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Embodied thought of the month (ETM) – June 2015

John Day

The Authenticity and Meaning of Embodiment in Life History Interviews

My research uses life history interviews to better understand the connections between family relationships, being active and well-being across the life course. During the one-to-one pilot interviews of my study with family members, one thing that struck me was how the more meaningful stories relayed to me by participants comprised of both a relatively authentic sense of connection with previous lived experiences and how these experiences were simultaneously played out within the interview context. In a number of ways it might be argued that while participants were providing me with historical snippets of their biographies, a second story was also developing concerning the way in which these histories were being told.

During the interviews, when the conversation moved to the topic of engagement with physical activity during adulthood, participants felt it was something that they 'should be doing' but their lives had become 'comfortable' in the intimate space of a romantic relationship and they often struggled to find time because of work commitments or household circumstances. While they were telling me about their everyday challenges and struggles to be regularly active I noticed how some participants appeared to become more aware of their bodies. One woman, who was in her seventies, put her cardigan back on and folded her arms while another male participant, in his mid-twenties, moved from a sitting position and curled up on my sofa. It seemed to me as though they had become more conscious of their bodies and were (consciously or subconsciously) making attempts to hide them from my gaze, maybe because they felt guilty. At no point did they orally express that they felt guilty about what they described as 'not being active enough as I *should* be', but coupled with their embodied responses to this topic of conversation, indicated that they might have felt somehow to blame for not being as active as they used to be.

The participants in the interviews also spoke with delight about their early experiences of being active during childhood. These stories referred predominantly to the enjoyment and fun associated with play. Noticeable at this point, was how one participant moved his arms to illustrate to me the height of the jumps that he, his brother and their friends would attempt to land safely using skateboards, rollerblades and bikes. His embodied illustration of how they safely negotiated risk and danger without physical injury highlighted to me how meaningful these experiences were, in a way that the interview transcript was unable to capture.

Thus, their stories of the past became embodied in the present. This type of response to the interview schedule might be specific to the topic of physical activity and other experiences

where the body is a central feature. Yet regardless of whether such embodied experiences of interviews are exclusive to stories of bodily practices, the way that the interviewees brought their stories to life through their bodies provided a point of connection between narrative and realist perspectives of life history interviews. Both lived experiences (realist perspective) and the role of the interview context (narrative perspective) can be extracted for analysis from a life history transcript. However, if capturing authenticity and meaning are as essential to life history research as scholars suggest, we might look to pay more attention to the embodied aspects of interviews in physical activity research.

Next month – James and Ian continue this theme and discuss early experiences of sport within the context of family life.