reflect on and

problematize our personal experiences and interpretations of conducting sports ethnographies. Methodologically, the analytical framework of personal and academic voice was applied by blending the techniques of ‘writing with self’ and ‘writing with academic voice(s)’: stepping in and out of the experience and reflecting on what we learned.

### 5.3 Summary of results

A complete version of all four published articles is attached. For this reason, the summary will not fully document the specific references to theory. The results of these papers illustrate how employees experienced a contradiction in role expectations and used elements from the work role to construct a worker-exercise identity (paper I). Furthermore, within the exercise groups the embarrassment of believing that one was perceived as less competent led to intricate face saving strategies to protect their exercise selves (paper II). These initial findings led to further exploration of contextual influences on the formation of identity, thus we analysed how the situated social and bodily experiences throughout life can form a fluid and vulnerable exercise identity (paper III). Participating alongside the employees on their terms for a year provided great insight and elucidating awareness, however the thesis also warrants some caution about how this type of activity based ethnographic research can possibly challenge the researcher’s own exercise identity (paper IV).

The results described in **paper I** yielded four principal themes. These included; social comparisons with ‘competent colleagues’ leading to loss of credibility and stigmatization; viewing exercise as a ‘guilty pastime’; justifying participation in terms of injury prevention, rehabilitation and for enhancing professional productivity, and finally, the construction of a ‘worker- exercise’ identity. Although each of these themes is discussed individually, they can also be categorized more generally. That is, the first two explores the complex problematic



barriers evident when struggling to participate within workplace exercise groups, while the latter two describe the strategies used by the employees to negotiate and develop their participation.

First, a main barrier stemmed from the clear indications of many employees suffering from a high degree of social comparison in the work context as a whole, and particularly when faced with fitter colleagues in the exercise group. There was an apparent contradiction between acknowledging and accepting oneself as being unfit in contexts outside work, while experiencing particular uneasiness when being in an exercise situation with more competent colleagues. Such anxiety may arise when individuals fear an inability to make or maintain a particular impression, and has been previously identified as a potential barrier to exercise enjoyment and participation. Although the participants might not find their limited exercising abilities inhibiting outside the work environment, the same shortcoming was perceived as highly embarrassing and risky in terms of their professional credibility when exposed before an audience of colleagues.

Second, despite the programme being supported by official company policy, participation appeared to be rooted in a troublesome consideration related to taking time away from a busy work schedule for perceived 'recreational' purposes. To deal with this feeling of guilt, some employees tried justifying participation in terms of 'socially acceptable excuses' like injury prevention and rehabilitation. Those who did not have an injury to lean on, resolved their socially perceived conflict about exercising during work hours and the guilt associated with it by arguing they would more than make up for the time 'lost' through enhanced work effort. The interpretation of undertaking the exercise on offer as 'doing a job within the job' manifested itself in two ways. On the one hand, employees attempted to make the decision to participate resemble a normal work task. In doing so, they moved away from perceiving the exercise as indulging in personal matters, towards something they were committed to do as

part of their work schedule. Also, some employees tried to make the actual execution of exercises as serious and ‘work-like’ as possible. This allowed them to adopt a ‘worker-exerciser’ identity, where the pursuit of regular and guilt free exercise attendance was the goal.

The results described in **paper II** illustrate the intricate facework strategies engaged in by employees within a workplace exercise group. When dealing with the embarrassment and stress of the undignified status as beginners in the workout sessions, and how this might ‘spoil’ their established image of professional competence, one might seek to keep the two performances or people watching them apart, so that one cannot undermine the other (role or audience segregation). As this was not possible when being an unaccustomed exerciser alongside colleagues, employees strove to resolve their role conflict by acting out a ‘familiar strangers’ scenario in the exercise group; behaving as if they had no prior, potentially conflicting ties to consider. To this end, they attempted to engage only in what we call ‘minimal interaction’ with their colleagues in pursuit of ‘non-binding relationships’. Thus, participants avoided the generation of deeper ties that extended into other settings or had repercussions for identity performances elsewhere. Minimal interaction manifested itself into three different facework strategies.

With *defensive facework strategies* the aim was for the individual to save their own face in line with the desired self-presentation. Participants protected their own space in the room with personalized props, and when approaching the instructor, they affected the appearance of a private, one-to-one encounter. Individuals self-consciously strove to bracket out their awareness of the others’ presence. Also, when moving their bodies out of line with the group they self-consciously tried to gloss over the blunder, by getting a drink of water or stepping away to save their own face.

*Protective facework* strategies on the other hand, was an effort to save another individual's face. Participants would engage in sympathetic identification where they would step in to spare the fellow participant's blushes with reassurances that they had had the same difficulty and thus that the individual was not inherently incompetent. A related strategy of protective facework occurred when participants stepped in to reassure a struggling member that their problems could be attributed to external features of the situation (such as the task difficulty or physical setting), rather than to their inherent low ability. Although these protective facework gestures may seem friendly and altruistic, the actors were motivated by a need to distance themselves from the stigmatizing label of the whole group being of 'low ability', which was hinted at by individual protestations of incompetence.

The third set of facework strategies was *collective facework*, which occurred where the members of a group perceived a threat to their shared face, and used tacitly agreed upon strategies to avert this danger. Collective facework functioned to affirm one claimed group identity (familiar strangers) while denying another (low ability exercising colleagues); an unwanted social face that had been bestowed upon them. It is ironic that, in attempting to deny their groupness, the participants actually revealed just that, because collective facework is a team performance. Particularly, participants engaged in civil inattention (Goffman, 1963) and glance management, trying to look past or straight through fellow participants in the exercise group and in the locker-room. Civil inattention was sometimes compromised by cooperative exercise tasks and participants dealt with this embarrassment by using humour, gentle chuckles and over-playing their parts, turning aerobic steps into mock dance moves. Finally, participants actively chose to keep silent whenever the instructor tried to engage the group with motivational encouragement and questions. Thus, dramatizing strangeness, ironically, required collaboration, and was a team performance.

The results in **paper III** reports on our case study of 'Adrianna'. We explored how fluid an exercise identity can be throughout life, and how its construction is dependent on the shifting contextual boundaries between self and others. This in turn highlighted that prominent social discourses are an interwoven part of ongoing identity formation. Adrianna's story was analyzed along three dimensions of social comparison that emerged as being 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 were interpreted as essential features in Adrianna's story of the construction and (re-)negotiation of her exercise identity.

First, Adrianna's older brother was perceived as a 'real athlete' and, throughout her youth, a lot of attention was given to his training and competitions. Although being an active child, this contrast led Adrianna to think of herself as not a real athlete - someone who was making a claim to the identity but did not really deserve it. Adrianna expressed a sense that the exercise identity was something that belonged to others, who appeared more competent than herself; it was not something that could fit with her own self-image, and thus it remained out of reach. Subsequently, for Adrianna, being a competent exercising and sports person became associated with performance rather than participation.

Second, Adrianna's perception of her body moved from being judged on physical measurable ability to being judged on visible appearance. This involved two sub-narratives: stories of first *having* and then *losing* the appropriate or adequate body. Her early twenties were a phase of life in which her body was close to 'normal size', as she described herself. She 'had the body' that was necessary to comfortably push herself in physical activity. This enabled Adrianna to define herself as an exercising person – not by competing in sport but by living an active outdoor lifestyle. Later on, gaining weight and losing the appropriate body was accompanied

by a disruption of the body-self relationship: Being out of breath, sweaty and tired with sore muscles – feelings that Adrianna had previously associated with having an appropriately fit and healthy body – changed to be associated with negative connotations for her, because it reflected her 'unhealthy' body image. Sweating and getting out of breath became synonymous with appearing, to herself and everybody else present, as overweight.

Third, a constant theme through Adrianna's story was her focus and strong commitment to health and exercise. While she struggled to participate on a regular basis in the exercise programme at work she was aware of that the societal health discourse took a toll on her perceived exercise identity. She struggled to find her place within the strict norms promoted by the health industry, and to be content with her own accomplishments. 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'.

**Paper IV** shifts the focus from the study's participants and empirical findings to its methodology and the researcher's experience. We are reflecting on our own experiences from studies of aerobics groups (Rossing & Scott, 2014) and lane swimming (Scott, 2010). Here we illustrate how behaving differently within a familiar setting and activity can create emotional dissonance and self-alienation for the ethnographer. By shifting our positions from master exercisers to apprentices, due to the demands of the field-worker role, we started to feel like strangers in our own worlds. In relation to this, we gradually sacrificed more and more of our exercise identities, in order to reach progressively deeper understandings of the participants' subjective experiences, as we endured participants' verbal strategies, bodily discomfort and social awkwardness. This process towards a 'spoiled' exercise identity was

analysed through four stages; (1) emulating poor technique, (2) bodily knowledge and bodily frustration, (3) enduring interactional awkwardness, and (4) invasion, role engulfment and spoiled identity.

First, preparing for participant observation in a sports activity meant altering the physical techniques of our movements to be able to audibly and visually observe the other participants. We had to deliberately modify our behaviour to fit the group's standard, but viewed this as a performance, totally contrived and separate from our real, exercise self who remained safely intact. However, our movements in the field become constrained, fitting uncomfortably upon our shoulders like an itchy sweater. Being stripped of leadership and license to set the tone of interaction in the group, we experienced a shift to a radically different social and practical role. We had to learn new ways of relating to our participants, commanding space and navigating space. Having learned from the first stage how to mirror the participants' *techniques of the body* (Crossley, 2005), this process became less of a conscious effort and more of a routine.

Thus in the second phase, the novelty of anthropological strangeness wore off and the acting became part of our embodied consciousness. At this point the cost of the research began to take its toll on our bodies, as we moved them in unfamiliar, uncomfortable and ineffective ways, and felt the effects of poor technique. We started to suffer aches, pains and muscle strains, which told us that we were doing things wrong, yet we could not correct the movements and had to carry on. It felt counter-intuitive to discard all we had learned about correct body positions and optimal performance, and losing that feeling of bodily ease meant that the activities became less enjoyable.

The strain increased as we entered the third phase of the projects, as we began to focus on the social interaction dynamics of the setting. We now stood to learn about an even deeper aspect

of the participants' *social* experiences, but to do so had to give up an important feature of our sports activities: our own preferred levels of sociability. For me, socialising with others was one of the things that made aerobics classes pleasurable. Now, I found myself becoming increasingly quiet and withdrawn, as the new experience I shared with my fellow participants in the beginners' aerobics class, of embarrassment and interactional strain, led me to adopt the same behaviours as them; avoiding eye contact, keeping silent and avoiding friendly conversations.

In the final stage of our projects, we began to feel the separation of our researcher-selves and bodies as researcher instruments became blurred. Habituating to the role performances echoes the problem of *going native*, whereby an actor loses his or her anthropological strangeness, through prolonged immersion in the field. Scenarios that had initially struck us as strange faded into invisibility as we began to see the fields through the same perspective as our participants. However, for us, going native was more than just an intellectual problem of compromised objectivity; rather it was emotional, embodied and personally meaningful. Going native signaled the loss of our cherished exercise identities and their supplantation by the embodied lived experience of our participants.

## 6.0 Discussion

The specific findings of each paper are summarised in Chapter Five. This chapter will contain a discussion of the main results and includes a more comprehensive discussion of the more far-reaching theoretical, methodological and empirical/ practical implications than are evident in the attached articles. First, the chapter presents empirical observations before relating them to the underlying assumptions described in the theory section. Consequently, the discussion specifies observations that confirm and modify theoretical expectations related to negotiating exercise participation and identity. Second, this chapter also addresses practical implications for professionals, before discussing directions for further research.

Subsequently, the findings presented in the papers raise two important issues: How can a symbolic interactionist perspective inform the field of exercise participation and adherence? And how can companies and professional health promoters take such social experiences into consideration when motivating employees unaccustomed to exercise? One important question, both theoretical and practical, that the findings pose is whether or not the workplace context is actually a good environment to promote exercise for beginners. This will be elaborated upon and addressed in the concluding remarks of this thesis.

### 6.1 Negotiating exercise participation: employees' perspectives and experiences of becoming 'exercisers' within a workplace setting.

Although the exercise adherence problem has been the subject of considerable research, this has mainly been from a psychological perspective. Conversely, few studies have employed a sociological perspective (and more specifically a SI one) to explore social factors that influence such participation. This study demonstrates the usefulness of SI in further



explaining and exploring exercise adherence in workplace groups. It does so by (a) applying and illustrating the usefulness of SI in this regard and (b) expanding upon current work through generating new explanatory concepts. In applying SI in this way, the psychological body of research on social support, cohesion and exercise identity-behaviour is challenged.

Three main findings relate to how exercise participation depends on; the extent to which an individual can engage with it (negotiating such obstacles as role conflict and social comparison: paper I), how they perform it with others (through such social strategies as facework: paper II) and the meaning such an identity holds for an individual (e.g., a worker exercise identity: paper I; a vulnerable exercise identity: paper III, and embodied awkwardness: paper IV). In other words, employees experienced and perceived challenges on a contextual, social/ relational and embodied level, when negotiating an exercise identity within their work place.

6.1.1 “I feel that most of the other participants are better than me” (field conversation, November 2009)

Health professionals and advocates of exercise groups consider the work place a place of familiar colleagues, and hence a place that would likely yield benefits to exercise participation in terms of the social support and group cohesion on offer (Bruner, Dunlop & Buachamp, 2014; Fraser & Spink, 2002; Strachan, Shields, Glassford, Beatty, 2012; Wilson, Crozier, Spink, & Ulvick, 2012). However, when the employees unaccustomed to exercise entered the ‘Exercise for all’ programme, some felt a negative social comparison to colleagues whom they perceived as better than themselves.

*“It feels extra uncomfortable, because I know I can easily lose the professional authority I need if I push myself forward in a breathless poorly executed exercise”* (Hayley log book, spring 2010).

Thus, by defining others as fitter and more capable than themselves, they marginalised themselves within the larger group. Applying SI theory, three plausible explanations were explored.

First, this perception can be explained in SI terms and in particular through Scott's concept of 'the competent other' (2007). Although Scott's (2007) focus was on shyness, the results from the current study resonate clearly with her work. In both contexts, not only were individuals worried about momentarily embarrassing themselves through performing ineptly in front of more capable others, but they were also concerned with the consequences of giving a performance that fell below the standard of the 'team' and, thus, of being rejected by it (Scott 2007). In other words, the employees feared what we termed 'the competent colleague', where one's own *relatively* poor exercise performance (cf. Scott 2007) was perceived to stigmatize and contaminate one's whole professional persona (cf. Goffman, 1963).

Consequently, while individuals might see themselves as exercising people within a leisure setting, this identity did not translate to a different field (e.g., a workplace setting). Thus, whether employees had previous histories of partaking in exercise or not, the resultant identities had to be negotiated anew when they began exercising in their work based context. The need to feel competence and confidence somewhat supports the findings in the quantitative literature about self-efficacy being a barrier to exercise participation (e.g., Higgins, et al., 2014). However, the study goes beyond the individualistic approach, suggesting that employees might have confidence in their own exercise performance but still experience a challenge when comparing themselves to 'competent colleagues'. Thus, the findings in this study emphasize the contextual influences an actor navigates their way around.

A second explanation for the contestation lay in the issue of juggling two roles before the same audience. Being a *beginner* in groups with employees perceived as experienced and,

therefore, competent resulted in a greater degree of embarrassment; something described as “another role-identity (such as ‘unfit or clumsy person’) has come to the fore and is interfering with the impression we wanted to project” (Scott, 2015, p. 86) (i.e., that of being a competent exerciser and a competent colleague). Juggling such roles before one audience created a dramaturgical dilemma for some, in trying to manage the consistency between the roles. Subsequently, the perception rose that audiences (in this case colleagues) became “critically evaluative in scrutinizing role performances (of doing exercise), and their real or anticipated judgments [*they all see how unfit I am*] have the power to refuse or discredit identity claims [*well, I am not an exerciser like them*]” (Scott, 2015, p. 83).

A third explanation for feeling inferior to colleagues in the exercise groups lay within contradictory role expectations. The theoretical case cited above posits that the embarrassment and stigmatization felt by unaccustomed exercisers occurs when one is forced to occupy two or more roles simultaneously that do not fit well together, creating a role conflict. This is supported by the work of Swann (2009), who, in introducing the compatibility principle, argued that company employees need to feel coherence across their identities at work. Swann’s (2009) argument is given increased credence by the tendency of the exercise and health industry to be achievement-focussed, while giving specific strategies of how to reach given goals; a predilection which places the blame squarely at the feet of individuals who do not reach such goals. Such a perception of the exercise role was evident in the current work context, with the company where the research took place being saturated with a discourse of achievements and high standards. In line with SI theorising then, the participants in the current study were in a constant process of interpretation and definition regarding social roles or norms. Their actions, in turn, stemmed from such meaning making (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Subsequently, engagement and participation in exercise groups

(action) were found to be complex processes, tied to notions of perceived competence, contradictory role performances and competing role expectations.

Consequently, just ‘stepping away from the computer and into the sweats’ was far from an unproblematic activity for those workers unaccustomed to exercise. In this respect, negotiating participation involved navigating a competitive culture of social comparison, trepidation about more ‘competent colleagues’, and a general fear that their lack of competence as exercisers would influence others’ professional opinions of them. Such problematizing indicates that providing opportunities to exercise is not enough to secure adherence; neither is the taken-for-granted assumption that collegial social support is always straightforward and functional.

This intriguing role conflict between employees work identities and their newly constructed identities as members of the company’s ‘Easy Aerobics’ group (a new group, within ‘Exercise for Better Health’, aimed solely at beginners), paved the way for exploring the strategies used to manage this conflict and to avoid feelings of stigmatization and embarrassment within the groups. This leads to the question of how exactly were the interaction dynamics in a ‘low ability’ exerciser group?

#### 6.1.2 “It’s not a kind of group that acts like a group together” (Paige, interview, spring 2010)

In analysing the participants’ social interaction it became increasingly interesting to explore how participants presented themselves *not* as a group but however, disclaiming both their shared background as co-workers and how they were designated members of the ‘Easy Aerobics’ group. This was particularly intriguing as the group appeared as a group of ‘regulars’ who held familiar, secure positions in the work related structure, as opposed to more tentative positions of strangers (Katovich & Reese, 1987). Instead they tried to resolve

the role conflict of being colleagues and low ability exercisers by acting out as ‘familiar strangers’ (Milgram, 1977). Acting as familiar strangers means behaving as if they had no prior, potentially conflicting ties to consider. This social milieu allowed the exercise group to appear as loosely structured, avoiding being drawn into deeper levels of involvement and thus engaged in only minimal interaction.

To uphold this familiar stranger and minimal interaction scenario the participants engaged in defensive and protective facework (Goffman, 1967) (see Chapter Five for a summary of findings). Although these protective facework gestures appeared friendly and altruistic, the actors were motivated by a need to distance themselves from the stigmatizing label of the whole group being of ‘low ability’. Subsequently, as being a member of the ‘Easy Aerobics’ group felt compromising in the work context, we built upon Goffman’s facework theory by suggesting an additional, third category of *collective facework*. Collective facework occurs when members of a group perceive a threat to their shared face - the common identity they wish to present - and use tactically agreed upon strategies to avert this danger. Here, the participants in the ‘Easy aerobics group’ performed collective strategies such as resorting to silence, or muteness, by failing to respond to questions and encouragement from the instructor. Alongside this, they performed Goffman’s (1963) strategy of civil inattention, where they would glance briefly or ‘straight through’ each other, as strangers would, “to avoid being drawn into any focused encounters that would draw attention to their common status” (Scott, 2015, p. 130):

*You have to be careful not to stare at somebody, [but] at the same time it is impossible to avoid it. If you randomly happen to meet the gaze of someone, it feels embarrassing: have you been observing the other person? Should you smile or something?* (Haley, logbook, winter 2010)

According to SI each person acts according to his ‘definition of the situation’ (Thomas & Thomas, 1923). He or she has to interpret other people's behaviour and to make a personal assessment of what is ‘right and proper’ at the moment (Segalman, 2014). This explains why the ambiguity of the social, relational and contextual landscape of the workplace is an important factor when these employees navigate their exercise identity construction and participation. All this considered, the questions which subsequently arose related to whether and to what extent the company employees were able to see themselves as exercisers. Did the idea of an ‘exercise identity’ make sense to them and, if so, how?

#### 6.1.3 “I just want to be me when I’m exercising” (Adrianna, narrative-interview)

Consistent with other studies, the analysis illustrates that one’s self-perception as an exerciser in a particular setting seems to be a factor affecting decisions about exercise participation. However, unlike the quantitative literature which has somewhat claimed a causal link between exercise behaviour and the formation of an exercise identity, the current study demonstrated such identity to be a fluid phenomenon, with its constant construction dependent on shifting and blurred contextual boundaries between self and others, self and society and self and body.

As stated above, previous research on exercise identity from a psychological perspective has posited such identity in terms of self-schema and identity theory (Burke, 2006). Such work has provided 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. Hence, once individuals endorse a role identity, they are said to be motivated to maintain consistency between their identity and their behaviour (Stets & Burke, 2003). Interestingly, this functionalistic view of role identity has somewhat crossed from academic discourse into popular use. It has become commonplace to speak of

particular identity roles as if they were fixed, agreed upon by all and uncontroversial (e.g., the role of the teacher or a parent's role). This everyday usage tends to construct roles in a rather simplistic, reductionist way, through a dichotomy between 'proper' and 'inadequate' modes of performance. For example, in the case of the exercise identity, lay conceptions of the 'proper' exerciser might involve expectations of a person having a high level of physical fitness, exercising regularly and frequently. Thus, when several participants in this study dismissed the notion of being an exerciser, it was on the basis of the belief that they did not exercise extensively, properly and in the way they 'should'. However, the findings in this study suggest a more complex picture of exercise identity construction. The alternative, SI definition of identities and role is more fluid and subtle. A role, in this conception, is not fixed or prescribed but something that is constantly negotiated between individuals (Scott, 2015). The findings show how exercise identity construction relates to, three themes (binding the four papers together) of competing roles, previous experiences and bodily experiences.

Firstly, the role conflict between being a competent worker and a less competent exerciser created a fear of embarrassment and stigmatization for the participants. In line with the findings in paper I; this resulted in some employees adopting the exercise behaviour to mimic work behaviour. By writing down the group times in their appointment calendar and adjusting to a hardworking and serious mentality in the workout sessions they constructed what we called a 'worker-exercise identity', adopting a work-like mentality towards exercise participation. A similar process was reported by Johnston and Swanson (2006, 2007) who showed how women constructed a work-mother identity to allay competing tensions between intensive mothering and career success. Thus, through constructing a worker-exercise identity, some employees in this study managed to somewhat resolve the perceived role conflict. Subsequently, they gave meaning and constructed a context-specific exercise identity.

Secondly, Adrianna's narrative demonstrates similar process of negotiating and constructing context specific exercise identities through life and shifting social experiences. An intriguing aspect of her case is that she saw herself as a 'capable exercising person' in some situations (e.g., the swimming group) while being the opposite in others (e.g., the workplace aerobics group). A similar ambiguity was present in her childhood years: She was an accomplished cross-country skier and ball player, yet did not regard herself as a 'real athlete' or a 'good gymnast'. These ambiguities or contradictions culminated in a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954), termed the 'vulnerable exercise identity'. Adrianna's narrative reveals various points of social comparison and contrast to perceived others (people, normative standards and cultural demands), against which she measured her own competence. In some of these cases, she perceived herself as relatively successful, while in others she felt inferior. Over her life course, therefore, Adrianna's self-image kept changing through the extent to which she viewed herself as a 'proper' or 'good enough' exerciser.

Finally, researchers with confident exercise identities may face challenges when researching activities they love. In Paper IV, reflecting on our own experiences from studies of aerobics groups (Rossing & Scott, 2014) and lane swimming (Scott, 2010), we discuss the effects of deliberate self-deskilling in order to relocate ourselves in more peripheral positions in the research context. Here, embodied physical activities that were once fluid and unselfconscious became clumsy and awkward. This had further implications for emotions and identity. Behaving differently within a familiar setting and activity can create emotional dissonance and self-alienation (Hochschild, 1983). By shifting our positions from 'masters' to 'apprentices', we endured both corporal and interactional awkwardness. Subsequently, we started to feel like strangers in our own worlds, with new strange roles in turn having a damaging effect on aspects of our self-identities. Thus acting or actually performing (as a low ability exerciser) below standard might feel damaging not only to one's exercise identity but



also to one's work and/ or research persona. These findings support the notion of a vulnerable exercise identity, whether this results from a lifelong struggle with that self-image or more recent, situational experiences that disrupt it.

When comparing these two findings concerning (a) Adrianna's vulnerable exercise identity and (b) our own destabilised exercise identity during the course of fieldwork, there is a common theme. Whether one has become an overweight person who has struggled all her life to recognise herself as an exerciser or one is a fit person with a confident exercise identity, contextual social experiences challenge how and to what extent, one is able to view oneself as an exerciser. Thus, whether one is unaccustomed to exercise or confident and experienced, encountering others within changing social and relational contexts, might lead to questioning one's exercise identity. This challenges the notion that there is a straightforward causal link between exercise behaviour and exercise identity. Instead, using an SI perspective, this study suggests that exercise identity is vulnerable, fluid, contextual, relational and performative (cf. Scott, 2015).

Thus, "*I just want to be me when I am exercising*" is an apt statement from Adrianna (ref. paper III), which resonates with several findings in this study. The employees struggling to construct an exercise identity in conflict with the perceived demands of the work context (ref. paper I), who gather meaning from their work role in order to interpret a 'worker-exerciser' identity, would probably have found the negotiation easier if they could have exercised as their private selves, not worrying about how this might affect their professional persona. Similarly, in paper II we follow Adrianna's struggle to see herself as a 'real' exercising person, hence her plea to just be allowed to define her own version of this without reference to her previous experiences, society's demands or her overweight body. Similarly, our confident exerciser identities in paper VI would not have been eroded, had we not entered a

contextual position in the field that required us to diminish our own exercise competence, causing social and bodily discomfort.

## 6.2 Theoretical contribution

Based on the discussion above, this study's main theoretical contribution is exploring, applying and developing new sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954), in order to further understand the struggle some beginners to these workplace exercise groups experience when negotiating their participation. Valuable SI concepts were used in the final stages of analysing the employees' experiences, including the potential *role conflict* between a competent work role and the new, less competent, exercise role. A culture of competence led some of the beginners to perceive themselves as inferior to '*the competent colleague*'. This comparison created a feeling of embarrassment and stigmatization about having to perform in front of colleagues below their preferred level of competence.

Within the exercise groups this role conflict and embarrassment in relation to 'the competent colleague' was dealt with by aiming to define the group participants as *familiar strangers*. This is an SI concept that explores the actual interaction in a different light than concepts like communities of practice, social support and cohesiveness. By applying and illustrating Goffman's dramaturgical perspective of facework strategies, the study describes the intricate self-presentation and impression management techniques that were found in these workplace exercise groups. Their denial of groupness/ group identity challenges the idea that group exercise in the workplace increases motivation and adherence. In addition to Goffman's defensive and protective types of facework which are both individual strategies, we suggest a third type, called *collective facework*. Collective facework becomes a collaborate strategy to preserve the notion that the participants are not part of a 'low ability' exercise group at work.

At the core of the study lay the concept of exercise identity. Using SI theory, I have demonstrated that this is a relational identity; that is, an identity defined in relation to time, others, context, body and discourse. This kind of identity is fluid and changeable, as opposed to fixed and stable, and it is an active social construction. Subsequently, based on the experiences of the participants of this study, a new theoretical concept of '*vulnerable exercise identity*' was suggested. This is a sensitizing concept that illustrates how employees and others, with or without previous exercise experience (ref. paper III and IV), have to actively work, navigate and continuously construct their self-perception as exercisers. Consequently, I claim that actors are always 'doing' (constructing, working on, performing and monitoring) their exercise identities. I also demonstrate how this construct is vulnerable to change, through the social and relational experiences encountered across different situations and contexts.

It should be noted that using the term 'exercising person' may possibly have made it harder for participants to relate to than if the study had used the term 'physically active person', or just 'active person'. It is perhaps easier for people to relate to simply being an active person through everyday tasks, such as riding their bike, tending the garden, playing with children, walking their dog, etc. However, the study was designed on the basis of the 'inactivity problem' and the officially recommended need for at least 30 minutes of vigorous activity every day. This, alongside the issue of low participation and adherence to workplace exercise groups, meant that the term 'exerciser' seemed warranted.

### 6.3 Methodological contribution and limitations

In presenting the findings, I am mindful of what can be claimed by a single case-study, (Smith-DiJulio, Windsor & Anderson, 2010). This was a specific public knowledge-production company in Norway with its own particular organizational culture, which could be both similar and different to other organisations. This culture would be reflected in the interaction in the exercise groups. Thus, some of the findings might be due to the general organizational culture and some of the nature of the exercise programme itself, which is consistent with a social constructionist view of the social world (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This is an inherent problem in all ethnographic accounts, “that the descriptive world is descriptively inexhaustible and therefore all ethnographic work will involve an inevitable degree of filtering on the basis of what is (and is not) perceived to be relevant (Hillyard, 2010, p. 6). However, the culture in this organisation, though not specifically explored, may be presumed to be similar to other computerized companies with a precise high standard in their product and competition for funding.

Furthermore, compared to other exercise participation/adherence literature, in which most studies last six months or less this study was a longitudinal study, lasting for a year. I feel this gave a varied picture of the challenges employees might experience after the initial motivational boost of being accepted to the programme, the newness and the excitement about finally getting started, begin to wear off. Thus, I was able to explore the members’ everyday experiences and challenges of trying to incorporate this exercise group into their life beyond the initial phase.

While including either total non-participants or regulars would have given a somewhat different picture, my focus was on those employees that were unaccustomed to exercise, but did still attempt to participate, with the intention of making exercise part of their weekly

routines. I believed that employees in this phase were especially mindful and considerate of their deliberation processes, and so would yield rich information. Additionally, interviewing employees at several points in time while exercising alongside them, I managed to build a trusting relationship. The idea of positioning and using oneself as a research instrument is considered more fully in the methods section, where I suggest that this relationship gave the informants and I a common platform of shared experience, which generated empathy and rapport. Through informal discussions with the participants, I managed to get beyond the often cited excuses of lack of time, not being interested in this particular activity and so on (Edmunds, et al., 2011), to access the less socially acceptable but perhaps more genuine reasons for struggling to participate.

Being open to being surprised and learning the unexpected is perhaps a strength of fieldwork and particularly participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Thus, a particular strength of this study lies in the discovery of unexpected findings, which were contrary to what the previous literature had suggested. A key aim in sociology is ‘making the familiar strange’ (Garfinkel, 1967). Through the inductive nature of this study, the researcher achieved this by using different explanatory concepts like role conflict, familiar strangers and facework in understanding employee participation and adherence to exercise programmes.

Methodologically, paper IV makes a contribution to the debates about insider research and ‘going native’. The findings suggest that doing ethnographic research on an activity one loves can change one’s relationship to it (we can fall in or out of love), and more seriously, might challenge the researcher’s (exercise) identity. This latter point strengthens the main finding in this study of how fragile and changeable an exercise identity might be across contexts and social relations, regardless of one’s starting position.

### 6.3 Implications for professional practice

In Norway, the Working Environment Act (Arbeidsmiljøloven, 2005) stipulates that workplaces have a duty to consider measures for physical activity in the workplace and several companies already have different kinds of physical activity programmes to offer their employees. However, the challenge is for beginners to get started. There is a recognised need to combat the inactivity and sedentary trend in Norwegian society, and its devastating health effects. As the workplace is a designated arena to reach the majority of adults, the potential to introduce exercise to beginners is high. However, as previously mentioned, these programmes have an average of 30 % participation rate and attract mainly fit and healthy employees, and less so those with suboptimal health (Kilpatrick et al., 2015). While the health industry and fitness professionals are moving their attention from one fitness trend to another with a focus on motivation, this study urges the benefits of pausing and taking a closer look at *why* it is hard for employees unaccustomed to exercise to participate and adhere to low threshold exercise programmes. Ziegler's statement from two decades ago is still relevant: "...all the well intentioned, beautifully structured programs in the world will make no difference to workers' health if too few workers participate" (1997, p. 26).

*"Can you help me get into better shape? I really need to, before I can join in the activities at work."* (employee to PT Instructor, SATS, Kampen 2015)

This is a request a personal trainer at my local fitness centre had received from several clients. Indeed, the findings of this study support the notion of employees initially seeking to separate the two roles of competent worker and exerciser. There might be a solution of building up an exercise competence level in private; enhancing their exercise competence outside the workplace might help employees to 'keep face' when they enter a class of colleagues. For instance, some companies are already providing employees with reduced price gym passes.

While this might be a good strategy for some companies, how can the findings in this study help employers and health professionals to accommodate beginners *within* the work context and possibly include more inactive employees?

The workplace context, as a competitive, comparative environment, can make it difficult to introduce a leisure activity like exercise. This is especially so for inactive employees negotiating and entering into a new exercise role that they do not feel comfortable with. Thus, exercise participation in the workplace is a relational activity, which can be affected by several social barriers. Companies might then consider taking steps to adjust their organisational culture towards including all levels of competence, as well as encouraging employees to accept (without stigmatisation) the varied levels of competence amongst themselves.

Employers and leaders could help merge the roles of worker and exerciser by participating themselves, thereby endorsing all aspects of the exercise programme. By participating preferably within an unfamiliar exercise, a leader might both demonstrate that working hours can proudly be used to exercise and that it is safe ‘to make a fool of yourself’ in front of one’s subordinates and colleagues. However, leaders that are particularly occupied with their personal physical activity and fitness need to understand that this is not the case for all employees. Few inactive employees will feel inspired by super-fit leaders in running tights. More relatable role models (of similar fitness levels to oneself) might be a key to success in creating an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere.

Relatable role models and mentors are an interesting strategy to help beginners to see themselves as an exercising person. Edmunds and Clow’s (2015) intervention and focus group study found the role of physical activity ‘peer champions’ on the workplace to have a positive influence on physical activity behaviour change. They, in line with this study, suggest

that encouraging changes in employees' physical activity is a delicate subject. Although peer support at work is not a new idea, it holds great potential in workplace interventions (Linnan, Fisher & Hood, 2013) Thus, alongside being a PA role model, these peer champions could also help beginners find other exercising partners in the workplace. Having an exercising 'buddy' might help lessen the embarrassment and provide experiences of how the roles of being a colleague and a beginner exerciser could coexist.

The findings of this study indicate that participating in a formal exercise group at work might be too big a first step for some beginners. Organisations might consider more modest interventions that simply aim to have employees become more active during their workday. An active workday could mean standing at one's desk instead of sitting, walking to colleagues instead of emailing, taking the stairs instead of the lift, etc. According to Biswas, Oh, Faulkner, Bajaj, Silver, Mitchell & Alter (2015) health-promotion messages advocating a reduction in sedentary time are far less common than the promotion of physical activity in the workplace, though just as complicated to implement. However, such a focus might help beginners to view themselves as physically active. By first coming to see themselves simply as an active person, joining an exercise group might be less intimidating. Another, facilitated step prior to entering an exercise group might be walking groups. From their study of inactive employees participating in three weekly 30-minute lunchtime walks, Thøgersen-Ntoumani, Loughren, Kinnafick, Taylor, Duda and Fox (2015) suggest that these improved enthusiasm and relaxation, which may have broader implications for public health. As postulated at the beginning of this thesis, there is evidence suggesting that physical activity programmes mainly attract those who are already physically active. While my study suggests that there are considerable perceived ramifications to being a less competent exerciser in workplace exercise groups, worksite walking groups might be a less intrusive activity. Van Wormer, Linde, Harnack, Stovitz, and Jeffery (2012) measured participation in worksite walking clubs



over a two-year period and found these clubs to be appealing across varying levels of previous and current physical activity.

Finally, exercise groups in the workplace might benefit from the provision of groups that are more homogenous in terms of ability level, even within the broad category of ‘beginners’. Exercising alongside colleagues that have the same competence level as oneself might reduce the feeling of embarrassment. Additionally, group instructors could be educated in facework strategies, along with possible cohesive strategies, specifically targeting facilitating employee group dynamics. However, this must be done with sensitivity. Instructors need to be mindful of how explicitly naming and focusing on ‘low ability’ exercise groups, where employees do not want to be seen as ‘unaccustomed’, can have stigmatising implications for their professional work identities.

#### 6.4 Implications for further research

This study responds to the recognised ‘participation and adherence problem’ with workplace physical activity programmes. One of the reasons these programmes are still struggling to provide any significant health changes is due to low participation and adherence rates. The focus was on employees unaccustomed to exercise, and the social and relational struggles they encountered as they entered the workplaces’ low threshold exercise programmes. Further research could investigate whether similar or different concepts would emerge in other types of organizations with differing cultural climates or different structures, such as production companies in industry. Further research using different research design and methods, such as an intervention study could provide other valuable insights into how beginners in the workplace participate and adhere to exercise programmes. This study has explored some of

the social challenges to participation, but further research could have a stronger focus on what could be done to facilitate participation, as outlined above.

As suggested in this study, being physically active independently in one's private leisure time is quite different from exercising in a setting where one holds a strong primary role like a competent worker. It might be interesting to learn if the findings in this study also extend to somewhat similar contexts like schools, insofar as these are also arenas where health professionals and legislators are encouraging physical activity interventions in order to prevent inactivity and obesity from an early age. It might be interesting and valuable to explore possible role conflicts and exercise identity construction within the PE curriculum in a school setting. How is it to combine the role of a high achieving student with that of a gymnast; for example, not being able to cartwheel in front of your fellow students?

We need greater knowledge not only about participating in exercise groups but how employees view incorporating a more active lifestyle into their work. Further research could investigate what kind of social complexities are at play in responding to practical advice such as taking the stairs, walking to the printer at the other end of the building etc. While exercise programmes at work hold the promise to make a health impact based on the beneficial effects of physical activity on the individual, we still need to know more about why employees hesitate to participate, struggle to become regular exercisers and, as this study suggests, might find it stigmatising.



## 7.0 Conclusion

Developing healthier workforces has increasingly become a driving concern for companies; however, providing opportunities to exercise is not enough to secure adherence. The findings in this study show that constructing an exercise identity at work is far from a linear, straightforward process but is rather a vulnerable and continuous process of negotiation and deliberation according to one's previous experiences, bodily abilities and social context. Thus, becoming an exerciser in the workplace might be socially challenging because of conflicting expectations and possible embarrassment and stigmatization. Theoretically, these findings question the stability of an 'exercise identity' and the presumed supportive effects of participating in groups of familiar others. Instead, the study offers an insight into how employees might tackle the challenges of impression management; through constructing a context specific 'worker-exerciser' identity, acting as 'familiar strangers' and using facework strategies. Furthermore, it offers new sensitizing concepts in order to understand the experiences of employees unaccustomed to exercise. Equally interesting, however, is how these findings question whether or not the workplace context is actually a good environment to promote exercise for beginners. Based on the experiences in this study the answer is both yes and no. For some beginners exercise programmes at work becomes a constant reminder, along with the performance-related health and fitness discourse telling them that they are failing to meet the required standard, and that even their work is not a safe space away from this pressure. However, with a more holistic mind-set, considering the social, relational and contextual challenges behind the excuse of 'I don't have the time', employers, health professionals and employees can work together in developing activities to include more inactive employees.



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## Papers I- IV

- I) Rossing, H. & Jones, R. L. (2015). 'Stepping away from the computer and into the sweats': the construction and negotiation of exercise identities in a Norwegian public company. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and health*, 7(1), 1-16.
  
- II) Rossing, H. & Scott, S. (2014). Familiar Strangers: Facework Strategies in Pursuit of non-binding relationships in a workplace exercise group. *Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works (Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 42) Emerald Group Publishing Limited*, 42, 161-183.
  
- III) Rossing, H., Ronglan, L.T. & Scott, S. (2016). I just want to be me when I am exercising: Adrianna's construction of a vulnerable exercise identity. *Sport, Education and Society*, 21(3), 339-355.
  
- IV) Rossing, H. & Scott, S. (2016) Taking the fun out of it: the spoiling effects of researching something you love. *Qualitative Research*, 1468794115622561.





# Paper I



## **‘Stepping away from the computer and into the sweats’: the construction and negotiation of exercise identities in a Norwegian public company**

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While research has found that a developed exercise identity enables individuals to view exercise participation as self-reinforcing, the social barriers to such exercise identity development and participation have not been fully addressed. The subsequent aim of this study was to explore some of the social complexities at play in terms of how company employees construct and manage their exercise identities within a work place setting. A case-study method was used to address the research issue over a year. The case to be studied included a sample of 72 employees from a Norwegian public company who participated in an on-going work-based exercise programme called ‘Exercise for all’. The principal means of data collection comprised participant observation, individual interviews and exercise logbooks. The data were subject to inductive analysis. The primary barriers to exercise participation included high levels of social comparison in a competitive working context, particularly in relation to ‘competent colleagues’, and feelings of guilt associated with partaking in ‘recreational’ activities during work hours. Strategies engaged with to overcome and negotiate such obstacles included justifying participation through a health-related discourse, and constructing a more distinct ‘worker-exerciser’ identity.

**Keywords:** case study; exercise; group-based physical activity; identity; workplace

### **Introduction**

In continued efforts to establish and maintain a healthy and productive workforce (Hymel *et al.* 2011) while also responding to an intensifying political agenda (Toronto-Charter 2010), an increasing number of companies have developed exercise programmes for their employees (Robroek *et al.* 2007). Despite the obvious advantages of increased physical activity on workplace health (Pedersen *et al.* 2009), research indicates that such programmes’ uptake and subsequent impact remains limited (Atlantis *et al.* 2004, Robroek *et al.* 2007). Indeed, as pointed out by Ziegler (1997) ‘all the well-intentioned, beautifully structured programmes in the world will make no difference to workers’ health if too few

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workers participate' (p. 26). Despite such protestations, relatively little research has been carried out into social contextual reasons associated with (non) participation by company employees in established exercise programmes (Thompson *et al.* 2005, Robroek *et al.* 2009). The work which has been done, however, has increasingly pointed to the salience of an exercise 'identity' or 'self' in developing and maintaining involvement.

A sociological approach to identity is founded on the notion that a reciprocal relationship exists between the self and society (Stryker and Burke 2000). Within such analysis, the concept of identity has traditionally been analysed in terms of social identity theory, where an individual is associated with a group, or identity theory, where the association is with a particular role. Within both, however, the self is taken as being reflexive (McCall and Simmons 1978). Identity construction then, involves a process of a negotiation between social roles and environmental expectations, and personal beliefs (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Hence, Dionigi (2002) describes an exercise identity as representing how an individual sees oneself as an exercising being, with participation in exercise groups being strongly linked to individuals' self-esteem as exercising persons (Fox 1997). Such an identity perception is, of course, often formed via interactions with others in particular contexts (Stryker 2002). This was a point echoed by the symbolic interactionist perspective taken by Stryker (1980), who, positions the self as emerging in and from a social context in which other selves exist.

Despite a growing appreciation for exercise identity as reason for exercise behaviour, Strachan *et al.* (2009, 2010) claim much research within the area has been concerned with a causal link between exercise identity and exercise behaviour. Subsequently, the social context within which people are situated, and how it impacts on exercise identity creation, has been largely neglected (e.g. Vlachopoulos *et al.* 2011). This would appear a considerable shortcoming, considering that the self is acknowledged to be extensively constructed by and through the social context (Stryker 2002). This was a point recently emphasised by McGannon and Spence (2010) in this journal, who argued that social psychology's predominant belief in a divide between self and society has hindered contextual understanding. Similarly, there has been no research on work place exercise identity, despite the apparent clash between the dual identities of being an employee and an exerciser, and its subsequent impact on exercise participation (Johnston and Swanson 2006, 2007). Building an exercise identity at work then, appears to be a far from linear or straightforward process. The subsequent aim of this article was to explore some of the social complexities at play in terms of how company employees construct and manage their exercise identities in a work place setting. More specifically, the objectives were related to exploring the barriers inherent in developing and maintaining such identities and the subsequent strategies engaged in by individuals to overcome them.

The principal significance of the article lies in exploring the complexities associated with constructing and maintaining exercise identities. This is particularly in terms of the difficulties inherent in negotiating a multitude of social roles and their conflicting expectations and standards (Vrazel *et al.* 2008). For example, a study by Nezelek *et al.* (2007) found the existence of distinct job-related role expectations among working colleagues associated with a desire to demonstrate high competence in all related interactions. For such individuals, being perceived as less competent or seeing others as more competent (Scott 2004) held the potential

for subsequent tension and a fear of personal inadequacy in any area important to them. Similarly, Anderson *et al.* (2006) found that a high degree of social comparison existed within groups of working peers; a tendency that inhibited participation in activities where employees felt less competent. Consequently, in many cases, it would appear that people steer clear of confronting the implications of potential divergence between their various identities by avoiding participation in public situations in which they expect to perform weakly (e.g. sporting areas). The value of this article then, relates to exploring both the extent of these and other barriers to exercise participation, and how they can be negotiated and overcome. Better understanding of such processes and how they are dealt with holds the future potential not only for more productive and efficient company work-forces, but also more fulfilling and healthier agential lives.

## **Methodology**

### ***Context***

The study was located within a public knowledge-production company in Norway. The company comprised 650 employees spread across nine departments. The nature of the work was generally sedentary and computerised. Nevertheless, the company had a long tradition of offering many formal sport and exercise programmes for its employees. The focus of the current study lay in an ongoing programme termed 'Exercise for all'. The initiative was innovative in many ways. Firstly, unlike the company's employee-driven, after hours 'sports structure', which involved participation in established team sports such as football, bowling and indoor hockey, 'Exercise for all' comprised so-called low-threshold activities, easily accessible activities. This was activities such as aerobic step and strength exercises performed to music, aimed at those staff who had little or no previous exercise experience. Secondly, all of the company's employees had access to the 'Exercise for all' programme during work hours as part of a negotiated employment agreement. Thirdly, participation within it was also free of charge as long as individuals committed themselves to an additional hour of exercise a week during their own time. The programme was popular and was now expanding to eight exercise groups, with each individual being allowed to enrol in one of the groups for a two semester course over a calendar year.

### ***Methods***

Consistent with the aim of the study, an exploratory qualitative methodology was used. Case-study was considered especially suited in this context as it enables the study of action and perception *in situ*, allowing a strong focus on the social construction of the case (Stake 1995). By using a case study design, a detailed contextual and temporal analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life was sought (Yin 1984). More specifically, the principal methods used within the case-study were participant observation, individual interviews and weekly exercise logs.

### ***Participants***

Of the eight groups in the exercise programme, four were selected to partake in the study. Such a decision was predominantly based on the idea of 'purposive

sampling' (Patton 2002) which relates to gleaning data from a particular sample that manifest the phenomenon to be studied (Patton 2002). In this respect, the groups were considered 'information rich' cases (Patton 2002), as they consisted of a mixture of individuals who had never participated, infrequent exercisers and regular exercisers with previous exercise history. Despite this apparent diversity, it is important to note here that the vast majority of the participants were new to exercising at work. The four chosen groups consisted of 84 employees. However, 12 chose not to participate in the exercise group leaving 72 participants subject to observation. Of these, five females and one male agreed to be interviewed about their developing exercise involvement over the year, giving a total of 11 interviews. In deciding upon the appropriate number to interview, we were guided by the notion of data 'saturation'. Being aware of Dey's (1999) cautionary note related to closing inductive categories early, we also felt the need to recognise when more data became 'counter-productive', where the 'newly discovered does not add to the overall story, theory or framework' (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 136). Such a process also echoes Hennink's (2011) belief in the need to continuously assess the variations found in 'new data' in terms of the investigative aim. Finally, in addition to the above authors, our decision to 'cut' here was also influenced by the lead of Kuzel (1992) and Guest *et al.* (2006) who tied such judgements as related to data saturation to sample heterogeneity and the research objectives. In addition, 18 participants wrote logbooks via their private company email account. The interviewees and all logbook contributors came from different departments and had worked for the company from 1 to 35 years. Again, these informants were similarly subjected to purposive sampling criteria (Patton 2002).

### ***Procedure***

The observational work was carried out by the first author over a 12 month period, usually during the hours between midday and 4.30 pm, two or three days a week. Here, a written record of observations primarily related to a description and interpretation of events, settings and conversations was meticulously kept (Prudy and Jones 2011). Specific attention was paid to the nature of the social interaction among the participants (e.g. the work colleagues) and between the participants and the instructors, including what was spoken about, by whom, when and how it was said. The observations were primarily conducted within the exercise classes, in the changing rooms before and after each class, and in the hallway which led to and from the exercise rooms, giving a total 300 h of observations which included around 200 informal field conversations.

As stated, to specifically gather data from their viewpoints, 18 participants agreed to keep personal log-books related to their experiences in their respective exercise groups. After each class, they were sent an email containing several related questions, which they were encouraged to reflect upon. Typical of such questions were; 'how did you experience the group today?' 'Why?' 'Any examples?' 'How did you feel?' 'Why?' 'How did you experience the other participants?' and, 'what, if anything, did you talk about?' Like the observations, where appropriate, the responses here were explored in some depth in the subsequent interviews.

The development of the interview format was guided by a constructivist methodology (Charmaz 2006). Hence, the interviews were conducted as conversations (Esterberg 2002) with each following its own pathway in relation to a

basic framework. The framework was centred on such topics as the participants' thoughts on how they came to know about the exercise programme, their initial encounters and experiences of it, their relationships with colleagues, potential barriers to participation, how they tried to negotiate them, their participation in and understanding of the groups and how they considered themselves as exercising persons. These descriptions developed over the course of subsequent interviews to explore issues such as how their exercise identities were being constructed and maintained, or forsaken in the work-place setting. On average, the interviews lasted about an hour each and took place during or just at the end of the workday, either in the informant's office, in a designated meeting room or other suitable private place (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The interviews were also audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

In terms of a precise procedure, the initial observational data gathered were used to inform subsequent interviews. These were, in turn, analysed with a view to further observations and to focus log-book reflections. The study's design then, comprised a somewhat progressive spiral where a period of observation and log-book reflective entries was followed by interviews which, in turn, sharpened further observations (Hennink *et al.* 2010). The methods then, were complementary and mutually sustaining, with each informing the next in a developmental sequence. Such a structure ensured a progressive process of data collection and analysis. Although this set structure, comprising four periods of observations and three of interviews, existed as a guiding procedural framework, the emphasis here remained on flexibility in terms of quality of the data gained.

### ***Data analysis***

In line with the unfolding nature of the research design, the data were subject to inductive analysis (Patton 2002). By combining a constant comparative analysis with a line-by-line examination of interviews, field notes and logbooks, common words, phrases, meanings and ways of thinking were identified and constructed as initial codes (Charmaz 2006). What assisted the process here was the importation of the data into MAXQUDA, a qualitative data management and analysis software package. Interpreted repetition from within the raw data-set established subsequent patterns and topics that became focused coding categories (Charmaz 2006). The most significant of these focused codes were then used to sift through further field notes, field conversations, log books and interview responses. A final stage of induction involved linking similar categorisations together to generate higher order themes.

A person's story is co constructed between the interviewee, storyteller and socially shared conventions (Atkinson and Delamont 2006). Since narratives are social and researchers commit to interpretivism, a story cannot be regarded as the truth but rather a co-construction within a social context (Smith and Sparkes 2009). Subsequently, in order to get as insightful stories as possible, the researcher and informants collaborated in (a) trying out possible narrative interpretations of the findings from both observations made and previous conversations, during the interview situation and (b) encouraging elaboration on meanings and ideas that occurred in the logbooks (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). During the entire analytical process, the second author acted as a 'critical friend' 'to encourage reflection on and exploration of alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in



relation to the data' (Sparkes and Smith 2002, p. 266). Further, the prolonged engagement with the research field yielded considerably 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973). However, despite the iterative questioning of the respondents, the critical debriefing sessions, the constant member checking (Guba and Lincoln 1989) and general reflective process as related to data interpretation (Shenton 2004), as authors, we are aware that the trustworthiness of the case presented will hinge on the quality of the logic linking study purpose, data and the conclusion (Wells 2011) and if the tale presented justifies the interpretations made (Riessman 2008).

### ***Ethics***

Approval for the research was obtained from the ethics committee of the host institution. As part of the ethical process, informed consent was obtained from each participant. Here, the respondents were apprised about the purposes of the work, the scope of their involvement within it, guaranteed anonymity during the process and in the dissemination of results (through the use of pseudonyms). They were also notified that they could leave the project at any time without explanation or fear of penalty.

### **Results and discussion**

Analysis of the data yielded four principal themes. These included: social comparisons with 'competent colleagues' leading to loss of credibility and stigmatisation; viewing exercise as a 'guilty pastime', justifying participation in terms of injury prevention, rehabilitation and for enhancing professional productivity; and finally, the construction of a 'worker-exercise' identity. Although each of these themes is discussed individually, they can also be categorised more generally. That is, the first two explores the complex problematic barriers evident when struggling to participate within work-site exercise groups, while the latter two describe the strategies used by the employees to negotiate and develop their participation.

#### ***Social comparison, 'competent colleagues' and high role expectations***

Although 'Exercise for all' was a programme intended for those who needed help to get started with exercise, some fitter, more established exercisers also joined in. Subsequently, while the four exercise groups examined did attract employees from the desired target group, they also drew more experienced and regular exercisers, which immediately highlighted a difference in performance. In the words of one of the interviewees:

I think this group kind of suits me, because I have to start exercising. Still, there are also more well-trained people there. That kind of startles me, and I don't quite understand why they are here. This is not hard training, I don't find it particularly hard, so for those who are well trained, it is not like a hard workout at all. (Paige interview, spring 2010)

The beginner respondents then, began to construct negative social comparison or distinctions between themselves and some of the other, more experienced or able, participants. By defining others as more 'fit', the beginner exercisers seemed to marginalise themselves within the larger group. For example, according to one,

Some years ago I had a membership at a local gym. As I hadn't exercised in years I was one of the lesser fit people there, but you know I really did not mind at all, like of course I was not as good as the regulars, but in that situation it did not affect me standing in the back and seeing the others jump around. (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010)

Although the exercise 'beginners' seemed to somewhat accept their perceived inadequacies in terms of their general exercise abilities, this acceptance was immediately challenged when in the context or company of exercising co-workers. Subsequently, there appeared an apparent contradiction between acknowledging and accepting oneself as being unfit in one context, while experiencing particular uneasiness when being in an exercise situation with professional colleagues. As a consequence, Hayley described herself as quite self-conscious about taking part in the exercise group:

It is a whole different matter and uncomplicated in a fitness club, because I do not have relationships with the other participants at all, so no need to worry [if they see me as unfit], as their perception of me has no consequence. (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010)

Such feelings can somewhat be explained by Goffman's notion of 'audience segregation'. This is because role dilemmas are diverted or not forcibly engaged with if the audiences before which roles are played out vary. In the words of Goffman, 'ordinarily, those before whom he (*sic.*) plays out one of his roles will not be the individuals before whom he plays out another, allowing him to be a different person without discrediting the other' (Goffman 1967, p. 108). Lacking such segregation, the respondents within this study who perceived themselves as less competent exercise performers than others, appeared to suffer from social comparison and contradictory role expectations which were difficult to reconcile. Such anxiety arises when individuals fear an inability to make or maintain a particular impression, and has been identified as a potential barrier to exercise enjoyment and participation (Gammage *et al.* 2004). In other words, although the participants might not find their inept exercising abilities inhibiting outside the work environment, the same shortcoming was perceived as highly embarrassing and risky in terms of their professional credibility when exposed before an audience of colleagues. The feeling of incompetence came into play as the participants reflected on their image in the exercise groups from the others' perspective, and considered how their performances might negatively affect their whole social identity in the workplace. In the words of Hayley and Paige:

At work, we often have strong differences of opinion, and then we risk meeting each other's eyes in the exercise group ... It feels extra uncomfortable, because I know I can easily lose the professional authority I need if I push myself forward in a breathless poorly executed exercise. (Hayley log book, spring 2010)

I have no desire to exercise with my closest colleagues [that I interact with everyday]; I am a low performer when it comes to exercise and I actually think it would be more positive for me to participate in a group where I'm more in the middle, ability wise, and not at the bottom. (Paige interview, spring 2010)

Such a discovery appears slightly at odds with previous findings that proclaimed social support (from spouse, family, friends and colleagues) as a direct enabler for

general exercise adherence (e.g. Fletcher *et al.* 2008). Rather, the results from the present study indicated that such support was nullified by a fear of demonstrating a lack of competence coupled with the salient perception of the 'generalised other' (Mead 1934) as being more competent than oneself; a perception which somewhat hindered regular participation in the exercise programme. Furthermore, although the general findings here resonate with Festinger's (1954) comparison theory where individuals compare themselves to others in order to reduce uncertainty and gain more accurate self-evaluations, this perception of other participants as being fitter or better at exercise than oneself can be better explained in terms of Scott's concept of 'the competent other' (2004, 2005). Although Scott's (2004, 2005) focus was on shyness, results from the current study resonate clearly with her work. In both contexts, not only were individuals worried about momentarily embarrassing themselves through performing ineptly in front of more capable others, but they were also concerned with the consequences of giving a performance that fell below the standard of the 'team' and thus, of being rejected by it (Scott 2005). In this regard, exercise (or lack of it) becomes more of a social and less of an individual-cognitive concern, both in terms of its production and management. Such a view also helps locate face-to-face interaction as a significant shaper of (exercise) identity in relation to the social world (Scott 2007).

In the words of one of the respondents:

Top-trained, fit looking colleagues in tight trousers can be demotivating. It becomes so obvious and visible that some are much better than you ... I don't see a nice colleague anymore, when I look at them; it just annoys me as it makes the gap between our performances so visible. (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010)

Being a low-ability exerciser within as opposed to outside the programme became crucial to beginner exercisers' evaluation of themselves as work colleagues. Hence, developing a perception of low ability in this regard, threatened to spread from exercise to other work identities, with all its related uncertainties (Swann *et al.* 2009). Negotiating an exercise identity within a work context, comprising such distinct role expectations and demands, created an incompatibility within the respondents in terms of desired self-presentation (Goffman 1959). Although Swann *et al.* (2009) did not address exercising employees in his discussion of identity negotiation at work, his 'compatibility principle' helps make sense of the current results. The notion that employees need to feel coherence between distinct identities constructed in different settings (e.g. the office and the lunch room) within the overall work context, supports the current findings in terms of the respondents' perceptions of having their work identities and capabilities questioned through demonstrating relative physical incompetence (Swann *et al.* 2009). To not achieve such consistency or convergence held the potential to disrupt mutual expectations, obligations, commitments and the 'very nature of relationships themselves' (Swann *et al.* 2009, p. 81). The fear existed that poor exercise performance could stigmatise and contaminate their whole professional personas (Goffman 1963). Such a fear of stigmatisation loomed large as a barrier to participation.

What seemed to feed this anxiety was the precise working context, where a culture of high performance and competence dominated. To a certain extent, this echoes previous literature not only where a high degree of social comparison was found among working peers, but that the need for competence stretched far beyond

professional duties (e.g. Nezelek *et al.* 2007). This element of social comparison which was present in the daily working environment seemed to transfer into the newly formed exercise groups. Nezelek *et al.* (2007) found job-related role expectations among working colleagues to be associated with a desire to demonstrate constant high competence in related interactions within the work-place. The same seemed to apply to the work-place under study. In the words of Paige and Ben,

It is a working environment with several ... well, several highly accomplished people. The nature of the work is very competitive. Although we try to be supportive of each other in the department ... the reality is, there is a lot of pressure on delivering high quality on time ... we live in a world where there is a tight competition for funding in our line of work. (Paige interview, summer 2010)

Well, yes we are extremely competitive in this institution, things like high quality, good outcomes and such are highly valued. (Ben interview, summer 2010)

Consequently, a strong cultural expectation to be a high-achieving professional, employee existed within the institution. These expectations created a social context of competitiveness and competence across work related domains, and inevitably impacted on the willingness of workers to be perceived as 'non competent' in some spheres which, in turn, influenced participation within the 'Exercise for all' programme.

#### *A guilty pastime*

Despite the programme being an official company policy and free to all, participation appeared to be rooted in a troublesome consideration related to taking time away from a busy work schedule for perceived 'recreational' purposes. This was a belief echoed by many, as highlighted in the following log-book and field note extracts:

In terms of exercising within working hours, I sometimes feel like I am kind of deceiving the company. It's as if I'm sneaking off [from work]. I know I should absolutely not feel like this, [particularly as] my boss supports it even though she does not have time to participate herself, and I truly believe the company experience a win – win situation, but I do. (Susie logbook entry, spring 2010)

A woman enters the locker room with a big smile and turns towards the other four present in the room; 'Wow, that work out today really made me sweat; I think we all did good'. I join in the conversation. In the developing chat, it emerges that a second woman feels that other colleagues, who exercise in their spare time, make her feel guilty for exercising during work hours; 'They use every opportunity to comment and point to how this is a luxury for me'. The conversation develops into a justification about why the women shouldn't feel guilty; while it's obvious they do. (field notes, spring 2010)

It appeared then, that taking time off work to exercise was somewhat perceived as a guilt-ridden activity, equating to carrying out a personal errand during professional time. The findings here resonate with the work of Dixon (2009), who found that working mothers would feel a tremendous amount of guilt from partaking in leisure time exercise. While they acknowledged that exercise was good for them, such women perceived that it should not be their priority when compared to caring for their children, work or spouses.

However, such feelings of unease among the participants in the current study were not straightforward or linear. This was because if the participants now ignored the company's offer of sanctioned, official exercise time, feelings of culpability accompanied these actions too. For example, in words Charlotte:

Well I tend to feel guilty if I do not show up in class ... Because I was prioritized for this group, since I have not participated earlier and I do not know if my drop-in kind of participation might affect whether I will be offered the same exercise group next year. (Charlotte interview, winter 2010)

Such actions relate to the work of Smith-DiJulio *et al.* (2010) whose midlife women experienced a guilt-ridden conflict between adhering to traditional social roles of being a wife and a mother, and a perception that they were being held accountable to improve their own health. Furthermore, even when engaged in exercise, they often felt they were not doing enough. For our subjects then, feelings of self-reproach extended to leaving work early to participate in the offered exercise programme, to feeling guilty if they did not go. Such sensations of unease, allied to a culture of social comparison and 'more competent colleagues' (cf. Scott 2005, Anderson *et al.* 2006), located within a perceived competitive, performance-orientated workplace (Nezlek *et al.* 2007), no doubt made it difficult for the employees to immerse themselves sincerely (Goffman 1959) in an exercise related role performance. Instead, they were kept in a liminal state (Turner 1962) between work and exercise identities, being aware of both yet unable to reconcile them, nor to embrace either one completely. In addition, the apparent tension related to guilt and social comparison also created a barrier for the participants to exercise, thus increasing the difficulty of developing a sincere and consistent exercise identity (Schwarzer 2008). It is to a discussion of how individual agents negotiated, resisted and coped with such obstacles that we now turn.

### ***Justifying participation in terms of injury prevention or rehabilitation***

As discussed above, although the participants within the study appreciated the idea of being able or allowed to exercise during working hours, making sense of spending 'professional' time on a seemingly personal matter was problematic for them. In this respect, the participants' experienced considerable role conflict, whereby a desired (and officially encouraged) exercise identity seemed to clash with a more legitimately dominant contextual work identity (Stryker 1980). Consequently, they were reluctant to conceptualise their exercise participation solely within a recreational health perspective. Alternatively, many of the respondents framed their participation in the exercise groups in terms of a need for injury rehabilitation or prevention. Examples from the logbooks clearly highlighted this tendency:

The reason behind [my participation] is short and sweet, minor injuries. Time and again I have a troublesome back, a knee that some years ago was the reason I had to give my running shoes an early retirement ... the exercise programme strength class suites me just fine, because I can adjust the intensity according to my everyday physical fitness. (Scott logbook entry, spring 2010)

I don't actually have any problems, although I know it can't be good for the body to be sitting in front of the computer all day. Sometimes, I can feel my neck getting tired

and I say to myself it is important that I prioritize the exercise group. I know my boss is very positive that we do exercise ... she is very concerned with our wellbeing, like, if we need a new chair or more comfortable lighting. (Emma interview, autumn 2009)

Negotiating and making sense of their exercise participation within a preventive and/or rehabilitative needs discourse, reduced the feelings of self-reproach for the participants and facilitated their attendance as members of their exercise groups. Consequently, the employees' participation was clearly framed within a preventive and rehabilitative perspective to justify taking time off work to engage in something traditionally perceived as leisure. It was a strategy which echoes the findings of Lyman and Scott (1989), who positioned such justifications as accounts where 'one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it' (p. 113). Furthermore, like the subjects in the current study, the women in Dixon's (2009) work tended to justify their exercise participation in terms of something more than 'just being good for me'; they linked it to an aspect that facilitated their work performance. Here, evidence of a dominant worker identity came to the fore. Similarly, through rationalising their exercise adherence in this way, the participants within this study allayed any guilt-ridden feelings associated with it. Such a justification can also be somewhat explained by notions of 'motive talk' and 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills 1959). Here, people account for their perceived deviant behaviour (i.e. time away during traditional work hours) by referring to shared norms and values (acceptance of injury prevention), thus demonstrating to the audience that they are both conformists and reliable.

#### ***Enhancing professional productivity through exercise***

Those respondents who did not frame their involvement in a rehabilitative/preventative perspective (or did so to a lesser extent) tended to take a more instrumental approach when negotiating and rationalising their participation in the programme; that is, they perceived themselves as being better equipped for working as a result of it. For example:

Usually, the exercise provides extra energy. So I go because it means that I can keep on working until 6–7p.m. without getting tired. I might have been forced to leave the office at 5 if I had not exercised. So, I feel this is not a waste of time at all. (Ben interview, spring 2010)

If I will be working late one day, I think it's more important to exercise with the group, because I work a lot better throughout the evening then. (Jane logbook, autumn 2009)

Even though research has consistently demonstrated that work-place exercise programmes have struggled to significantly improve company productivity (Marshall 2004, Davey *et al.* 2009), these employees made sense of their participation in such a programme from an instrumental perspective related to better work place production. Hence, a negotiation towards a guilt-free exercise hour was found in the argument of working harder or longer. Although going against the general research grain, the findings resonate with those of Hardcastle and Taylor (2005) who found that older women justified their participation in a leisure exercise group in terms of how it gave them increased energy to do household and family chores.

The present study expands on such findings from leisure research into the work context. The subjects here then, resolved their socially perceived conflict about exercising during work hours and the guilt associated with it by arguing they would more than make up for the time 'lost' through enhanced work effort. In this way, the act of exercising was perceived as a 'job', or a part of 'the job', which was worth doing (for the company) in the work context.

### ***Constructing a worker-exercise identity***

The interpretation of undertaking the exercise on offer as 'doing a job within the job' manifested itself in two ways. First, employees attempted to make the decision to participate resemble a normal work task. In doing so, they moved away from perceiving the exercise as indulging in personal matters, towards something they were committed to do as part of their work schedule. Second, the employees tried to make the actual execution of exercises as serious and 'work-like' as possible. This allowed them to adopt a 'worker-exercise' identity, where the pursuit of regular and guilt free exercise attendance was the goal. The following data excerpts illustrate how employees tried to locate the decision to exercise as a part of their assigned work, by making a note of sessions to attend in the company's common appointment calendar:

I have written it down in my calendar, but I don't write the real reason for everybody to see, like 'exercise group', instead I just mark the time as busy, you know. So, I am trying to keep this time free of meetings if I can. (Laura interview, autumn 2009)

One of the participants marks her attendance next to her name on the attendance sheet hanging on the door. As she is leaving the exercise room, she turns to me and says; 'I could not participate last week as I was dragged away to a meeting, but now I have actually put down this time [exercise group] as occupied in my calendar, so ...' (field notes, spring 2010)

Although marking the time for exercise on the calendar was initially a good idea for the respondents, it also brought up new difficulties. This was particularly so in relation to a perception of being 'caught' doing something they should not when asked for a meeting at that time. A feeling of guilt then remained in terms of not prioritising their 'real' work. Some of the tensions here in terms of identity construction are also mirrored in the psychologically orientated literature. In this respect, although such an instrumental attitude has been found less robust than an intrinsic one to maintain exercise adherence, this is countered by the benefits of planning which leads to improved attendance, investment and subsequent identity creation (Schwarzer 2008). Additionally, this tension related to 'getting caught', often led to a revision of their decision to participate in the exercise group that week, or, to an even more serious and instrumental engagement with the exercise in question, approaching it as they would a work task.

... it strikes me as strange the total lack of atmosphere between the participants in this exercise class. It all feels a bit serious. (Alison logbook entry, autumn 2009)

The participants almost never talk to each other during the exercise class. They hardly look at each other while passing or leaving the exercise equipment to the next

participant. I've even started to look at the clock, only 20 min into the class. I started counting how many exercise stations were left until we were done. Even though I love exercise, it felt like I was conducting a necessary and repetitive work task. (field notes, autumn 2009)

When I first do an exercise, I like to concentrate and do the exercises as effectively as possible. (Adriana interview, spring 2010)

The respondents thus, appeared to be adding exercise to their work identity. They did so by constructing a 'worker-exercise' identity through adopting a work-like mentality towards their exercise participation. This, to a degree, mirrors the process which Johnston and Swanson (2006, 2007) reported in women who constructed a work-mother identity to allay competing tensions between intensive mothering and career success. Whereas, the competing pulls between motherhood and upholding a work-related identity left these mothers to modify either their motherhood or worker role expectations, the employees in this study managed to somewhat resolve the socially perceived conflict between work role expectations and exercise participation by modifying the former to include the latter. In doing so, the aforementioned barriers and challenges related to social comparison and stigmatisation in particular were somewhat overcome.

### **Conclusion**

Developing healthier workforces has increasingly become a driving concern for companies, as witnessed through the recent growth of official employer-sponsored exercise programmes. The development and establishment of better worker engagement in such programmes, however, are complex processes, tied to notions of identity, competence and role expectations (Johnston and Swanson 2007). Consequently, just 'stepping away from the computer and into the sweats' is far from being an unproblematic activity for most workers.

Echoing such a perspective, even notwithstanding the current organisation's long record of developing sporting and leisure activities for its workforce, the employees in this study still experienced many barriers to partaking in exercise within an officially sanctioned programme. These related to a competitive culture of social comparison, a trepidation of more 'competent colleagues', guilt about engaging in a less-serious activity during work hours and a general fear that their perceived lack of competence as an exerciser would influence others' professional opinion of them. A variety of justifications were deliberately used to overcome these barriers and facilitate participation. Here, exercise was couched in a discourse of injury prevention and/or rehabilitation, and that of taking time off work to exercise could be more than made up through the subsequent benefits of being able to work longer and harder. Furthermore, in an effort to ease the ever-present risk of guilt, the employees aimed at constructing a 'worker-exercise' identity. Such an identity permitted the employees to more legitimately regard exercise participation as part of their work duties, allowing them to use similar role expectations to that developed and used within their more traditional worker roles.

Far from claiming that a developed 'worker-exerciser' identity is a 'solution', the findings here build on the earlier work of Scott (2005) and Swann (2009) in further problematising the nuances and complexities inherent in developing exercise identities in the work place. Such problematising stretches into better appreciating



that providing opportunities to exercise is not enough to secure adherence; neither is the taken-for-granted assumption that collegial social support is always functional. Rather, the results point to the importance of recognising exercise participation (particularly in work place settings) as a complex relational activity, contingent upon many factors. These include individual and group perceptions, a constant consideration of impression management, and a variety of self-persuasive justifications for engaging in a somewhat 'guilty' pastime.

In presenting our findings, we are mindful of what can be claimed by a single case-study (Smith-DiJulio *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, we believe that a greater focus on the social barriers experienced and how they are negotiated by workers in relation to participating in officially sponsored exercise programmes exists as a rich area for further study. This is particularly so in terms of identity creation and maintenance. Such work is needed to better understand the exercise uptake within such programmes, and how problems are perceived, engaged with and managed.

### Notes on contributors

Hilde Rossing is currently finishing her PhD at the Norwegian School for Sport Sciences. Her background as an educated fitness instructor sparked an interest to explore the dilemmas, tensions, and barriers individuals face when partaking in exercise groups. She researches from an interpretive paradigm using ethnographic methods, primarily utilizing a socio-dramaturgical lens to interrogate and make sense of her data.

Robyn L. Jones, is a Professor of Sport and Social Theory at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a Professor II at the Norwegian School for Sport Sciences. His research area comprises a critical sociology of coaching in respect of examining the complexity of the interactive coaching context and how practitioners manage the power-ridden dilemmas that arise. He has published several books on sports coaching and pedagogy, and also serves as the General Editor of the Taylor & Francis journal *Sports Coaching Review*.

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## Paper II

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## Paper III



# ‘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.

**Keywords:** *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 as 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

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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, 2008, 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 (PE) at school), research participants found the clear contextual boundaries to be nonsensical to them (Walton & Fisette, 2013). Similarly, Wright and Laverty (2010) emphasized how young people's physical activity identities can change from school to post-school influenced by contextual conditions. In addition, Garrett (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 Fisette (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 (Banbery, Groves, & Biscoomb, 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 are 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. 218, cf. Vlachopoulos, Kaperoni, & Moustaka, 2011) through social relationships and interaction. Finally, few studies have used a *qualitative approach* (e.g. 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 PE, 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 (Hendley & 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 an 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 Fisette (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, in so far 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 Tinning, 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, p. 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 play 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 programme 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 programme and her participation in it (reported elsewhere, Rossing & Jones, 2013; Rossing & Scott, 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, 2009). 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 ongoing 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 PE 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 (Scott, 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, in so far 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 Scott'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 well-being 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 (Scott, 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 programme 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 programme 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 not only 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'.

### Acknowledgement

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## Note

1. Interchanging concepts used within this body of literature: exercise identity, exercise schematics, physical identity, exercise self-identity, athletic identity, sport/exercise identity and health identity.

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## **Paper IV**



## Taking the fun out of it: the spoiling effects of researching something you love

Qualitative Research

1–15

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### Abstract

This reflexive analysis of two sports ethnographers' studies of an aerobics class and a swimming pool explores the effects of doing fieldwork on a physical activity that one loves. While using our bodies as phenomenological sites of perception initially created an epistemological advantage, researching the familiarly beloved not only 'took the fun out of the activity, but also more profoundly challenged our 'exercise identities'. Emulating poor technique, enduring interactional awkwardness, and deep acting role performances, combined to take their toll, so that 'going native' became a matter not just of intellectual disadvantage but of ontological destabilisation. Doing activity-based ethnography on something personally special is a double-edged sword: on the one hand elucidating awareness, but on the other depriving the researcher of pleasure and 'spoiling' aspects of their identity.

### Keywords

confessional tale, ethnography, exercise identity, insider research, researcher self-identity

### Introduction

Ethnographers of education, sport and art agree that 'radical' participatory methods offer valuable insights into cultural communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Apprenticeship and embodied learning are assuredly the best way of developing an insider's expertise (Downey, Dalidowicz and Mason, 2015). By joining in and doing the activity we are studying, we learn more about the aesthetic techniques, crafts and physical labour used by members (Atkinson, 2015; Marchand, 2001), and moreover gain a

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deeper phenomenological understanding of how it *feels* to perform these skills (DeNora, 2014). Physically performing with our participants, resonates with a substantial anthropological and sociological literature on the embodiment of fieldwork (Delamont and Stephens, 2008; Novack, 1990; Wacquant, 2004) and its emotional effects on the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Thoresen and Öhlen, 2015).

However, one question that remains unexamined is how doing such activity-based ethnography, particularly in settings where one is already an established member, can affect the researcher's relationship to that practice. We find that particularly significant when doing 'insider' research on topics that the ethnographer is not only familiar with but also personally committed to, as a positive source of self-identity. As with any intimate relationship, we can fall in or out of love with an activity through prolonged, intense involvement with it.

The idea of the researcher's relationship to the practice has been implicitly suggested in previous accounts of sports ethnography. Wacquant (2004), who spent three years participating in a boxing club, describes how he dived in head first, investing his 'body and soul' into the culture. Embracing the role completely, he experienced a thrilling taste of the identity transformation that members underwent, from novice to expert: 'in the intoxication of immersion, I even thought for a while of aborting my academic career to "turn pro"' (Wacquant, 2004: 4). Conversely, McMannon's (2008) auto-ethnography of her swimming career evoked a reflective awareness of how that local world had socialised her into regulatory practices of bodily self-discipline, such as strict dietary control. But what we do not know is whether these fresh insights, as unanticipated biographical injuries, left permanent scars: did McMannon come to enjoy swimming more or less? In all the focus on the heroic and euphoric in sports ethnography, we have overlooked the experience of disillusionment, or importance of disappointment (Craib, 1994).

Thus in the following discussion, we consider how such 'radically participatory' embodied methods can negatively affect the ethnographer's personal and emotional relationship to the activity that they are studying. Drawing on our own studies of aerobics groups (Rossing and Jones, 2015) and lane swimming (Scott, 2010), we recount how using techniques of de-familiarisation and deliberate self-deskilling changed our attitudes, enthusiasm and motivation levels, spoiling our enjoyment of the sports. Emulating low competency, in order to relocate ourselves in more peripheral positions in the communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), we found that embodied activities that were once fluid and unselfconscious became clumsy and awkward, disrupting the immersive experience of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Behaving differently within a familiar setting and activity can create emotional dissonance and self-alienation (Hochschild, 1983). By shifting our positions from 'masters' to apprentices, we started to feel like strangers in our own worlds, and were unwittingly responsible for cutting ourselves out of them.

This in turn had a damaging effect on aspects of our self-identities, which were bound up with the practices. To say that we 'enjoyed' these activities would be an understatement: these were no casual 'hobbies' but rather serious leisure identities (Stebbins, 1992: 448) that were central, defining aspects of who we were and how we understood ourselves. As our paper's title suggests, aerobics and swimming were something that we *loved*, in a deep and phenomenological sense: they provided us with a strong sense of identity and an embodied mode of being in the world.

Unfortunately, this article tells the story of what happens when such an important aspect of identity comes under threat during the research process. We argue that we started out with strong 'exercise identities' (Anderson and Cychosz, 1995: 160) but these gradually became eroded by the experience of doing fieldwork. Not only did the activities themselves lose their 'fun' element, but also the associated parts of our identities became 'spoiled' (Goffman, 1963a).

## Methodology

This article is a reflexive piece in which we, two qualitative researchers, reflect on and problematize our personal experiences and interpretations of conducting sports ethnographies (see Alvesson and Skolberg, 2000; Finlay, 2002). In addition, we adapt Sparkes' (2004) analytical framework of personal and academic voice, by blending the techniques of 'writing with self' and 'writing with academic voice(s)': stepping in and out of the experience and reflecting on what we learned. In particular, we reflect on how the fieldwork affected our 'exercise identities', paying particular attention to our emotional reactions.

Hilde Rossing studied a workplace-based aerobics group while Susie Scott studied social interaction in a public swimming pool. Comparing and discussing our projects, 'we came to recognize that each of us was recounting situations of heightened awareness of our physical selves in fieldwork settings' (Sharma et al., 2009: 1642). Although our studies were conducted independently and in different sports settings, we found ourselves going through distinctly similar experiences of identity change. These similarities urged us to make a thorough analysis of what had happened to our selves through these experiences in the field. Here we are responding to the ethnographic call to *write vulnerably*, using honest self-disclosure about difficult emotional experiences in the field (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 434).

The focus of Rossing's project was a Norwegian office-based company, which had introduced an exercise program (offering classes in easy aerobics, strength and Pilates), aimed at reaching those employees who were 'unaccustomed to exercise'. A Symbolic Interactionist theoretical perspective was used for the analysis of the social interaction taking place between these novice participants. The fieldwork involved participant observation over a year in four different weekly exercise groups (approximately 300 hours observations), 200 recorded conversations, in-depth and multi-phased interviews with six women participants, and exercise log books kept by eighteen participants. Simultaneously, Rossing kept a research diary and had regular discussions about her experiences in the field with a colleague. Rossing had been an aerobics instructor for years and took great pride in being able to motivate all kinds of people. Her confidence as an exercising person lay in her enthusiastic personality, high capability in different exercises, strong pedagogical attitude, and sociability. Thus when offered a position on a funded project about how employees experienced workplace aerobic groups, she was delighted: it felt like a dream come true to be able to research the activity she loved.

Scott's study was a retrospective ethnography (Bryman, 2012) of a public swimming pool in the UK, which was based on her own experiences and developed through biographical opportunism (Anderson, 2006). A keen lap swimmer herself, Scott had been

enjoying the sport recreationally for over ten years and became intrigued by the patterns of social behaviour she observed in pools, such as lane etiquette, embarrassment about nudity, and perceptions of rudeness (Scott, 2010). She was also interested in encounters between higher and lower ability swimmers in different areas of the pool. Using a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, she began to analyse this social interaction context, recording her impressions over two years in personal fieldnotes, text messages, emails and conversations with fellow swimmers. Her observations were conducted during weekday evenings and weekend daytimes, incorporating a variety of session types: general public swims, Adults Only sessions, Women Only sessions and so on. The majority of the data collected were therefore auto-ethnographic: ‘mullings, questions, comments, quirky notes, and diary-type entries’ (DeMunck and Sobó, 1998: 45), which she recounted not as objective ‘evidence’ but as evocative descriptions of the world as she experienced it. Like Rossing, this researcher had a strong exercise identity, and was personally committed to her sports activity; the meanings she associated with swimming were, on the one hand, pleasure and relaxation, and on the other, fitness, discipline and self-accomplishment (cf. Altheide and Pfuhl, 1980).

Having strong exercise identities ourselves promised initially to offer an epistemological advantage. Doing ‘insider’ research like this entails the researcher and researched sharing both a socio-cultural identity and proximity of locations or perspectives (Labaree, 2002). Sharing a cultural identity is assumed to be beneficial in terms of gaining access to and understanding participants’ meanings and subjective lived experiences (Hodkinson, 2005). In addition, reflexive analysis makes visible the researcher as a member of the setting, who uses her or his own experiences as a springboard for theorizing wider social phenomena (Finlay, 2002). Thus although we were both ‘insiders’ to the settings we were studying, this did not preclude the possibility of standing back and reflecting from the position of the ‘professional stranger’ (Agar, 1980), or straddling the worlds of the insider and outsider simultaneously (Dwyer and Bukle, 2009; Labaree, 2002). Turgo (2012: 667) similarly discusses the challenge of juggling multiple identities when he returned to research a Philippine fishing community as a ‘homecoming native’.

However, we discovered that moving between insider–outsider positions was precarious, and difficult to sustain in practice. Over the course of the research, as we became increasingly immersed in the settings and understood how our participants felt by *sharing their physical and emotional experiences*, it became harder to separate our researcher-selves from our fieldwork roles. We shifted from being what Banks (1998: 8) called *external insiders* (erstwhile members who detach themselves to gain some critical distance on the setting) to *indigenous insiders* (full members who remain as such and share the values, beliefs and behaviours of the community they study).

Becoming indigenous insiders adds a further dimension to a criticism often levelled at the ethnographic method. The risk of *going native* (Whyte, 1973: 301) through over-identification with participants’ perspectives is framed in terms of an epistemological disadvantage of losing one’s objectivity. An associated problem is the *dilemma of overfamiliarity* (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995) and the difficulties of *researching at home* (Geer, 1964: 372), which happen when the researcher is already part of the setting and so close to the data that they fail to notice sociologically interesting things. As Kanuha (2000: 439) suggests, the boundary between *going native* and *being native* can sometimes be

blurred, and researchers can move between these two positions. Beyond these academic debates, however, we suggest there is a more serious risk of identity crisis, when insider and outsider roles collide (Arber, 2006).

## Findings

We have organised the findings in four stages. In the first three of these, we gradually sacrifice more and more of our exercise identities in order to reach progressively deeper understandings of the participants' subjective experiences: their verbal strategies, bodily discomfort and social awkwardness. In the fourth stage, the personal journey reaches its peak as we lose sight of the distinction between ourselves as researchers and the characters we are depicting: going native destabilizes our sense of self and creates feelings of role engulfment.

### *Stage 1: emulating poor technique*

In the initial stages of our research, we approached the task with an attitude of qualified yet ultimately naïve optimism: early days in the field are often blinded by 'bright faith' (Delamont, 2002: 113). We were confident in our exercise abilities, familiar with the particular context and knew that we had to sacrifice the indulgence of total immersion in our leisure activities, for the benefit of learning more about them.

Preparing for participant observation in a sports activity meant altering the physical techniques of our movements to be able to audibly and visually observe the other participants. In line with the classic ethnographic perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) we aimed to position ourselves as unobtrusive, relatively detached observers, yet in close enough proximity to our subjects for them to recognize us as non-threatening. Switching swimming caps for researcher 'hats', workout clothes for notebook and pen, we prepared to revisit these familiar settings from a position of anthropological strangeness.

At this point, then, we were using our bodies as mere tools for data collection, in the relatively straightforward way that previous ethnographers had advocated (Coffey, 1999). We had rehearsed the performances we needed to give, and strategically devised them as a pragmatic and instrumental means to an (academic) end. Naively, however, we thought that the challenges would remain only at a practical and superficial level, and could be dealt with by some cosmetic alterations: a few costume changes here, faking a poor technique there.

For example, Rossing recalled how she had deliberately modified her behaviour to fit the group's standard, but viewed this as a performance, totally contrived and separate from her real, exercise self who remained safely intact:

I had prepared myself to tone my energetic, motivational instructor-self down, not focusing on helping and teaching others but instead used my cognitive capacity to absorb 'what's going on here?' Mirroring the other participants; I had a big T-shirt on, my old sneakers, no make-up, like the others I kept to the outer corner of the room till the instructor started the class. I observed how the others talked/did not talk to each other and followed that code of conduct. I put on an



act: this was a role I played and had nothing to do with how I was/saw myself as an exerciser and instructor. (Rossing post-fieldwork narrative, 28 June 2012)

Being stripped of leadership and license to set the tone of interaction in the group, Rossing experienced a shift to a radically different social and practical role. She had to learn new ways of relating to her participants, commanding space and navigating space. Practising a new role convincingly in order to remain 'in face' (Goffman, 1967) requires careful skills of self-presentation, bodily comportment and emotion management (Hochschild, 1983). Movements in the field become constrained and contrived, fitting uncomfortably upon our shoulders like an itchy sweater. Thus Scott recalls altering her swimming technique in order to observe unobtrusively:

Normally I choose the faster of the three lanes for recreational swimmers and start my session with front crawl, where my head is mostly underwater, and just make quick turns at each end, so I can keep going at a constant pace. Now I had to swim in the slow lane with my head above water at all times, so that I could look around. This meant taking shorter, more confined strokes, having to arch my back and stretch my neck. Coming into a turn, I was very aware of the other participants, trying to work out how they were turning their bodies to go in the opposite direction, and I would pause at each end so that I could listen in to people's conversations. This made my swim quite disjointed and disturbed the flow, but I wouldn't otherwise have been able to capture these subtler nuances of interaction (Scott post-fieldwork narrative, 27 June 2012)

While neither of us claim to be professional athletes, we have both trained in our respective sports and have a reasonable grasp of how to do them well. Through years of practice and instruction, we had developed what Crossley (2001: 123) calls *bodily know-how*: an embodied understanding of skills and techniques that gradually become absorbed into the corporal schema or habitus (Bourdieu, 1972), and displayed via physical movements, practical sense or habitual action. Therefore, it was easy for us to initially alter our technique and perform badly while still being able to concentrate on observing the context. As the acting was prepared and deliberate, it gave us a safe notion of keeping our work performance roles and personal exercise identities separate. There was an element of corporeal detachment, as the knowledge we gained came more through our minds than our bodies. Crossley (2005) considers these occasions of reflexive embodiment; in which actors develop a reflexive separation between the two parts of their social self, the 'I' and 'Me' (Mead, 1934). The body's movements are consciously devised and managed by the actor as an agent; the body is an objectified tool of his or her intentions, and s/he can reflect upon its success or failure. Our strategic choice to under-perform can therefore be seen as what Crossley (2005: 1) calls *reflexive body techniques*: using the body to achieve certain ends, with a simultaneous reflexive awareness of doing so.

## Stage 2: *bodily knowledge and bodily frustration*

Having learned from the first stage how to mirror the participants' *techniques of the body* (Crossley, 2005: 7), this process became less of a conscious effort and more of a routine. Thus in the second phase, the novelty of anthropological strangeness wore off and the acting became part of our embodied consciousness – literally incorporated into our repertoires of action. At this point the cost of the research began to take its toll on our bodies,

as we moved them in unfamiliar, uncomfortable and ineffective ways, and felt the effects of poor technique. The effects were not pleasant. We started to suffer aches, pains and muscle strains, which told us that we were doing things wrong, yet we could not correct the movements and had to carry on. It felt counter-intuitive to discard all we had learned about correct body positions, training regimes and optimal performance, and losing that feeling of bodily ease meant that the activities became less enjoyable.

For example, Scott would grumble to herself about the way that having to swim 'badly' and with a stressful vigilance was taking the fun out of her beloved activity:

It was annoying when I was swimming that I had to keep my head and eyes above water, keep looking around to notice social behaviour, instead of just being away in my own world underwater. I lost that beautiful sense of solitude and tranquillity that came from having that head space... I couldn't immerse myself in the water, stretch my body into a streamlined shape and move with ease and grace; instead I was all jerky, uncoordinated, straining my neck. Usually after a 'good swim' (vigorous, peaceful and satisfying, where I had both pushed and challenged myself to achieve something more than the day before), I used to come out absolutely glowing and grinning widely, full of joy and exhilaration. Now however I was left having a sore neck, cranky and unsatisfied! (Scott post fieldwork narrative, 27 June 2012)

Similarly, Rossing's fieldnotes recorded how the contrived role performance demanded a lot of work from her body. The phenomenological effects were felt on it, as a site of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962):

My steps are confined into a smaller space than normal (due to both it being a small room and everybody standing in a circle almost stepping on each other's toes, and because I don't want to show off as being in much better shape than the others), the movements in my hips sometimes feels a bit claustrophobic as they have to stop three notches before full, liberating extension, my arms are kind of just dangling by my side. I know they are actually not, as they are following the movement of the instructor, but with only half power. My body feels like a sad banana and not a smiley banana. And it is taking all my concentration to follow the instructor leading dance steps off the beat of the music. I am forcing my feet to leave the floor – it feels like between two heart beats – making me hold my breath for a split second, to get it done. (Rossing fieldnotes, 10 September 2009)

Reflecting in hindsight, during our analysis, we realized that the endpoint of an enforced new pattern of practice was a new embodied consciousness. A consciousness that had given us a valuable insight into how other newcomers, novices in these communities of practice, must have experienced those scenes. Our bodily comfort was something we were prepared to sacrifice for the sake of gathering a deeper, more interesting phenomenological data about the embodied experience of being in these groups. However, the costs we were paying seemed higher than at the previous stage, and were beginning to threaten our exercise selves.

### *Stage 3: enduring interactional awkwardness*

The pressure and strain increased as we entered the third phase of the projects, as we began to focus on the social interaction dynamics of the two settings. Here again, there

was a trade-off between the professional and the personal: we now stood to learn about an even deeper, fascinating aspect of the participants' *social* experiences, but in order to do so had to give up a more central and important feature of our sports activities: our own preferred levels of sociability.

For Rossing, socialising with others was one of the things that made aerobics classes pleasurable: she enjoyed confidently participating alongside others in a shared activity, motivating them and talking to them outside of class. For Scott, by contrast, it was the solitary aspect of swimming that she enjoyed: she loved being able to don hat and goggles, put her head down and immerses herself, both literally and figuratively in her underwater world, shutting out the social world and its demands.

With a rather perverse logic, we discovered that we both had to give up these preferred positions and adopt their opposites – each now doing our activity in the way that the other would have liked to have done it. Thus Rossing found herself becoming increasingly quiet and withdrawn, as the new experience she shared with her fellow participants in the beginners' aerobics class, of embarrassment and interactional strain, led her to adopt the same behaviours as them: avoiding eye contact, keeping silent and avoiding friendly conversations (see Rossing and Scott, 2014).

In the beginning I handed mats to the other participants as I got my own, or handed the weights into the hands of the person coming next with a nod and a smile, as this is how I (the 'exercising me') would normally do it. But observing the others, I realized they did not do this. I struggled to put into words what this silent awkward and "anti-social" atmosphere was all about. And I did not get any closer to an answer in my interviews with the other participants. Today, though, I decided to mimic the interactional behaviour of the others by just putting the weights down and moving to the next station without looking at the participant moving in after me. By embodying their social behaviour I seem to understand more about the atmosphere of staying away from each other: protecting oneself from being seen, but also how this might actually counteract social enjoyment and the goal of becoming regular exercisers? I kind of felt more lonely in the class today and left feeling less fulfilled and happy with the workout. (Rossing fieldnotes, 16 November 2009)

Meanwhile, Scott was forced out of her peaceful solitary retreat and back into the social world, with its babble of voices, plethora of behaviours to watch, and labyrinthine obstacle course of slow swimmers to navigate her way between, all of which created a kind of sensory overload. She resented having to attend to all of these additional social demands that she would normally bracket out, became tense and stressed, and felt the loss of her solitude and relaxation as keenly as Rossing felt her loss of sociable activity.

Mimicking not only the participants' physical movements but also their social behaviour offered additional epistemological benefits. We could reflect on how this behaviour was affecting us, thereby learning more about how it might also have been experienced by the participants. Had Rossing gone about her normal business of talking and being sociable, she would have never picked up on the awkward interactional atmosphere. Even asking the women about it in the interviews only gave limited insights, as they were not consciously aware of how or why they were behaving this way. It was only by acting out the role, the behaviour and feeling the interactional strain in her body that she really came to understand it. Similarly, Scott would not have learnt about the complex pool

rules of slow lane etiquette without having first made herself an awkward, conspicuous body in the water, negotiating the rules with others and feeling the dramaturgical stress. Participating at the right 'level' – adapting to and matching the bodily techniques and standards of the group under study in order to fit in – can have powerful effects on the researcher. Specifically, it affects their consciousness of their place within the field: even 'native ethnography' can involve disorienting internal shifts in perspective and positioning (Wolcott, 2008: 164). Nevertheless, the fact that we were able to reflect upon this division between our situated role identities and our 'real' exercise selves suggests that we were still managing to cling on to a fragment of the latter.

#### *Stage 4: invasion, role engulfment and spoiled identity*

In the final stages of our projects, however, we began to feel that this separation of our researcher-selves and bodies as research instruments became blurred. The new repertoires of embodied action, habitus and Reflexive Body Techniques that had previously seemed odd and unfamiliar now had become almost natural, embedded in our corporeal schemas (Crossley, 2005) and no longer remarkable. As we became more immersed in this regular and routinized repetition of actions, we habituated to the role performances, so that they ceased to appear to us as strange. We stopped noticing that we were exercising in a different way, or that this was annoying and uncomfortable, for it was simply 'how things are done', or 'normal appearances' (Goffman, 1971: 238).

Habituating to the role performances echoes the oft-cited problem in qualitative methodology of *going native* (Whyte, 1973: 301), whereby an actor loses his or her objectivity and anthropological strangeness, through prolonged immersion in the field. Scenarios that had initially struck us as strange and noteworthy faded into invisibility as we began to see the fields through the same perspective as our participants. However, for us, going native was more than just an intellectual problem of compromised objectivity; rather it was emotional, embodied and personally meaningful. Going native signalled the loss of our cherished exercise identities and their supplantation by the embodied lived experience of our participants.

Dramaturgically, this shift in perspective reflects a changing relationship between ourselves as actors and the characters that we had been emulating from our participants' identity performances. The boundaries distinguishing these became blurred, as our roles became progressively internalized. In short, we found ourselves becoming the roles we were playing, and actor and character merged into one. Goffman (1959: 28) makes a distinction between performances that are *cynical*, whereby the actor retains a critical distance from, and often disdain for, the part that they are playing, and those that are *sincere*, whereby the actor is so fused with the character s/he is playing that s/he sees them as continuous, and believes in the reality s/he is staging. Hochschild (1983: 56) made a similar distinction between *surface* and *deep* acting as consecutive stages of emotional labour. The service industry employees in her study initially learned to manage the display of their emotions according to the 'feeling rules' of the organizational setting, but gradually internalized the role performances so much that they started to actually feel the emotions they had been emulating as if they were their own.

In our own fieldwork experiences, there was a gradual shift from cynical, surface acting to sincere, deep acting. The former attitude had characterized the earlier phases of our fieldwork, as we had retained a sense of corporeal detachment using deliberate strategies such as role distance. However, as time went on we became less self-reflexive and more immersed in the action. Loosing ourselves in the action was something that happened progressively and insidiously, each day adding a tiny incremental increase to the growing state of role engulfment (Goffman, 1961a), so we were not aware of it happening until it was too late. Anthropologists talk about leaving the field at the right time: before they are too enmeshed in the community to extricate themselves, and they have fallen in too deep (Bloor and Wood, 2006). Venturing beyond this point, a researcher may not be able to maintain the reflexivity needed to perform emotional and dramaturgical labour in the balancing act across the insider-outsider boundary (Arber, 2006).

Three examples of emotional and dramaturgical labour emerged from our discussions of the fieldwork. Firstly, Rossing experienced an escalation of her feelings of discomfort and reluctance to be in the research setting, in common with her participants. As we saw in stage 2, she had suffered muscle strain caused by emulating poor aerobic techniques, but at that stage this was relatively superficial, an annoying distraction that was purely physical. By stage 4, however, Rossing was experiencing a different kind of bodily discomfort that was more psychosomatic, as emotional experiences resulting from her impending loss of exercise identity were felt in and through her body. Through her growing empathy with the participants, feeling their physical discomfort and social awkwardness, Rossing started to directly experience the aerobics group in the same way as they did, as wholly unpleasant. Now that the 'fun' elements of the activity were lost, there was nothing left to enjoy or look forward to; Rossing lost her motivation and became disengaged. She complained of lethargy, fatigue and cold symptoms, as well as a phenomenological sense of 'heaviness' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 52). She was so engulfed by the role at this point that she had lost the capacity for critical detachment that would previously have allowed her to reflect on these symptoms as being strange, remarkable and belonging to the 'other' she was studying. Instead she actually felt the feelings herself, as if they were own, and as if she were a native member of the group. Thus Rossing recorded in her fieldnotes the following occasion when she felt suddenly reluctant to attend the group:

At home before going to one of the classes: I woke up fine this morning, but as the hours grow closer to the aerobics class, my body stops smiling; instead it feels heavy and 'energyless'. I am wondering if I actually might be coming down with a minor cold or a sore throat or something. There's no reason for me to become sick at this time. Better be safe, though.... With a guilty feeling I decided not to go today. (Rossing fieldnotes, 7 December 2009)

The second example, also from Rossing, was an occasion of deep acting and role internalization. This occurred when she empathized with an aspect of her participants' social behaviour that she had previously found objectionable, namely their silence and incivility. This turned out to be a tacitly understood rule observed by the actors to uphold interaction order (Goffman, 1983). In a previous article (Rossing and Scott, 2014), we discussed how the members of the beginners' aerobics class, who were also professional colleagues, would deal with the embarrassment caused by this awkward role conflict by

regarding each other as *familiar strangers*: people whom they regularly saw but did not interact with (Milgram, 1977: 51). They would ignore each other, avoid eye contact and generally display *civil inattention* (Goffman, 1963b: 84). Furthermore, if anybody broke this rule and tried to engage their team-mates in a conversation, they would be sanctioned by fierce stares and frowns. At first, Rossing found this bizarre, perplexing and downright rude, but after a while of being in the class herself and feeling her participants' embarrassment, she began to regard it as a normal, comprehensible response to the situation. She had been socialised into the role she was playing to such an extent that she actually felt the same emotions herself (cf. Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting gave way to deep acting as she no longer struggled to self-consciously imitate the gestures of inattention and inaccessibility (Goffman, 1963b), but rather began to display them as an expression of how she honestly felt.

On this occasion, Rossing observed the arrival of a 'new girl' who did not understand the rules of the group and cracked a joke, only to be met by an excruciating silence. Her reaction was not to sympathise with the newcomer from the position of an outsider, but rather to take the perspective of the native member: sharing in their sense of moral indignation at the breach of taken for granted assumptions (Garfinkel, 1967). Here again, taking the perspective of the members was something that she did unreflexively at the time, because of the erosion of the cynical boundary between herself as a critical actor and the unpleasant character she was playing:

I felt she was really out of place coming in slightly late and disturbing us with sociable questions. My body leaned away and my face turned into a big frown, trying to signal the intrusion she was causing. Can she not see that we are working out here?! (Rossing fieldnotes, 18 January 2010),

The third way in which we performed with 'native' depth and sincerity was through Scott's feelings of resentment as the fieldwork role encroached further into her everyday life. Scott had always prided herself on maintaining a firm boundary between her work and swimming, and striven to keep the two worlds separate. Even the decision to study the activity in the first place had been one that she had taken reluctantly, trying to resist the inevitable *colonization of the lifeworld* by external structures (Habermas, 1984: 196). Conducting the ethnography meant that swimming was no longer an escape route out of everyday life, but rather embedded within it, as part of the institutional structure of reality itself (cf. Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Her sense of territorial invasion resonates with Goffman's (1961b) model of the total institution, which confined and controlled inmates around the clock:

Just as I had feared, my safe non-work space was being invaded by thoughts of theory and intellectual matters, and I felt under pressure to discover something exciting or new every night, or at least to come away with something noteworthy to record. It was also a bit of a pain in the neck to come home and have to write up fieldnotes after swimming: even if it was just a brief sentence or two, it was annoying to have to switch on the computer and type this up, or find a piece of paper to scribble it down by hand, when I was tired and hungry from swimming and just wanted to eat, watch TV and go to bed. It was physically tiring to write when I was already muscle-tired, but it was also mentally and emotionally draining and stressful to have to

keep my brain switched on and wear my sociological persona: both during my time in the water (keeping alert and observing) and afterwards when I got home and just wanted to be 'at home'. It meant that my 'wind down' time after work was suddenly just a rest break between two periods of working activity in the day and evening. So when I left the office at 6 or 7pm, I knew that I'd be back in the virtual office later. (Scott post-fieldwork narrative, 27 June 2012)

The state and extent of role engulfment was brought home to Rossing on one epiphanous occasion, following the above incident of imitative rudeness. Catching herself enacting this 'other' persona, she realized that she had crossed the line from anthropological stranger to native. She almost did not recognize herself, and did not like the person she had become. Requesting an extra meeting with her supervisor, she contemplated leaving the field early, telling him: 'I really think I need to take a break, as I am turning into one of them!' (Rossing fieldnotes, 8 February 2010).

However, it was not easy to leave the field. In addition to the loyalty that ethnographers often report, in not wanting to abandon or betray participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), we felt an additional emotional conflict. These were activities that we loved, that were familiar to us and tightly bound up with our identities, yet our views of the settings had changed, and the activities no longer held such a magical charm. We had experienced the 'importance of disappointment' (Craib, 1994) and felt cynically disillusioned. We wondered whether we would ever be able to return to the state of blissful ignorance in which we had once enjoyed our sports, or whether our exercise identities had been irrevocably 'spoiled' (Goffman, 1963a).

The last day I said a heart-warming goodbye to the participants, as they had given so much of their time and shared insights with me, letting me into their private struggles about becoming exercisers. I sincerely promised to come back and visit them, and join them for a workout. As I said it, I thought it would be fun going back and just enjoying the workout, seeing the women again and giving them a positive boost. Coming home, though, my stomach felt so light and relieved: I was done. I did not have to do this again if I did not want to. I have not been back in an aerobics class since. (Rossing post-fieldwork narrative, 16 August 2010)

## Conclusion

The key issue of this article has been how placing an activity that is close to the heart – emotionally, motivationally, recreationally – under an ethnographic lens affects the researcher's relationship with it. While undeniably offering epistemological advantages in the form of deeper knowledge of participants' subjective experiences, becoming an ethnographer of something that one loves can make that object less enjoyable. Moreover, when the researcher is both an insider to the group and personally committed to the activity, doing 'radically participatory' fieldwork may come at a cost to her or his identity.

We have presented here a cautionary tale of how the research process unfolded in parallel with the progressive erosion of our exercise identities, creating a sense of ontological destabilization. At each stage, we gained more knowledge of our participants' experiences but simultaneously sacrificed an aspect of our selves. Emulating low competency and poor technique created corporeal discomfort, enduring interactional awkwardness disturbed our preferred modes of sociability, and deep acting our role performances dissolved

the boundary between professional and personal concerns, threatening engulfment of the lifeworld. Going native thus meant more than just a loss of intellectual objectivity; it involved embodied suffering and self-alienation. Researching the familiar not only 'took the fun out of' our favourite activities, but more profoundly 'spoiled' this part of our identities.

We therefore offer a word of warning to researchers contemplating undertaking this kind of immersive, activity-based research into something that they love. Reflexivity is crucial: not only about the intellectual questions of values, bias and positionality, but also about the emotional and personal effects of fieldwork on the self. By keeping diary log-books and remaining in close and honest dialogue with fellow researchers, we managed to understand what was happening and leave the field before we lost ourselves completely. We have both since managed to resume our sports and reclaim our exercise identities, but remain sobered by the experience. As Goffman (1961a) argues, action that is fateful for identity involves complex trade-offs between knowledge, risk and thrill, and so the 'fun' we find in games is no light-hearted matter.

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### Author biographies

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# Appendix

- 1) Interview guid participants Spetember/Oktober 2009  
Interviewguid participants Januar 2010  
Interview guide participants June 2012
- 2) Approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service
- 3) Oral information about what was being observed and the intention of the research
- 4) Informed consent form

## **Interview guide participants - Sept/Okt 2009**

Takk for at du stiller opp på et intervju, det vil ta ca 1 time.

### **Informasjon om intervjuet i prosjektet "Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet"**

Vi vet lite i dag om hvordan treningsprogram på arbeidsplassen fungerer. Forskjellige personer på forskjellige arbeidsplasser vil trolig ta i mot slike program på ulike måter. Min intensjon er å se om det er noen form for tilrettelegging som kan gjøres for å motivere ansatte til å delta. Min studie er opptatt av gruppeprosesser innad i en aktivitetsgruppe, om relasjonen mellom den som leder aktiviteten og deltakerne, om hva som hemmer og fremmer det enkelte individs deltakelse i gruppen.

Din personlige form er ikke relevant, så dette velger du selv hvorvidt du kommer innpå. Jeg har ingen mulighet til å vite hva du har svart på spørreskjemaet eller hvordan du gjorde det på gå - testen (dette behandles av en annen forsker).

Frivillig å delta, full anonymisering. Ta opp på bånd da jeg kan konsentrere meg mer om hva du sier enn å notere.

### **(Objective 1) An examination of individual consideration and action (social interaction) at and following program introduction**

- Hvordan avdeling jobber du i? Hvordan er en vanlig arbeidsdag for deg?
- Jobber du alene eller tett med kollegaer? Hvordan trives du med kollegaer?
- Pleier dere å gjøre noe sammen utenom arbeid?
  
- Velferds tilbud på arbeidsplassen?
- Hva er dine tanker om at arbeidsplassen har slike tilbud?
  
- Hvordan fikk du vite om "Trening for helse"?
- Hvordan fikk du vite om de forskjellige timene?
- Påmelding og oppfølging/kommunikasjon
- Kan du fortelle hvorfor du valgte den timen du gjorde?

**(Objective 2) To examine the nature of such groups and the interaction that occurs within them**

- Kjenner du noen av de andre deltakerne på gruppen? Er det noen du pleier å gå ned sammen med?
- Er det noen som kommer fra samme avdeling?
- (Hvor viktig er det sosiale for at du deltar?)
- (Hvis du ikke hadde kjent noen på denne gruppen, hadde det fortsatt vært ok å delta)

**(Objective 3) To explore the facilitation role and the nature of facilitation undertaken by mediating agents in generating increased participation.**

- Hva synes du om innholdet/opplegget i timen, oppvarming, øvelsene, musikken, forklaring av instruktøren, veiledning, pausene, rundene?
- Hvordan synes du instruktøren er? (Hvilket forhold føler du at du har med instruktøren?)
- Er det noe du skulle ønske der var mer eller mindre av på denne timen, (instruktøren eller tilbudet generelt?)

**(Objective 4) To investigate the barriers and enablers influencing employee engagement in exercise participation.**

- Hvordan ser ei vanlig uke ut for deg, hvordan er det å **gjøre rom** for trening?
- Deltar/ har du deltatt på trening/grupper på tidligere arbeidsplasser og/eller på fritiden? Hvordan var det å **passere dette inn** i hverdagen?
- På eget initiativ eller sammen med noen?
- Hva er det som er generelt viktig for deg i forhold til å delta?
- Hva kan gjøre det være som gjør at du ikke deltar, en gang, (hva om du er borte flere ganger)?

## **Interview guide participants - January 2010**

Takk for at du stiller opp på et intervju, det vil ta ca 1 time.

### **Informasjon om intervjuet i prosjektet "Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet"**

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Frivillig å delta, full anonymisering. Ta opp på bånd da jeg kan konsentrere meg mer om hva du sier enn å notere.

Noen spørsmål vil oppleves likt som ved forrige intervju, det handler om at dette er et oppfølgingsintervju av prosessen i treningsgruppa.

### **(Objective 1) An examination of individual consideration and action (social interaction) at and following program introduction**

- Hvor ofte trener du nå, inkludert Trening for Helse?
- Hvilke typer aktiviteter deltar du i?
- Hva liker du ved disse aktivitetene?

### **(Objective 2) To examine the nature of such groups and the interaction that occurs within them**

- Har du merket noen endring i det sosiale aspektet tilknyttet denne timen?

- Hvilken type kontakt har du med de andre deltakerne? Hvordan vil du beskrive kontakten? (Har du blitt kjent med noen av de andre deltakerne på gruppen? Er det noen du pleier å gå ned sammen med?)
- Er det en stabil gruppe med deltakere som du kan peke ut?
- Hva betyr denne kontakten for deg?
- Hender det at du ser noen av de andre deltakerne på andre tidspunkt i arbeidsuka, og hva sier dere evt da, sier dere mer nå enn ved oppstart i høst?
- Er det noen elementer du finner støttende for deg i denne timen eller rundt?

**(Objective 4) To investigate the barriers and enablers influencing employee engagement in exercise participation.**

- Lurer på om jeg skal individualisere disse spørsmålene i forhold til hvert enkelt intervju og hva de sa under første samtale med meg.
- Hva betyr trening for deg?
- Hvilke erfaringer har du med tidligere trening? Hvordan korresponderer den erfaringen med den du nå opplever her på SSB? (dette har j snakket masse med N om)
- Hvilke deler av treningstimen er viktige for deg, som gir deg det utbytte du ønsker av denne timen?
- Kan du beskrive en time for meg fra du reiser deg fra plassen din, (går ned, treffer de andre, skifter, går inn i salen, finner øvelse) og til de er på vei hjem?
- Hva føler du før, under og etter treningstimen?
- Kjenner du noen som kunne tenke seg og delta, men som ikke gjør det? Kan du reflektere litt over hva det er som kan være vanskelige for deg selv og /eller andre og ikke delta på dette tilbudet

La intervju personen få snakke mest mulig fritt, brukes bare som støttespørsmål



## Interview guide participants June 2010

### Generelle spørsmål:

- Hvem er dette tilbudet rettet mot i bedriften
- Er det noen forskjell på hva man bør reflektere over når man lager et tilbud på en arbeidsplass vs på et treningssenter? Gi eksempler?
- Hvem mener DU det dette tilbudet passer for?
- Hvordan har du deltatt siden januar?
- Hvordan ser du deg selv til høsten i forhold til jobb og til dette treningstilbudet?
- Er dette en sosial arbeidsplass og hvilke er for deg de mest sosial arenaer?
- Variasjon i øvelsene vs gjenkjennende øvelser, de samme uke etter uke?

### Individuelle spørsmål:

#### Ben:

- Ref snakket mye om instruktøren a på de to foregående intervjuene. a vs instruktør b? Forskjellen på disse to instruktørene, gi eksempler? (At samme opplegg blir benyttet?)
- Hvem føler du passer best som instruktør for deg .
- Stemningen i gruppen, ref lystbetont?
- Fordelingen i gruppen (kjønn, alder, avdelinger) hvordan virker dette på stemningen?
- Påmelding vs ikke påmelding, hvordan virker dette? Har du meldt deg på videre?

#### Laura:

- Hvordan er det sosiale miljøet på arbeidsplassen, din nå siden januar?
- Hvordan reflekterer du rundt det å ha en slik time i uken i forhold til din gamle/og din nye arbeidsplass som tilbyr 2 timer i uken for alle ansatte?

#### Paige:

- Hvordan om noen påvirker det treningsopplevelsen din å komme tilbake etter å ha vært borte noen ganger?
- Kan du beskrive litt nærmere de refleksjoner og tanker du gjør deg rundt det at det er blitt litt for tøft å delta?



Vår dato: 25.01.2008

Vår ref.: 18180 / 2 / LT Deres dato:

Deres ref.:

## KVITTERING PÅ MELDING OM BEHANDLING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER

Vi viser til melding om behandling av personopplysninger, mottatt 20.12.2007. Meldingen gjelder prosjektet:

18180	<i>Participation in workplace sport: A Norwegian case study</i>
Behandlingsansvarlig	<i>Norges idrettshøgskole, ved institusjonens øverste leder</i>
Daglig ansvarlig	<i>Hilde Rossing</i>

Personvernombudet har vurdert prosjektet og finner at behandlingen av personopplysninger er meldepliktig i henhold til personopplysningsloven § 31. Behandlingen tilfredsstiller kravene i personopplysningsloven.

Personvernombudets vurdering forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i tråd med opplysningene gitt i meldeskjemaet, korrespondanse med ombudet, eventuelle kommentarer samt personopplysningsloven/-helseregisterloven med forskrifter. Behandlingen av personopplysninger kan settes i gang.

Det gjøres oppmerksom på at det skal gis ny melding dersom behandlingen endres i forhold til de opplysninger som ligger til grunn for personvernombudets vurdering. Endringsmeldinger gis via et eget skjema, [http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk\\_stud/skjema.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/forsk_stud/skjema.html). Det skal også gis melding etter tre år dersom prosjektet fortsatt pågår. Meldinger skal skje skriftlig til ombudet.

Personvernombudet har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet i en offentlig database, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/prosjektoversikt.jsp>.

Personvernombudet vil ved prosjektets avslutning, 31.12.2011, rette en henvendelse angående status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.

Vennlig hilsen

  
Bjørn Henrichsen

  
Lis Tenold

Kontaktperson: Lis Tenold tlf: 55 58 33 77  
Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering

## Personvernombudet for forskning



### Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

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18180

Personvernombudet finner opplegget for gjennomføringen av prosjektet tilfredsstillende. Videre finner vi skrivet godt utformet.

Innsamlede opplysninger anonymiseres ved prosjektslutt, senest 31.12.2011. Med anonymisering innebærer at navnelister slettes/makuleres, og ev. kategorisere eller slette indirekte personidentifiserbare opplysninger. Lydbåndopptak makuleres.

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## **Information given about the project on startup and in exercise classes**

### **Informasjon om intervjuet i prosjektet "Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet"**

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Frivillig å delta, full anonymisering. Ta kontakt med meg etter timen om du har noen spørsmål eller reserverasjoner.



## **Samtykkeerklæring ved innsamling og bruk av personopplysninger til forskningsformål**

Prosjektleder: Hilde Rossing

Prosjektittel: «Inkluderende mosjon i arbeidslivet»

Jeg samtykker i at opplysninger innhentet fra meg kan brukes av Hilde Rossing i hennes doktorgradsavhandling og i artikler i tidsskrifter og i faglige bøker. På bakgrunn av faglig publisert materiale vil også resultatene kunne bli brukt i faglige debatter i media.

Jeg samtykker under forutsetning av at alle opplysninger jeg gir, skal anonymiseres.

Jeg er kjent med at min deltakelse er frivillig og at jeg om ønskelig kan trekke meg fra videre deltakelse.

.....  
Sted

Dato

Underskrift





