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**'We may be falling apart but we still keep going':  
Retired servicemen's experiences of their ageing bodies**



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## **‘We may be falling apart but we still keep going’: Retired servicemen’s experiences of their ageing bodies**

Currently, there is scant research that investigates in-depth retired servicemen’s perceptions and experiences of ageing and being physically active, particularly in relation to retirement experiences. In this article, we employ a novel theoretical combination of figurational sociology and symbolic interactionism to explore a topical life-history of twenty retired servicemen’s experiences in relation to physical activity (PA), the ageing body and constructions of identity in later life. Participants were aged 60+ and members of the Royal British Legion (RBL) in a city in the English Midlands. Three semi-structured focus-group interviews and follow-up conversations were completed, together with informal observations. Key findings revealed that although participants recognised the need for regular PA, their perceptions routinely centered upon the ‘felt’ limitations of the ageing body, often in stark contrast to their former ‘disciplined’, active, military bodies. Corporeal challenges and limitations discouraged some from taking part in PA altogether. Despite their perceived bodily limitations, however, many ex-service personnel still endeavoured to stay physically active. Findings highlight the salience of the temporal aspects of older adults’ lived experiences of exercise and PA, for past experiences of PA and exercise were identified as strongly shaping current-day motivations, attitudes and behaviours.

Keywords: ageing; physical activity; figurational theory; symbolic interactionism; embodiment and the military

### **Introduction**

With an ageing demographic profile in the United Kingdom (UK) (Office for National Statistics 2016), the pressure on healthcare services to manage age-related health and well-being challenges is mounting (Ashby and Beech 2016). Investigating the role of physical activity (PA) in the lives and leisure practices of older adults in relation to their health and ageing bodies is therefore of research interest. Currently, literature on men’s experiences as embodied, ageing subjects is relatively limited (Sparkes 2015), however, and there is somewhat of a research lacuna with regard specifically to figurational studies of men’s ageing. This present study seeks to contribute to this research area by exploring a figuration – an evolving network of interdependent human beings - of retired

servicemen in the Royal British Legion (RBL). The term ‘figuration’ was used by Elias (1978b) to describe the ways in which people are socially inclined towards and bonded with each other. Figuration sociology thus emphasises how people form, and are situated within, webs of interdependent social interaction. Recent figures from the Royal British Legion Household Survey (2014 cited in Cooper *et al.* 2016) estimate that 4.4% of the UK population (2.83 million) are military veterans. A further 1.5% are dependent children (0.99 million) and 3.2% are dependent adults (2.09 million). Overall, it is estimated that 9.2% of the UK population (5.91 m) are part of the veteran community, with 46% of the veteran community over 75 years of age. As Cooper and colleagues (2016) note, these figures are significant, and thus research on retired service personnel’s lived experiences of ageing and PA potentially has wider applicability. It is also timely vis-à-vis the UK government’s promotion of PA and exercise as ‘medicine’ (see the special issue of this journal), and a means of reducing financial pressures upon the National Health Service (NHS). Investigating older adults’ motivations and capacities for engaging in PA is of sociological interest particularly in a climate where governments are engaged in ‘responsibilising’ citizens in relation to their own rationalized, health-related behaviours.

Traditionally, ageing has been framed by biomedical discourses (Tulle-Winton 2000), which often construct the ageing process as a medical and social ‘problem’, associated with physical ‘frailty’, poor health, disengagement from work, social and physical activities, disability and dependency on the health care system (Blaikie 1999, Phoenix and Tulle 2017). In contrast, the ‘positive ageing’ discourse has sought to shift away from the narrative of age-as-decline, and instead corresponds to a wider shift in attitudes towards emphasis on more positive aspects of old age (Phoenix and Orr 2014, Tulle and Phoenix 2015, Gard *et al.* 2016). ‘Active ageing’ can also be situated within this general set of ‘positive ageing’ discourses, which maintain that the outcomes of increased and long-term social engagement among older adults are beneficial to a healthy lifestyle (Mendes 2013). Nevertheless, the ‘positive ageing’ discourse tends to over-emphasise individual choice whilst largely ignoring the socio-cultural conditions within which choices are made (Katz and Calasanti 2015). It can also appear to highlight the moral imperative of choosing to stay active and healthy in order to age ‘successfully’ (Dionigi 2006, Tulle 2008a, 2008b, Author 3 and Another 2015, Gard *et al.* 2016). Whilst our purpose here is not specifically to engage in further debate regarding ‘positive

ageing’, it is clear that not all individuals and social groups have the means or ability to ‘choose’ to be ‘active,’ and the maintenance of good health is rarely a simple choice, as emerged from the accounts of our participants.

Researchers have demonstrated how PA can have a significant impact on the lives, identities and health of older adults’ (Phoenix and Orr 2014, Sparkes 2015, Tulle and Phoenix 2015, Burn 2017, Phoenix and Tulle 2017). In the last decades in particular, there has been a burgeoning of sociological research exploring the lived, embodied dimension of ageing, much of which also problematises (and trenchantly critiques) some of the ageist ideologies and gerontophobic norms present within contemporary youth-orientated capitalist societies (Author 3 and Another 2012). It is upon embodiment, social agency and the lived experience of ageing and PA that we focus in this article.

Whilst the past two decades have seen a veritable explosion in writing on the sociology of the body (Author 2 and Another 2010), researchers such as Tulle (2008c) have also noted the relative absence of ‘ageing bodies’ from this literature, until recent times. Tulle (2008c) has also highlighted the need to challenge the cultural and social framing of old age and the older body as problematic. Researchers (e.g. Blaikie 1999, Kenyon *et al.* 2001, Featherstone and Hepworth 2004, Victor 2005, Phoenix and Grant 2009, Author 3 *et al.* 2017) have also noted how people’s biographies are strongly influenced by the continually changing, complex and dynamic societal settings in which they live, signaling the need for different epistemological and theoretical approaches to address complex biographies and societal settings. Such approaches include figurational perspectives, which offer scholars concepts that can be used to address corporeality *and* the social, psychological and temporal aspects of the life course. Figural theory has the potential for deepening and developing the theorisation of embodiment, the body (Atkinson 2012) and ageing (Author 3 and Another 2012, 2014, Author 3 and Another 2015) and through the ‘systematic study of experience and subjectivity’ (Bullington 2006, p. 70) can offer distinctive ways of investigating the ageing body. Here, we use a novel theoretical combination. In addition to figurational theory, we also draw on insights from symbolic interactionism, in order to examine both wider societal contexts and the finer-grain detail of the micro social order and retired servicemen’s interactional encounters. The research upon which we focus examined the lived experiences of retired older adults (servicemen, aged 60 and over) who had served in the British armed forces and who were currently members of the RBL figuration. We explored participants’ collective, shared

memories and experiences of ageing, the body and PA. We also investigated how these memories and experiences shaped participants' present-day lives and participation (or not) in PA. Findings revealed the complexities, diversity and indeterminacy embedded in retired servicemen's experiences of growing older, including their engagement with PA. Here, we consider two salient themes that emerged from the data: 1) Military Basic Training as a 'civilising' process of bodies, and 2) The ageing (ex)military body. Before portraying the research project from which our qualitative data are drawn, the overarching theoretical frameworks are described.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

As noted, we draw upon both figurational sociology and symbolic interactionism, each being employed to focus upon different aspects of the analysis; here we provide a brief overview of both frameworks, together with our rationale for employing this particular theoretical combination.

#### ***Figurational sociology***

Between the 1930s and 1990s, Norbert Elias developed the 'figurational' approach to sociology, which for him involved the study of how interdependent people are situated within a multiplicity of contested, tensile and dynamic bonds of association (Elias 1970, Murphy *et al.* 2000, Liston 2015). The term 'figuration' was used by Elias (1978b) to describe the multiple ways in which people are socially inclined towards and bonded with each other. Characterised by tensile power balances, figurations highlight how mutually-oriented people constitute and are situated within webs of interdependent relationships, or bonds of association, that pass beyond the bounds of their direct awareness down 'interdependency chains'. We are born into figurations, develop within them, constitute and to an extent influence their dynamics and structure, and finally, at the end of our lives, we die within them (Jarvie and Maguire 1994, Dunning 1999).

Of direct relevance to our interest in older adults and former service personnel, for figurational sociologists, the notion of a separate past and present represents a false dichotomy. For Elias, sociological study should attempt to avoid the 'retreat to the present' because the present is always created through ongoing social processes that are the result of the temporal actions of individuals within figurations over time (Baur and Ernst 2011, Author 3 and Another 2014). This is useful in the study of changes in the life course (Author 3, Author 2 and another 2017). Hence, the figurational approach focuses

on the investigation of continuous social processes rather than viewing and conceptualising history as a sequence of static states (Van Krieken 1998, Elias *et al.* 2000). In examining what he termed the ‘civilising process’, Elias (1982b) was particularly concerned to trace the development of both the ‘personality structure’ of individuals and the social norms and standards that have developed in European societies (Jarvie and Maguire 1994). Elias (1982b) examined the increasing control that people are expected to exercise over their emotions and ‘impulses’ (Elias 1982b, Jarvie and Maguire 1994, Author 3 and Another 2014). In relation to the ageing process, long-term social processes such as rationalisation, biomedicalization and the tendency within modern capitalist societies to valorise the youthful and healthy body as an object of production and consumption tend to place older bodies in a position of vulnerability and marginalise them in relation to the ‘public’ sphere. As Tulle (2008c) notes, a figurational perspective shows how biological ageing deprives the human body of its ‘civilised normality’, and the ‘uncontrollable’ older body can evoke feelings of disgust and fear. It threatens to become ‘uncivilized’.

In *The Civilising Process*, Elias (1982b) describes the complex interplay between the learned and unlearned aspects of human behaviours and emotions, positing that human conduct is always guided by an interweaving of unlearned and learned processes. The internalisation of social experience, norms, expectations and codes of conduct, is noted by Elias (1982b) as creating the habitus, where personal beliefs and behaviours are contoured by generalised dispositions at the moment between a person’s first and second nature; that is, at the point between unconscious and conscious decision-making (Elias 1982b, Elias and Dunning 1986, Author 3 and Another 2014). Elias and Dunning (1986) note how these dispositions are created through the interdependent processes of sociogenesis (internalisation of social norms) and psychogenesis (in which the individual agent’s psychological dispositions come to the fore). The point at which the two intersect is termed by Elias and Dunning (1986) ‘the hinge’ where individual dispositions and social processes meet and blend; the habitus also has biological and biographical aspects, which are germane to a life course perspective (Elias and Dunning 1986, Author 3 and Another 2015).

Culture and habitus are very slow to change, as Van Krieken (1998) emphasises, and it is only over relatively long spans of time that one can trace habitus, including through embodied experiences occurring over a lifetime (Author 3 and Another 2014). Past experiences may influence behaviour and contour perceptions as much as do recent



ones. Furthermore, recollections of the past are selectively interpreted and continually influenced and contested by various groups (Summerfield 2010). As such, habitus can influence how a person negotiates or contests their position within a figuration. At the same time, however, power balances and norms within a figuration can influence the habitus (Jarvie and Maguire 1994). The interdependence, therefore, of 'external' sociogenetic processes and 'internal' psychogenetic processes, according to a figurational approach, impacts on human emotions (Van Krieken 2014), emphasising how bodies are experienced, rationalised and understood (Jarvie and Maguire 1994, Author 3 and Another 2015). As Atkinson (2012) points out, the integrated analysis of social interdependence, sociogenesis and psychogenesis lead to nuanced understandings of how cultural, social and biological factors interweave.

In sum, with its strong focus on temporality and interdependent human relationships, Elias's figurational theoretical framework has been shown to be highly applicable to studies of ageing and the ageing body (Elias 1985, Author 3 and Another 2012, Author 3 and Another 2015), and the current research sought to contribute to this small but developing literature. Elias (1978a) stressed the importance of theorising individuals' activities as products of mutual (but not necessarily equal) social relationships. His figurational perspective is, however, less theoretically strong in relation to the in-depth analysis of the intricacies of social interactional encounters, particularly in the context of the micro social order. In order to generate this further layer of detailed analysis at the micro-level, particularly vis-a-vis identity-related dimensions, we employed a separate, secondary analytical framework of symbolic interactionism.

### ***Symbolic interactionism***

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theoretical tradition that focuses on meaning and meaning-making, human interaction in context, the dynamic social activities that occur when people interact with each other, and how people make sense of their lived interactional experiences (Herman and Reynolds 1994). Cooley's 'looking glass self' (1902, pp. 151-152) highlights how people reflect and form images of themselves through their imaginary perspectives of what others might think of them. For Cooley, there are three principal elements in this process: 'the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his (or her) judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification' (Cooley 1902, p. 152). Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self also emphasises the reflexivity of embodiment. Waskul and

Vannini (2012) note that when people gaze upon the bodies of others, they interpret what they observe, and reciprocally, these latter envisage what the former are seeing, thinking and feeling. The reflections of the looking-glass are thus infinite. In sum, the looking-glass body-self can be conceptualised as an imagined reflection developed via social cues gleaned from others. The self, therefore, is constructed relationally, during social interaction. Social actors' imagined images and evaluations of self can then become internalised and deeply embodied, coming into play with or without the presence of other social actors.

Further developing Cooley's thinking, Mead refined conceptualisations of 'mind' and 'self', theorising mind as a result of an exchange of social acts, such as gestures and symbols, with language constituting one of the most complex social acts in which human beings engage (Benzies and Allen 2001). According to Mead (1934, p. 135) the self is fundamentally a relational construct and thus exists and develops only through the social processes, experiences and activities that arise between social actors. As Benzies and Allen (2001) discuss, the 'self' was differentiated by Mead (1934, p. 178) into two phases: a 'spontaneous' 'I', and a socially influenced 'me'; the 'I' being the initial impulsive tendency (often associated with reflex responses, and bearing some similarities with Freudian notions of the 'id') in individuals and the 'me' representing the social expectations of others – both individual 'significant others' and more general society in the form of the 'generalised other'. The 'self' thus results from the dynamic interaction between the 'I' and the 'me', and these conceptualisations have the potential analytically to illuminate how people (might) respond in different interactional encounters.

Blumer (1969) in turn developed Meadian theory, with an emphasis on how the self evolves from the interactive process of joint action (Denzin 1992), where individuals engage in mindful action, which allows them to manipulate symbols and negotiate the meanings of different situations (Mead 1934). Like Mead, Blumer (1969) similarly challenged the dualist conceptualisation of individual and society as separate entities. His work highlighted the centrality of meaning in human life, positing three core principles: (1) that human beings act towards 'things', including one another, on the basis of the meanings these things hold for them; (2) these meanings are created through social interaction with others; and (3) these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process that human beings use to make sense of the objects that constitute their social worlds (Blumer 1969, p. 2). For many, these three premises remain important core tenets of symbolic interactionist thought, although some have suggested a need for

their development and refinement. Snow (2001), for example, argues that Blumer's (1969) conceptualisation links symbolic interactionism too narrowly to the issue of meaning and interpretation, and thus tends to overlook other cornerstone principles, such as the importance of social structure, including its constraints on social agency. In summary, the looking-glass self and the 'I'/'me' distinction, are amongst many symbolic interactionist concepts that provide researchers with understandings of how social actors' identities are developed and negotiated through social interaction and different social contexts, and these concepts proved highly apposite when analysing the data from our project. As noted above, whilst a figurational perspective offers many strengths, it is less theoretically strong in analysing in-depth the complexities of social interactional encounters in the context of the micro social order. In order to generate this particular level of sociological analysis and to 'do justice to' the rich interactionally-oriented data that emerged, we therefore employed symbolic interactionism as a secondary analytical framework in our qualitative project, which is now described.

## **The research**

### ***Limited topical life history***

This research is based upon a small-scale study of a particular group of retired servicemen in a city in the English Midlands. *Servicemen* were selected in order to address the current dearth of sociological literature that focuses specifically on men's experiences as embodied, ageing subjects, as noted by authors such as Sparkes (2015). Further, we aimed to address the present lacuna specifically in relation to figurational studies of men's ageing. Our analysis thus focuses upon two particular phases of participants' lives: their time in the military, and, in contrast, their life post-retirement from the military figuration, as 'older' men. For the purposes of this present study, we conducted what has been termed a 'limited topical life history' (Author 2 2011, p. 111) of a group of 20 former servicemen. This approach is so termed because it examines a particular period and topic in a person's or social group's life, in this case time spent in the military and then in post-military retirement.

Ethical approval was granted for the research by the relevant University ethics committee, and data collection was undertaken by the full-time researcher on the project, R [name to be inserted post-reviewing], primarily via three semi-structured focus group interviews. Our participants were twenty retired servicemen (thirteen retired Army servicemen and seven retired Royal Air Force (RAF) servicemen) aged 60+, who were

members of the Royal British Legion (RBL) in a city in the English Midlands. Participants were initially opportunistically sampled, which allowed R to take advantage of unexpected opportunities (see Gratton and Jones 2010) as they arose within the context of the RBL environment. For example, R attended RBL coffee mornings every Wednesday over a period of four weeks. As she began to build rapport with the RBL members, they started to invite her to various other RBL events regionally, which assisted in meeting and recruiting members who did not regularly attend the local RBL coffee mornings. Snowball sampling (Bryman 2012) proved beneficial in the selection and recruitment of an additional six participants. Potential participants were asked to complete a screening questionnaire prior to the focus group sessions, enabling us to assess which individuals met the study's inclusion criteria: aged 60 or over, retired from the Services, having served in active duty post WW2 and up to and including 1975, and able to understand and speak English fluently.

#### ***Data collection and analysis***

A total of twenty men participated in the focus group interviews. Two of the focus group sessions had seven members and the other session had six. As Smith and Sparkes (2016) note, most focus groups contain between four and ten participants, and the size of our groups proved helpful in generating in-depth discussion that was also manageable in terms of recording and identifying individual voices. We decided to group the participants into Service branches, so that two focus group sessions were held with ex-Army servicemen and one with ex-RAF personnel. Retired Navy personnel would have been included, but as we received consent from only one man who had previously served in the Navy, it was decided to exclude ex-Navy personnel. We purposely categorised into groups specific to military branch as we sought to engender discussions around collective recollections and experiences from people with analogous forces backgrounds. The focus group interviews lasted between 80 and 100 minutes, and were recorded by Dictaphone.

Participants readily entered into dialogue, sharing personal information and detailed accounts of their experiences of PA and their physically active bodies in both the military and then in retirement. The focus group setting also offered us the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively undertake sense-making, and construct meanings around particular phenomena (Bryman 2012). This coheres with the purposes of both figurational and symbolic interactionist theoretical positions, as both perspectives seek to understand how social phenomena are produced by individuals collectively and

in interaction. As Elias (1987) highlights, individuals and the elements that make up an individual (i.e. social, physiological, psychological and historical factors) are interdependent. In this sense, therefore, focus groups as a method of data collection reflect, to some extent, the processes through which meaning is constructed in everyday life (Wilkinson 1998) and are regarded by some as constituting a more ‘naturalistic’ approach in comparison with individual interviews (Finch and Lewis 2003, Bryman 2012). The focus groups provided insight into the social norms and values present within the men’s RBL figuration and also the military figurations in which the men had been situated during their working lives. The semi-structured format allowed us to adopt a flexible approach, seeking further explanation when necessary, and also encouraging participants to lead the discussions into new areas unforeseen by the research team.

Data were analysed using Braun and colleagues (2016, p. 117-118) six-phase thematic analysis (TA) model. First, R familiarised herself with, and immersed herself in the data, working systematically through the transcripts and generating initial codes that seemed most relevant to our research interests. Connections between codes were then established to develop higher level patterns and themes. Themes were reviewed by all members of the research team to check for resonance and meaningful coherence in the coded data (see Tracy 2010). In congruence with Braun *et al.* (2016), we too found that in relation to defining and naming our themes, strong and compelling data quotations worked well as part of a theme name. We used a member checking process (see Sparkes and Smith 2014, p. 191) to assess with participants the accuracy of our understanding and interpretation of the data gathered; a summary report of the study findings was also sent, via email, to all participants. Pseudonyms have been given to all participants to protect anonymity, and we also provide details of age and services branch alongside each participant quote.

## **Findings and discussion**

In order to help situate the current study and our participants, our first theme provides contextual information regarding the British military and participants’ past experiences of military training, PA and sport; specifically, the Basic Training organisational socialisation process to which all the men were subjected. The extreme physical and psychological pressures that participants endured throughout this military socialisation stage emerged strongly from the data. It was noteworthy too, that in relation to participants’ recollections of military Basic Training, their particular branch of the

services (Army or RAF) did not appear to be a key variable, as men from both groups recounted very similar experiences. The key findings that emerged from data analysis, which we consider here, are grouped under two salient themes: Military Basic Training: civilising bodies, and The ageing (ex)military body.

### ***Military Basic Training: civilising bodies***

Upon being selected and accepted for military service, the new recruits, as new members entered the military figuration and had to undergo a period of Basic Training. Throughout this period, as Hockey (1986) notes, recruits are subjected to processes of harsh, rigorous organisational socialisation. This is a form of ‘secondary socialisation’ (Berger and Luckman 1976, pp. 157-166) in which recruits undergo training to imbue them with the specific characteristics of the military figuration. Basic Training is presented to recruits by their ‘superiors’ (in the terminology of the Forces) as a challenge, a number of demanding tests, which must be passed (Hockey 2004). To this end, Basic Training consists of a scheduled series of activities, and participants shared some examples of the compulsory fitness tests and highly physical activities through which they were put. These physical activities have work like characteristics (see Elias and Dunning 1986 on the ‘sparetime spectrum’) and often generated experiences of ‘intense embodiment’ where the body is brought, sometimes acutely, to conscious mind by physical demands (Author 2 and Another 2015):

We had basic training to start with...it was at least sixteen solid weeks of physical exercise, running, jumping, carrying logs, crawling through trenches, crawling under barbed wire, leaping over walls. (Louis/84yrs/Army)

A ten-mile run in full battle kits, steel helmet, rifle and the lot. They picked the hottest time of the day, two o'clock, when it was eighty in the shade, as they normally did, just to task you. But generally it was in those assault courses and all that, you know, every physical training. (Murray/79yrs/Army)

Participants discussed how throughout Basic Training, they were forced to confront a new social world, filled with activities that many found unfamiliar and extremely physically and mentally challenging (see also Hockey 1986). From a figurational perspective, these military activities were designed processually to ‘civilise’

recruits' bodies (see also Atkinson 2012). The ability to pass through this stage of military service constitutes a *rite de passage* (Van Gennep 1960); not only does it indicate the change of status from civilian to military serviceman (or servicewoman in the wider context), but successful completion of Basic Training also represents, for many, the transition from boy to man (Hockey 2004). The popular cliché highlighted by Hockey (2004), that entry into the Army, or in this case entry into the military figuration, 'makes a man out of you' is illustrated through Edward's comment:

That's what they do, they turn boys into trained soldiers by building you up how they want you to be. (Edward/75yrs/Army)

The military socialisation process involves the development of a particular self-image and a number of qualities, such as endurance, loyalty, aggressiveness and toughness, which are explicitly linked by instructional staff to masculine potency (Hockey 1986, 2004). Participants' accounts illustrated how some of these masculine behaviours and qualities were seen to be axiomatic to their role as effective military servicemen; there was no possibility of passing through the Basic Training stage without displaying and embodying such attributes (Hockey 2004), as James and Gilbert both explain:

You had to do physical training to start with. You had to pass what was known as a PE test, which consisted of various things, a ten-mile bash, for instance, in a certain period of time. If you didn't pass it, you did it again next week until you did pass it. (James/72yrs/Army)

We did a run every morning, so we did at least three miles every morning. If you couldn't do it or you felt you couldn't do it, you had to report sick straight away. But obviously anybody lagging behind was pulled along with the rest of the squad anyway... there was one lad who just wasn't fit enough and he wasn't making it. So the sergeant said to me, "Take him out running day and night until he obtains that fitness". (Gilbert/80yrs/Army)

As Author 3 and another (2014) explain, the hinge is a two-way process. It is a balance between the effect an experience has on an individual, and how the individual then reacts to and interprets that experience. In the present analysis, it is clear from Gilbert's account that the social elements are driving the physiological elements of experience. Participants described how they learnt to adopt and internalise the norms,

values and perspectives that were present within the military figuration. Gilbert exemplified how recruits were instructed to take on new roles, and subsequently establish new identifications which conformed to the symbols and politics of the military figuration. Through Basic Training, military rules, symbols, norms and values were introduced to the recruits by their 'superiors'. In figurational terms, this illustrates the melding of learned social behaviours with innate emotions (Elias 1982b, see also Author 3 and Another 2012). From this theoretical perspective, combined with biologically-grounded elements experienced through the physical aspects of the socialisation process, the participants' shared military habitus began to form. These mechanisms experienced in Basic Training functioned to cement in recruits a new habitus and a new concept of self, one that developed, directed participants through their military careers and continued to influence participants even in their retirement from the military.

### ***The ageing (ex)military body***

Participants' experiences and perceptions of corporeal limitations in relation to their older bodies appeared highly salient within our analyses. In this section we explore participants' accounts of their ageing bodies in relation to PA and exercise, and highlight the ways in which participants' past embodied identities and PA practices shaped and influenced their present-day perceptions of ageing and participation in PA. Some participants described evocatively the effects of considerable corporeal limitations on their involvement with PA and bodily movement more generally.

The data also suggest that participants had an awareness of the wider ideologies and government information (see for example, Department of Health, Physical Activity, Health Improvement and Protection 2011, p. 39) surrounding ageing and the ageing body that place emphasis on health maintenance, ageing 'well', and minimising the risk of chronic disease. For instance, Samuel made reference to government policy guidelines that state what older people (deemed to be those aged over 65) '*should*' do and described his and his wife's efforts to comply with these, despite the corporeal difficulties he encountered. Having the social support and companionship of his wife, from early days in the army through to the present-day, was signalled as of great importance in maintaining his commitment to being physically active:

Retirement is great – it is. It is getting harder now because it is harder to move around and get to places because I can't drive anymore because of my leg. I do notice that we



stay in the house more, but that is fine because I have my wife for company. We have a routine every day and it suits us. Most days now we go for a walk to keep our old hearts ticking over, you know. We do know we have to do something to stay in good health. You always get those guidelines of what you should be doing but we keep each other going. I couldn't imagine what I would do if my wife wasn't here. I look at some folk who have lost their wives and, well it is just unbearable to think about. The wife has always been there ever since I got called up into the army, she has followed me around the world. I am the man I am today because of my wife. (Samuel/65yrs/Army)

Samuel's quote, similar to those of other participants, emphasises strong personal bonds of association with family members and the role that these relationships play in older adults' PA practices (see also Tulle and Phoenix 2015, Author 3 *et al.* 2016). Samuel and his wife support and encourage one another to maintain a lifestyle they perceive as healthy and active. Moreover, Samuel placed importance on the shared place experiences he has with his wife, pointing out how they have jointly adapted their movement activities and their choice of activity location in order to accommodate their changing mobility and health needs as a couple.

Bell and Wheeler (2015) remind us of the increased bodily vulnerability that many older adults report experiencing, noting how 'place' encounters can heighten this sense of vulnerability. This may be in terms of feeling some reluctance towards exploring new places when alone and in the face of declining energy levels and personal mobility, or with regard to the difficulties some older adults encounter in navigating spaces they once took for granted (Bell and Wheeler 2015; see also Elias, 1985). Such temporal and spatial comparisons were highlighted in the data, as participants evocatively contrasted their present-day body-selves with their younger ones. Frederick, for example, compared his present corporeal self to his former 'disciplined', 'civilised' (from a figurational perspective), active and highly capable military body, and explained how even attempts at 'walking around the block' served as a vivid reminder of his increased bodily vulnerability:

I used to go out walking every day. Even though I still try I don't really go anymore because I know that if I get half way around the block I may not be able to make it back to the house. I have bad knees and even though walking around the block seems simple, like I could do it in a flash, realistically I don't think I could anymore. It is embarrassing too; I wouldn't want to call my wife to pick me up in the car because I couldn't walk

round the block. I used to be able to run over 10miles in full kit and now I can't even walk around the block - it is sad that. (Frederick/72yrs/Army)

Again, the relational, social aspects of embodiment came into play, as Frederick admits that his imagined embarrassment, should he have to call his wife to collect him part way through his walk, constrains his actual behaviour. Frederick frequently compared his contemporary walking and PA performance to his former military sporting practices and identity, suggesting that reflecting upon the self was temporally interdependent. Current activities were analysed in relation to previous capabilities during previous periods in participants' lives. Similarly, as symbolic interactionist analyses highlight, when a person's assessment of her/his performance does not conform to a previously held and salient identity, this can have a highly deleterious effect (Stryker 1981, Author 2 and Another 2007) especially when this contrasts negatively and poignantly with a former 'gloried self' (Author 2 2005). In Frederick's case, his embodied corporeal limitations had discouraged him almost completely from taking part in sport and PA. His 'gloried', disciplined, active, military body was once a strong symbol of traditional masculinity (see Hockey, 2004; Jamieson, 2017), but for Frederick, old age and its bodily effects represented the contestation, even negation of that bodily ideal in threatening his ability to 'match up' to his former military self. For participants whose sense of masculine self was closely tied to their physical ability and highly disciplined body, declining health and weakening bodies were reported as particularly problematic and created conditions for an acute sense of disruption (see Hinojosa *et al.* 2008) to their former military self. For Frederick, whose body was recounted as being central in the formation of his self-identity, the decline and 'de-civilisation' (see Elias 1982a, 1996) of his ageing body and physical capabilities were experienced as very challenging, and in his words, 'embarrassing'.

Symbolic interactionism affords specific insights at this juncture, as Cooley's (1902) concept of the looking-glass self is highly apposite in analysing the relationships between identity, self and the body. Briefly to outline this formulation, the three characteristics that underpin the concept of the looking-glass self are: a person's imagined image of how they appear to others; the judgement they imagine others to make of them; and the feelings they have about themselves that are invoked by this imagined judgement, such as shame or pride. Waskul and Vannini (2012) note that for many people who have 'compromised' or 'limited bodies', the looking-glass self assumes magnified meanings when individuals can no longer take a 'competent' body for granted. People with

disabilities and chronic illnesses can therefore confront the kinds of tensions between identity, self and the body that all people face, but potentially in an intensified, magnified and accelerated form (Waskul and Vannini 2012). For Frederick, these tensions come into play when he even considers ‘walking around the block’; we could assume that Frederick doesn’t actually know what his wife would think if he were unable to walk the whole route, but nevertheless his imagined view of her judgement evokes strong emotions of embarrassment. Consequently, Frederick responds to his projected ‘incapable’ self by withdrawing from this PA, to avoid potential identity challenge (Author 2 2011), demonstrating vividly the power of the looking-glass self in shaping older adults’ (and others’) PA beliefs and practices.

Our participants’ military habitus and identities clearly play a key role in their present-day experiences, perceptions of and attitudes towards ageing and the ageing body. Even though participants are no longer part of their former military figuration, their embodied military habitus, sedimented through the extensive military socialisation process, still influences their present-day life-worlds. Simon, for example, expresses his gratitude towards the armed forces and acknowledges the huge impact of his past military experience in influencing his (and his fellow service personnel’s) contemporary attitudes and practices:

But we may be falling apart but we still keep going. I think it’s just that, that’s the way we’ve always been. I think that we owe a great debt to being in the forces, because...it definitely changed our perception of how we are, the world and everything else.  
(Simon/69yrs/RAF)

Relatedly, Grosz (1994 p. 138) notes how the body is an ‘inscriptive surface’ upon which practices, actions and adornments leave their mark, and researchers in sport and exercise have similarly noted how repeated training practices become inscribed on to the body (Author 2 and Another 2007, Spencer 2009). Our data demonstrate how the men were clearly marked by the physical and psychological training they carried out in the military figuration; the strong military exhortation to ‘keep going’ – instilled by the military (see Hockey 2002) illustrates well the ‘valorisation of endurance’ (Another and Author 2 2015), and also its corporeal consequences. Victor, for example, explains how many of his fellow participants have ‘destroyed knees’ due to the ‘bunny hops’ (a particular

exercise that imposes intense pressure on the knees) they had to do as part of their military physical training:

I think a lot of destroyed knees for people of our age now are a result of bunny hops  
(Victor/63yrs/Army)

In contrast to the injuries and negative bodily impacts generated by their years of service, the physical benefits of service were also recounted. As found elsewhere (Author 3 and Another 2015), although they associated with other veterans as part of a 'we' group with shared experience, many participants simultaneously contrasted their physically active, embodied 'I' in relation to their peers; Louis and Victor, for example, both former army recruits, contrasted their present-day corporeal selves favourably with those of their more 'decrepit' age-peers:

But for many years I always found that when you go back to your place of living before you joined the service and meet up with people of your own age, you realise how decrepit they are in comparison to us coming out of the services. (Louis/84yrs/Army)

But it's a delight to see. It's a delight to see. It really is, you know. I have friends that I knew back at school and when I look at them and I look at myself, I think, "My goodness, you know, some of us have worked better than others." (Victor/63yrs/Army)

Despite their corporeal challenges and difficulties, some participants still endeavoured to stay physically active, and for many, the leisure activities they sought out and took part in after retirement were similar to the work like physical activities they experienced in the military figuration (see also Elias and Dunning 1986). For instance, Edward spoke of past experiences of speed hiking over the Pennines (hills and mountains in the North of England) and five-a-side football subsequent to leaving the army. He thus pursued the embodied practices of keeping fit, long after these were no longer required as part of his membership of the military figuration:

What I missed was, as a soldier in the regiment, you had to make sure that your fitness was up to scratch. And I continued to do that. At the age of forty-seven I did a speed hike with three other guys, it was a competition, over the Pennines, and I did forty-five miles in twelve hours. And then we did another one in Lincolnshire called the Poacher Hike,

and that's forty miles, and that's up and down...It's not quite as bad as the Pennines, but it's still up and down. And that was forty miles, and I did that in nine hours fifty-two [minutes]. So I still kept pretty fit, even though I was no longer required to do it. And I used to play five a side football once a week down at the football ground. So it's a regime which you don't come out of it as it were. (Edward/75yrs/Army)

As Author 3 and Another (2012) note, it has been argued by Maguire (1991) that leisure pastimes have become key factors in the formulation of identities. Indeed, the bodily discipline that is required to be a soldier (see also Godfrey *et al.* 2012, Cooper *et al.* 2016) becomes so ingrained, and so embodied in a soldier's habitus, that the sheer physicality of the military training can become almost addictive, as illustrated by Edward who pursued demanding physical 'serious leisure' (Stebbins 1993) pursuits, reminiscent of fitness tasks in the army.

It has been argued, as Shilling (2003) and Williams and Bendelow (1999) contend, that Elias (1987) did not fully explore the biological aspects of embodiment as exposed in his writing on 'the hinge'. Here, however, we note that although Elias's contribution to the study of bodies and embodiment is debated (Atkinson 2012), Elias did at times acknowledge the importance of the corporeal body within his work, as is particularly evident in *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Elias 1985). Here, Elias clearly articulates the physical, sensuous, cognitive, emotional and socio-cultural experience of ageing and the death 'performance'. Furthermore, studies of violence and how it is enacted against the body, for example, in the suicide process (Whitt 2010), in the act of filicide (Websdale 2010), or against other bodies in the mixed martial arts context (Sanchez and Malcolm 2010) illustrate the significance and importance of Elias's work for deconstructing how anger, aggression and violence have interlaced biological, psychological and socio-cultural dimensions (Atkinson 2012).

Elias's figurational theory is very much concerned with people in the plural, given that in this theoretical framework human beings in a variety of ways are interdependent with each other, and their lives [including their bodies] are significantly shaped and evolve in the social figurations they form. Furthermore, bodies, like figurations, are continually in flux. As Louis and Victor point out, in the military figuration and in figurations since their retirement, their bodies have undergone changes of many kinds. Some of these changes happened quickly, for example, participants' physical bodies and their identities changed relatively rapidly through the military Basic Training

socialisation process, which transformed them from civilians into service personnel. On the other hand, some of the changes occurred more slowly and incrementally, such as the knee damage recounted by Victor as being provoked by the extreme physical demands of military training. Participants were not always aware of the long-term consequences that might arise from their time in the military figuration. Thus, during active service, participants were unaware that performing ‘bunny hops’ might result in chronic knee pain and problems (‘destroyed knees’); nor did they comprehend that their military careers and life-worlds might have a positive effect on their body images in later life (as reflected in Louis’ and Victor’s comments above). Thus, as theorised by Elias, the long term developments that take place in human figurations (and bodies) are largely unplanned and unforeseen; a theme we revisit in our concluding remarks.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, as has been noted (e.g. Sparkes 2015), research on men’s experiences as embodied, ageing subjects is relatively limited, and there is scant extant research specifically on figural studies of men’s ageing. Our purpose in the qualitative study portrayed here was to contribute to this developing research area by exploring a figuration of retired servicemen. Data were generated via a limited topical life-history of retired servicemen in the Royal British Legion (RBL) in a small English city in the East of England. This study sought to explore and analyse these former servicemen’s embodied life experiences of ageing and PA. As portrayed above, the data highlight the embodied experiences of PA as recounted by participants in relation to their careers within the military figuration and subsequently post-retirement. The often poignant contrast between participants’ remembered, ‘gloried’, fit and strong military body-selves and their current-day, less physically able body-selves emerged strongly, and resonates with other accounts in the literature, including on ageing and/or injured athletes and sportspeople (for example, Author 2 2005, Author 2 and Another 2001, Dionigi *et al.* 2013, Author 3 and Another 2015). There is evidence to suggest that for those who have enjoyed fit (some might say ‘hyperfit’), strong and athletic bodies in their younger days, adjustment to the limitations of an older, less physically capable body may be particularly challenging (see for example, Pfister 2012, Dionigi *et al.* 2013, Tulle and Phoenix 2015). Despite their perceived corporeal limitations, however, many participants described striving to maintain a lifestyle that was healthy and active, drawing on the ‘head down, Bergen on’ (keep going) mentality so deeply instilled by the military (Hockey 2002) during Basic

Training and throughout their military lives. This ‘keep going’ endurance mentality (Another and Author 2 2015) is not, of course, without its negative consequences, for example, in exacerbating fears of a loss of control over the fit and active body, and losing the ability to keep going (Dionigi *et al.* 2013, Author 2 *et al.* 2017).

The importance of taking into account the temporal and relational aspects of PA experiences came to the fore, as is commensurate with the figurational perspective adopted. Our findings illustrate the salient role of temporality, for participants’ past experiences of PA and exercise strongly shaped their current-day motivations, attitudes and behaviours including via corporeal comparison. This indicates the interdependency of previous life stages and participants’ present-day conceptualisations of self and their perceived embodied capabilities. Such comparisons highlighted tensions in the ‘I-we’ balance across time and space. Shared memories of experiences of past service were recounted as a unifying, bonding element in the creation of a ‘we-group’ between veterans. Moreover, participants also identified the disjuncture between participants’ contemporary ‘I’ identities and those of the past in terms that highlighted physical decline. In contrast, some participants emphasized their relative corporeal competence when compared to their ‘civvie’ (civilian) male peers, which again served to bolster the ‘we-group’ identity of retired servicemen.

Drawing on a dual theoretical lens of (primarily) figurational sociology and (secondarily) symbolic interactionism combines the strengths of both of these sociological perspectives. With its strong focus on temporality and interdependence, Elias’s figurational theoretical framework has previously been employed in studies of ageing and the ageing body (e.g. Author 3 and Another 2012, Author 3 and Another 2015), to which body of work the current study contributes. Elias (1978a) theorised how the short-term, planned actions of individuals’ are situated within, and influence, webs of relationships that both enable and constrain their opportunities and ability to influence the rest of the figuration. Indeed, the ex-servicemen highlighted in myriad ways how their activities and behaviour were facilitated and shaped by the interdependency chains within which they were situated, both in the interdependent military and RBL figurations. To sharpen the analytic focus on the actual social interactional encounters themselves and how the ex-servicemen engaged in forms of identity work and presentation of self, however, we turned to symbolic interactionism. We drew upon its fine-grained attention to the micro level of social action and the social order in order to analyse the servicemen’s social interactions and presentation of self.

In terms of theoretical analyses, both our figurational and symbolic interactionist perspectives highlighted the salience of relational aspects in participants' accounts. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, analyses revealed how military culture and participants' relationships with both their military 'superiors' and their peers strongly shaped the men's perspectives on, and experiences of physical activity - in the present-day as well in their past military service. In the military, they were required to engage in, and to make presentations to self and others of a 'tough, rough' fit, civilised and disciplined military body – and mind. Participants' accounts often highlighted the 'felt' limitations of their present-day ageing bodies, narratively contrasted (often starkly and evocatively) with their former 'disciplined', active, military bodies. Despite these 'felt' older-body limitations, however, many ex-servicemen still determinedly endeavoured to stay physically active, and again in terms of the relational identification aspect, sometimes contrasted positively their own attitudes with those of their more 'decrepit' (as one termed this) civilian friends, often in a jocular fashion.

In summary, this study makes an empirical contribution to the figurational literature, on men's ageing, physical activity and embodiment, and to a lesser extent to the symbolic interactionist research in this domain. In considering the effects that ageing had on the felt identities and lived bodies of our participants, the research contributes to a small but growing sociological corpus on the ageing experiences of ex-service personnel. In particular, findings indicate the importance of analytically taking into account the distinctive, lived, embodied experiences of ex-service personnel, including in order to promote more targeted social, leisure and exercise/physical activity opportunities for this specific population group. More generally, the research highlights the need to acknowledge, analytically and in policy and practice, the temporally-framed, embodied experiences of older adults, who were not always 'older' and whose memories of their younger body-selves impact, often substantially, on their expectations and experiences of physical activity in later life.

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